Church sees imperative role in racial justice, reconciliation

By Pat McCaughan

[Episcopal News Service] *Editor's note: This story has been updated. Though the Ferguson police department is predominantly white, it is not all-white as previously stated.*

While the fatal police shooting of an unarmed African-American teenager continued to spark protests in Ferguson, Missouri, Episcopalians throughout the U.S. were grappling with a tough reality that it could have happened just about anywhere and with a difficult question: what should the church be doing about it?

Despite the Aug. 9 shooting death of Michael Brown and its violent aftermath the hope "is that it will finally be the wakeup call we need in this country to address this issue," Bishop Stacy Sauls, Episcopal Church chief operating officer, told ENS. "Because, in my opinion, race relations in the United States have been getting worse, not better."

Festering tensions between the predominantly white Ferguson police department and the African-American community erupted in violence after officer Darren Wilson fatally shot 18-year-old Brown. Conflicting eyewitness reports followed and an independent autopsy revealed Brown had been shot six times. Ferguson police subsequently identified Brown as a robbery suspect.

Regardless, local clergy and residents decried the level of police violence directed against the predominantly African-American community.

Sauls said Christian churches sparked the civil rights movement "and I think we're seeing a very strong call for us to be involved again. One thing we can do, is bring people together to talk, not only on a local level or a regional level, but for a national conversation. That can have a very positive impact."

Similarly, in an Aug. 20 statement young adult members of the Union of Black Episcopalians (UBE) cited, among other things, "the subculture of prejudice against black people resulting in headline after headline of another American lying dead in neighborhood streets."

The statement called upon UBE chapters across the country to help carry the message "so that the prophetic voice of the Episcopal Church resounds in speaking against the legacy of institutionalized oppression in the United States and across our world."

Carrying the message: prophetic voices Chester Hines began serving as a trainer at anti-racism workshops in the Diocese of Missouri by choice, and because of circumstance.

"I grew up in segregated St. Louis. It doesn't matter what institution you identify in St.

Louis they have always – in my experience – been segregated, even after the federal Civil Rights legislation of 1964," said Hines, 67, an auditor and former teacher who serves in a field placement assignment at St. Timothy's Episcopal Church in Creve Coeur, as part of the diocesan ordination process.

Hines said that, not only was he not surprised that racial tensions erupted in nearby Ferguson after Brown's shooting, "I was surprised it hadn't happened sooner and in more places."

He passed on his own life lessons to twin sons, Christian and Christopher, as they came of age, in the interest of preservation, he said. "I educated my children to understand and know about segregation, race and racism, that it existed in St. Louis," he said. "I also told them how it manifested itself.

"I taught them as they became 10 years of age, that they would be encountered by the police, by security when they went to the mall with their friends, and they had white friends. I taught them the lessons that I knew they were going to have to learn in order to be out in the community because these were the lessons I had to learn and it hadn't changed," he said.

"I told them what was going to happen but, more importantly I told them, here is your response: You engage the policeman with respect and regard, yes sir, no sir. You give your name. You follow his directions, even if you have to be arrested.

"Because, here's what's at risk: if you aggravate or in some way convey to that policeman that you're challenging him, he's going to harm you in some physical way or bust your head and once your head is busted or you're shot up, it can't be fixed.

"However, it can be fixed if you're taken to the jailhouse, because I can come and get you from there. But a physical confrontation, I can't do anything about."

Now that both sons are 31 and attorneys, he says, "Every day I wake up and say 'Amen.'"

'Race is so hard to talk about' – so listen The Very Rev. Mike Kinman, dean of Christ Church Cathedral in St. Louis, was "trying to listen to folks on the ground" in Ferguson and counseling others to do likewise.

He also invited cathedral parishioners, following the Aug. 17 main Sunday service, to spend time together, with no judgment, no comments, no arguing, just plain listening to each other. "There were tears, anger, confusion, a wide variety of feelings were represented but there was just this holy space and I realized it was grace," he said.

"There are people who've said 'I don't have any place to say this. We are afraid of talking about race; afraid we will say the wrong thing. We need a place where we can

stumble.

“This is something we can do as a church; provide that safe space, to talk about race, because race is so hard to talk about,” he said. “But, I told them all, if you’re not talking, don’t be thinking about what you’re going to say next, just listen.”

The Rev. Eric H. F. Law, an Episcopal priest and founder of the Los Angeles-based Kaleidoscope Institute, which offers leadership development and diversity training in multicultural and changing environments agreed “the first step has to be listening to the historically powerless folks.

“The big question to ask is, do you want to continue to have these sporadic explosions or do you really want to find a way to engage people so you have real relationships?” said Law, who helped to coordinate reconciliation efforts after the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

“The bottom line is, do we have real friendships across racial lines in this country, and can our church facilitate that and not in a superficial way but in a way that we can really attempt to understand each other?”

Sauls said that after a Florida jury found neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman not guilty in July 2013 in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, the Episcopal Church began working toward creating for the first time a missioner for racial reconciliation. In June 2014, Heidi Kim was appointed to that position and Charles Wynder was named the Episcopal Church missioner for social justice and advocacy.

“I really do believe that if we take seriously this notion that we are all members of the Body of Christ, then we have to behave differently toward one another. The first step is listening to people that think completely differently than you do,” said Kim. In her new role, she is responsible for facilitating the establishment and growth of networks in the church to confront the structural issues of racism in the church and society. Wynder is responsible for engaging Episcopalians in building, resourcing and empowering advocacy movements and networks for social justice at a local and community level.

“There was an incident in New York this summer,” said Sauls, referring to the chokehold death of Eric Garner, an African-American man, by New York City police officers, “and now the Michael Brown case, so it’s not an uncommon occurrence.”

“Unfortunately,” he said, “this is one of the saddest statements I can make, that we all knew this day would come again.”

The Interfaith Center of New York on Aug. 21 welcomed New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio’s outreach to religious leaders as a way to “heal and deepen the relationship between police and community” in the wake of Garner’s death. “We applaud senior religious leaders for coming together for dialogue at this critical moment,” the

statement said, recognizing the crucial role that grassroots faith leaders play “in maintaining peaceful co-existence in their neighborhoods.”