

FERGUSON & FAITH

**Sparking Leadership &
Awakening Community**

LEAH GUNNING FRANCIS



CHALICE
P R E S S

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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Editor's Foreword

Cultivating Faithful, Wise and Courageous Leaders for the Church and Academy

Welcome to a conversation at the intersection of young adults, faith, and leadership. The Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) is a leadership incubator that inspires diverse young people to make a difference in the world through Christian communities. This series, published in partnership with Chalice Press, is for individuals reimagining Christian leadership and creating innovative approaches to ministry and scholarship from diverse contexts.

These books are written by and for a growing network of:

- FTE partners seeking to cultivate Christian leaders, pastors, and theological educators needed to renew and respond to a changing church.
- Young leaders exploring traditional and alternative paths to ministry and teaching that serve the common good and justice—both inside and beyond “the walls” of the church and theological academy.
- Christian leaders developing new ways to awaken the search for meaning and purpose in young adults who are inspired to shape the future of the church, academy, and world.
- Members and leaders of faith communities creating new solutions to address the needs of their congregations, institutions, and the broader community.

This series offers an opportunity to discover what FTE is learning, widen the circle of conversation, and share ideas FTE believes are necessary for faith communities to shape a more hopeful future.

Thank you for joining us!

Dori Baker, Series Editor
Stephen Lewis, FTE President

Foreword

by Jim Wallis

Ferguson and Faith is a frontline account of the experiences of young activist leaders and local clergy—the two groups who have played the biggest role in transforming the aftermath of Michael Brown’s tragic death from a *moment* to a *movement*. To create this book, Leah Gunning Francis interviewed dozens of clergy and young leaders, from diverse religious and racial backgrounds, who found themselves united in a desire to confront and transform a criminal justice system—and broader society—that systematically values black and brown lives less than it values white lives. The brave young women and men in Ferguson took their convictions to the streets and laid their safety—and indeed their very lives—on the line day after day in the face of a police response more suitable for a theater of war than the streets of an American city. They refused to let tear gas or rubber bullets silence their voices. And when the clergy interviewed in this book joined those young leaders, they also put themselves in situations of risk. Tear gas and rubber bullets shape theology, as you will read in this important volume. This is what happens when we take faith to the streets.

At *Sojourners’* annual leadership Summit in 2015, many of these young leaders and clergy were honored. The theme of the Summit was leadership and hope—and these young people and clergy demonstrated both. Hope means getting up, day after day and night after night, and getting back at the struggle for freedom and justice. That’s what these activists and clergy did in the face of both exhaustion and danger. And that’s what leadership means. Each honoree received a small wooden holding cross, a perfect thing to hold in our hands when we are leading with hope in ways that drive us to risk taking.

I believe that if the young Ferguson leaders hadn't gotten up day after day and gone to the streets night after night, and some courageous clergy hadn't joined them there and spoken out in their community, there might never have been a historic national commission on policing or a damning Department of Justice report on the Ferguson Police Department—and we would not be at the beginning of a new national conversation on reforming the criminal justice system. But it is only the beginning, and the test of the nation's soul will be action aimed at the systemic racial injustice embedded in that system. Without the courage and perseverance of the young Ferguson activists and clergy, we simply would not be in the place of new possibilities that we now find ourselves. While the road ahead of us to achieve racial freedom, equity, and healing is still long and difficult, I believe that future generations may well look back on the Ferguson movement as a watershed in our painful racial history. The young leaders and clergy who led the way may be seen as key figures who helped bend the arc of history toward justice, much as the civil rights movement did in the 1960s.

Leah Gunning Francis's conversations with both the clergy and the young activists show how important it is for communities of faith to reach out to a new generation of young leaders and help elevate and nurture their gifts. What many of the clergy interviewed in this book realized in the course of the Ferguson protests was that rather than sitting back in their sanctuaries and waiting for the young people to seek out the church for guidance or leadership, it was *the church* that needed to go out and meet the young people where they were, joining them shoulder to shoulder, on the streets, in the struggle for justice.

