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The Rev. Anthony Evans of the National Black Church Initiative leads a demonstration outside the Department of Justice.

White churches uncommonly quiet after Zimmerman verdict

By Jeffrey Weiss, special to CNN

(CNN) Even before the jury read their verdict acquitting George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, a number of black religious leaders had responses at the ready.

The voices of white pastors and predominantly white churches and religious groups? Much harder to find.

Nearly a week later, some denominations that often weigh in on matters of national policy have yet to go on the [public record](#). It's particularly notable in the leadership of the Catholic Church, the country's largest religious body.

Admittedly, the flood of responses from black religious leaders was a partly a function of where the [TV](#) cameras were pointed.

Familiar figures such as [the Rev. Jesse Jackson hit Twitter](#) moments after the verdict was released.

Less familiar figures, such as [Pastor Michael McBride](#), head of the PICO Lifelines to Healing Campaign, immediately issued a call for peaceful demonstrations. McBride had also prepared a tool kit for "Hoodie Sundays" in honor of Martin before Saturday night's verdict.

The Rev. Raphael Warnock, senior pastor at the famed Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, [preached a sermon](#) about Martin's death on Sunday.

Others took longer to react.

National Council of Churches President Kathryn Lohre took a couple of days to [release a statement](#) about the "shocking impunity granted by a Florida jury to a man who stalked and killed a black child."

Similarly, the two largest Protestant denominations in America took several days to figure out their responses.

By Tuesday, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the first African-American leader of that body, [offered a bland quote](#) to his denomination's official news service.

"Some people are upset, angry and frustrated, while others are in full support of the verdict, so where does the church fit in? The church should be there to pray for both families, the city of Sanford, and our nation," said the Rev. Fred Luter, pastor of Franklin Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans.

Russell Moore, head of the convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, took a stronger stand, saying that regardless of the verdict, Zimmerman was wrong to take ["upon himself some sort of vigilante justice."](#)

Several bishops, white and black, from the United Methodist Church rapidly offered their thoughts [on the denomination's website](#). That included the [white bishop for the area that includes Sanford, Florida](#), where Zimmerman shot Martin.

But other organizations where reactions might have been expected still haven't posted anything.

Where's the response from the Union of Reform Judaism? Where's a comment from the leaders of the Episcopal Church? What's the position of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America?

Those, however, are religious groups that represent relatively few Americans. The largest claims fewer than 5 million members.

The most notable silence is from the American Catholic hierarchy, who head a church that claims to have nearly 70 million members.

It's not necessarily surprising that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has not issued a comment. The conference is large and sometimes moves slowly.

But it has committees that can be more nimble.

The day after Vermont legalized assisted suicide, for instance, Cardinal Seán O'Malley of Boston, chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities, warned of a "slippery slope" and urged Catholics to fight the future passage of such laws.

But there's been nothing I can find from any Catholic committees this week.

Nothing from Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, the conference president. Nothing from the bishops' Subcommittee on African American Affairs. Nothing from Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, former president of the conference and the first black man to hold the office.

In fact, when I searched the web for "Catholic" and "Bishop" and "Trayvon" and "Zimmerman" and "verdict" over the past week, I found only one bishop on the record: Retired Bishop John H. Ricard of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida, now president of the National Black Catholic Congress. And that wasn't until Friday.

[Ricard told Catholic News Service](#) that it is proper for the church to encourage prayers for Martin and his family and Zimmerman and his family - "his life will never be the same either."

He also said that he didn't see a place in the church to foster interracial dialogues to deal with the vastly different understandings of the verdict by many whites and blacks.

It's not as if there isn't a logical opening for Catholic leaders to offer an opinion. Zimmerman, after all, is a former Catholic altar boy, according to news reports.

The official catechism of the church includes [a section, 2263, on the right to self-defense](#). And individual bishops have not been reluctant in the past to speak out on questions of racial justice.

I did locate a parish priest who gingerly approached the topic: The Rev. Richard Voor serves at All Souls Catholic Church in Sanford, Florida, where the Trayvon Martin trial was held.

On Sunday, the day after the verdict, he [focused his homily](#) on the parable of the Good Samaritan.

It's a story that turns racial profiling on its head, of course. The hero of the tale, the Samaritan, belonged to a group that was a persecuted minority 2,000 years ago.

For several minutes, Voor circled rhetorically around the elephant in the room, talking about compassion and mercy and unpacking the historical understanding of the story.

"If somebody does something to us we kind of react and react badly sometimes and then we react back. You know how that goes? It's called the circle of violence," he said. "It happens between families, it happens between countries, it happens between groups of people."

Finally, Voor addressed directly the subject his parishioners were surely thinking about.

"I would suggest to you, especially what we've all been through in Sanford in the past 17 months, that what we need is compassion," the priest said. "Because people are all invested in one way of looking at that whole situation or the other way...this has really affected everybody."

Jeffrey Weiss is an award-winning religion reporter in Dallas.

** After this article was posted, an Episcopalian noted that the church's COO, Bishop Stacey Sauls, had a written a blog post about the verdict on July 15. You can read it [here](#).

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Outside the Department of Justice in Washington on July 15, Rev. Anthony Evans, president of the National Black Church Initiative, leads a prayer during a demonstration asking for justice for Trayvon Martin.

