

Race in America

It has been less than two weeks since the Nov. 24 grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. With demonstrations in over 170 cities and mob violence in Ferguson and St. Louis, everyone understood that race relations were at the lowest point since the 1960s. Then Sunday night, Nov. 30 in St. Louis (just 20 miles from Ferguson) Zemir Begic, a 32-year-old white Bosnian immigrant, was bludgeoned to death by hammer wielding black and Latino teens. The Bosnian community has taken to the streets with their own protests. They are saying, "Bosnian Lives Matter."

Next, Wednesday, Dec. 4, a New York grand jury failed to indict a policeman in the choking death of Eric Garner. Our national response to the decisions of these two grand juries is like a Rorschach test revealing our attitudes about race. We are interpreting recent events through the lenses of our personal racial history.

Why do most blacks and whites see this case so differently? The standard response from many whites who do not understand the reaction of most blacks is to point to the high rate of black-on-black crime. It is undeniably true that black men are far more likely to die at the hand of another black man than at that of a white police officer. In fact, the overwhelming majority of homicides are intra-racial, regardless of the race in question.

But what white Americans must understand is that the slaying of a black youth by a white police officer—regardless of the details—evokes painful memories for many blacks. These memories are easily exploited by irresponsible leaders and unscrupulous members of the media, until the deaths of young men like Michael Brown become symbolic of all the lynchings of the not so distant past. Furthermore, for many blacks, America's criminal justice system still doesn't feel fair.

Blacks are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites, and even law-abiding African-Americans have experienced the humiliation of being stopped, searched, or watching friends or family members get arrested.

None of that is to say that Officer Wilson should have been indicted if he didn't do anything illegal. Killing Michael Brown was tragic, but if it was done in self-defense, it was not a crime. I believe the press conference at the time of the announcement gave enough details to convince objective observers that the jury took its job seriously and weighed the evidence impartially. Law enforcement must be allowed to use lethal force in the line of duty, and putting violent criminals behind bars benefits communities of all races. However, the Garner case is much more troubling.

Unfortunately, even a just process offers little comfort to grieving parents and a grieving community. For many, both the Brown and Garner cases will serve as further "proof" that America is still mired in racism. I agree with the protestors that "Black Lives Matter" and that the number of black deaths in urban communities is unacceptable. But valuing black life doesn't mean indicting a police officer if he didn't commit a crime.

So where do we go from here? Although we no longer live in an era of mass lynchings, we have not crossed over into an idyllic post-racial era. A large segment of the black community remains trapped in generational poverty, underachievement and resentment. This brewing undercurrent and racial tension in most American cities will take a long time to eradicate. But many of our historic civil rights organizations are not tackling the root problems; they focus on assigning blame rather than creating solutions. Our cities need stronger families and better government, as well as education and prison reform. The black residents of Ferguson need to feel like active participants in their government rather than its subjects. In a community so divided, I believe

multi-denominational and multi-racial Christian coalitions must lead the way.

A fundamental question that we must ask ourselves is this: "Do we have the collective moral will to change our nation and renew the Martin Luther King Jr. dream?"

I believe that the Urban World Summit we held in St. Louis two weekends ago can be part of that new beginning. The work now lies with Christian leaders like the Summit participants, who will start the long journey to build a stronger Ferguson and a stronger St. Louis. Reconciliation is slow, challenging work; and only those who labor in love can hope to have any success. But though I grieve for the people of Ferguson, St. Louis and New York, I have great hope that a unified church can lead them to a better future.

Bishop Harry R. Jackson Jr. *is senior pastor of Hope Christian Church, a 3,000-member congregation in the Washington, D.C., area. He is also founder and president of High Impact Leadership Coalition, which exists to protect the moral compass of America and be an agent of healing to our nation by educating and empowering churches, community and political leaders.*