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In the Light of Michael Brown: Living the Mission of a Jesuit University

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Dr. Norman White is Associate Dean for Community Engagement and Associate Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Saint Louis University (SLU). White has long been known for his work for and with the underserved and under-privileged minority communities that surround SLU's urban campus. In August 2014, after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri and during the protests and civil unrest that followed, White fielded numerous calls from the media for interviews and analysis. Those interviews brought White to the attention of newly inaugurated SLU president Dr. Fred Pestello. The two met in person, by chance, at an August SLU vigil calling for peace and justice in the wake of the violence in Ferguson. As the events of Occupy SLU unfolded a few weeks later, Pestello called on White as he sought to discern how to proceed. White played a pivotal role in administrative deliberations about how to respond to the occupation, as a voice who personally knew the communities and concerns being lifted up by the protestors and as a voice for SLU's Jesuit mission.

White's reflection offers a narrative of the events of Occupy SLU as he experienced them and suggests how he was transformed by those events.

In the late summer and fall of 2014, I was swept into a whirlwind that had begun to blow in the St. Louis community and beyond. I have had few moments to think back on those days and the meaning they had for not only the campus of Saint Louis University where I teach, but for my life as well. In the reflection that follows, I will try to share the narrative of those tumultuous days and the meanings I took from it.

Gone Too Soon

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown laid in the street on Canfield Drive for four hours after being shot and killed by Darren Wilson, an officer with the Ferguson police department. The nation watched in disbelief as residents of Ferguson and the surrounding communities filled the streets of the tiny town to protest the death of yet another young black man at the hands of law enforcement. During the ensuing days images of his lifeless body lying there were emblazoned in our minds like the flaming trails of the projectiles fired at the protestors from the machinery of a mechanized police force. The militarized police presence, their actions toward the protestors, the imagery of a black man left lying in the street for hours, and the

anger it invoked ignited a chain of events that would change worlds.

In the weeks following Michael's death, I was reminded of the prophetic words of the Kerner Commission that had investigated the uprisings and civil unrest that occurred in the late 1960s. In their report, they stated that "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal."¹ It seemed as though no one had read or heeded those words and the future they predicted. Michael Brown's murder represented a perfect storm to highlight the gross inequality that exists in America between black and white communities, making Ferguson iconic for the American racial divide. Two more incidents involving the police use of deadly force that resulted in the deaths of Kajieme Powell and Vonderitt Meyers, Jr. further fueled the tensions of the St. Louis community.

Leading from the Front Line

It is in this context that Saint Louis University and other local institutions found themselves during that fateful summer and



Occupy SLU Collection

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fall. As a Jesuit university with a stated commitment to social justice, Saint Louis University and its leadership struggled to understand their role in events that were unfolding in the region. Having been through its own turmoil the previous two years, the faculty had taken votes of no-confidence for then President Lawrence Biondi. He was ultimately forced to resign. The conflict had taken a toll. In the aftermath, Saint Louis University appointed its first lay president, and the events that were taking place fell squarely on the shoulders of the newly appointed president, Dr. Fred Pestello.

The campus scheduled several vigils and other activities as reflections of its solidarity with the community. The first vigil was organized by Campus Ministry and was held at the Clock Tower. It was at that vigil that I first met Dr. Fred Pestello. Our meeting was warm, and his comments made me hopeful that the campus was at a turning point. As a faculty member whose work focused on the African American community and issues of youth violence, I had been called on by the campus media office to be interviewed to discuss the growing unrest and the conditions that had fueled it. Dr. Pestello mentioned having seen several of the interviews that I had done with local and national media and thanked me for representing the university during such a difficult time. I thanked him for being present in the way that he was at a time when our campus community could use moral leadership in response to the crisis.

The next day I received a call from Dr. Pestello's office asking if I was available to meet with him. I met with him later that morning and found that he was a man trying to understand the lay of the land in a community that was foreign to him. He mentioned that in Syracuse or Dayton he would have known whom to call and would have done so, but, here, in St. Louis, he needed to get his bearings. As one of the few African American faculty members on our campus, and because of my record of working in the local community, Dr. Pestello called on me to provide him with background on the social conditions in St. Louis related to the African American experience. We spent a great deal of time talking about the community and his academic background in sociology. He so clearly understood the dynamics

of the community he had entered even if he didn't know the particulars. He struck me as a man committed to the mission of the university in a way that made me want to find ways to support his effort to revive what I felt was our flagging commitment to it.

