

# Editorial: We've got a lot of race work to do in America

November 28, 2014

No matter what we think about a [grand jury's decision not to indict](#) police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of Michael Brown, can we acknowledge attitudes about race divide our nation?

The grand jury's Wilson/Brown decision [sparked protests](#) in 170 cities across the nation. Despite looting in Ferguson, the vast majority of those protests remained peaceful, although deeply passionate.



Editor Marv Knox To be sure, the death of one black teenager at the hands of one white policeman did not send tens of thousands of protestors into the streets. Likewise, the decision of one mixed-race grand jury not to indict one officer did not cause hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Americans who resonate with those protestors to shake their heads in disbelief.

No, reaction to the grand jury's decision transcended what happened both in the middle of a suburban street last summer and a decision reached in a county courthouse just before Thanksgiving.

For millions of Americans, the grand jury's decision represents American racial injustice. The point is not Michael Brown and Darren Wilson. The point is every person of color confronting white authority in our society.

You definitely recognize this if you are a parent of nonwhite teenagers—particularly sons, especially black sons. You probably recognize this if you are the friend of one or more of those parents and you have had honest conversations about raising their children in America today. You recognize fear. You recognize utter powerlessness to ensure the safety of young people you love more than life itself.

### **The gunshots reverberate**

Do not be distracted by the specifics of Michael Brown's case. By nearly all accounts, both Brown and Wilson were at fault that hot summer day. All other facts aside, a black teenager died in the street, and a white police officer pulled the trigger. The echoes of those gunshots reverberate still.

They reverberate in the hearts of parents of color, who fear dangers almost invisible, if not incomprehensible, to white parents. Fear that a child, particularly a son, will be assumed guilty if anything—and sometimes before anything—goes wrong. Fear of wrong time/wrong place/wrong color scenarios ending in tragedy and injustice. Fear of a future filled with mountain-high obstacles composed completely of melanin.

They reverberate in the hearts of white people, too, who cannot comprehend racial rage a half century after voting rights and civil rights acts supposedly changed the nation. Who cannot explain, much less tolerate, what seems to be simple lawlessness. Who, though they rarely think it and cannot express it, fear a future in which that rage embodies full expression.

This is why we're all so fidgety about Ferguson. Together, Wilson and Brown pulled a scab off a wound white people thought—maybe "hoped" is a better word—healed over. But it's a wound everyone else knows still oozes, far from healed.

So, how does it ever heal? Can we, as a nation, ever actually achieve "post-

racial” peace? And if it is attainable, how do we reach it?

### **Responsibility of the church**

This is a challenge where the church—full of conservatives and liberals alike—should wave off government and proclaim clearly and forcefully, “We’ve got this.”

Baptists are best equipped to lead in charting racial progress and, ultimately, peace. Of all voluntarily associated groups in America, none is as racially mixed—though not fully integrated—as are Baptists. The Baptist banner flies over African-American, Anglo, Asian-American, Hispanic, multi-ethnic and myriad other congregations. We don’t come together all that often on Sunday morning, but we come together. In Texas, we know each other moderately well, because we come together in associational and state meetings and sit across from each other at virtually all institutional board meetings.

Yet beyond platitudes of resolutions and other broad public statements, we rarely address race.

Sisters and brothers, we’re past due for heartfelt, honest and fearless conversations. We need to talk about race. And we need the unvarnished truth.

We need to hear from one another. But for starters, Anglos need to keep quiet and listen. Whites must plead for blacks, Hispanics and others to talk candidly about what life is like for them. About raising children. About jobs and education and opportunity. About healthcare and housing. About traveling anywhere and everywhere. About drugs and prison. About our denomination, too.

And then Anglos should respond. Not with defensiveness or explanation. But with similar honesty. About what frightens them. About what frustrates

them. About how they see change.

The bosom of the church may be the only safe place for such conversations.

But until we talk, honestly talk, we cannot hope to heal.