



## Connecting Faith and Life

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### Session at a Glance

The deaths of unarmed African American males continue to raise questions about race and the use of excessive force by police. How do we have meaningful conversation when opinions are so polarized in the wake of these high-profile incidents? How can our Christian witness offer healing and hope?

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# Race and Excessive Police Force

by Alex Joyner

## Two Weekends in December

Just when it seemed it couldn't get any more difficult to talk about, it did. For weeks in the fall of 2014, after the shootings of unarmed African American males by police officers in several cities, a confused narrative about race and policing in the United States broke out in street protests and Twitter campaigns featuring hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #SupportDarrenWilson. To many, the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; and Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York, were visible injustices pointing to the persistence of racism in American life. Others resisted the racial implications and saw, in the fires and looting that accompanied the mostly peaceful protests, a dangerous disregard for police authority.

Then, on successive weekends in December, the debate was in the news again, first as tens of thousands of demonstrators in major cities across the country marched in rallies with titles like "Justice for All" and "Millions March," demanding attention for the inequitable treatment of African American males in the criminal justice system. Then on the following Saturday, December 21, two New York City police officers were gunned down in their patrol car in Brooklyn by a troubled man who had suggested on social media that he was planning to kill police. With passions inflamed and people polarized, the question in the air was and is, Is there a way for us to move forward in a conversation that has lingered in American culture for so many years?

## The Incidents and the Aftermath

The high-profile deaths of Brown, Rice, and Garner sparked the initial wave of protests, and the circumstances in each case were troubling. Michael Brown was shot by Officer Darren Wilson in what Wilson later said was a struggle that felt very threatening to him. However, several witnesses said that Brown had his hands up and appeared to be surrendering when Wilson fired his last shots. Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy, was shot by Cleveland police after he was reported to be carrying a gun on a playground. It turned out to be a toy gun. Eric Garner was put in a chokehold during an arrest for selling cigarettes illegally on a street corner and later died. In a video of the incident, he can be heard saying repeatedly, "I can't breathe," a phrase that protestors have taken up.

## Core Bible Passages

The Hebrew Scriptures are ambivalent about the role of the kings of Israel. While the people clamored for the order a king could bring, there was also danger in the way kings might wield their power. **Psalm 72** outlines the attributes of a king ruling according to God's will. Among these is a special concern for the powerless in society—"the needy who cry out, the poor, and those who have no helper" (**verse 12**).

**Amos 5:7-15** echoes this theme as it takes up the problem of justice for those on the margins of society. The city gate was where legal cases were heard, and the prophet is denouncing the inequitable treatment of the poor. The warning is followed by a challenge to the nation to "establish justice at the city gate" (**verse 15**) so that God might be gracious to the land.

The question of the use of force and counterviolence is embedded in the narrative of Jesus' arrest. **Matthew 26:47-56** relates how "a large crowd carrying swords and clubs" came to Gethsemane to apprehend Jesus. When one of his disciples strikes out with a sword, Jesus rebukes him for using violence in resistance. Jesus also implies that the force used in arresting him was inappropriate. "Have you come with swords and clubs to arrest me, like a thief?" he asks (**verse 55**).

In the cases involving Brown and Garner, grand juries declined to indict the officers involved, prompting new protests. Grand jury action is still pending in the case involving Rice. There was large-scale property damage in Ferguson, Missouri, surrounding protests over the grand jury decision on November 24. This was not the rule, however, as most demonstrations were not violent and destructive.

## What Is the Question?

But what were the protests about, and what things needed to change? There was outrage over the deaths of unarmed African American males and the subsequent decisions by grand juries not to indict. The use of massive displays of force by Ferguson police officers during August protests raised concerns about the increased militarization of American police departments. The perception that many police departments use excessive force and racial profiling in approaching African American males led to the adoption of the "Black Lives Matter" slogan. All of these themes combined in the protests, along with calls for wearable cameras on police officers, more consequences for officers who commit abuses, and better community relations.

Meanwhile, and especially in the wake of the shootings of the NYPD officers in December, there were renewed calls to support police and to understand the challenges of policing effectively. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks stated that "racist police brutality has to be punished. But respect has to be paid. Police serve by walking that hazardous line where civilization meets disorder."