Over the next few weeks we had several conversations. Sometimes it was just us, but there were occasions when others joined us as well. Kent Porterfield, Vice President of Student Development, and Stefan Bradley, Director of African American Studies, were among those most present. It felt refreshing to actually have conversations about the conditions in the community that I had been working in for a number of years; to talk about the need for the campus to take a moral stand against the inequality that resided at our doors. It was also refreshing that Dr. Pestello was making an honest effort to understand what questions needed to be asked before simply jumping in without comprehending the problem. I shared what I could of the lessons I had learned from conversations with community members. Among those lessons was the feeling that, although as a university we boasted that one element of our mission was the training of students to become men and women for others, we had, in reality, been insulating them from those "others" who lived north of the campus. We, in fact, had created our self-described "SLU Bubble." During orientation in the summer before they matriculated, students were routinely told by representatives of the campus Public Safety department to "not go pass the Fox." The Fox Theater along with Powell Hall, home to the St. Louis Symphony, represented the central attractions in St. Louis' Grand Center region. Two blocks past the Fox was Delmar Boulevard, a street that gained fame in a BBC news story regarding its representation as *the* racial dividing line in the city of St. Louis.² In following these advisories, our students were discouraged from venturing north into the African American community. The "Bubble" was an imaginary space that protected our students from the world beyond the school. It has over the more recent years begun to be marked with blue lights on buildings and posts. Students are now told that if they are under the blue lights, they are in the area

Public Safety patrols. The implication was and is that this is a safe zone.

This insulation had created a difficult reality. Community representation was often limited to well-established organizations that had name recognition but who in some respects over the years had become divorced from the constituents they served. This was becoming increasingly apparent as the protestors made plain their discontent with those who claimed to represent the community. I encouraged attention to more grassroots organizations that could be found in church basements or in the apartments of activist and organizers, those who served many but were seen by few.

A Call to Action

As Dr. Pestello and I were developing a relationship, a friendship, based on mutual respect, I received an email from Reverend Rebecca Ragland with a request from the organizers of “Ferguson October.” The request seemed simple. A group of community-engaged clergy was seeking to hold an event on campus on October 12 as part of Ferguson October. The event, “Mass Meeting – An Interfaith Service,” represented a faith coalition that sought to come together as a local community for healing at a time of great pain. Saint Louis University’s location represented a perfect place to bring people together in prayer.

I forwarded the request to Dr. Pestello and suggested that agreeing to host the event would be a symbol of a new commitment to the local community. I saw the work of this group of clergy as an important part of reaching into more grassroots work in the community. In my email to Dr. Pestello, dated September 26, 2014, I indicated two reasons that I considered this request to be important. I wrote,

“I have attended a meeting of a large clergy group at Pastor Ragland’s church who are seeking to provide positive spiritual support to these young people while allowing the story of this moment be told.

The additional reason for passing this on to you is that it would make an

extraordinary statement to the community that I think we are seeking to join in a spirit of accompaniment to bring change that this community needs. Having said that, I would understand if you do not feel this can take place on campus, but I felt it important to give you the opportunity to consider it.”³

In my estimation both of these were consistent with our university mission. The clergy were living out the Gospels in their daily work with young people who had been pushed to the margins for far too long. They were standing with them in their pain and their strength. Further, my experience at SLU had told me that the Jesuit practice of accompaniment meant we should walk with members of communities to join their efforts as a partner not as a savior. This could be a critical moment for us.

Dr. Pestello’s response was quick and affirmative. On September 27, he wrote back that “Bridget Fletcher [Chief of Staff] is working on this. She is optimistic but has yet to identify something. She will get back to you sometime soon. Thank you for passing along the request. Fred.”⁴ Having turned the effort over to his Chief of Staff meant that this would happen. After much discussion, it was decided that the Chaifetz Arena located on the eastern edge of the campus would serve best. It could accommodate a larger crowd and was not in the middle of the campus.

