

*St. Paul & the Redeemer's story  
after the Zimmerman verdict*

# Creating Space for Conversations about Race

By Lu Stanton León



*The conversation after the Zimmerman verdict was an eye-opener for a lot of people because they didn't understand each other's stories. So it was great that the church created a space for people to talk about the verdict.*

—Romonda McKinney Bumpus

When Romonda McKinney Bumpus moved from Washington, D.C., to Chicago's Hyde Park three years ago, she immediately started searching for a church home. She and her husband looked for almost seven months before settling on St. Paul and the Redeemer (SPR), a parish that, to her, is trying to live into Martin Luther King's vision of a day when people "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

"This is the first truly multiracial church I've ever attended," said Bumpus, an African American woman who grew up in the Pentecostal church. "I really love how diverse it is, not just in terms of racial ethnicity, but economically and socially. A big focus of our church is getting to know each other and understand each other's stories, what brought us to church and who we are as people. We value each other as people beyond our ethnicity. At SPR, race does not divide us."

There are, however, differences in opinions

and life experiences, which were brought to the fore following the July 13 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Two sermons, two discussion groups and a vestry meeting were devoted to discussions about the verdict, its impact on parishioners, and parishioners' past experiences with racism.

"The acquittal uncovered a real diversity of opinion here, which in some ways mirrored the different reactions of different races across the country," said the Rev. Peter Lane, rector of SPR. "What is great about SPR is that there is a solid grounding and a real desire to keep working towards King's vision of the Beloved Community. We have an incredible tradition of caring about working on race relations. The challenge for us is to not just have diverse races in proximity, but to connect lives in meaningful ways and to work for racial justice."

The Church of St. Paul and the Redeemer



was created in 1968 by the merger of two neighboring parishes in the Hyde Park and Kenwood neighborhoods of Chicago. Located on the South Side of Chicago in Hyde Park, near the University of Chicago, SPR has undergone tremendous changes over the years. By making changes to the ways they welcome, the ways they worship, and to the worship space itself, the congregation has gradually and intentionally transformed itself into a church that reflects the neighborhood in which it exists. The service music selections, once entirely early European, changed to include gospel and music from multicultural traditions. The congregation, which averages 275 parishioners each

Sunday, is about 61 percent white and 33 percent black, including African Americans, Africans, and people from the Caribbean Islands, and 7 percent Asian or Hispanic.

## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

It was late on a Saturday night when George Zimmerman was found not guilty of second-degree murder and also acquitted of manslaughter in the death of Trayvon Martin. In his sermon the next morning, the Rev. Dan Puchalla, assistant rector at SPR, preached on the gospel for the day, saying, “How providential it is that today’s gospel is the parable of the Good Samaritan. How providential it is that on this morning after George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin, the pressing question before us is, *Who is my neighbor?*”

Puchalla delivered a stirring sermon, saying, in part, “Whatever else was involved in this horrible case—from figuring out who was on top of whom in that struggle on the pavement to the State of Florida’s bizarre notions of what constitutes legitimate self-defense—the fact remains that none of this would have happened, absolutely none of it, if George Zimmerman hadn’t come to the worst conclusions about who Trayvon Martin was and what he was doing in that neighborhood based on nothing more than his clothing, his age, his gender, and, most fundamentally, the color of his skin. At the very least, we should have been able to expect of our legal system an unrestrained denunciation of that kind of twisted reasoning. But where our legal systems fail us, the Word of God today is all the more faithful.”

Parishioner Steven J. Heyman, a 54-year-old law professor at Chicago-Kent College of Law, described it as a “terrific, powerful sermon” and said, “Not surprisingly, Dan’s sermon strongly condemned the verdict, said the legal system had failed and the verdict basically validated what Zimmerman had done.”

Heyman said he, like many legal scholars, was not surprised by the verdict.

“Dan’s sermons always have a great theological depth to them; he’s one of the best preachers I know. This sermon had that kind of theological depth to it, but there was a very strong condemnation of what he saw as the racism in how the legal system treated the case. I gather there were some strong reactions to the sermon. I can tell you my own reaction. I’m a criminal law teacher by day and had been following the trial closely. It was clear to me that it was unlikely that there would be a conviction because we just don’t know what happened between Martin and Zimmerman.

