

Pentecostals Put Themselves in Middle of Ferguson, Missouri, Violence

The streets of Ferguson, Missouri, have fluctuated between violence, calm and renewed violence following the shooting death of Michael Brown, a black 18-year-old, by Darren Wilson, a white Ferguson police officer, in a confrontation on Saturday, Aug. 9.

After two failed attempts to restore order by police, as violence and looting erupted again over the weekend, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon has set a curfew and called in the National Guard.

Destruction, violence, hatred, division, death.

"The only one sitting back and laughing at this all is Satan," says Jack Hembree, pastor of Bethel Fellowship (AG) in Florissant, Missouri—located just a few minutes from where rioting has broken out. Hembree, who expressed his grief in a note to his congregation over the violence, urged his congregation not to "take sides" but instead bring Christ into the situation.

"The differences that divide us were not created by God but designed by the enemy. It is time to battle not with a gun, bottle, or badge, but with prayer and the Word of God," Hembree wrote. "Lay down our economics, our political persuasion, our differences, or whatever is hindering the power of the words of God from working in us and pick up the cross of Jesus Christ that brings forgiveness, confession, repentance, acceptance, love, freedom and life."

And his church has joined other churches as members of the Metro North Church Alliance to do just that.

"What you don't see on the national media is the church," Hembree says. "The churches got together and marched down that same street the rioters marched on, passing out bags of supplies, food and toiletries to people. Church members stood in front of buildings through the night to make sure they were not looted. Church members parked in people's driveways to make sure they were safe all through the night. Church members went up and down the streets, cleaning up the mess. The national media doesn't show any of that.

"The people of Ferguson are very good people," Hembree says. "Yes, there needs to be some changes. We know that and it's nothing new, but it's a good community with good people."

Brian Schmidgall, executive presbyter and pastor of MiddleTree Church, located on the dividing line between North and South St. Louis and about three miles from the rioting, agrees with Hembree's evaluation of Christ being the answer.

"There will be people of profile flying in and getting their face in the spotlight because it's trendy and in vogue ... there will be social-justice programs and systemic structure changes, but there will be the same problems 10 years down the road," Schmidgall says. "The one thing the church addresses is the heart. If you don't address the heart, then healing and recovery don't happen."

Schmidgall also observed a phenomenon of the digital age that he felt actually intensified and fueled the rioting.

"Social media is instigating a lot of this [violence]," he says. "As the mainstream media [originally] couldn't get access to the scene, social media was really getting charged and drawing a line in the sand for people—and everyone knows that if it's on the 'Internet' [or a text/tweet], it must be true..."

As Schmidgall works to bring a sense of stability in the midst of chaos, he believes this tragedy can be redeemed by God. The

focus of MiddleTree Church, he says, is to bridge the divide between North and South St. Louis (the haves and have-nots), and he believes the incident in Ferguson will open doors for the churches in his area to unite and be used by God to make a change in the community.

“The Lord’s hand is priming this for good things,” he says, adding that he’ll be meeting with local ministers this week to plan united action. “What the enemy meant for harm, I think the Lord is going to use this.”

Pastor Aubery Kishna and his wife, Vimla, have been pastoring Jubilee Worship Center (AG) for the past 19 years. Theirs is the AG church located closest to the demonstrations and rioting, occurring just down the road from the church. One member lives in the apartment complex directly behind a looted and burned gas station that has appeared on national news.

Kishna, a bivocational minister, says his church canceled services last Wednesday but held them on Sunday, encouraging members to pray for their community, while leading them in prayer for the families, school districts and political leaders involved. They currently plan to hold midweek services this week.

The church, which sees 40 to 50 people in attendance on Sundays, also took food from its pantry and partnered with another church that was distributing food to those in need in the area of the demonstrations.

The Kishnas both agreed that the community seems to be fairly peaceful during the daylight hours, but at night, things “get out of control.” But Vimla, who is a teacher, says her school district, along with two others, were closed on Monday, due to the demonstrations.

AG Missionary Jay Covert, who oversees Urban Outreach Church Plants in East St Louis and Washington Park, where he is no stranger to danger, hasn’t seen a strong reaction in his

community or neighborhoods to the riots.

Having just been caught in gang crossfire several months ago while he and a visiting pastor drove around the neighborhood, Covert is concerned that the riot in Ferguson might not be an isolated event. That unless there's a God-driven transformation in the hearts of people, riots and violence may happen and intensify as a trend throughout the country before things get any better.

"Where we're at, murder is not uncommon," Covert explains simply. "Murders rarely get solved because no one talks, they're fearful—'snitches get stitches' is the saying."

Kishna says that no matter what the outcome of the investigation, he feels deeply for the parents of Michael Brown. "We had a 26-year-old girl that we buried just a couple months ago," Kishna says. "She was at the wrong place at the wrong time and was caught in a gang shooting. ... My heart breaks for Michael Brown's family. But not just for them, but for all the 'Michael Browns' who have been shot and killed on the streets by gangs. There's no one crying foul for them."

Hembree says that the weekend's renewed violence is making things difficult and unsafe for churches, where prayer is even more of a focus.

"Some of the [ministry] efforts have been suspended for a few days," Hembree says, expressing concern about "outsiders" being the cause of the problems. "As of now, we are still proceeding with attempting to meet the needs of families in the area... [but] if it gets too dangerous, they will have to stop for the short term. Those decisions will be made daily."

Schmidgall says that it is vital for the church to be actively involved in the lives of people in the community. "If you have relationship, you have a voice," Schmidgall says. "Because if we don't have those relationships, what is going to happen if the outcome of the investigation isn't what people want to

hear?"