

Sanford Pastors Unite in Trayvon Martin Tragedy

Sanford, Fla., pastors stood united on Friday morning in front of Holy Cross Episcopal Church to declare unity among local clergy.

More than 20 pastors crossed ethnic and denominational lines in a pledge to work side-by-side to bring healing and reconciliation to the community in the wake of the tragic death of **Trayvon Martin**.

"We call not on our city but on our state and our nation to work toward reconciliation," said Rory Harris, pastor of Holy Cross Episcopal Church. "There are certain things we need to deal with. There is work to be done. We have to get past this and move forward."

Martin, a 17-year-old African-American, was killed by the 28-year-old **George Zimmerman** on Feb. 26. The Sanford community has seen protests and threats of violence from the New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a black political organization. In response, armed neo-Nazis are patrolling Sanford.

"We aren't going to stand on the side of black or white," said David Charlton, pastor of First United Methodist Church of Sanford. "We are standing on the side of justice."

In one of their first moves to bring healing to the divided community, the pastors announced tentative plans for a citywide memorial service for Martin. The ministers are seeking the Martin family's permission. Tim Waisanen, a local youth pastor, believes a memorial would help.

"Young people want to rally around a cause that's greater than themselves. We believe this is a cause they can rally around,"

he said. "We want to usher in a spirit of peace and healing and love."

The overarching sentiment at the gathering was clear: oneness. Derrick C. Gay, pastor of Sanford's Dominion Church International who was involved in discussions around releasing the 911 tapes between Zimmerman and police dispatchers on the night Martin was killed, made it clear that the pastors were "casting aside our personal opinions" and praying for both the Martin and Zimmerman family, seeing justice for Martin and due process for Zimmerman.

The press conference comes a day after more than 80 pastors met in a Charisma Media conference room to discuss how to foster true healing and reconciliation amid the racial tension in Sanford. Raleigh Washington, president and CEO of Promise Keepers, whose mission is to issue a catalytic clarion call to the body of Christ and to hear and obey the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, led the meeting. Bishop Harry Jackson, senior pastor at Hope Christian Church in Beltsville, Wash., also helped facilitate the multicultural meeting.

"You are not going to be able to come together with oneness unless you create an environment of repentance and forgiveness," Washington said, noting that he was there to deal with the elephant in the room. "You have to have a heart of forgiveness."

Jackson, a Florida native, noted that the "Martin problem" has been going on in the Sunshine State for years and offered some personal examples. Then he asked a pointed question: Are we going to solve it now? Jackson led the room of pastors and spiritual leaders in repentance, which saw people bowing down to their knees in prayer.

"I don't know of a white pastor who wouldn't go to the Martin family on their knees and ask for forgiveness," said Joel Hunter, pastor of Northland, a megachurch in nearby Longwood,

Fla. "We have to figure out what repentance looks like is what we are doing here."

At the end of the meeting, Gay stood up and offered to lead the charge toward unity and to work with local pastors to bring the repentance, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation that needs to take place for the injustice dealt to Martin and many others in Sanford over the decades.

In a powerful move of the Holy Spirit, Sam Hinn, pastor of The Gathering Place in Sanford, stood up and offered to be "an Aaron or Hur" to Gay through this process. Other pastors rallied around the 32-year-old minister, who is an employee of Charisma Media, to lay hands and pray for him as the group of pastors bands together to heal a generation.