Churches in Times of Unrest: A Rapid Response Guide

West Midlands Racial Justice Initiative | July 2025

This is a guide for clergy, lay leaders, and church communities navigating moments of protest, unrest, or state violence. It does not offer neutrality. It offers clarity, rooted in justice, solidarity, and the Gospel imperative to stand with the oppressed.

1 Immediate Priorities for Church Leaders

A. Be Present, Not Silent

- **Open your building:** create space for reflection, rest, lament, and sanctuary.
- **Be visible:** clergy presence in the streets, vigils, or community spaces matters.
- **Speak clearly:** racism, poverty, and injustice are not secular issues — they are spiritual ones.

B. Acknowledge Pain and Anger

- Validate grief and righteous anger in sermons, prayers, and conversations.
- Avoid rushing to calls for calm that silence trauma.
- Say the words: racism, policing, injustice, Black and Brown suffering.

C. Communicate Quickly and Clearly

- Use your platforms (bulletins, WhatsApp groups, social media) to share a short pastoral message of care and presence.
- Share verified local information (safe spaces, support services, solidarity actions).

2 Do's and Don'ts for Churches

DO

- ✓ Open doors for prayer, refuge, and conversation.
- ✓ Preach sermons that name injustice and call for transformation.
- ✓ Support local youth and families who may be targeted or criminalised.
- ✓ Listen to those most impacted by injustice.
- ✓ Reach out to migrant-led, Black-led, and youth-led groups.

DON'T

- × Keep the church closed "until it's safe."
- × Offer vague prayers for "unity" or "order."
- × Assume the role of law enforcement interpreter or moral referee.
- × Speak *about* communities without listening to them.
- × Stay siloed in church-only spaces.

3 For Reflection & Planning

Ask your leadership team:

- What is our pastoral responsibility if young people in our community are arrested, harmed, or scapegoated?
- Do our sermons and prayers offer comfort without challenging power?
- Who do we not hear from in our congregations? Who stays silent — and why?
- If the Church is not a sanctuary during unrest, what is it?

In your church building:

- Post a visible message of solidarity and welcome.
- Ensure someone is available to speak with people in distress.
- Review your safeguarding and support protocols: what happens if someone seeks shelter?

In your worship:

- Integrate lament, resistance, and justice themes. Don't sanitise scripture.
- Invite laypeople or young people to name their hopes and fears aloud.
- Allow silence — not avoidance — to create space for grief.

4 Scripture to Preach with Urgency

- **Luke 19:45–48** — Jesus overturns the tables: holy anger in the face of corruption.
- **Isaiah 58:1–12** — True worship is undoing oppression, not empty ritual.
- **Exodus 3:7** — "I have seen the misery of my people… I have come down to deliver them."
- **Amos 5:21–24** — God rejects performative worship: "Let justice roll down."
- **Matthew 5:9** — "Blessed are the peacemakers" — not peacekeepers.
- **Acts 2:17** — "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy." Let youth speak.

5 Crisis Communication Checklist

- Draft a short 1–2 paragraph message acknowledging unrest and affirming the church's care and clarity.
- Include contact info for pastoral support or prayer drop-ins.
- Share the message via email, WhatsApp, social media, noticeboards.
- Avoid tone-policing. Model listening, not lecturing.
- Translate or interpret where needed (especially in multilingual parishes).

6 What to Do if the Police Contact You

- Ask why they are contacting you. Keep a written record.
- You are **not obligated** to share private pastoral information.
- If police want to use your church as a base, **seek guidance** and assess community trust first.
- Prioritise **safety and trust** over optics or reputation.

7 For Follow-Up

When unrest quiets, the trauma doesn't disappear. Plan for:

- A dedicated Sunday of lament and recommitment.
- Listening circles or community meals with facilitated reflection.
- Deep teaching: run scripture sessions on justice, empire, and resistance.
- Anti-racism training contextualised to your church tradition.