

Holistic approach needed after Nichols' death, pastor says

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MEMPHIS (BP)—The swift criminal indictment of five police officers and the release of camera footage after the death of Tyre Nichols are positive steps toward transparency in policing, Pastor Bartholomew Orr said after meeting with local and federal officials.



Pastor Bartholomew Orr of Brown Missionary Baptist Church in Southaven, Miss., with his wife, Valarie.

(<https://brownbaptist.org/about-us/our-senior-pastor/>)

But preventing police brutality and achieving widespread reform will require a holistic approach that addresses the many facets of such evil, said Orr, senior pastor of Brown Missionary Baptist Church in the Memphis suburb of Southaven, Miss.

“I believe the consensus is that the police chief (Memphis Police Chief Cerelyn Davis) and the D.A. (Shelby County District Attorney Steve Mulroy) have acted appropriately in this situation,” Orr said.

“No one can control anyone, and unfortunately, we’re going to always have this issue because we’re dealing with human beings, and they’re flawed. Their hearts are flawed, and we just need ways that when this happens, we can be able to deal with it.”

While cases of police brutality, such as the 2020 murder of George Floyd, often center on racial disparities in policing, all of the police officers charged in the death of Nichols, a 29-year-old Black father, are also Black.

Orr has led Brown Missionary in praying for Nichols’ family.

“First of all, our hearts go out to the family,” Orr said, noting Nichols’ aunt is a member of his church.

“No one should have to bury their young person senselessly due to violence. The community has definitely rallied together, Black and white, and everyone has expressed deep hurt and remorse for the family and is lifting the family up as well in prayers. We have been praying specifically as a church and as a community for the family.”

Pursue ‘the things that lead to peace’

Orr paraphrased Proverbs 11:11, “By the blessings of the upright, the city is exalted, but by the treacherous talk of the wicked it is torn apart,” in exhorting communities to pursue “the things that lead to peace.”

“The Black-on-Black crime is so apparent in many communities, even without the police element involved,” Orr said. “And so, it’s so important that we get at the root causes, and that is we have evil people in our society whose heart needs to be changed.”

Nichols was hospitalized after Memphis police officers beat and tasered him during a Jan. 7 traffic stop. Nichols died three days later while hospitalized for his injuries.

No reason for the traffic stop has been established. While police initially said Nichols was driving erratically, Davis said there's no evidence of such.

Five police officers have been charged in Nichols' death, and at least one police officer, two Shelby County Sheriff's deputies and two Memphis Fire Department employees have been relieved of their duties for acts related to Nichols' arrest.

Charged with second-degree murder and other offenses are former Memphis officers Tadarrius Bean, Demetrius Haley, Emmitt Martin III, Desmond Mills Jr. and Justin Smith, the law enforcement officials announced.

Need for trust

Orr met in a small group with Davis and Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland, and attended a separate meeting with U.S. Department of Justice officials as reports of the tragedy began.

"We have been involved in the past when these things have happened in Memphis, and the things that we were trying to advocate for, in this situation we do feel as if those things that we have advocated for in the past, that they actually did a great job addressing those issues," Orr told Baptist Press. "To me it's a matter of just trust.

"The community needs to trust the law enforcement that we have given and granted the authority to help maintain the order and peace in our community. And for that trust to take place, we do need transparency, we do need to rely on technology especially in terms of bodycam, and timing is

so important as well, because in the past, oftentimes, things have been delayed.”

Orr describes the Nichols tragedy as a “crime issue,” not a “color issue.”

“I believe that as the community, we need to look at the root causes of all of this. I spoke with the chief years ago in Southaven about what could really change the crime situation that we find ourselves in. And he said, ‘Brother Orr, the bottom line is we need people with changed hearts, and the only answer to a changed heart is Jesus Christ.’”

The evil of police brutality should spur Christians in evangelism, Orr said.

“For believers, the reason our work is so important, as we evangelize, as we share the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, ultimately only a changed heart is going to stop the senseless killing, the crime imbalance that’s consuming our society.”