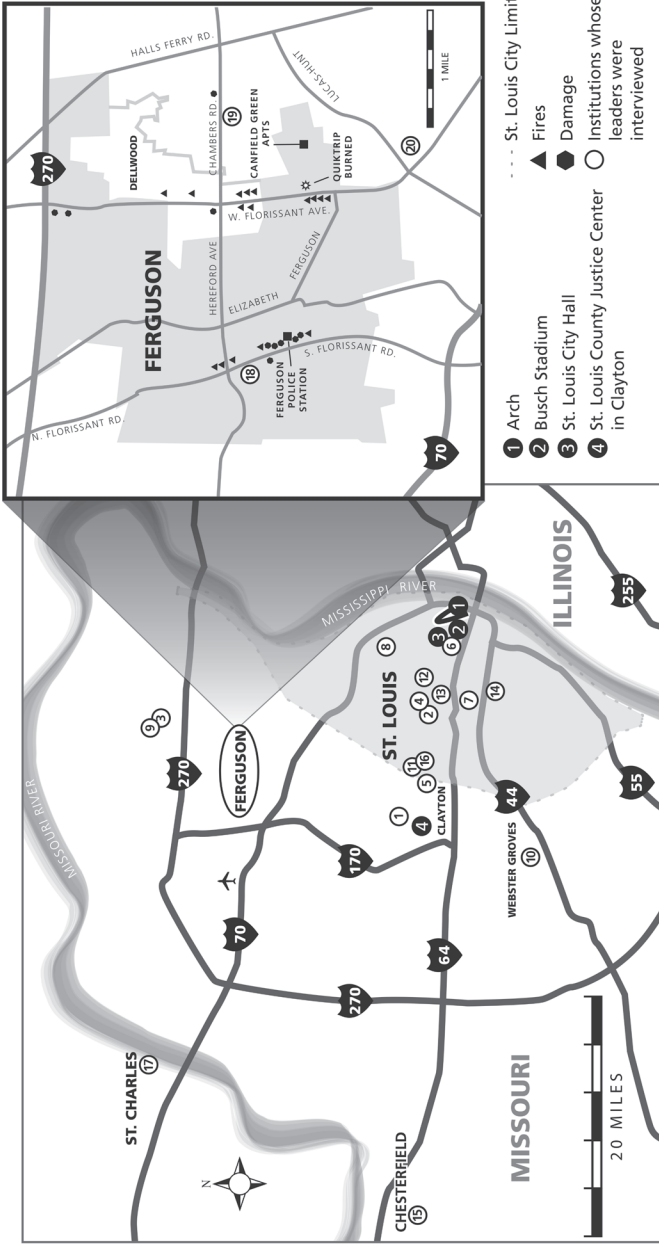
Equally important, the clergy did not go out there expecting automatically to lead or be listened to simply by virtue of being clergy. They understood that these young protestors were *already* leaders who were accomplishing extraordinary things, and that they needed *allies* in the clergy more than they needed the clergy to act as their leaders. At the same time, by meeting these young leaders where they were and being their allies in the truest sense of the word, these clergy were able to use their gifts, experience, and networks to complement and elevate the gifts and experience of the young activists.

From churches that were distrusted for their distance and isolation from the lives and experience of marginalized young people came clergy willing to be transformed by their engagement in the streets, some of whom became role models and pastors for new generation

activists whose trust they had gained. Ferguson is one of the best examples of the authenticity and power that come from walking our talk.

While many books will be written on the complex issues surrounding the killing of Michael Brown, the racism of the Ferguson Police Department, the Black Lives Matter movement, this is not one of those books. Rather, this book is a collection of *stories* of people on the front lines of a struggle against profound societal injustices at a historically significant moment in time. What this book offers is nothing more or less than the direct experiences and perspectives of those who were there. I believe that stories are critically important to the ongoing struggle for racial justice, and I have seen many times that it is the experience of hearing and *believing* the stories of others that causes people's own perspectives to be transformed.

This book shows that clergy can make a real difference in today's social movements if we are willing to leave our comfort zones, take our faith to the streets, and are humble enough to open ourselves to learning from a new generation that is now leading the way in many of the most important struggles to overcome racial injustice. I invite you to learn from these extraordinary stories, and be inspired to join in these struggles.



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| 1 Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion | 11 Liberation Christian Church | 17 St. John African Methodist Episcopal Church |
| 2 Metropolitan Congregations United | 12 Washington Tabernacle Baptist Church | 18 Wellspring United Methodist Church |
| 3 Christ the King United Church of Christ | 13 St. Louis University | 19 Greater St. Mark Family Church |
| 4 Second Presbyterian Church | 14 Compton Heights Christian Church | 20 The Flood Christian Church |
| 5 First Congregational Church of St. Louis | 15 Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel | |
| | 16 Central Reformed Congregation | |
| | 6 Christ Church Cathedral (Episcopal) Complex | |
| | 7 Mt. Zion Baptist Church-Christian Complex | |
| | 8 St. John's United Church of Christ | |
| | 9 Ward Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church | |
| | 10 Eden Theological Seminary | |

- 1 Arch
- 2 Busch Stadium
- 3 St. Louis City Hall
- 4 St. Louis County Justice Center in Clayton

- ▲ Fires
- ◆ Damage
- Institutions whose leaders were interviewed

--- St. Louis City Limits

Introduction

“We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.”

