

After a wrenching week, a Dallas church stops to reflect

By NIGEL DUARA JUL 10, 2016 | 5:54 PM | DALLAS



Elizabeth Holmes hands out hugs as worshippers come together for a service and town hall meeting at the Potter's House church in Dallas. (Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times)

Behind candles and lights dimmed to near darkness, their faces flashed across the screen. A bootleg CD salesman in Louisiana, a cafeteria worker in Minnesota, a 17-year-old in Sanford, Fla. Then the face of a police officer, and a second, a third, a fourth and a fifth.

It wasn't necessary for the pastor of the Potter's House megachurch in Dallas to identify the dead projected on a screen behind him. All the faces with light skin were police officers. All the faces with dark skin were citizens killed by the police.

On Sunday at 11 a.m., which the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once called the most segregated hour in America, the black-majority congregation of Potter's House took time to reflect on a wrenching week of race-related violence in America.

"These are trying times in our nation, but we believe that God can do the impossible," said associate pastor Onterio Green, pacing the vast stage at the front of the church. "Halle-lujah! Halle-lujah! Halle-lujah! Halle-lu-jah!"



Worshippers at the Potter's House church in Dallas. (Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times)

The week had begun with the shooting deaths of two black men at the hands of police in suburban St. Paul, Minn., and Baton Rouge, La. Then on Thursday night, a Black Lives Matter march in Dallas ended in a few terrifying moments when a sniper disrupted the peaceful protest by shooting 14 people, 12 of them police officers.

Five officers were killed. Seven others and two civilians are expected to survive. In an instant, this city became the locus of the nation's continuing conversation with itself on race, discrimination and justice.

"We are ground zero today," said state Sen. Royce West.

West spoke from the stage on Sunday, joined by a dozen others, including family members of people killed by police, and police officers themselves, who pleaded for patience and understanding.

"I wasn't born a robot," said Dallas Police Department Cpl. Justin Brandt. "We are human."

Brandt, dressed in full uniform, said he has to travel the country to find acceptable recruits for the police department, and said he wished qualified applicants from Dallas would consider joining.

"I can get you all a job tomorrow," he told the congregation, to laughter.

Sometimes, the reception in church to the police was icy. After all, the protest on Thursday was meant to bring attention to incidents of police brutality, and some of the marchers were in the pews on Sunday.

When Brandt suggested that the solution to racial tension was giving the police more resources, including money for training, the room was silent.

This city has not been touched by the kind of slow-boiling violence that rent Ferguson, Mo., and erupted last week in Baton Rouge between protesters and officers in riot gear. But some protesters, including James Ali-El, 36, found the presentation in church to be more show than substantive dialogue.

"They're missing the whole point of what's really going on," said Ali-El, who said members of his family are current and former members of the Los Angeles Police Department. "It's camouflage [to] shut attention to the black community by coming out here and saying, 'We have to have sympathy for the police officers.'"

"Of course we have sympathy for the officers. But it's convenient. Now they want restraint, now that it's them [who are] hurt."

Mayor Mike Rawlings, who has sought to make inroads with Dallas' black community, sat in a front-row pew and spoke briefly of fighting "the battles of tomorrow instead of the battles of yesterday."

Frustration with the police sometimes boiled over during the on-stage dialogue. Potter's House Pastor T.D. Jakes, who held a microphone and asked questions of the assembled group on stage, complained that police officers never truly face justice.

"They're always exonerated," Jakes said.

Jakes then introduced a series of people whose loved ones were killed by police. Sandra Sterling said her nephew Alton was like a son to her, and she had worried about his decision to return to selling bootleg CDs in Baton Rouge. He was killed Tuesday by police.

"He suffered, he suffered," Sterling said.



Magnus, the 8-year-old son of slain Dallas Police Officer Lorne Ahrens, rides with his father's coffin during the funeral Wednesday afternoon. Sr. Cpl. Ahrens and four other officers were killed in an attack during a Black Lives Matter protest on July 7. (Barbara Davidson / Los Angeles Times)

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Diamond Reynolds watched her boyfriend, Philando Castile, die after he was shot several times by St. Anthony, Minn., Officer Jeronimo Yanez on Wednesday.

"The officer was scared, I heard it in his voice," said Reynolds, who live-streamed Castile's final moments on Facebook and spoke at the service on a phone line connected to church speakers. "It clicked to me. This is much bigger than myself."

Jakes asked her what she wonders about when she thinks about that day.

"If I could change anything, it was never to take that route," Reynolds said, her voice breaking. "None of this would have happened."

Finally on stage was Dallas County Sheriff's Lt. Steven Gentry, who has had a troubled history with his own department. He was fired for filming female inmates in the shower, but reinstated due to a technicality.

Gentry said he was abandoned at a police station by his birth mother and brought home by a sympathetic police officer, whom he regards as his father. On Thursday, he saw one of his friends and fellow police officers die in front of him.

"Whether you like police or you don't, whether you've had bad interactions with us," Gentry said, "we're not over you, we're with you."

Jakes, the pastor, clutched Gentry to him.

"I'm holding Steve and he's trembling right now," Jakes said.

He turned to Gentry.

"You look alive," Jakes said.

Gentry collapsed onto the pastor's shoulder, tucked his head into Jakes' lapel and wept.

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