As the planning began, I learned that the organizers were members of the PICO Network, whose mission is “a national network of faith-based community organizations working to create innovative solutions to problems facing urban, suburban, and rural communities.”⁵ The speakers at the interfaith service would include a number of activists from the protest movement in Ferguson: Revs. Osagyefo Sekou, Traci Blackman, Michael McBride, Dr. Cornell West, Jim Wallis, Ashley Yates, Tef Poe, and Rabbi Susan Talve among others. Rev. Sekou was a Visiting Scholar at Stanford University at the Martin Luther King Education and Research Institute who came to St. Louis during the protests and had been an active part of training protesters in non-violent civil disobedience.⁶ Traci Blackman was the pastor of Christ the King Church in Ferguson, Missouri,

and a leader among local clergy who stood in solidarity with the protesters bearing witness on their activity.⁷ Michael McBride was National Director of the PICO Networks Urban Strategies/LIVE FREE campaign.⁸ Dr. Cornell West was a nationally recognized scholar/activist and Emeritus Professor at Princeton University.⁹ Ashley Yates and Tef Poe had become two of the leading grassroots activists/organizers of the protests in Ferguson.¹⁰ And, Rabbi Susan Talve was Rabbi of the Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis. These were powerful voices who had become part of the unfolding story of Ferguson.

Although the decision had been made, there were some among the executive leadership who were unhappy with the decision. The concern was still with the SLU brand and how inviting the group of activists onto campus would look to the community, to the families of our students, and to alumni. This fear was further fueled by another shooting that seriously jeopardized the chances that the event would take place. This one was closer to home. On October 8, Vonderitt Meyer, Jr., the son of a SLU employee, was shot and killed by a police officer working secondary employment in a neighborhood fairly close to campus. The protests moved from the streets of Ferguson and downtown near the St. Louis Police headquarters to the Shaw community about a mile from campus.

Time to Take a Stand

Another call came from Dr. Pestello's office; he wanted to meet with me. This meeting reflected an urgency and was attended by not only Stefan Bradley and Kent Porterfield who had been part of the previous conversations, but also included James "Jim" Moran (head of Department of Public Safety), Bridget Fletcher (Chief of Staff), Bill Kaufman (General Council for the University), Jeff Fowler (Vice President of Marketing and Communications), Bob Gagne (Advisor to the President), and Fr. Paul Stark, (Vice President of Mission). The concern was that the murder of Vonderitt had changed things dramatically. Tensions were now rising even higher than they had been, and it was unsafe from the view of SLU Public Safety to have an event where the protestors were welcomed onto the campus.

My argument was simple. We would look bad in the community if the plug was pulled on this event and it negatively impact the efforts to change the nature of our relationship to it. Additionally, there had been advertising publicizing the event, and, in fact, it was announced on the Ferguson October website. People might come anyway. I asked for time to talk to organizers about what was happening regarding the new concerns.

Reverend Sekou asked that he be able to meet with Dr. Pestello, and a meeting was arranged for the following morning. Everyone involved was concerned. And we were all committed to the idea that this event needed to take place safely and without damage to the campus or its image. The Jesuit mission was raised a number of times during that meeting, and it was decided we would go forward. Given the tensions that were present in the region and city between police and protestors, it was suggested that the police presence in the arena be as invisible as possible, and that included the St. Louis Metropolitan Police. Rev. Sekou indicated that the organizers would hold the security in their hands.

On October 12, the event took place with little disruption. Although there was tension in the air, nothing happened to diminish the university's involvement and willingness to be a community partner. A single incident did occur that called for security, but it was handled in a way that respected the planning. In fact, some were upset the DPS officers did not intervene more forcefully. They respected the plan, and the disruptive community member was removed.

Although it had been tense, the night had been successful. In fact, after the crowd left, we were ushered into the restaurant on the floor level of the arena where Dr. Pestello quietly met with local clergy, quite a few of whom had been in the arena for the interfaith service. He spoke of a commitment to the community and the desire to be a partner for change in the years to come. He listened to their concerns, and we ended the evening with a wonderful sense of optimism.

Around the Clock Tower

On Monday morning October 13, I woke to a text from Kent Porterfield. Something had happened overnight: SLU was the highest trending item in social media. The occupation had begun.