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875–1955) Educator, Civil Rights
Activists, Humanitarian

August 9, 2014, started as an ordinary Saturday morning. Hot, sunny, and just right for enjoying the final days of summer vacation. After breakfast, I took our two sons to a friend’s birthday party at a local kids’ play zone. While the children played, I chatted with other parents about our summer adventures and how we were anxiously preparing for the impending first day of school. We mused over lunchbox ideas and afterschool activities, and wondered aloud how some of our children would fare in their new schools. “Leaving kindergarten is a big step,” one parent said, “I hope he finds his footing pretty quickly.” “Me too,” I said, as I thought about our youngest son leaving the cozy cocoon of his preschool and venturing into the new terrain of elementary school.

Meanwhile, the children played, ate pizza and cake, and played some more until they reluctantly had say their goodbyes. We hugged and high-fived our friends as we made our way into our van. It was still daylight and my sons were still pretty hyped from the party, so I knew I needed to find a way to keep the party spirit going. We drove to a nearby store and purchased a few school supplies and knick-knacks, went home, ate dinner, and they played baseball in our backyard until the August moon was ready to appear.

After the boys were bathed and in bed, I walked into the family room and caught a glimpse of a chaotic scene on the evening news. As I inched closer to the television, I suddenly heard: “You took my son away from me! Do you know how hard it was for me to get him to stay

in school and graduate? You know how many black men graduate? Not many. Because you bring them down to this type of level, where they feel like they don't got nothing to live for anyway... But I refused to let my son be like that."¹ I stood, shell-shocked, in front of the television as I watched who I now know was Leslie McSpadden uttering those painful words to KMOV St. Louis reporter Brittany Noble on the fateful day her son, Michael Brown, Jr., was shot and killed by Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson. The police shooting of Michael Brown was the lead story on the local news and, at that time, the details were still murky and the circumstances were largely unknown. I had no idea what lay ahead.

The news images captured some of the chaos and anguish that gripped the Canfield Green apartment community where Brown was killed. In my mind, I kept trying to make sense of what was unfolding before my eyes. I had far more questions than answers. Witnesses were being interviewed and said that Brown had his hands up in surrender when he was killed, and that his body was left in the middle of this residential street for more than four hours. Children could be seen standing near the yellow crime scene tape that cordoned off the area. What began as a typical Saturday for me quickly morphed into something unusual, and once I saw an image of Brown's body lying face down on the pavement with his blood streaming down the middle of the street, I was convinced that life in St. Louis would never be quite the same.

I live in the city of St. Louis with my husband and our two sons. The city of Ferguson is a nearby northern suburb of St. Louis. Our house, which is on the south side of St. Louis, is only 11 miles from the Canfield Green apartment community where Michael Brown was killed. During my first visit to the apartment complex, two observations stopped me in my tracks. First, I was stunned by the narrowness of the street on which Brown was killed. I had been closely following the news coverage of the unfolding events for two days, and on television the street looked much wider than it actually is. Canfield Drive looked like a familiar street because it is not much wider than my own street—the same kind of street that my own sons ride their bikes along. The second startling observation was that this is an apartment *community*. It is privately owned, complete with manicured lawns and trimmed

¹<http://www.kmov.com/special-coverage-001/video/Michael-Browns-mother-speaks-right-after-shooting-272803691.html>

bushes. There is ample green space for children to play and frolic around, and the location where Brown was killed is in the middle of this community. Apartment units are clustered on both sides of the street. As I stood beside the street memorial where Brown's body once lay, the gravity of what actually happened permeated my mind, body, and spirit: Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old black man, was killed by a police officer in the middle of the day, in the middle of the street, in the middle of this residential community and laid there for over four hours for all to see. In that moment, I was awakened to a reality that was more than I could bear.