“My own feeling is that Zimmerman was very much at fault for assuming Martin was up to no good. So in that sense he was responsible for provoking the situation; he bore a lot of moral responsibility for Martin’s death. My reaction to Dan’s sermon was mixed. I mentioned that some people strongly endorsed it and I gather from what Peter said, some didn’t.

“I told Dan that I thought he had overstated the meaning of the verdict. That one couldn’t just look at the verdict and say the jury was racist,” Heyman said. “My own sense was that there was

## Task Force on the Legacy of Slavery

The Task Force on the Legacy of Slavery will present its final report at this year’s diocesan convention, where attendees will be encouraged to engage in conversation about its findings.

The task force was created in 2009 in response to a 2006 general convention resolution that said the institution of slavery in the United States was a sin and called upon the Episcopal Church “to acknowledge its history of participation in this sin, its legacy and lasting injury which it has inflicted on our society and on the church.” The resolution also called for every diocese to collect and document “detailed information in its community on (a) the complicity of the Episcopal church in the institution of slavery and in the subsequent history of segregation and discrimination, and (b) the economic benefits the Episcopal church derived from the institution of slavery.”

The interracial task force has worked with Chicago area scholars and historians to research and document the history and legacy of slavery in northern Illinois and the Episcopal church’s involvement in it. Dr. Johari Jabir, a research consultant to the task force, sought to answer these questions in his work:

- How has the church’s “silence” regarding race, slavery, and violence contributed to a legacy of injustice?
- What has been the diocese’s role in shaping the social/cultural context of race, justice, and integration in Chicago and Illinois?
- What are the moments of specific outreach to communities of color?
- What, if any, have been the church’s specific allocations of resources for parishes serving poor communities?

The report is available at [www.episcopalchicago.org](http://www.episcopalchicago.org).





something missing from the way we were talking about it that Sunday morning. We were too sure that we were right and we would rage against the forces of evil.”

The following Sunday, Lane’s sermon also addressed the Martin/Zimmerman case at the 8 and 10 am services.

“Peter’s basic point was we need to be careful and thoughtful in the way we use the word racism,” Heyman said. “It can mean different things. It can be the thoughts of an individual, but he thought there was a second sort of racism that is present in institutions and society as a whole, in its history and assumptions that people make about other people. And that racism diminishes and undermines community.”

Following Lane’s sermon, he invited parishioners to a coffee hour where they could discuss the issues he had raised. About 15 people attended the conversation after the early service and 40 after the later. Lane said people responded “with a lot of honesty. What was rich about it to me was that I felt people were sharing in a bigger, racially diverse group what they probably had shared before in more intimate conversations, some blacks about being profiled and some whites saying that a too quick charge of racism concealed the complexity of the case.

“There’s a lot of disagreement still,” Lane admitted. “Where there is hope is that this is seen as a safe place to air that, where there are black people and white people together.”

Lane said many parishioners thanked him for providing the opportunity for an open, honest discussion about race.

Heyman said he thought the coffee hour discussion was “tremendously valuable. A lot of the discussion was people sharing their perspectives, part in reaction to the verdict, partly talking about what it is like to be white or black in America. Some said they felt that, if

they were black, they were under suspicion. The white people were really interested in what they were saying.

“It was a wonderful occasion. It wasn’t as if there was a deep rift in the congregation; it was something the whole country was talking about. Everything I heard was respectful,” Heyman said. “It was a very thoughtful, respectful, and somewhat loving discussion. My sense is that people felt quite comfortable to do this. The biggest reason is that there is this underlying community of trust.”

Bumpus, a 33-year-old vestry member and employee in the U.S. Government Accountability Office, said she didn’t stay for the coffee hour discussion that day, but she heard a lot about it afterwards and that the subject came up again at a vestry meeting.

“The conversation after the Zimmerman verdict was an eye-opener for a lot of people because they didn’t understand each other’s stories,” she said. “I think that discussion was one of the few times I heard comments that were really divided along racial lines. Among the African American congregants, there was frustration at the verdict, anger that the problem still exists in our country. And some white members questioned whether or not this verdict was the result of racism or George Zimmerman just making a mistake. That was where the real divide was among races. So it was great that the church created a space for people to talk about the verdict.”

