

After Ferguson, churches must confess the sin of abandonment

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(RNS) The ride to the church seemed too short to give me time to unleash all those tears. I had to preach. What would I say?

How do you preach what you feel when you're one of only a few black people in the church?

What do you say to a mostly white congregation after the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown? What do you say after prayers and litanies are offered to remind us that we are called to promote justice and peace?

I cried because I feared saying what I felt to members of Bethel Baptist Church in Columbia, Mo., last Sunday. I cried because I wondered if they would understand. In that moment, the deep burden of division landed in my stomach and forced me to scream. Yes, the ache was about the death of another black man.

But I cried because I felt my blackness come to me in a way that exposed historical pain. I wondered if it ever goes away. I thought about what it takes to move beyond the trappings of history.

Have we evoked a language of peace devoid of a clear understanding of how it feels to be harassed by the police?

Is it possible to preach to those who haven't lived that experience? Isn't it much easier to drive away?

I wanted to leave the pain of the parking lot and find a congregation filled with black people. I wanted to find home — the affirmation, love and support of the black church.

But as easy as it is to drive away, change happens when we stay.

People keep asking what the church can do to move us past the pain of Ferguson. Maybe the answer is found in staying.

Staying is painful. The desire to leave is rooted in that deep sense of loneliness. The desire to depart is cultivated by the fear of not being affirmed and understood.

Ferguson is a story about abandonment. It began when white residents left due to the rise in black population. Some blacks left in search of the American dream defined by the percentage of white residents. Churches followed by abandoning their mission around the corner.

What service can churches offer among those they have abandoned?

“It’s not about what we can do, it’s about what they want us to do,” said Muriel Johnson, regional associate minister of the American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region. “We can offer to stand in solidarity with them in our giftedness to do what they tell us they need.”

Johnson is correct to suggest we listen. What else can churches offer?

Churches, black and white, can confess the sin of abandonment. They can confess the limits of their theological claims.

We can confess that our congregations are dying and becoming less relevant due to our unwillingness to listen. We can apologize for not being present with those who hurt. We can ask forgiveness for formulating views about people and their communities that negate their dignity. We should beg forgiveness for walking away.

We can admit how hard it is to be present. Congregations should talk about the fear of poverty and the consequences of walking in that space. Pastors should admit how they are lured into embracing congregations with wealthy members. We should confess packing sermons with language that satisfies the masses and maintains distance from those we fear.

Yes, we should confess not moving beyond the talk about race and racism. Yes, we must admit how difficult it is to stay in the parking lot, move into the church and preach to those who don’t understand what we have to share.

But we have to stay there until they get the message.

So, we're sorry, Ferguson. We abandoned you. Be patient with us as we prove to you that we will not walk away again.