Reflections on Ferguson – The Role of the Faith Community
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Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple police, and the elders who had come for him, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit? -- Luke 22:52

“But, mama, you are the police.” “Yes, so I know what we are capable of doing.” I was having “the conversation” with my son. It was not the first time; it would not be the last time. My son is now 38 years old, so “the conversation” occurred over twenty (20) years ago. It was the conversation that I had with him whenever he went out, particularly with friends – what to do if he encountered the police. It was not a matter of respecting the police; after all I was a police officer, as were his father, step-father, god-father, and stepbrother. He had grown up around police officers, and still, “the conversation” was necessary – I wanted my son to come home – safe. “The conversation” I had then is just as relevant and necessary today. I’ve had it with each of my nephews. It became a rite of passage.

On Saturday, September 13, 2014, the rectors of Calvary Episcopal Church and the Church of the Holy Communion (Episcopal) co-sponsored a forum on Ferguson, MO – could what happen in Ferguson happen in Washington, D.C.. Could an encounter involving a black male and the police (regardless of the race of the police officer) end in the injury or death of the black male. The resounding conclusion was “yes.” All that is needed are the right circumstances, which could be a “furtive movement”—finding one’s driver’s license in anticipation of being asked for it, getting out of the vehicle instead of remaining inside on a traffic stop, being viewed as “dangerous” by the police officer. The issue needed to be discussed and it was on that day between past and current members of the law enforcement community and members of various communities around the city. As the panelists were speaking of the need to understand the police culture as it affects relationships with members of minority communities, the bishop of the Diocese of Washington who was moderating the discussion stopped the discussion and stated that while she had two adult sons, she never even thought to have “the conversation” that many minority parents have with their sons, grandsons, and nephews. A community member in attendance whose stepson is black offered that she was concerned about how her stepson is and would be viewed by the police.

I had the very same conversation with a high-ranking official of the U.S. Department of Justice who is white back in the 1990s. She related how her friends were diverse; however, her white friends never thought to tell their sons to be on guard when encountering the police; but that her black friends told her it was a major concern. As the bishop and the community member related their stories, I “replayed the tape.”
The conversations were productive. The law enforcement personnel did not hold back; they agreed there was a problem; that police departments have attempted to improve police-community relations; however, there is still much work to be done. The voices heard were current officials of the two police districts in which the churches are located and former police chiefs who told of their experiences in changing the culture of their police departments. This first step was just that, a first step. The work is ahead of us. Sessions to this one must be conducted throughout the diocese. Young people need to know what their rights are and how to respond when they encounter the police. One of the panelists represented the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE). NOBLE, in conjunction with the NAACP and Allstate Insurance produced a booklet, “The Law and You: Guidelines for Interacting with Law Enforcement Officials” to assist, in particular, young people in knowing what their rights are and how to survive an encounter with the police. Copies were distributed at the forum and also during the “H Street Festival” on September 20, 2014. At the festival, young people were approached and asked, “Do you know what to do if you are stopped by the police?” Some did; too many did not. They were also asked if they would attend sessions sponsored by the faith community that provided information on their legal rights. Many gave their email addresses and stated that the sessions were needed. The NOBLE pamphlet is no longer in print. We must update and republish it as a cooperative effort between the faith community and the police. We are in this together. We are not pointing fingers at the police, rather, we are saying that we of the faith community must partner with law enforcement to change the perception of both the police and members of the minority communities the police serve. This is “doing justice” not just talking about it. We of the faith community are called to “do justice” (Micah 6:8).