Shirley Knight, a 68-year-old black woman who has served on the vestry and as junior and senior warden at SPR, said she was one of about 15 people who attended the coffee hour after Lane’s sermon at the 8 o’clock service.

“The 8 o’clock group is mostly older people, and we kind of just went around the room and people gave their life experiences as far as

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race was concerned,” said Knight, a retired nurse who has been an SPR parishioner since 1972. “Not one black person in the room was surprised at the verdict. That’s sad. No one was surprised but deep down, everyone had a hope that the verdict would be different. Especially the women, who gave examples of their sons being profiled. The white people, we had one lady who had had an African American husband, and she told about her experiences with prejudice because she was married to a black man.”

Knight said she doesn’t recall the issue of racial injustice being discussed so openly and freely before.

“I think this event really opened up the discussion. And it’s not something that is discussed every Sunday, but I think it gave us a better understanding of people’s lives and helped us understand why people see things the way they do.”

## SEEING THROUGH A DIFFERENT LENS

Bumpus said the discussions following the Zimmerman trial brought to light the different experiences of white and black parishioners in their day-to-day lives.

“Peter talked about it in his sermon. I don’t think our white parishioners were entirely aware of the profiling, of people following them, locking their doors. That’s where the divide was apparent. I think moving forward we want to think about that and talk about that. In his sermon he talked about what it means to be a white man and the privilege that comes with that. And he provided some examples of how those without that privilege have suffered in many ways.”

She said an important part of the SPR community is the ability “to share ourselves and be open and authentic. We don’t have these conversations on a regular basis because they are painful, they are difficult, but they are part of our story. To understand someone’s life story, you need to understand the impact of race. I think when we talk about these things we become more empathetic and we see the world differently.”

As an example, Bumpus told two stories. One was of a white friend from college who is a social worker and was working with a black mother who was trying to regain custody of her daughter.

“After her visitations with her daughter, who was living with a

non-black foster family, the mother would always complain to my friend about her daughter’s hair. Megan, my friend, could not understand why, of all things, this was her concern. So, she asked me. I told her how important our hair is to us, and how difficult it can be to manage for those unfamiliar, and how as a mother, she was voicing concern for her daughter and concern about whether her daughter was having her cultural needs met by this family. Megan got it, once I explained. She then told me that she couldn’t ask her black coworkers about this because she wasn’t sure how they would they react to her questions. I told her that I was glad she could ask me.”

Her second story involved a conversation during coffee hour at church.

“I was sitting with a member who is white and has an adopted daughter who is black and has locs, which are a traditional Black/African/Caribbean hair style also referred to as dreadlocks,” Bumpus said. “I had locs at the time, so I started talking to her about how she maintained her daughter’s hair, the products she uses, etc. This conversation happened so freely, and I thought about how SPR had created this environment where this member and I, who see each other only briefly on some Sundays, had this very casual conversation over coffee that Megan felt uncomfortable having with coworkers she sees most days, shares lunch with, etc. But yet she still wasn’t sure what judgment they would bring about her asking a question about black hair.”

## STRIVING FOR MORE THAN DIVERSITY

Lane said that in Korie Edwards’ book, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches*, “she argued that the goal shouldn’t be diversity in church but to work for racial justice. More important than having a communion rail that looks diverse is having a church whose structures are not negatively influenced by racism and a society not negatively influenced by racism, but both positively influenced by the rich traditions that we all bring.

“How can we better achieve that? I think we do it by singing and praying together, in using different musical languages so that each person can hear something that is deeply familiar. We do it by working together in our organic garden, by working together in Haiti and in the school across the street, and by having open, honest conversations that can only happen when you have a level of trust that comes when you work together and pray together.”

Lane, who is 36 and has been at SPR since 2007, reflected on how to advance the conversation about racial justice.

“This is the neighborhood that produced Obama, the post-racial president. What is the way to talk about race now? We’re not post-racial. People are still grappling with it. There continue to be structures and ways in which the parish isn’t welcoming all equally, in ways we may not even recognize.

“We are trying to live together in meaningful ways with the notion that seeing glimpses of the Beloved Community will transform us and, perhaps, the world.” ✚