The following letters, one from Saint Louis University faculty and staff of color and the other from allies, have been seen collectively and undersigned by more than fifty among our ranks. As we send this, additional faculty and staff continue to sign them. We submit them and undersign them together in solidarity.

17 October 2014

Dear Members of the Saint Louis University Community,

Over the last two months as a community we have struggled with the consequences of the death of a young man under circumstances that raise significant questions about the relationships between police and the citizens and communities they are employed to serve. Since that first homicide there have been two more that involved police and citizens. The latest happened nearly on our doorstep and the young man is the child of one of our Saint Louis University community.

The mission statement of Saint Louis University explicitly articulates an institutional commitment to leading the quest “for the discovery, dissemination and integration of values, knowledge and skills required to transform society in the spirit of the Gospels.” In support of that mission, the University aims to welcome diversity and to foster the kind of community that “facilitates [our] development as men and women for others.” More importantly at this moment in St. Louis, the Saint Louis University aims to support its mission by “[Nurturing] within its community an understanding of and commitment to the promotion of faith and justice in the spirit of the Gospels.”

In the early hours of the morning of October 13, 2014, the institution was lead, in the spirit of the Gospels, by a group of young protesters who awakened the campus and urgently called us into accountability to that mission and how we support it. After a civil and quiet march from the corner of Shaw and Kiemm, where Vonderrit Myers died on October 9, 2014, protesters were met and blocked by members of the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department at the north end of the Grand Boulevard bridge, in a moment too eerily reminiscent of Selma, Alabama nearly fifty years ago. Fortunately, this standoff gave way as the police retreated and let the protesters pass. From Grand the protesters entered campus and rallied at the clock tower. There presence here on campus, approximately two miles from the Shaw Market awakens us appropriately to the fact that neither justice nor societal transformation in the spirit of the Gospels can take place as long as more than four hundred encounters between citizens and police end in fatalities. Faith cannot be promoted or advanced when 90% of the victims in these encounters are citizens.

What we in the SLU community have at stake here is even more poignant and frightening. Among the protesters occupying the clock tower space now are SLU students. Among this group of SLU students are young African American men and women who live in St. Louis City and St. Louis County. For all the world, these young people—engineers, social scientists, humanists, RAs, and campus leaders—look and move precisely like Mike Brown, Vonderrit Myers, Renisha McBride, and the many young African Americans who lose their lives to fatal encounters with police and with overzealous, armed citizens. These sons and daughters of SLU strike a particular chord among those of us who, as Black people and people of color, see them as reflections of our children, our grandchildren, our neighbors, and ourselves. For this reason, we do appreciate and applaud President Pestello’s decision to avoid confrontation and to allow the protesters to do the work of calling us ever to our mission.

We urge the SLU community to look up at the side of Salus and recognize that we have a college dedicated not only to Public Health but also to something called Social Justice. That is to say, Saint Louis University houses a school of Public Health with a heart; something no other university in this nation or in the world has or is capable of being. We must begin to deepen our commitment to understanding the inequality that surrounds our not only our university, but also many of the neighborhoods in which our administrators, faculty, staff, and students live. We, as a community, must join our neighbors to take on America’s most vexing and enduring problems. The Ignatian promise of commitment to communities and service must be our guide.

In love and hope,
Dear Members of the Saint Louis University Community,

By the morning of Monday, October 13, hundreds of protesters against police violence chose our campus as a rallying point. Some remain. Saint Louis University does far more than provide them with a convenient resting place. Indeed, the presence of this protest on our campus asks crucial questions about the relationship between our university and our community, and demands that we reckon with them.

Many of these protesters are already our students. But many others of the young people who have been central to the activism contesting and demanding accountability for the police shootings of Michael Brown, Vonderrit Myers, Stephon Aveyhart, Christopher Jones, Kajeme Powell, and far too many others in our region and nationwide, are not. As professors, we cannot help but ask, "Why not?"

A common refrain among young protest leaders in St. Louis City and County since the Brown shooting has been "We are Michael Brown." Two of the most widely circulated photographs of Brown have been of his body, left in the street for over four hours after his death, and of him a few short months previously, posed in his high school graduation robe. These photographs help illuminate some of the many ways in which young people of color are Michael Brown: as targets of racial profiling and police brutality, and disproportionately as products of defunded educational institutions. At Saint Louis University, we must ask how our student recruitment, our admissions processes, our financial aid programs, and our treatment of bias incidents, among other things, are implicated in the maintenance of the systematic inequality that young people of color like Brown face, and how they can instead be manipulated to challenge it.

It is worth remembering that until 1944, Saint Louis University remained a formally segregated institution. Today, it remains white-dominated. We have had protests against institutional racism come to us, which provides the opportunity for serious self-reflection. This self-reflection suggests we could do better work to combat institutional racism in our university and bring what we offer--"the pursuit of truth for the greater glory of God and for the service of humanity"--dialogically to all sectors of our community. People of color should be welcomed on our campus not only as protesters, but also as students, colleagues, and community members.

We write as professors, and we also write as allies to people color. Those of us who are white are reminded that racial inequality in the United States is something we have the privilege to refuse to confront, unlike people of color who are impacted by it every day. The demonstration at Saint Louis University has forced many of the white people on our campus, including some of our students, to confront racial injustice, perhaps for the first time. Long after this demonstration is over, we urge our white students, coworkers, and community members to make the choice to confront racial injustice every day. White people can be privy to iterations of racism that are unlikely to be said or done in front of people of color. These are opportunities to speak out, to educate, and to advance the cause of justice.

We are proud of the work our university has done so far to commit to making our campus--as college campuses should be--a place for dialogue and learning about weighty and sometimes painful issues. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

Sincerely,
The undersigned:
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Dr. Lauren Arend
Kira Hudson Banks
Aaron N. Taylor
Olubukola A. Gbadegesin
Jonathan Smith
Wynne Moskop
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