

## **LCA presiding bishop urges prayer, peace amid outrage over shooting death**

CHICAGO (ELCA) – In response to the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., which has triggered outrage among some area residents and others across the country, the Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), has called for prayer and peace. “Throughout the gospels, Jesus reached out to the ‘others,’ those whom society deemed utterly foreign. We are at greatest risk when we divide into ‘us’ and ‘them.’ Then, we are unable to see each other’s humanity,” said Eaton. “In Christ, there is no ‘them,’ not Michael Brown, not the community, not the police. All are one. All are ‘us’ and all are Christ’s.” “We pray that peace will come to Ferguson and the Brown family – peace is founded on the knowledge that in Christ, there is no ‘other,’ only brothers and sisters,” she said.

In an effort to bring the community together, the Rev. Rick Brenton, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church in Ferguson, said thousands of local residents gathered for a peace march Aug. 14. “Last night we came together to march and reclaim the streets,” said Brenton. “Somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 people marched. Clergy from all over the city, from every denomination, creed and origin, came together along with youth and others to peacefully protest. We had also delivered food and toiletries items to residents of the Canfield Green Apartment complex [where police opened fire Aug. 9]. People there are afraid to leave their homes. God’s people deserve better than what has been happening.” According to Brenton, the march and outreach to residents “was a collaborative effort. We came together and made a difference.

It’s an amazing example of God’s love for us. That in Christ, God walks beside us and before us, crossing the boundaries of our lives, exercising the demons of racism, sexism, classism and ageism to bring hope, healing and new life to our community.” In an Aug. 14 pastoral letter to members and congregations of the ELCA Central States Synod, the Rev. Roger R. Gustafson, bishop of the synod, said that “St. Louis’ racial divisions and strife are deeply rooted and complex. Related issues – what has been called the militarization of the police, the lop-sided racial makeup of the Ferguson Police Department itself (nearly all White in a predominantly African American community), (and) a struggling local economy – intensify the conflict.

Related events – store lootings, peaceful street demonstrations and a police response that has treated them alike – further poison the atmosphere. “The various elements of this painful drama carry the temptation of distracting us from an even more painful truth, one that’s at the heart of it all: His name was Michael Brown. He was 18 years old. He was Black, and he was killed by a police officer. Had he been White, chances are excellent that he would still be alive,” wrote Gustafson. “But the stark fact of Michael Brown’s death under extremely unclear circumstances points our attention to a larger truth: To be born male and African American in this country is to be born into a clear and present danger.” “We need to talk about race and privilege, but high-level conversations between groups will take us only so far.

There is no substitute for personal relationship, for connecting one to one with someone who is unlike 'us.' Such relating is not comfortable because it has not been the norm. But it is possible and necessary if we want to become more and more the people who trust in God and God's providing more than we trust in ourselves," he wrote. For Judith Roberts, program director for ELCA Racial Justice Ministries, the story of Michael Brown "is becoming all too familiar in the headline.

The shooting death of Michael Brown is another example of how young Black and Brown people are targeted in our country. They are stereotyped as a threat, treated as distrustful (and) then it becomes OK to fear them. When you mix that with law enforcement (and) racial profiling, we see the senseless death of a young man with so much promise. I hope and pray the community of Ferguson can work with law enforcement to hold them accountable in improving race relations." "As this case moves to trial the verdict will determine how this community can move forward. Will we continue to see a justice system that does not value the life of Black and Brown bodies? The ELCA criminal justice social statement calls for an end to racial profiling, and I believe this church has a responsibility to continue to follow this story," said Roberts.