

Editorial: Race, class, equal opportunity & the church's job

May 1, 2015

Baltimore rarely crosses Texans' consciousness, except when the Orioles or the Ravens play our ball teams. But it's been on our minds lately.

Another young black man dead at the hands of police.

Peaceful protests turned violent.

The bulging scar of racial confrontation—ripe, potent and painful.

✘ Editor Marv Knox Besides becoming president, a sports star or an entertainer, an African-American male's most likely path to national fame seems to be death by cops. Freddie Gray of Baltimore now heads the list. Recent inductees include Walter Scott in North Charleston, Eric Garner on Staten Island, Tamir Rice in Cleveland and Michael Brown in Ferguson.

This isn't a rant about police brutality. Nor is it a tirade about consequences of breaking laws. It's not even a commentary on appropriate or inappropriate responses to police action.

It's a simple observation: So much smoke of untimely death and escalating protests signals a raging fire fueled by racial and class division.

Let's say three things up front: No reasonable person condones (a) breaking laws, (b) police brutality or (c) rioting, looting and arson. So, don't get sidetracked by the particular details surrounding Gray, Scott, Garner, Rice and Brown. The questions we must ask are straightforward: What do these deaths and their reactions mean? How do we respond?

President Obama [addressed the issue](#) when he answered a question about

Baltimore April 28. "If we think that we're just going to send the police to do the dirty work of containing the problems that arise there, without as a nation and as a society saying, 'What can we do to change those communities, to help lift up those communities and give those kids opportunity?' then we're not going to solve this problem," he told reporters.

Soul searching

"We can't just leave this to the police," he added. "I think there are police departments that have to do some soul searching. I think there are some communities that have to do some soul searching. But I think we, as a country, have to do some soul searching. ..."

"This is not new. It's been going on for decades. And without making any excuses for criminal activities that take place in these communities, what we also know is that if you have impoverished communities that have been stripped away of opportunity, where children are born into abject poverty; they've got parents, often, because of substance abuse problems or incarceration or lack of education themselves, who can't do right by their kids. It's more likely that those kids end up in jail or dead than that they go to college. ..."

"If we really want to solve the problem, if our society really wanted to solve the problem, we could," Obama said. "It's just it would require everybody saying, 'This is important; this is significant,' and that we don't just pay attention to these communities when a CVS burns, and we don't just pay attention when a young man gets shot or has his spine snapped. We're paying attention all the time because we consider those kids our kids and we think they're important and they shouldn't be living in poverty and violence."

What do we do? Where do we begin?

Answers would require a book, not an editorial, but maybe here are

starting points:

- **Make friends.**

Of course, myriad social, cultural, economic, political and judicial dynamics are at play. But the root of the problem is we don't know each other. A Public Religion Research Institute [survey](#), reported by the [Washington Post](#), documented the disconnect between races.

The average white American's circle of friends is only 1 percent black, while the average black American's circle is 8 percent white. Numbers are similarly poor across other racial lines.

From time to time, our churches sponsor pulpit exchanges, where a pastor from one racial or ethnic groups preaches at a church dominated by another group, and vice-versa. What we need are pew exchanges. Our churches can create multiple opportunities for trans-racial friendship-making—from mission projects, to shared meals, to all kinds of formal and informal get-togethers.

Individually, we also must make the effort to meet and befriend people from various racial and ethnic groups.

The only way we'll ever transcend racism is by getting to know one another. We must become close-enough friends so that we not only hear each other, but that we empathize with each other. We want the best for our brothers and sisters because we begin to feel what it's like to be them.

- **Invest in children and youth.**

We can mentor children of other races. We can tutor minority children who don't get educational support at home. We can volunteer in their schools. We can support public schools.

We can aid—with our time and money—community programs in minority

neighborhoods.

We can assist programs designed to help minority parents raise their kids.

- **Work for better jobs.**

We can advocate for programs, policies and investment that create more and better-paying jobs. We can support an increase in the minimum wage, so working parents can support their children.

While we're at it, we can campaign for more and better affordable child care, safe housing, adequate nearby grocery stores and other basic building blocks of safe and secure families.

- **Stand for justice.**

Baptists are most comfortable operating programs out of our churches and church-related charities. But some challenges—such as race- and class-related disparity—are social and systemic.

We need to work on behalf of judicial reform, public education, nutrition support, regulation of payday lending and other public programs that make our whole society more just and fair.

Without these infrastructure changes, we're treating many symptoms, but we're not working on large-scale solutions.