As the days, weeks, and months passed, I concluded that it was actually more than I could bear—I could not bear to sit quietly by and pretend that this was just another “unfortunate incident” or “ill-fated tragedy.” I could not bear to go on with my days as though I had not seen, heard, and felt the cries of Brown's family and friends. I could not bear to allow my righteous indignation to remain locked inside my heart and mind, and not give voice to it through tangible acts of resistance. So I marched, prayed, organized, held vigil, lectured, protested, and passed out supplies—all in an attempt to bear witness to this tragedy and work toward social change. And I was not alone.

As a seminary professor and pastor's wife, I have deep ties to the progressive Christian community in the St. Louis area. I have worked with or visited dozens of congregations, and made connections with twice as many clergy throughout the region from almost every mainline denomination. As a woman of faith, I did not separate my actions in pursuit of justice for Michael Brown from my faith. Instead, I understood them as an expression of my faith. My faith, or my belief and trust in God, motivated me to join the efforts to seek justice and provide care. My faith was integral to my works, and, together, enabled me to embody my idea of faithfulness in this time of communal distress. Throughout the days, weeks, and months since Michael Brown was killed, there were many other people of faith who were taking similar and greater actions. Specifically, I am talking about clergypeople.

There were clergypeople involved in this movement since “day one.” Of course there were scores of people who were neither clergy nor expressed a faith impetus for their participation in this movement, but I was compelled to try to keep my finger on the pulse of what local clergy were up to and join them. I took some of my direction from and worked with several of them; I learned from them and prayed for them as many were putting their bodies on the line in extremely risky ways. These were women and men whose primary places of service

were in local congregations, jails, hospitals, seminaries, and nonprofit agencies, yet they made it their business to extend their services of care, hospitality, and vigilance into the streets of Ferguson and its environs.

Images of tanks and tear gas have flashed across television and computer screens around the world, but it is not likely that the breadth and diversity of stories of clergy that laid their all on the altar of justice ever made it across the airwaves in a comprehensive way. This book shines a spotlight on some of their sacred stories of courage and hope that might awaken in us seeds of possibilities that, if nurtured, could bend our imagination and actions toward a future filled with hope. This book, however, does not pretend to represent all of the clergy that have participated in or contributed to the movement for justice for Michael Brown, as there are untold numbers of clergy that have supported this movement from around the world. Some came to Ferguson to lend support and guidance, and others made handsome financial contributions. While all of these actions have supported the aims of the movement, this book is limited in scope to the perspectives of a few dozen clergy who live and work in the St. Louis area. These on-the-ground perspectives are not intended to diminish or minimize other perspectives; rather, they are presented to orient the reader to the context of this movement within the wider St. Louis area.

I interviewed 24 local faith leaders who are deeply connected to the faith community in St. Louis, and are affiliated with a range of mainline denominations that include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Roman Catholic Church, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, National Baptist Convention, Inc., Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, and Unitarian Universalist. I also interviewed a Jewish rabbi and two Protestant clergy affiliated with a nondenominational church. I interviewed an equal number (12) of women and men, 11 of them black and 13 white, with an average age of 47. Three identified themselves as gay or lesbian. I asked open-ended questions that encouraged them to tell their stories of how and when they learned about Michael Brown's death, their immediate reactions, what compelled them to subsequent actions, and how they understood the implications of their actions as relating to the mission of the church. I also wanted to get their takes on the most compelling phenomena within this movement: the emergence of young leaders.

Any book that is related to Ferguson events in the wake of Michael Brown's death would be incomplete without the acknowledgment of young leaders and their critical location within the movement.

While that topic alone is worthy of a series of books, I wanted to try to capture a dimension of their presence in relation to clergy. I invited a *few* young leaders whom I knew worked with clergy to share their reflections with me. I interviewed 13 young leaders who represented or worked with the Deaconess Ann House (Episcopal Service Corp), Metropolitan Congregations United, Millennial Activists United, and Tribe X. Nine are women and four are men. Seven are white, five are black, and one is Taiwanese-American. Two identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Their average age is 22.

To be clear: I do not suggest that young leaders emerged within this movement *because* of the clergy. Actually, I think the argument could be made that the *young leaders* ignited the leadership among the clergy; they created space and impetus for the clergy I talked with to live into their roles as leaders. From the early days in August until this very moment, young leaders and clergy have remained vigilant in their commitment to bearing witness to the atrocity of Michael Brown's killing—both in the streets as well as in strategy meetings. Although I have participated in many public actions that included clergy (and congregants) and young leaders, I was curious to learn more about how the two mixed and mingled over the first few months. What were the points of connection and departure? How did they create space to hear and see each other anew? What did they learn about the church and its possibilities for cultivating and supporting emergent young leaders in the church and society? How might these and other queries point us toward the signposts that may reveal new insight on what it means for congregations to engage in transformative social action as they consider critical questions about the nature and mission of the church in these turbulent times?