Following the interfaith service at the Chaifetz Arena, many in the crowd had left to go to the Shaw neighborhood where Vonderitt had been killed, and events led them back to campus. The protestors who entered the campus included both students and community members. They were prepared for a stay. Tents had been set up, and rations were carried in.

When I got back to the campus, I met Kent and Dr. Jonathan Smith, a colleague from African American Studies, and a very tired Jim Moran. Jim had done something amazing. He and Dr. Pestello held the commitment to minimal law enforcement presence, and his men had been positioned a slight distance from the clock tower. He also explained that Chief Dotson had offered to remove the protestors, and they were told they could not come on campus. This would be handled differently.

I was called to meet with Dr. Pestello, Stefan Bradley, and Kent Porterfield to discuss what was to come next. A very shaken Dr. Pestello described what was happening on campus. Not with the protestors, but rather in the offices that were beginning to field phone calls from irate alumni and concerned parents. A storm was brewing. There were threats to remove students from the university. There were even louder threats that donations were going to stop. We spoke for some time, and, as we were leaving, the question was asked what was owed to the protestors. I suggested they deserved an opportunity to be heard. They were from a community whose voice was muted by historic disdain, and they had real grievances that should be heard. I remember him asking about the non-students and recalled that during my earlier conversation with Jonathan, he had stated that this was an opportunity to follow the religious tradition of sanctuary. I shared that with Dr. Pestello. Maybe we owed them all sanctuary, a place free from the fight, where they could be heard.

At some point I also had a conversation with Bob Gagne, an advisor to Dr. Pestello, and in our conversation I suggested that part of the problem he was confronted with was that all the voices he was hearing in his usual rooms were the same. He needed different voices. That evening I was asked to attend a meeting to be held the following morning in the president's conference room. When I arrived, I found that Stefan and I had been invited to participate in the president's executive leadership meeting. I knew many of the people in the room but not all. They were trying to make sense of what to do in the middle of a storm.

There were many concerns about what was happening. The recollection I have of the meeting with this group of people was sharing the truth of American life in African American communities: the struggle, the tension, the ongoing treatment as an "other." Most importantly, my work had told me that, in addition to the many social risk factors that social scientists described, the community had been experiencing an occupation of its own for many years by law enforcement that ruled with an iron hand. That relationship was what had brought us to this space. I encouraged the individuals in this meeting that as leaders they needed to be able to stand with the university mission and be present for a community that deserved more than it had been given in the past. For many in the room, that was not a reality with which they were they were familiar. In the end this leadership group determined they would stay the course.

I remember feeling that Dr. Pestello was standing straight even in the midst of a storm. I was gaining such respect for him as a person who had been thrust into a circumstance for which none of us were prepared. I remember thinking, Fred was a man I would support any time.

That evening I received a call from Romona Taylor Williams, the Director of M-Slice, asking that I participate in a meeting that would take place the next day. There was some concern that although the Black Student Alliance (BSA) had distanced itself from the initial occupation, they were now looking to be included in the conversation to bring an end to the protestors' occupation.

The participants in the room represented three organizations. Tribe-X is a community and student-led group of protestors led by Jonathan Pulphus and Alishia Sonnier; M-Slice is a community advocacy and development organization led by Romona Taylor Williams, Lola Zasaretti, and James Page; the BSA was led by Christopher Walter Jr.; President Pestello represented SLU. I describe this as a conversation, because it was. It was not a negotiation or the presenting of a list of demands; it was a respectful conversation between people who cared about the world they lived in. Tribe-X representatives described what they would like the university to do toward being more supportive for African American students on campus. They also indicated a need to work with the local community toward building a more diverse student body. M-Slice described larger concerns about being of support to community-centered community development. The focus was on listening to the community as the experts on their lives and future and working with them to achieve those aspirations. Interestingly, after the issues raised by the community were concluded, Dr. Pestello stated that he was going to appoint a special advisor for issues related to community engagement and growth. In response to a request made by students, he identified artists who could commemorate the events of that week in a piece of art. He made it clear that his commitment to the community must go beyond that moment in time. During this meeting conversations began that would reflect an air of mutual agreement and respect for one another. The meeting closed with an agreement to return the next day to sign the formal agreement that would become the Clock Tower Accords.

