

*AMERICAN PROPHETS* BY JACK JENKINS  
SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 5: KEEPERS OF THE STORY

The **August 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri helped birth the Black Lives Matter Movement**, the largest racial justice campaign of our time. Local police officer, Darren Wilson shot 18 year-old Michael Brown at least 6 times and killed him within sight of the Canfield Green apartment complex. Ferguson businesses were looted and protestors flooded the streets.

The "Ferguson Uprising" turned the city into a catalyst for a national conversation about race, police brutality, the militarization of law enforcement, and the disproportionate killing of black men.

**Rev. Tracy Blackmon's Christ the King church sits 3 miles from the shooting.** Gun related killings of young people had become so frequent that the area suffered from a shortage of funeral locations. Some churches refused services to people who were not part of their congregations, because of fear that their churches could be visited by the same violence as well as the sheer cost of hosting so many funerals. **Blackmon saw a ministerial possibility and opened Christ the King to funerals for all offering the space to bereaved families free of charge.**

A woman named **Sierra**, who lived in the Canfield Green apartments attended a funeral at Christ the King for a friend killed in a drive-by shooting. A year later she **called Blackmon and asked her to come to Ferguson after she and her 2 children walked past the bloody body of Michael Brown.** Blackmon responded with a call to action. A hundred or more faith leaders organized a **prayer vigil at the Ferguson police station.** Blackmon drafted a **petition demanding a thorough and transparent investigation into Brown's death.** A large group of **young people of color peeled off from the vigil and began a "sit down for Mike Brown."** Blackmon and the other clergy tried to stop them because of fear of police retaliation. The activists refused. **A chasm grew between the clergy and the young activists. Blackmon joined the activists becoming a participant in their protest. A new order emerged in Ferguson, one that was orchestrated by a coalition of activists led by young tech-savvy activists and assisted by the clergy.**

One young activist, **De Ray McKesson** a 29 year-old Minneapolis, MN school administrator quickly emerged as a **key online organizer of the Ferguson protests and the broader Black Lives Matter movement** leaning heavily on social media to orchestrate actions and share their message with the world. McKesson helped the fledgling Black Lives Matter movement (which emerged after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trevon Martin, 2012) make the most of the new social media platforms. **"The internet meant we didn't need to convene at church."**

Blackmon witnessed the tension between the young activists and the clergy firsthand. Many were not "pro-institutional religion" because they had been ostracized or shunned by their church. **63% of unaffiliated African Americans in Ferguson profess a belief in a higher power and 57% make less than \$30,000 a year.** McKesson was one of many Ferguson activists for whom "church wasn't necessarily a safe place," and he and other African American activists **viewed the clergy with skepticism.** Blackmon said it saddened her not only that the youth were distant from faith communities, but that clergy like herself **"had not missed them."**

The clergy needed to build their credibility with the activists:

- **Blackmon** led a march to the Canfield Green apartments and she **criticized both the police and the clergy.** "We had relationship building to do in the middle of trauma. Blackmon explained that the clergy-as-mediator role served to allow faith leaders to stand in solidarity with the demonstrators. **"We're not antipolice but in that confrontation, there was an unequal balance of power, and we stand on the side of those who do not have the power. Part of our role was to be present for everything so that we could bear witness to the truth."** KEEPERS OF THE STORY.
- **Renita Lamkin, a white AME church pastor** walked between police and demonstrators during a tense encounter and lifted her voice in prayer. McKesson noted, "The police got calm, the protestors got calm, and there was like, just this moment. It was one of those moments where you're like there must be a God somewhere." Renita Lamkin was attempting to act as a mediator when she was struck by a rubber bullet. Images of Lamkin's injury, juxtaposed with her smiling face spread on social media. Renita said, "They say 'You took a bullet for us.' I have no sense of taking a bullet for someone. My sense is that I'm in a struggle, I'm in it. We're in this together, and I was playing my role."
- **Greater St. Mark Family Church** headed by **Rev. Tommie Pierson** opened as a sanctuary church where protestors could take refuge and organize

