



How the Ferguson Commission Can Promote Healing and Reconciliation in Metropolitan Saint Louis

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A tragic police shooting and massive protests in Ferguson, Missouri, have underlined that racial inequality and discrimination remain a reality of contemporary American life. In the St. Louis metropolitan region, political fragmentation has created and perpetrated disparities between whites and African Americans in vital spheres such as education, civic engagement, income and employment, housing, and health. Data on communities in the region from the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that African-Americans continue to lag in household incomes, educational attainment rates, levels of employment, and infant health. Blacks are also more likely than whites to be victims of crimes.

Last October, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon charged a newly appointed Ferguson Commission to investigate the various socioeconomic and political conditions that contribute to these disparities. The Commission also has a mandate to explore underlying sources of distrust and animosity that exist between the municipal governments in north St. Louis County and their predominantly African-American residents. Wide ranging reforms proposed by the Commission aim to reduce racial inequalities in education, employment, community policing, and municipal governance.

The Ferguson Commission raises several important questions. Can uncovering the truth about past injustices remove distrust? Can suggested reforms reduce racial animosity? In sum, to what extent can results of the Commission's deliberations promote healing and become a catalyst for reconciliation in the region? We can generate some preliminary answers by comparing the work of the Ferguson Commission to the operations of international truth and reconciliation commissions created to investigate human rights abuses under oppressive military regimes in Latin America and during the apartheid regime in South Africa. The Missouri effort is distinct in many ways, of course, but comparisons can help gauge the therapeutic potential of the Ferguson Commission – and also remind us that uncovering the truth, listening, and forgiveness are important steps to take in addressing social injustices.

How Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Work

Worldwide, truth and reconciliation commissions have been formed in the aftermath of civil wars to investigate past atrocities and human rights violations and establish an official, impartial record of what transpired. In addition, these commissions are often asked to suggest reforms that could right the balance between groups divided by ethnicity, religion, and class. In their final reports, most commissions identify social disparities and institutional weaknesses that allowed violence to erupt and recommend reforms in the security apparatus, judicial institutions, and economic and political arrangements to further reconciliation and head off future troubles.

According to scholars such as Priscilla Hayner, Martha Minow, Margaret Popkin, and Elisabeth Porter, truth and reconciliation commissions have the potential to reduce underlying feelings of hate, anger, and revenge, and reintegrate perpetrators and victims into society. Research shows that clear-cut conditions must be met for commissions to achieve their goals: To be effective, commissions must have strong public support, include representatives of various sectors of society, and operate in impartial, transparent, and non-political ways. Commissions must have adequate financial and material resources to collect testimony, perform investigations, and conduct public hearings. On the other hand, commissions will be toothless and impotent to further constructive changes if they lack legitimacy and transparency among ordinary citizens, have inadequate resources, and draw their members only from elites or specific segments of society. Above all, commissions fail if they are used as tools to whitewash past injustices by those in power.

The Promise of the Ferguson Commission

Prospects for the Ferguson Commission to serve as a catalyst for racial reconciliation in a troubled metropolitan region are still unclear – and much hinges on additional steps taken by civic leaders and the business community, who must take many sustained steps to redress persistent racial injustices. However, based on what scholars have learned about the effectiveness of international truth and reconciliation commissions, we can already determine that the Ferguson Commission can have a positive impact in several crucial ways:

- Strong public support for the Ferguson Commission increases its legitimacy and bodes well for the likelihood that several of its policy reforms will be implemented – especially in areas such as making policing more oriented to community needs, reforming the operation of municipal courts, and promoting more equal education.
- The Commission’s ability to further linkages and dialogues among disparate groups – ranging from elected officials and clergy to protesters and law enforcement officials – is laying foundations for helpful interdependencies in the future. Such ties are likely to be crucial to sustaining any reforms adopted at the Commission’s behest.
- Most important, the Commission’s public hearings, testimony, and investigations will draw attention to the gross racial disparities and injustices that remain a reality of life for most African-Americans in the St. Louis metropolitan region. These public events can put a human face on pervasive racial problems – letting African Americans know that their difficulties have been recognized and prompting others in the community to perceive persistent racial injustices they might willfully ignore or have occasion to notice.

In sum, the Ferguson Commission represents a critical juncture for the St. Louis metropolitan region to move beyond its corrosive racial divisions. Although the Commission’s efforts are not likely to achieve full reconciliation, establishing an impartial record of past injustices can help to reduce entrenched distrust and animosities. Like the most effective international truth and reconciliation commissions, the Ferguson Commission also has the potential to reduce racial oppression and draw traditionally disenfranchised African Americans in the St. Louis region more fully into local and regional decision-making, laying foundations for a better future.

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