The book has 10 chapters. The stories in each chapter create portraits of a few key moments in the movement, moments that were integral to the connection between clergy and young leaders, leading us toward reflection on the explicit learnings from these events. It is important to note that this book is not a historical account of Ferguson events in the wake of Michael Brown's death, nor is it a "tell-all" about the "inner workings" of a movement. Perhaps the historians and gossip columnists will take up those tasks. As a practical theologian, I took up the work of looking for evidence of God's tenets of love, justice, faithfulness, and hope, and I wanted to tell and reflect on some of that story using the experiences of a few clergy and young leaders.

Chapter 1, titled *Just Protest This by Prayer!*, explores the stories behind the now familiar photo of clergy kneeling to pray in front of

the Ferguson police station.

Chapter 2, *Praying with Their Feet*, recounts some of the stories of the urgent calls from Canfield Green Apartments, and the activity that followed. This chapter also briefly explores the following question: “What has been done?” in relation to the St. Louis region and racial justice movements that resulted in mass public displays of protest.

Chapter 3, *Not Looking Away*, describes an overarching theme of the work because there was an emphasis on seeing and not looking away. It describes and explores stories of some of the early and risky decisions that led to expanded commitments within some congregations.

Chapter 4, *Jesus Is in the Streets!*, describes the stories of young leaders arrested in Ferguson on October 2 and taken to the St. Ann jail, and the role clergy played in support of them. Young leaders also take to task the notion of respectability politics, and its impotence in this movement.

Chapter 5, *Where Have All the Leaders Gone?*, explores the origins of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and highlights the leading role of women in the protests.

Chapter 6, *This Is What Theology Looks Like*, recounts the clergy march on Moral Monday on October 13. The chapter explores the theological and ethical imperatives for this movement.

Chapter 7, *Why Are Your Doors Open to Us?*, reframes the idea of “safe sanctuaries” and casts it through the lens of congregational responses as hosts to the #BlackLivesMatter freedom rides and in the aftermath of the off-duty police shooting death of Vonderrit Myers in South St. Louis City on October 8.

Chapter 8, *There Is a Ferguson Near You*, explores the issue of doing racial justice in communities outside of the immediate Ferguson area.

Chapter 9, *Standing on the Side of Love*, offers a different framework. Instead of taking the prescribed sides, it engages in a reflection on how clergy and young people understood their work as standing on the side of love.

Chapter 10, *#staywoke*, is a critical reflection on what the church needs to do to stay awake to the racial justice issues that have resurfaced, the vision of leadership cast by the young emergent leaders, and the implications for building a beloved community that will lead us into a future filled with hope.

As I reflect on my conversation with parents at the birthday party, I wonder if faith communities and clergy may feel that leaving some of their familiar ways of doing and being church is too big of a step. This

may be true, but, if you *do* take some steps, my hope is that this book is a source of encouragement to help you find your footing quickly.



A memorial to Mike Brown at the shooting scene on Canfield Drive in Ferguson. (Photo by Leah Gunning Francis)



CHAPTER 1

Just Protest This by Prayer!

“All my life, my political and social and spiritual selves have all moved together; I just could not separate them.”

United Methodist Bishop Leontine T. C. Kelly

The Ferguson police station was a daily site for protests after Michael Brown was killed. For months, protestors regularly gathered in front of the police station to bear public witness to their outrage because of the shooting death of Michael Brown. They chanted, marched, and held up signs. They made their demands known to the police through chants such as, “What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!” and they implicated the entire criminal justice system with chants such as, “The whole d**n system is guilty as h**!” They were resolute in their witness, and were determined to give voice to the egregiousness of this offense. When they chanted, “We’re young, we’re strong, we’re marching all night long,” they meant it. They were young, as most were in their late teens and twenties. They were strong, as their fortitude was unwavering in what became for them a daily way of life. And, oftentimes, they marched long into the night.

On September 29, a typical protest night took a memorable turn. Young activists were present and chanting fervently, and the police were posted in front of them, fully dressed in riot gear. However, on this day, more clergy were present than usual, because word had spread that young protestors were often being arrested during these evening protests. In the midst of the standoff, a few clergy took a decidedly different public action: they knelt on the sidewalk outside the police station and prayed. They symbolically laid down their collars on the

altar of justice and made clear that their resistance was an action of their faith.