For some, questions of race were less relevant than the breakdown in trust between police and the communities they serve. Reihan Salam, writing for *Slate* magazine, said, "There is no question that something has gone badly wrong with policing in many of our cities. When high-crime neighborhoods grow to distrust local law enforcement, local law enforcement finds it more difficult to do its job. Anger and anxiety build, and sometimes it explodes."

## What Would Jesus Do?

For Christians, having just come through the season of Christmas and hearing again in the Scriptures how the infant Jesus was seen as a threat to the reigning powers, there is a natural inclination and a theological imperative to stand with the powerless. Jesus himself was abused and put to death by an unjust system with a monopoly on force. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber noted in a recent Advent sermon that "the Christ child on whom we await . . . would be born in a land controlled by an empire that he was not a member of." He would be born into a system where some citizens enjoyed the protection of "the powers that be," while others did not.

## A Difficult Birth

Juana Villegas was nine months pregnant when she was detained by police following a 2008 traffic stop. The Mexican immigrant was undocumented and for that reason was held in a Davidson County, Tennessee, jail. During her detention, she gave birth but was shackled during delivery.

Villegas won a settlement against the city of Nashville in 2013 after a five-year legal battle over her treatment. In 2011, a federal judge ruled in her favor, “finding that jail officers had shown ‘deliberate indifference’ to her medical needs by cuffing her ankle to her hospital bed through most of her labor and during recovery,” according to *The New York Times*. In the same article reporting the decision, Villegas said, “If my case had not become public, the sheriff would not have made any changes. . . . I’m glad other women who go to the jail here will not suffer what I went through.”

Elliott Ozment, the lawyer for Villegas, says he has been approached by other women who experienced similar treatment. “This is not a lone problem, this is a systemic problem,” Mr. Ozment was quoted as saying. For their part, jail officials say there have been reforms in their procedures. Karla R. West, a spokeswoman for the Davidson County Sheriff’s Office, was quoted as saying, “We do not restrain pregnant inmates at any time unless they are threatening harm to themselves or to others.”

Jesus taught his followers how to respond to unjust treatment. When they were forced to walk a mile, as Roman soldiers could compel a person to do, Jesus told them to “go with them two” (**Matthew 5:41**). When a centurion asked Jesus to come heal his servant, Jesus recognized and responded to the military man’s humanity and faith (**Luke 7:2-10**). And when Pilate confronted Jesus with his authority to put him to death, Jesus responded by pointing to God as the one true authority (**John 19:10-11**).

## Responding Constructively

“Churches can make a huge difference in urging nonviolence and constructive ways forward,” says the Reverend Susan Henry-Crowe, top executive at the General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church. While she has urged major reforms in policing methods, Henry-Crowe recognizes the human realities of policing. Quoted in a United Methodist News Service article, she says, “I understand why police departments would be fearful. . . . They don’t know when someone may be carrying a gun or not, so I have a lot of sympathy for police departments and their charge and their responsibility.”

Erin Hawkins, top executive at the United Methodist General Commission on Religion and Race, strikes a similar theme as quoted in the same article. Hawkins says, “There are decades of tension in terms of relationship between law enforcement and especially poor, ethnic communities. . . . Churches need to do their own thinking about what are the ways we heal that gap.”

## A Continuation of an Old Struggle?

At the same time that the Millions March was winding down in New York City on December 14, a new Hollywood movie was premiering in the city. *Selma* tells the story of one of the most dramatic moments in the American Civil Rights Movement, when protestors seeking voting rights were met with excessive police force in front of television cameras broadcasting the scene to the world. Wendell Pierce, who plays the Reverend Hosea Williams in the film, drew comparisons with the current protests as he stood with other cast members. “What we are dealing with now is that we just lifted the veil on an ongoing issue that we’ve been fighting for a very long [time],” Pierce said. “It’s not even a parallel, it’s the same. It’s a continuation of vigilance that was needed. Civil rights are always depicted as something that was historic and has ended, but it’s an ongoing vigilance.”