As I reflected that evening on what had transpired, I was amazed to have been a participant to this historic conversation. Dr. Pestello had shown a moral leadership that was wedded to the mission of the university and the commitment to urban communities that Jesuits have historically sought to promote. The members of Tribe-X and M-Slice had shown extraordinary trust and faith in this process and the man they had sat with through it.

The next morning, we all reconvened, and the written document was presented. There were

additional members of Tribe-X present who had not been there the day before. There was a sticking point raised about the representative of BSA signing the document. There was also some conflict that emerged with the outside community members of Tribe-X and the student members. The Tribe-X community members were not willing to trust the agreement. They had not been there for the initial discussion and had no way of holding Dr. Pestello or the university accountable to this document that they were being asked to sign. It appeared there would be no signature put to paper this day. Dr. Pestello and his administrative team left the room, disappointed because he thought they had come to an agreement the previous day.

After he left the room, a conversation took place behind those closed doors by those who remained in the room. It was intense, but ultimately led to the agreement that they would sign. BSA would not be included among the signers. After the Accords were agreed to, one young man from Tribe-X asked if the university could work to assist with issues around health and wellbeing in the local black community. He specifically noted that cigarette smoking and violence were of crisis proportions in his community. He asked if there were any things we could do to help with the reduction of these problems. These requests were not part of the document that ultimately was signed, because they were raised after there had been an agreement. I mention this because it reflected the tone of hope and aspiration that existed in that room and in those discussions. It was a moment when two worlds met and treated each other with respect and dignity.

A Starting Point, Not the End

The events between August 9 and October 18 were life changing. For many years I had felt apart from the campus. This feeling was created by a sense that the rhetoric of social justice was just that, rhetoric. It did not feel like it was linked to the struggles of the African American community of St. Louis, which is the core of my work. Our stated commitment of training students to become “men and women for others” worked as a tag line, but, as a course of action, we had failed. Our students were taught to fear the members of the

community who had the greatest need, through the representation of a SLU Bubble.

My commitment to bringing students into the community, exposing them to those “feared” others, and enhancing the campus community partnership had been fulfilling. Yet, it had been disappointing at the same time. Although the students were moving in that direction, the campus administration had not adequately supported systems to make those interactions easier. The death of Michael Brown had served as an awakening. Students were becoming increasingly aware of the privilege of their lives. They were becoming more involved in the community. They participated in protests and were becoming advocates for social change. I was meeting students at street protests and at trainings for non-violent civil disobedience. Since the events of 2014, students no longer assumed that they had answers to the problems they saw in the surrounding community. They knew they had questions, but, they knew that the questions needed to be answered by those they would seek to serve. A recurring question has become “How do I best serve in ways that respect the dignity and humanity of others?”

For me the events were transformative. Although I had long been respected on campus for the work I did in the community, I was now being called on more and more to be a leader of conversations. We were speaking about how to become partners for change as opposed to saviors. In the summer of 2014, I had been on retreat at the Sacred Heart Jesuit Retreat Center in Sedalia, Colorado. During that sacred time I had discerned that the university needed to find a way to facilitate my working on campus to move us further to living out the spirit of the Gospels. When I returned to campus, I suggested that they find a way to support my community work as a university. Initially, the response was tepid. Universities have trouble at times with models that don’t begin in the traditional three-legged stool of research, teaching, and service. Service is often an after-thought, and community service seems to be defined as philanthropy. It is not rewarded in a structure that is based on tenure and promotion. In Michael Brown’s light, I have been appointed to the position of Associate Dean for Community

Engagement and Partnerships in the College for Public Health and Social Justice.

We have come to live in the light shed by the death of Michael Brown. We understand the depths of racial inequality and inequity that exists not only in St. Louis but across America and the world. Since then, voices have risen that were not being heard; a new civil rights era began. Although there are some who are troubled by the movement’s descriptor “Black Lives Matter,” the truth is that many have felt for far too long that they didn’t.

The response to the pain experienced by the African American community and their call for more than equality (true inclusion) in this America has not been an easy one. During 2014 and 2015, the uprisings that took place were reminiscent of America in 1967 and 1968. Enough had been enough then. Yet, here we are 50 years later. However, what was incredible about these months here at Saint Louis University was that a different way of responding was attempted. There had been a respectful dialogue without the violence that had become too common. It was a moment when equals from different worlds talked and listened. In fact, a group was developed on campus called the “Access and Success Committee” as a result of the events of that fateful October. During one of our meetings, we moved from the president’s conference room to a room with a roundtable so that we were all sitting in spaces where we could see each other. This may seem like a small thing; however, this felt like a monumental achievement. There was no head of the table. It was equity in practice; all voices mattered.

