We Are All St. Louisans Now August 15, 2014 By Kenneth J. Pruitt

On Saturday, August 9, 2014, our child, Mike Brown, was shot and killed in the streets of his home community of Ferguson, Mo. in St. Louis County. We join in solidarity, prayer, anger, and sadness with our sisters and brothers who continue to mourn his death. As a collective of regular contributors to this blog, and as people of faith in the living God, we seek at this time to speak with one voice.

We believe we are all one. There is no us and them. We are all family. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. When one of us celebrates, we all celebrate. We believe that we, as a community, have lost sight of this reality. We believe that we are made in the image and likeness of God, and that when we see our human family, we can't unsee God. We can't act towards others or speak to others in any other way than we would towards God.

We believe in our citizens' right to protest. We denounce unnecessarily harsh tactics used by St. Louis County Police Department and the Ferguson Police Department. We believe the police state is not the long-term answer to social unholiness and relational blasphemy. We are grateful and humble to stand with local leaders and their nonviolent work in our city and county. We thank Antonio French's tireless documentation of the beauty and pain of the Ferguson community over the past week. We thank pastors such as Traci Blackmon of Christ the King UCC and Willis Johnson of Wellspring UMC who have embodied bold, prophetic leadership. We celebrate the impeccable leadership of Captain Ron Johnson of the Missouri Highway Patrol, whose calm, empathetic presence has created a marked change in protests on West Florissant Avenue. We also call upon our fellow St. Louisans to refrain from violence. Your anger is wholly justified, but violence, even when it seems the only tactic left to draw attention to the ills of the community, leads down a path towards death. Love has won, is winning, and will always win. That narrative has already been written. We are called to live into it.

We call on our local, national, and international press to strive for painstakingly fair reporting. Social media and mainstream news outlets have been awash with inaccurate, sensationalized, and one-sided reports of events in Ferguson and St. Louis County. It is the duty of the press in a democracy to serve the people with fair, balanced, and accurate reporting. Coverage heavily weighted towards looting solidifies stereotypes of African Americans in the media. Coverage weighted towards discussion of the reasons anyone would resort to looting could foster productive discussions of poverty, race, and disenfranchisement. We ask our fellow St. Louisans and Americans to not seek judgment, but rather, to seek knowledge and wisdom, and to be critical of news coverage as the story of Ferguson continues to unfold.

We believe that the church, particularly our United Methodist Church, can't sit this one out. The world is literally watching. We are waiting for answers and looking for people of faith to ask the right questions. These are the moments when the wheat is separated from the chaff, the sheep from the goats. The United Methodist Church has not always

served the African American community in this city in the way that our Christ would have us serve. Justice begins at the margins. Jesus calls from the outskirts of our comfort zones. The Gospel is proclaimed most clearly in the streets of the Canfield Green Apartments, not in our comfortable sanctuaries and gated suburbs.

We believe that music and prayer are soothing to the soul during these times of crisis. Healing takes community, touch, and voices lifted in unison. Healing takes looking into the eyes of your neighbor, embracing, saying, “I’ll pray for you. You pray for me. I love you. You are important to me. I need you to survive.” Our prayer is also, “Lord forgive us as we turn a blind eye while the world goes to Hell.” We believe that crossing borders—denominational, geographical, racial—is necessary, and that listening, crying, and singing with our mothers and brothers should be a priority for all people of faith during this tragedy.

We believe that a transformed community is possible, but that we must do our part. We will be present with one another. We will attend worship services and vigils to honor Mike Brown. We will extend hands, to friend and stranger, to hold in prayer. We will demand accountability from our local governments. We will give generously to scholarships for the youth of our community.

We call on our leaders to listen to and to watch what is happening. A true leader is one who leads from the bottom up, not from the top down. Systemic change in the way of the Gospel begins with the powerless. Most of our elder pastors and superintendents are white. Many of them are men. Privilege comes with the responsibility to point to unheard voices. Host discussions of race in your churches. Preach on racial reconciliation. Allow marginalized people to share your pulpits. Innovate the way your church is led in a segregated city by purposefully seeking out people of color to hold positions of leadership. Take a hard look at the messages, worship environment, and ethnic makeup of your local church and ask if people of color would feel welcome and safe there. If they wouldn’t, make the necessary changes so that they would.

We believe that sunshine can come out of this storm and that St. Louis can not only heal, but can be made stronger than ever through this tragedy.

We believe that Mike Brown deserves better than to be remembered in relation to looting and violence.

We believe that it is our duty to honor his memory by doing all we can to reconcile all divides throughout our beautiful city, this St. Louis that we love so much.