Oprah Winfrey, another cast member, praised the protests but wondered aloud if there was enough clarity about the issues to make a difference. “It’s a wonderful thing that people are protesting,” Winfrey told *New York* magazine. “But in order for real change to happen, you’ve got to figure out what [it] is you want first. I think that’s the first question. So you’re not just marching.”

## Statistics on Police Shootings

One of the difficulties in having a conversation about race and excessive police force is the lack of reliable information on the problem. A database maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) relies on self-reported data from some, but not all, of the nation's more than 17,000 law enforcement agencies. These voluntary reports lead the FBI to estimate that there are about 400 justifiable homicides by police officers each year.

Several organizations have tried compiling their own statistics. ProPublica, an independent, nonprofit newsroom, did an analysis of police shootings between 2010 and 2012 and determined that, in those years, "young black males . . . were at a far greater risk of being shot dead by police than their white counterparts—21 times greater." The report found 1,217 deadly police shootings in the federal data, which "show that blacks, age 15 to 19, were killed at a rate of 31.17 per million, while just 1.47 per million white males in that age range died at the hands of police."

In a *New York Times* piece, columnist David Brooks cites statistics from the Department of Justice that show that "the number of incidents in which force was used or threatened declined from 664,000 in 2002 to 574,000 in 2008." Brooks also notes, however, that race still plays a factor. "Only 1 in 20 white officers believe that blacks and other minorities receive unequal treatment from the police. But 57 percent of black officers are convinced the treatment of minorities is unfair."

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## United Methodist Perspective

A resolution entitled "White Privilege in the United States" (#3376, *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2012*) lifts up several areas in which lingering racism persists. One of these is police brutality, which, the resolution says, "is much more prevalent in ethnic minority communities, partly because police in minority communities are usually a nonresident, mostly white occupying force." The resolution goes on to say that criminal justice "is meted out more aggressively in racial minority communities than white communities. Nearly half of the inmates in the US are African American; one out of every fourteen Black men is now in prison or jail; one out of every four is likely to be imprisoned at some point during his lifetime."

Another resolution, "Equal Justice" (#5031), notes the many roles that police are expected to play in a democratic society and the "extraordinary trust and power" that are given to them. The resolution recommends that, as part of their training, police officers "be instilled with the knowledge that the rights of many will never be secured if the government, through its police powers, is permitted to prefer some of its citizens over others." Among the other recommendations in this statement are that police officers "live within the jurisdiction in which they are employed" and be paid an adequate salary.

## Helpful Links

- Reporting of statistics related to policing is spotty, but there are some websites with relevant information. The Cato Institute has a National Police Misconduct Reporting Project at [www.policemisconduct.net](http://www.policemisconduct.net), which includes daily recaps of news from around the country.
- ProPublica has compiled a summary based on federal data that can be accessed at [www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white](http://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white).

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## Race and Excessive Police Force

How can our Christian witness offer healing and hope in the wake of high-profile incidents revolving around race and excessive police force?

## CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from “Teaching Alternative” to plan the session.

## OPEN the Session

### Create a Hashtag Poster

Before the session, place a large sheet of paper on the wall. On it write one or two hashtag slogans that have been prevalent in discussions of race and policing this year such as #BlackLivesMatter and #ICantBreathe. (Hashtags are often used in social media to help categorize a statement the user has posted or to comment in some way on a current topic.) As participants arrive, tell them the topic for today’s session, and invite them to add their own hashtag slogan to the sheet or to create their own. Leave the sheet visible throughout the session.

### Pray Together

When all participants have arrived, offer the following prayer incorporating the statements on the sheet of paper: God, we live in a land of unease. In our communities we are divided, and violence plagues our interactions. Misunderstanding keeps us from true communication and honesty. Our screens are filled with slogans, such as (read a few or all of the slogans on your sheet). Lord, we offer the competing voices to you, and we invite you into our space. Come quickly, Lord. Amen.

## EXPLORE the Topic

### Examine Childhood Messages

Invite the group to pair up for this exercise. Ask them to take one minute each to share with one another a message they remember getting from their family of origin about the police. The message could have been spoken or implicit. Keep tabs on the time, and tell the pairs when each of the two minutes is up. The person listening should not ask questions during this time but simply listen carefully to the person speaking.

