

Support and solidarity with Ferguson

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August 21, 2014

Walking from tent to tent in the Ferguson, Mo., neighborhood where 18-year old Michael Brown lived and died, the Rev. Geoffrey A. Black witnessed firsthand the strong presence of local pastors reaching out to heal a community that is hurting, but thirsting for justice. Black's presence in Ferguson, and at the Canfield Green Apartments where the young African American Man was shot earlier this month, also brought a moment of solidarity and support to area UCC ministers.

Black, the UCC general minister and president, spent Wednesday, Aug. 20, on the ground in Ferguson, accepting an invitation from the Missouri Mid-South Conference and local pastors.

"It was good to help them to see that they were not alone in this and that the wider UCC was a concerned and committed partner in ministry with them," Black said. "There was such a strong presence at the gatherings I attended, especially on such a short notice. It was obvious to me that there is a heartfelt concern among UCC people in the St. Louis area to address the issues of race and institutionalized racism that the Ferguson situation presents."

The brief trip was "an opportunity to visit with UCC colleagues and listen to them as they wrestled with a very difficult and challenging situation," he said. The fatal shooting of Brown, who was unarmed, by a white police officer, has heightened racial tensions in Ferguson between a predominantly black neighborhood and a mostly white police force. It's spilled over with riots, questions of police militarization, and attempts to suppress media coverage.

"Two of the clergy I spoke with [Wednesday] had moved to St. Louis from other parts of the country," Black continued. "Their shared observation was that when they arrived in St. Louis they realized that it was a 'powder keg just waiting for a spark in order to explode.' Their conclusion was that the death of Michael Brown at the hands of a white police officer was the spark."

Black joined local UCC pastors at the Canfield Green Apartments, now a rallying place for mourners and protestors. An ecumenical gathering of Christian and Jewish leaders has provided prayers and counseling for the neighborhood. Black met with fellow ministers at St. Peter's United Church of Christ in Ferguson in a discussion on how local churches can respond to this crisis, and how the wider church supports their efforts. In the late afternoon, Black preached at a community interfaith service at the church.

"Once they were together with the opportunity to share their experiences in their churches and the surrounding communities with each other, [local UCC pastors] started to see the many layers of concern and the complexity of the situation they face," Black said. "Some of them were beginning to get in touch with their own thoughts and feelings, while others were fully engaged in advocacy and human service action in response to people in need. Others were also out in the community engaging people in an effort to stem the violence. There was a spectrum of response."

Black sensed that the crisis could present an opportunity for change in St. Louis.

"It is clear that issues having to do with racial profiling, lack of concern or sensitivity to the real needs of the African American community, lack of meaningful engagement across racial lines and lack of political and economic empowerment of the black community in the region are real, significant and must be addressed," he said.