Clergy kneel to pray between police and protesters at the Ferguson police station on September 29. (Photo by Philip Deitch)

Many pictures were taken of this action and posted quickly on social media. These pictures were often described as “iconic” because they depicted clergy doing something many had not seen in any Ferguson-related events. Not only did they voice their support of the protestors, but they put their bodies on the line and brought the gravitas of their moral authority to the moment and movement. They sent a clear message that they were bringing the resources and authority of their faith to the cause of racial justice.

Several notable events happened that evening as soon as the clergy knelt to pray. First, the atmosphere changed from raucous and rowdy to silent. The chanting stopped and the protestors listened to the prayer. The police seemed uncertain how to respond, since they were confronted with a different kind of protestor and tactic. Surely someone had to consider what the optics would look like if they dragged the group of middle-aged, collar-wearing, loudly praying clergy people off the sidewalk and cuffed them. None of the clergy were arrested that night, and it became a mile-marker in the movement for racial justice.

Rebecca Ragland, pastor of Holy Communion Episcopal Church in University City, Missouri, describes her experience from that evening.

I heard on the news that people were getting arrested at the police department. Even by the end of September protestors seemed to say “We’re not giving up on this.” So I went to Ferguson and there were a lot of clergy. We had emailed a lot of the people we knew and said, “We need to go,” and so we went. We were trying to say, “I think we need to be present because there needs to be de-escalation” since there had been this string of arrests every night.

The protestors were doing their thing. It seemed fine, but we didn’t really know each other yet, the people that were out on the line. Then we all stepped out into the road, and the cars were still coming, and Mike Kinman and I started to direct traffic with several other people. We were just trying to keep the traffic away so the cars could turn around.

Then the police came forward. There was a little interaction and then it was really scary. Everybody’s scared, and then [Osagyefo] Sekou went forward and knelt. Mike was really instrumental in getting the kneeling part for us because we were both just standing there praying out loud and then we came right up onto the sidewalk and we all just knelt. As we knelt then the protestors, who had been in the middle of the street, came forward and stood behind us. And as they did that, it got just quiet. You could actually hear crickets. It was that quiet just for a minute.

Sekou prayed out loud and then I prayed and Mike prayed and so we prayed up and down the line, and I thought to myself, “If we keep praying, we could pray all night and just protest this by prayer.”

Jon Stratton, an Episcopal priest and director of the Episcopal Service Corp, was present that night with several of the interns from the service corp. He describes the evening in this way:

So there were about 20 or 30 people, and police come out in their riot gear. There was a row of young protestors in the

street. The police were saying, “Get out of the street or we’re going to arrest you for unlawful assembly. Disperse or you’ll be arrested.” And the clergy knelt down in front of the police with the protestors behind, and the atmosphere changed. We knelt down and prayed, and the atmosphere completely changed. The protestors—this is amazing—the young protestors came up behind the clergy, laid their hands on the clergy and knelt as well and prayed.

And it was very tense in the moment right before we knelt down and prayed. The police were dumbfounded when we did that. They didn’t know what to do. That was the first time that clergy were out in this way. I mean, there were clergy who were out all the time, so I don’t want to discount that. But this was the first time clergy were out in a really visible way, and I think it just surprised the police and changed the atmosphere that night. I mean, there were no arrests made. There was no tear gas or rubber bullets. The police stood down. They eventually left.

The Episcopal Service Corp intern program is a ministry of the Episcopal Church. Through this ministry, recent college graduates commit to one year of service in a designated U.S. city in nonprofit or church-related organizations. Jon Stratton describes the program as

...a national program in the Episcopal Church. There are about 30 different locations of intentional communities, of young adults in their 20s who are taking a year to live in community, together under one roof, to share our common rule of life. It’s based on Benedictine values and Benedictine spirituality, and then they work in not-for-profits for that year. So kind of like AmeriCorps meets St. Benedict meets the Episcopal Church, Dorothy Day kind of thing.

This particular cohort began their St. Louis internship over Labor Day weekend; however, they committed to serve for one year in St. Louis before August 9 and quickly found themselves engaged in the Ferguson protests. Seven young adults came to St. Louis from around the country, despite some of their loved ones’ fears and discouragement.