As a result of our work, Dr. Pestello received a letter from Attorney General Eric Holder commending him on his amazing leadership and the way he handled what could have been a dramatically different moment on campus. Even though he had received this national level of recognition, Dr. Pestello remained under attack from alumni, students, and parents for his handling of the situation. Although it might have been easier to give in to the pressure, he continued to stand tall. During these tumultuous times, I began working with several students, particularly Nebu Kolenchery, and we began a movement called “We Stand with Pestello.” Nebu

was a passionate student whom I had come to know since his arrival on campus. He represented the epitome of a SLU student. His interest in helping others and making a difference in the world we live in was consistent with my own. Originally, after Michael Brown's death, Nebu and I had started organizing another effort together that we labeled the Overground Railroad to Literacy. This was a response to requests I had received from community members. Based upon that effort with the tutoring program, I knew Nebu could make the "Stand with Pestello" effort happen because that was who he was and what he does. It is an important part of what happened on campus.

While I am not in full agreement with everything that has transpired since October 18, 2014, I found Dr. Pestello to be a courageous leader who was committed to the mission of the university in a way that was different than I had experienced previously on campus. Today, I continue to stand with him.

Where We Stand

Since the Clock Tower Accords were signed, movement has been slow. The process of getting people to agree on part or all of what is needed has been impeded by many things. First was a shift in leadership. Initially, Dr. Pestello attended all of the meetings. However, reality set in. As the president of the university, he has many responsibilities in addition to guiding this process. Dr. Jill Carnaghi, a recently hired Assistant Vice President of Student Development, was given the helm of the Access and Success Committee, while an effort was made to hire the Special Assistant to the President who would lead this committee as one of their tasks.

In the spring of 2015, Dr. Jonathan Smith was hired into that position. As often happens in tense situations like this, the job he was charged with looked impossible on paper. He was to be responsible for campus diversity issues, community engagement, and managing the Clock Tower Accords. We celebrated his selection because we knew he was the right man for the job. On the SLU campus there is limited diversity, particularly among administrators. The campus needed an individual with vision to address issues

of race on campus and in the surrounding community. However, upon reflection, the shortcoming, as often happens, was that Jonathan was appointed with little attention to the resources it would take to conduct this work. Community engagement requires a number of resources. The Clock Tower Accords were our most significant effort toward that engagement. The resources that are needed include the time required to establish relationships with community members, the funds to support engagement activity for both community groups and faculty/staff members, and the administrative support that demonstrates that this work is of value to us as a community.

The "Campus Compact Initiative," a coalition of more than 1,100 universities across the United States, suggests that among the most important strategic conditions to be met in doing this type of work is an allocation of resources to support it.¹¹ Tabitha Underwood, Executive Director of the Missouri Campus Compact, describes the need for intentional well-planned reciprocal associations between campus and community members to create effective partnerships.¹² The importance of Underwood's perspective is that strategic planning around community engagement must become a part of the activity of a university or college. Strategic planning brings with it an assumption that adequate resources are to be allocated to achieve desired goals. We have not yet made that commitment wholeheartedly. The commitment has to be part of the strategic planning for the university. At present, the university struggles with scarce resources to make that happen.

In the above sections, I tried to describe a set of circumstances that conspired to make us as a university act in a way that was outside of our comfort zone. Yet, even though we were functioning outside our comfort zone, these circumstances were truly at the heart of who we were and are as a Jesuit university. If we are to live and act in a way that brings the Gospels to life, we must be willing to walk with "Others" whom we do not know so well. For me this was not an academic exercise but rather represented the calling that I had felt when I was recruited to Saint Louis University. "Men and women for [with] others" meant striving for a more just society, it meant providing the opportunity for that just society to come to life. For a moment in the

summer and fall of 2014, we began the process of that journey, and I had the privilege of being a participant to history. HJE

Notes

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⁴ F. Pestello, email message to N. White, September 28, 2014.

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