

Hope in Sanford: The Untold Story

Behind the scenes of the Trayvon Martin case—and the inspiring account of reconciliation no one's telling 

Trayvon Martin was killed 2.3 miles from my office in a newer part of Sanford, Fla. The exact street where he was shot is less than a mile from a similar gated townhouse community where my younger son lives.

So to me, this is extremely personal. As we put together this special issue, I've been in a whirlwind of meetings and diplomacy unlike anything I've ever experienced during my journalism career, stretching back to high school. And as with most stories, there is a behind-the-scenes account that's just as interesting. This is my attempt to tell that personal side of the story, even as *Charisma* deals with the spiritual, cultural and political effects of this situation.

I've known for years Sanford was a racially divided community, and I've worked in my own way to bring healing and reconciliation—including getting to know black pastors, attending their churches and serving on the board of a small ministry to the homeless in the center of this predominantly black area. I've helped to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars for many of these ministries. I've even been involved in Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations and lobbied to get a street named after the slain civil rights leader.

Over the years I saw that some black churches cooperated in community-wide events such as fundraisers for the inner-city mission or our annual prayer breakfast. Some didn't cooperate for various reasons, including deep hurts. So one year I took the initiative to invite the Rev. Bernice King, daughter of the civil rights pioneer, to speak at our prayer breakfast in

Sanford, partly because we wanted the African-American community to feel welcomed at the event.

At the same time many white churches passed on getting involved in our efforts in the black community. Even now we're unable to get some churches and ministries involved in reconciliation. The receptionist at one local ministry said she'd been told they wanted to stay 100 miles away from the current situation in Sanford, but that they'd "pray." The problem is, they aren't 100 miles away; they're about 6 miles from where it happened.

I never dreamed Sanford would become ground zero for the festering racism now gripping America. I believe justice must prevail in the Trayvon Martin case. At first, it appeared as if things were being swept under the rug. But the facts are beginning to come out, and it's clear this was not a situation like Jasper, Texas, where white racists dragged a black man to his death behind a pickup truck.

Whatever occurred between Trayvon and the man who shot him, George Zimmerman, the outcry is out of proportion to the actual events, especially since equally tragic killings have happened with little or no outcry. In my opinion, many people are trying to use this sad situation for personal gain. But it has also triggered an awareness of something beneath the surface that America must deal with. Even more so, believers must deal with the sin of racism. Our cover story offers a take on the church's response to racism, but I believe every Christian, as a part of the body of Christ, must ask the question: *What is my response to racism?*

I first heard about the Trayvon killing in the local news. As it became a national controversy I didn't want to get involved because everything seemed to be spinning out of control. But I also knew this was something we, as a magazine that's represented many cultures over the years, *had* to deal with. It was so important I decided to write the cover story myself. I

reached out to some friends to get their advice and quickly decided to co-author the story with Bishop Harry R. Jackson Jr., one of the most respected African-American leaders in the nation, and the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, who is an articulate spokesman for the Hispanic community. Not only did I want their contribution as community leaders, I found it significant and symbolic that a black, Hispanic and Anglo write about such a divisive issue with complete solidarity.

As we were collaborating on the article, I discovered Bishop Jackson was to speak in Orlando in a few days, so I offered to host a meeting of local leaders to diffuse some of the racial tension and deal with the spiritual issues involved. Undoubtedly others were already talking, but since I'm known as a convener, it was something I could do.

Twice the Department of Justice, which sent in an expert to tend to the situation, asked me to help notify local pastors on short notice—once when special prosecutor Angela Corey wanted to meet with pastors, and another time for a community meeting dealing with the fact protesters had held a sit-in and blocked the doors to the police station. I attended both and motivated up to a dozen others to do the same.

Meanwhile my longtime friend Raleigh Washington was also in town to promote an upcoming Promise Keepers event and offered his help for the situation. The result was a meeting with 75 pastors and leaders, both black and white, representing nearly every segment of the church at our headquarters. It was a powerful meeting in which leaders called for justice for Martin and due process for Zimmerman. They also prayed for forgiveness, understanding and healing in our community.

At the end of the meeting we decided it was time to speak out. While outsiders had been saying inflammatory things—including the New Black Panthers, who were quoted as calling for race riots—we wanted to display our unity. We held a press conference the next morning on the steps of Holy Cross

Episcopal Church, the oldest church in Sanford. We called both local and national media and all the major outlets covered it, including a couple that carried it live. Amid the unrest and media frenzy, God established a national platform for a few unknown pastors who have been praying for years for healing, restoration and spiritual renewal in Sanford to tell their side of the story. The following day the *Orlando Sentinel* ran this headline on its front page: "Pastors: Time for Sanford to Heal."

We decided at the last minute to videotape the pastors' meeting, though we told those present that we'd turn off the cameras if anyone objected. Instead, the leaders seemed to appreciate the opportunity to speak out. We also recorded the press conference the next day, as well as many individual interviews, which you can watch online at .

We also invited many national and local leaders to write op-ed pieces, which we've run on our Charisma News site. We intend to get out the word about racial reconciliation in a documentary that's being produced in cooperation with our nonprofit partner, Christian Life Missions—though how extensively it is run depends on how much we raise from readers like you. You can learn more by visiting .

Of course, we'll continue to cover this story as it unfolds, both online and in print. Sign up for my Strang Report e-newsletter, where I'll share more about our reconciliation efforts and tell you how we're telling these stories on YouTube, Facebook, etc. And we'll continue to cover the black community, just as we have for a quarter century.

I'm introducing this cover story package by telling my personal behind-the-scenes story. But this is bigger than just this incident or just my city—and certainly bigger than *Charisma* or Charisma Media. This is a work in progress, both locally and nationally. Never will the issue of racism be totally solved, but we are told to be witnesses. We must do

what we can. For me, it's devoting issues like this, running blogs on the topic, getting leaders in a room or hosting a documentary. For you it may be something completely different in your own circle of influence. The point is to do something. Together we can make a difference in the name of Jesus. The world is watching and I believe is more open than usual to us offering messages of reconciliation and hope.

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