

Prophets and peacemakers

by [Stephen Huba](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

When racial unrest erupted in Cincinnati in April, African-American ministers were caught between being prophets and peacemakers. They clashed at times not only with city authorities but with members of their own communities.

On the second day of rioting, black clergy intervened to keep a group of angry protesters from entering the downtown business district, where widespread looting and vandalism had wreaked havoc a day earlier. For this action, the clergy, many of them veterans of the civil rights movement, found themselves vilified by protesters as tools of the establishment.

“We were caught off guard by the amount of resentment and how it was expressed,” admitted Damon Lynch III, pastor of New Prospect Baptist Church in Over-the-Rhine. His neighborhood was the site of many of the disturbances that developed following the April 7 fatal shooting of Timothy Thomas, an unarmed black man wanted on 14 misdemeanor warrants, by police officer Stephen Roach. Part of the rift was generational, but part of it was caused by ministers trying to do two things at once—participate in the street-level calls for justice and avoid the appearance of contributing to the unrest.

A month later, many of those same clergy were being looked upon as true community leaders. On May 7, when a grand jury announced indictments against Roach, Lynch and other ministers led a triumphant “Jericho march” around District 1 police headquarters. “We believe, spiritually, that the walls of our police division are coming down brick-by-brick, indictment-by-indictment,” he said then.

What changed in the intervening month was the fact that “we listened,” Lynch said, and that ministers stayed visible and engaged in the riot-affected areas. “We were there every night, every day. The church was open all day, all night.” Lynch, whose father, Damon Lynch Jr., is a longtime activist in Cincinnati, emerged as the primary spokesman for change in the weeks following the riots, which were the worst the city has seen since 1968.

“We need prophets in the faith community. I accept that as my calling,” Lynch, 41, said. “People ask me, ‘Are you a peacemaker or a protester?’ Well, I’m both.”

The churches’ struggle has been to stay “relevant” to the people on the streets while acting constructively. “Our agitation for social justice has been so mainstream . . . and it never filters down to the people who are being harassed on the streets by police officers on a daily basis,” Lynch said.

Black churches weren’t the only religious organizations caught off guard. Because the riots happened during Holy Week, many churches found themselves “overprogrammed” with Easter activities and unable to respond, said Duane Holm, director of the Metropolitan Area Religious Coalition of Cincinnati.

But in the weeks that followed, religious groups were at the forefront of activities, leading peaceful protests, confronting the City Council, issuing statements on racism and holding prayer vigils.

“We were really blessed in this city. All the churches and religious groups, white and black, got together and made a strong stand for peace,” said Aaron Greenlea, president of the Baptist Ministers Conference. “I’m really proud of the religious community for that. I think a great work was done.”

Among the religions responses:

- After a curfew was imposed on April 12, Roman Catholic churches in the city obeyed Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk and canceled their Easter Vigil services, postponing hundreds of baptisms, confirmations and first communions.
- Clergy and lay members of the United Church of Christ met on Holy Saturday to draft a statement. “We are reminded that during the first holy week, Jesus wept over Jerusalem because of its failure to be a city of peace,” it said. “We, too, have wept over Cincinnati.”
- United Methodist Bishop Bruce Ough of the West Ohio Conference and Greg Stover, superintendent of the Cincinnati district, met with United Methodist ministers April 22 and followed up with a letter stating, “We can no longer pretend the evil of racism has been cast out.”
- Syngman Rhee, moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), visited Cincinnati on May 2 to speak on racial reconciliation.

- On May 2 the Cincinnati City Council, heeding the advice of Archbishop Pilarczyk, MARCC director Holm and other religious leaders, agreed to hire a mediator to settle a racial-profiling lawsuit pending against the city.
- The Council of Christian Communion sponsored a May 3 dialogue session, out of which grew plans for a May 5 clergy prayer walk through the Over-the-Rhine section.
- Several ad hoc clergy groups have called for boycotts and an end to “business as usual” between the races. One such call led to the cancellation of the Pepsi Jammin’ on Main festival. But a month later, calls for a boycott of the 22nd annual Taste of Cincinnati had little noticeable effect.
- MARCC, the coalition of Jews, Christians and Muslims founded after the 1968 riots, sponsored two prayer vigils for peace—one at Fountain Square on Good Friday, the other at Hamilton County Courthouse on May 7, one hour before the indictments against Roach were announced.

At the May 7 vigil, the genteel calls for peace and justice by area religious leaders were met with hostility from a group of sign-waving protesters. When Taylor Thompson, president of MARCC, opened with a reference to “this place of justice,” he was interrupted by shouts of “There ain’t no justice here!” Once again one could sense tension between the clergy and the angry protesters. Only when Damon Lynch gave a fiery benediction did MARCC and the protesters seem to be on the same page.

“I was glad Damon pulled out all the stops at the end,” Holm said, “because at some point you have to bring those people along with you.”