

Charismatic Pastors Mobilize in Wake of Fatal Shooting in Grand Rapids, Michigan

Pastors in Grand Rapids, Michigan, are taking action as the city reels in the aftermath of the fatal shooting of 26-year-old Patrick Lyoya by a Grand Rapids police officer on April 4. Video footage of the shooting was released on Wednesday (April 13), sparking protests outside the city's police department.

Lyoya, who is Black, was pulled over last week for a mismatched license plate. Video footage shows a white officer shooting Lyoya in the head after a brief scuffle. Lyoya and his family arrived from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2014 as refugees, and he leaves behind his parents, two young daughters and five siblings.

In the days since Lyoya's death, a group of Black pastors in Grand Rapids, called the Black Clergy Coalition, has been organizing community events to promote dialogue, healing and justice.

"We think that our faith perspective is critical in this hour, to not just discuss policy change, which is necessary, but to also discuss the spiritual and faith dynamic," said Pastor Jathan K. Austin of Bethel Empowerment Church in Grand Rapids. "We must continue to keep our trust in the Father so that people don't lose trust in this time because of the heartache, the pain."

On Sunday (April 10), the group helped organize a forum for community discussion in response to Lyoya's death. The discussion took place at Renaissance Church of God in Christ in Grand Rapids— the location was intentional, according to the church's senior pastor, Bishop Dennis J. McMurray, who noted the wider church's historic role in guiding civil rights

movements and said the Black Clergy Coalition is drawing on that legacy.

“It was unreal, the level of cooperative dialogue and understanding that took place,” McMurray told Religion News Service. “If these conversations would have started almost anywhere else, the volatility that could be associated to something as devastating as what we’re facing could have been a bomb that goes off that would cause so many other issues.”

The group also helped host a Thursday press conference at the Renaissance Church of God in Christ and a noon Good Friday service at the church, where they took up a collection for the Lyoya family.

The Rev. Khary Bridgewater, who lives in Grand Rapids, said the city’s racial and religious landscape informs how local leaders are responding to Lyoya’s death. Grand Rapids has a population that’s over 65% white and about 18% Black. It’s also the headquarters for the Christian Reformed Church, a small, historically Dutch Reformed denomination, and is home to over 40 CRC churches. According to Bridgewater, leaders shaped by the CRC’s reformed theology are often more likely to advocate for change within existing systems.

According to Bridgewater, “It’s very hard for most CRC churches to look at a system and say, ‘This is wrong, we’re going to act as activists to push the system into a different state.’ They’re more inclined to say, ‘Hey, let’s sit down and have a conversation with the leaders and try to do things differently.’” Bridgewater says this theology can bump up against the Black church’s prophetic tradition of change-making. For this reason, he said, Christian groups in Grand Rapids need to have theological discussions around topics like justice and citizenship.

For years, the city’s police department has been criticized for racial profiling and for drawing guns on Black children.

Joseph D. Jones, who is a city commissioner and pastor, told Religion News Service he wants to address police and community relations by looking at “root causes” of socio-economic inequality and other disparities while also addressing training for officers.

“I do believe in the absolute power of prayer,” Jones added. “I’m asking those who do pray ... to pray for the family of Patrick, to pray for our city, to pray that angels are encamped around our city to protect our city and to pray that God restore and change the hearts of those who desire to engage in anything that is seen as evil in our country and our world,” Jones said.

Austin of Bethel Empowerment Church said the Black Clergy Coalition has long been advocating for police reform and specifically wants to see better diversity and culture training for officers and changes in how the department responds to police shootings.

“I am going to allow the wheels of justice to roll, and we pray that they roll properly,” said McMurray, who is also part of the coalition. “We are working, but we’re also watching.”
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