Brendan O'Connor, an intern from Wisconsin, describes his rationale for getting involved in the protests:

I felt compelled to go to the things that Jon Stratton had been inviting us to in these protests for a number of reasons. I really had a sense that this is the city and the community that we're entering into. If we want to be serious about this, that we want to be a part of this, and we want to be part of the force that is here to help and stand for just the Christian ideal here in St. Louis, then we have to be a part of this.

It doesn't mean that we get to be the leaders. I never thought of myself as being some sort of leader or on the frontlines, but I recognize that this was a moment where I had to at least be there to listen and to learn and even just be a body for support. And I was there at a number of events, but I was never especially salient. And I can recognize that I'm not like one of the saviors of these events, and I'm okay with that.

I was an auxiliary member of the Student Labor Action Coalition [in college]. So it was, I felt, like a way to add another layer into my trying to understand things about justice, and this was a police-related thing which is something I hadn't had much experience, and also involving race relations. So before [Ferguson], I happened to watch the film "Fruitvale Station," which was about the killing of Oscar Grant. So this seemed pretty real and it was very disconcerting realizing like why does this keep happening, and, also made me mindful that this event and the response to it is not – this isn't a onetime thing. This has happened before.

Rosemary Haynes, an intern from North Carolina, describes her experience that night in front of the police station.

So [September 29] was a Monday, and on Mondays, we have Eucharist, and it's our community meal. And after all that was over, Jon asked us if we would go because we're seen as faith leaders, and he thought that our presence would be welcomed and needed. So I went, and, of course, I was kind of nervous. I mean, coming from the South, people are like, "Don't go over

there. It's not safe." But, of course, I went anyway, and I remember getting there and I'd never seen riot police ever before. So it was very shocking to me, but when we got there, there was a line of young adults in the street. And I just remember just being so proud and just like—I just wanted to be one of them. And so we gathered, and we wrote the jail support number on our arms, and that was nerve-racking because I was like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm going to get arrested." We joined in the street, and we were locking arms. And the police called out, "If you're in the street, you're subject to arrest." So I just stood there, and I was just like, "I'm going to do this," like, "I want to do this because how else can I be a part of this without putting myself in the shoes of those young people who have been there since August 9?" So it's what I wanted to do. And so I stood there and then clergy walked up. Reverend Sekou walked up first and kneeled down and then Bill Perman and Jon Stratton walked up with him, and they were kneeling, and they were praying. And so myself and my other housemates walked up, and we kneeled behind them.

Many of the young adult interns who were beginning their service in St. Louis wanted to personally experience the same process their peer protestors had been engaged in since August 9. This kind of experiential learning was important to them as they reflected on their experiences and shared with friends whose only perspective was the news. Sherry Nelson, an Episcopal Service Corp intern from Illinois, shares her experience of talking with her family and friends who did not support the movement and trying to give them another perspective of what was actually happening in St. Louis.

I started out like watching Rosemary's involvement, and I had a lot of conversations with people back home that were very much in disagreement with like me supporting the movement, Black Lives Matter, and like everything going on. And so I started out in that way, just having a lot of conversations with her and bouncing ideas off of her of ways to help people view things differently and things like that and then I started joining her on the streets in protests and Rebecca [Ragland] too.

And, before that, I was just going to a lot of educational things like events at churches and things like that but then I realized like, okay, this is not stopping. I want to get more involved in another way and I'm being way too comfortable in the way that I am approaching this. It's time to get out of the box. So I stepped into the streets and started protesting and it was nerve-racking, but it made a huge difference in my life. I've learned a lot through the time that we've spent here, and I'm excited to continue to be involved.

Tori Dahl, an intern from Minnesota, describes her experience that evening. For Tori, one of the greatest values of her participation was to be able to tell others what was really happening on the ground, sharing an account that was different from media reports. From her perspective, the media mostly reported from a particular lens that often shone a negative spotlight on the protestors.

So Jon [Stratton] just said, "I think this is really important, and I would love to have you come out and add to our clergy numbers because we've been asked to support this cause. And it would mean a lot to me, and I think it's important, but, of course, it's your decision." And so I was nervous but also did feel a call to be involved and to see what was going on and to be able to be a voice back, and I think that's maybe been the biggest thing, at least for me, but maybe for others too—to talk to people from home and from other places and to say that, yes, this is being skewed, and there's so much peaceful and positive things happening.

One of the peaceful moments Tori described was during the time when the clergy kneeled to pray. This is significant because peace did not equate silence; peace emerged in a way that gave voice to the angst and suffering of those who fought for justice.