When the pairs have had a chance to share, come back into a large group and share observations. Ask: What differences did you notice in each other’s stories? What might account for those differences? Were issues of race a part of your story in attitudes toward police? Did you have law enforcement officers in your immediate family?

### Discuss Key Incidents in the Recent Debates

Have participants volunteer to share what they know about the following stories in the news: the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; the chokehold death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York; and the killing of two NYPD police officers in Brooklyn in December. Ask the volunteers to use as few adjectives as possible in describing the events and to stick to the facts without offering interpretation at this point. Read “The Incidents and the Aftermath” and “A Difficult Birth.” Ask: What has happened since this FAITHLINK issue was written? Is it hard to describe the facts of the events without getting into opinions? Why or why not?

### Look at Statistics

Read “Statistics on Police Shootings” Ask: What do the statistics cited suggest about race and policing in the United States? Does the lack of a reliable database of information on shootings affect your trust in analyzing the statistics? What more would you want to know?

### Identify the Questions

Read “What Is the Question?” Ask: What issues do you see in the incidents described in this FAITHLINK? What, for you, is the central

question involved in such incidents? List the questions on a markerboard or large sheet of paper.

## Envision Minority Perspectives

Ask participants to close their eyes and imagine the following scenario, recognizing that for some this may be reality. Imagine that you are walking down a street that has several police officers on patrol. As you walk, they seem to be watching you closely. You don't believe you've done anything wrong, but that doesn't seem to matter. Now imagine that all of the officers are of a different race than you are. Ask: How does that change your feeling in this situation? Do you imagine you will get a fair hearing if they stop you? What apprehensions or fears might you have? Spend some time discussing the scenario as a total group.

## Study Scripture Together

Read "Core Bible Passages." Form two teams. Give each team one of the first two passages (Psalm 72; Amos 5:7-15), and ask them to study it together, answering the following questions: What was the author of this passage trying to say to the original hearers? What is the central message of the passage? What might it mean for us today? How does the passage relate to the issues of race and excessive police force?

## Report the Story of Jesus' Arrest

Read Matthew 26:47-56. Ask: How might contemporary news organizations report this story? What perspective might be given to the action of the arresting authorities? How would they report Jesus' reaction? What insights does this story give us on Christian responses to the problems of race and unjust systems?

## Consider Christian Responses

Form three teams. Assign each team one of the following sections: "What Would Jesus Do?" "Responding Constructively," and "United Methodist Perspective." Ask the teams to discuss the following question: How does the information in your section offer insights about the response of Christians to the difficult incidents described in this FAITHLINK? Have the teams share highlights of their discussions with the reassembled group.

## CLOSE the Session

### Imagine God's Hashtag

Review highlights of "A Continuation of an Old Struggle?" and ask: What challenges you about the material in this section? Ask participants to imagine that God offers a hashtag slogan to speak to our country today. What would God say? Invite volunteers to write their imagined hashtag slogan on the large sheet of paper you posted before the session. You might use a different color marker for these slogans. Prompt their imagining by writing one of your own on the paper, perhaps something like #JusticeRollsLikeARiver or #WalkTheExtraMile.

### Pray Together

Invite participants to pray the following prayer with you: Redeeming God, we desire to be close to you. But when we read the Scriptures to hear of your love for us and fail to see the many peoples in the text that you hold dear, forgive us. When we use differences as ways to demean, when we fail to see the humanity and dignity in any human person, forgive us. We desire to be close to you, Lord, and in so doing to love all. Amen.

## Teaching Alternative

**Encourage a ride-along with your local law enforcement agency.** Many police and sheriff's departments offer citizen ride-along programs to help people better understand the operation and concerns of law enforcement. Talk with your local law enforcement agency to see if they have a program. Encourage some member or members of your group to do a ride-along and report back to the group about what they learned. Ask: What things made you uncomfortable? What do you appreciate now that perhaps you didn't before about the work of officers? What do you want to know more about?

Next Week in  
FAITHLINK

Meat, Poultry,  
and Eggs

Purchasing meat, poultry, and eggs presents several dilemmas for shoppers. What are the concerns? How does faith help us navigate our food choices?