

Pastors Pray for Racial Healing in Sanford

A prayer meeting at the police department in Sanford, Fla., was held Tuesday to bring healing to this divided city five months after the death of Trayvon Martin thrust it into the national limelight.

A group called Sanford Pastors Connecting—formed in the wake of the death of 17-year-old Martin, who was killed on Feb. 26—challenged law enforcement and the faith community to step up and bridge the racial gap and mistrust of the police that has undeniably existed in the city for many years.

The group of 25 to 30 pastors led the services at the Sanford Police Department. Approximately 100 people of diverse backgrounds attended.

Thomas Battles, regional director for the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service, has been working with the city and has been urging local pastors to unite for the cause of racial harmony in Sanford. Battles suggested the formation of Sanford Pastors Connecting.

“We have united ourselves together against the common evil that is happening here,” said Rev. H.D. Rucker, lead pastor at First Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church following the prayer meeting.

Rucker is co-chairman of Sanford Pastors Connecting along with Pastor Jeff Krall, lead pastor at Family Worship Center, the local Assemblies of God church.

In early April, the national media converged on Sanford to cover the Martin story. Members of the local media attended the Tuesday prayer service.

Rucker said Tuesday's prayer meeting was only one step along the path to racial harmony in Sanford.

"This meeting today was to let people know that we are united across racial and denominational lines," he said. "Also, it was to let the public know that we are praying for them and we are willing to lend a helping hand to the Sanford Police Department to eradicate the sin problem and evilness that plagues our city."

Rucker said Sanford Pastors Connecting plans to meet at least twice a month in the upcoming months to devise plans to iron out community issues and to develop a cohesive strategy to unite the community.

One of the major goals of Sanford Pastors Connecting is to build a stronger relationship between the city's youth and its law enforcement agencies. The group aims to help the city develop programs involving sports and other after-school activities in which youth will interact with members of the law enforcement community.

"The faith community in our city wants to make programs like that a priority for our youth, and we fully support that ideal," said Sanford Police Chief Richard Myers. "I think we can network that with some of the already existing programs and see if we can use that as a springboard to what we want to accomplish. We want to help our youth to have better choices to make. This raises the bar for that, but we've still got a lot of work to do."

Respect, Rucker said, is the key word on both sides of the equation.

"It's not just one or the other, it's both sides that need to work on it," he said. "We need our children to heed to authority. But, we also need our police officers to be a little bit more patient with the youth of our community. That's what builds a better relationship."

Tim Waisanen, a Sanford youth evangelist and missionary, said some youth initiatives are still in their infancy stages, but that several ideas already have been discussed.

“We’re looking at September for beginning a monthly worship service to bring youth together,” Waisanen said. “We need to show the youth of this city some love. The Scripture says to love your neighbor as yourself.

“But, these kids don’t love their neighbor because they don’t love themselves. We need to give them a foundation to love themselves and then to teach them how to love others.”

Charisma magazine has covered this tragedy and the issue of racism in America and the church in its June issue. *Charisma* Founder Steve Strang has taken a lead in Sanford to help bring healing partly because the tragedy happened 2.3 miles from the Charisma Media office. Strang has worked for racial reconciliation in Sanford for many of the 30 years he has lived in the area.