The most powerful thing for me was that we were in the middle of this really raucous crowd and it had gotten kind of scary, and they were ready to head out. But the clergy stepped out,

kneeled down to pray, and it just went silent. And there was just like this really powerful moment of peace, and the police didn't know what to do. I think, at that point, they may have even walked away because this crowd that had been chanting and loud had just entirely gone silent and was listening to Reverend Sekou pray, and that was one of the most powerful moments for me that night.

For several who were present that night, the presence and prayers of clergy were not merely *symbolic* of God's presence, but they report *feeling* the presence of God. The public witness of clergy symbolizing the presence of God was made known. Rosemary Haynes continued her reflection by talking about how that moment made God's presence tangible for her.

That moment of prayer was like the first time that I really felt God. Well, I've never been like super religious. I've always been more spiritual. Like I just felt God's presence and meaning that, in that moment, I knew that I was supposed to be there, and I was seeing God in all the people who were there which I had never, like, experienced that before. So that night has had pretty much everything to do with my faith and where I am now.

Like most pictures, there is a story behind the now-familiar photo that rarely gets unearthed. The photo of the clergy kneeling only captures one part of what happened that evening. A glaring question that many observers had was, "What happened after they prayed? What happened after they got up off their knees?" Jon Stratton describes the way that the young activists asserted themselves as leaders, and the clergy offered support from the sidelines.

After the prayer, we got up, and we asked the young folks, "Do you want us to stand in the street with you now that we've done this?" And they said, "No. We appreciate your support, but this is our thing now." And the clergy went to the sidewalk and just prayed on the sidelines, supported, but we took our cues—that

night, anyway—from the young folks, particularly the Millennial Activists United. They were kind of calling the shots that evening.

David Gerth is the executive director of Metropolitan Congregations United (MCU), an interfaith coalition of congregations working for social change. He was instrumental in engaging clergy in the protests. He also talks about what happened after the prayer, and how he recognized the spirit of God at work.

So that prayer moment was pivotal, but what was more pivotal—for me—was as that started to break up, there were 16 or 17 protestors, most were Millennial Activists that stood on the center line of the street, locked arms, and they began chanting. And they were disciplining other protestors, you know: “You’re in or you’re out.” And I don’t remember what all was said, but it was the first time that I could see that there was a discipline and a direction and some very clear goals. And I thought, “Oh, maybe there are some clergy that I could bring to this because, if they’d see this, they might not want to do it, but they would respect what’s going on here.” And, theologically, for me, it was that night, when I watched them, and the image for me is that their feet drilled into the core of the earth and they were pulling out raw magma. I mean it was—it’s just his level of power. And I know that’s not exactly a theological image, but, for me, then I recognized, “The spirit of God is in this place. Whether they’re claiming it or not, I’m claiming it.” And so, then I knew my job was to figure out whom I could get up, just even if they came for 45 minutes just to watch. You need to see this firsthand because this is not what you have been reading and watching. There is something different going on here, and it’s powerful.

Many clergy saw themselves as witnesses to a truth that was not being portrayed in the media, and were compelled to tell others the truth about what they’d seen and heard. This was a clarion call to come and see the power of God at work through the young activists. The media has portrayed them as rebel-rousing looters, but the clergy bearing witness to their actions saw something very different. Yes,

there were some people who took advantage of the mayhem and looted stores and business. However, they were not representative of the people at the heart of this movement. They were not the same people holding vigil in front of the Ferguson police station, marching along the St. Louis area streets, rallying at the County Prosecutor's office day after day demanding justice on behalf of Michael Brown. They were not the same people who strategized and organized with local and national groups for the cause of racial justice and human freedom. The young activists represented the heart of this movement. They embodied the courage, strength, and fortitude that inspired the winds of justice to blow across the country and call people to consciousness about the racial injustice sanctioned by the state against black bodies.

For the clergy, standing up for justice on behalf of Michael Brown was about joining the work of God in the world. This was a tipping point in the fight against black lives being deemed as disposable. The people I interviewed, and many more, heeded the call of God to call for justice on behalf of Michael Brown and all black bodies that are deemed less than human. This movement has beckoned all of us to see black people as human beings created in the *imago Dei*—the image of God.

Prayer is a common link to most expressions of faith, but the question this prayer moment raises for us is: "What happens after we pray? What do we actually do in response to that for which we have prayed?"