- The St. Louis, UCC-affiliated **St. John's Church (The Beloved Community)** headed by **Rev. Starsky Wilson** played a critical role in the development of protest-focused liberation theology within the rapidly expanding Black Lives Matter movement. Wilson explained, "God gave us an opportunity to do the politics of Jesus, and thanks be to God, somebody answered the call...Jesus' politics are both radical and revolutionary. **The Roman occupation in Jesus's neighborhood seems similar to the police state on the streets of Ferguson that we have seen in the last 2 weeks.**" A month later BLM activists returned to Ferguson and used St. John's to plan acts of resistance across the country.
- St Louis Metropolitan Clergy Coalition, an Interfaith group that included black and white clergy, convened a faith-based march in August that included an address by Blackmon.

Re-earning the trust of demonstrators estranged from the church would take time and there was still more healing to do. In October a larger group of interfaith leaders gathered for a "Weekend of Resistance" in St. Louis. Activists in the audience demanded that the voices of those who had been in the streets be heard alongside faith leaders from out of town. **Blackmon invited the young protestors to the stage saying, "This is what democracy looks like."** The next day at the demonstration interfaith leaders and young protestors were arrested together.

- **Black Lives Matter chapters cropped up around the country on their own.** The rise of white supremacy and racially motivated killings stretched the national conversation around race into a broader discussion of systemic white supremacy.
- **Faith leaders also began to take seriously the spirituality of unaffiliated activists recognizing that activism and the communities it creates could be, for some, a form of faith.**
- Ferguson helped usher in a new phase of activism that spawned a fresh pantheon of faith leaders to champion racial justice.
- **Voicing public support for BLM became a cultural mainstay for progressive faith communities,** one of several expressions of solidarity that formed the foundation for renewed partnerships between African American church leaders and liberal white clergy. Left leaning denominations had serious conversations about race. Pastors of color who oversee majority white—evangelical churches as well as white clergy lost members. Faith in Action's director of clergy organizing said "race has to be at the center of their faith-rooted work."
- Blackmon's star rose quickly in progressive faith circles. **Regarding politicians** who wanted to speak with congregations around election time, **Blackmon said, "If you're going to come into the community, you should come to listen more than talk."**

**Charlottesville:** It was August 11, 2017 and Rev. Blackmon wearing a raised fist on her stole was in Charlottesville to talk about race at St. Paul's church, which was packed with a thousand worshippers from all over the country. They were there to muster counterdemonstrations on the night of the Unite the Right demonstration. When it comes to race, American faith groups have much to reckon with. Blackmon had also called Rev. William Barber that first night in Charlottesville. Barber sent a security team to protect her. **As 'Keepers of the Story,' he told Blackmon that Joy Reid from MSNBC was preparing a film crew to cover the protests.**

Many who showed up for the next day's counterdemonstration already had existing relationships with faith-based organizers. **The bolder of the faith leaders marched directly into the fray and knelt, prayed and sang hymns** for an hour while white supremacists hurled insults at them. A group of BLM protestors stood nearby and joined the clergy in chanting, "Love has already won." Then some Unitarian Universalist pastors in BLM stoles formed a line across the entrance to the park, locked arms and dared the white supremacists to pass. Friction arose between faith leaders and the counter protestors because initially Antifa members mistook the clergy outside the park as white supremacist supporter but once the alliances were clarified, **Antifa rushed to defend the clergy from an advancing line of white supremacists.** Cornel West said, "They saved us, because we were going to get crushed like cockroaches." Later in the day faith leaders reorganized themselves, locked arms and marched through the streets of Charlottesville. As they passed, members of Antifa, BLM, Industrial Workers of the World and others all stopped to offer them a standing ovation. Later that day, **when a white supremacist plowed a car into counter protestors, faith leaders formed a protective barrier around the wounded and dying.** An Antifa member knelt in the street and cradled a distraught victim. He called to a minister and said, "Father, this women needs help."

The experience of Charlottesville was a reminder that America's struggle with race is far larger than a divide between black and white. White Supremacists also spewed vitriol at Jews, Muslims, LGBTQ people, and immigrants. Blackmon bemoaned the role some Religious Right leaders played in backing controversial policies that she says embolden that hatred.