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We must all stand up to injustice to achieve equality

by Mariam Williams

At the Intersection

About a month after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin made it to the national news cycle, I attended a women's conference at which the keynote speaker, Donna Britt, talked about her brother being gunned down by police. Britt, a journalist, had recently been on public radio talking about Trayvon and the talks she and other black parents have with their sons about how to stay alive when white people see them as dangerous.

Throughout her keynote address, I watched one of the conference organizers. I went to church with her and knew she had four sons under the age of 10. While most of the women in the room nodded with understanding at Britt's comments, the organizer looked angry.

Probably 90 percent of the audience at the conference, including this staff person, was black women. I asked the woman later what she was thinking as she heard Britt speak. She said what made her angry was the thought that she, as an African-American mom, would be expected to tell her boys -- whom she described as sweet, loving, trusting, giving and unaware of race -- that they should expect white people to expect the worst of them. It would taint them, she said, destroy their innocence and, most detrimentally, cause them to no longer see people who were supposed to be their brothers and sisters in Christ the same way.

The organizer went on to explain that when she left the church she grew up in and ultimately joined the Baptist church we both belong to, she lost a racially integrated church life that she misses, and she doesn't fully understand why it doesn't exist in every church and every Christian denomination.

I thought about this brief conversation this week when I read "Dear White Christians of Florida: An Open Letter," a blog post by Rev. Michael Bledsoe, pastor of Riverside Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. He says what even some members of the jury in Michael Dunn's trial won't admit: "Jordan Davis was not

killed for playing loud music. He was killed for being an uppity black kid who dared to smart off to a drunken white man with a concealed weapon's permit." Bledsoe calls "stand your ground" laws "a few steps removed from lynching. And you recall, do you not, that the center of the Gospels is the story of the passion of our Lord who was lynched by Romans who perceived him as a threat?"

It's shocking for me to hear this type of rhetoric from a white pastor. Bledsoe's church is in D.C. and appears from its website's photos and mission statement to have a racially diverse congregation. The church also has interns from Howard University School of Divinity, and Howard is a historically black university. I'm thinking, therefore, that Bledsoe might have a little more awareness of the racism some of his congregants face than, say, a white pastor of an all-white congregation in rural Kentucky. Nonetheless, he's a white Christian leader addressing other white Christians about injustice against blacks, and that doesn't happen enough. And although I don't attend a predominantly white church or one under the leadership of a white pastor, I'm sure of this, because Bledsoe is right: "If white Christians in Florida stood up and cried out for justice, demanding an end to the license-to-kill-stand-your-ground law, it would be rescinded immediately."

But it isn't just white Christians in Florida who have to want an end to "stand your ground" laws; it's white Christians everywhere, even in the states that don't have the laws. Since the Dunn verdict, I've heard many African-Americans demand that black people mobilize. Yes, we have to mobilize, agitate and diligently seek to repeal these laws that have ended far more lives than the few publicized. But whose job is it to make white people, and especially white men, see themselves as equal to every other human being?

Notice I didn't say, "see every other human being as equal to them." I don't believe in white maleness as the standard of normalcy for everyone else to achieve, and if white Christians are going to mobilize for justice, they have to stop believing it is. As womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas said in her thoughtful analysis of how she is to live out her faith in a world where there are George Zimmermans and Michael Dunns, "Humility is about dethroning ourselves from the center of the world so that we can see others, be for others, and thus, see god and be for and with god."

It is about constantly reminding ourselves of what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

[Mariam Williams is a writer born and raised in Louisville, Ky., where she's received numerous arts awards. When not working in the field of social justice research and taking graduate courses in women and gender and Pan-African studies, she blogs at RedboneAfropuff.com. Follow her on Twitter: @missmariamw.]

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