

<<Bishop Lyons: Let's stand together and sing the National Negro Anthem, page 477>>

Narrator Eleanor Klibanoff: It's a Wednesday evening, and Bishop Dennis Lyons is behind the organ at Gospel Missionary Church, in the West End.

<<music>>

Narrator: Bishop Lyons is 70, with the boundless energy of a much younger man. Every time I've seen him, he's in a full suit, and one of his signature embroidered hats. Even for this sparsely attended weeknight service, Bishop Lyons is giving it his all.

[church members singing "Lift every voice and sing"]

Narrator: Gospel Missionary Church looks unassuming from the outside — it's a squat, one-story building, right by the entrance to the interstate. Most of the property is taken up by a large, cracked parking lot that logjams on Sundays.

[singing continues]

Narrator: But inside — this place is something special. The walls are painted lavender. There's a life-size cut-out of Bishop Lyons greeting people as they walk in the door. It's a community hub — sit there long enough, and you see all kinds of people dropping by to see the Bishop — police officers, other pastors, young guys looking for a place to crash, single mothers looking to see if any food has been donated.

Bishop Dennis Lyons to church: Thanks to the Lord for those great songs.

Narrator: Gospel Missionary Church has been here since the early 90s. When Bishop Lyons first moved in, he says this corner was one of the most dangerous in the city.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: When you come to 34th and Vermont...there were certain behaviors that was accepted. You knew, your drug dealer, you knew it was prostitution. You just knew it. The police knew it.

Narrator: One day, Lyons says a young man was shot and killed right in front of the church.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: I said 'No more, no more.' The next person who would be killed here will be me. And I went straight to the corner and told the drug dealers, we're going to shut the whole corner down.

Narrator: The people selling drugs on the corner didn't immediately love that idea.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: I said, regulate it, or we close it down, who do you think you are, the damn big shit? Go on out of here son of a bitch, take the son off, just call me Bishop,

turned into a joke, 'Hey, here comes the Big Shit,' but all of a sudden people around town started saying Bishop.

Narrator: Lyons went from the son of a bitch to the Bishop in part because his plans to clean up the corner — *worked*. It was pretty simple in his eyes: he says an alley near the church where old guys hung out had also become a popular hiding spot for people dealing drugs.

Narrator: So he says he asked the police to let the old men come do their gambling and drinking out in the open.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: And give them an opportunity not to be afraid and not to give the drug dealer's a opportunity to hide among them. And they were willing to do that. So the concept is, let the people really do the policing and police, you back us up.

Narrator: Bishop Lyons has been working to build this kind of relationship between the police and Louisville's Black community for decades now — often without much reward. But he keeps trying.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: But I knew that there had to be a bridge for the Black community to cross. After the wildfire is over, somebody has to go across the bridge. And that's why I was able to make a commitment that we're with the police when they're right, because they are right. I stand with them when they're wrong to help get 'em right.

Narrator: The Bishop was that bridge, just like David McAtee. Lyons knew McAtee well. His church is around the corner from where McAtee grew up, where his mother still lives.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: She is a mother of the neighborhood... David on 26th and Broadway kind of took on that same flavor of Mama here in Vermont.

Narrator: Bishop Lyons was glad to see the next generation, like David McAtee, starting to build those relationships with the police.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: They could stop in there and he would give them barbecue, just a regular, Andy Griffith, Barney, it was that relationship with David McAtee and the beat officers.

Narrator: Louisville was hardly Mayberry, even at Yaya's BBQ — or Gospel Missionary Church. Because beyond these one-off relationships that people like Bishop Lyons or David McAtee fought hard to create — the relationship between the police department and the West End of Louisville has long been a fraught one.

Narrator: Parts of the West End have high rates of violent crime. The police department has admitted to targeting many of these neighborhoods with aggressive patrols, and a recent audit found that Black people are more likely to be stopped, arrested and cited, citywide. A lot of Black people say they don't trust LMPD.

Narrator: And there's evidence that LMPD officers don't trust the people they're supposed to be protecting and serving. Researchers surveyed LMPD officers for the University of Louisville, asking them if they thought the department treated citizens like they can be trusted to do the right thing. The 2016 study found nearly 60 percent said no — officers don't trust people to do the right thing.

Narrator: The chasm between the police and Louisville's Black neighborhoods has been widening for decades. But a few years ago, things seemed to really hit a crisis point — in Louisville and around the country.

[MONTAGE of news anchors discussing protests in Ferguson, Missouri fade into President Obama: 'A gulf of mistrust exists between too many communities of law enforcement and communities of color.']

Narrator: Ferguson, Missouri is 270 miles west of Louisville, KY. But the police killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown reverberated across state lines — worsening tensions between the LMPD and the city's Black communities — and, finally, pushing the city to do something about it.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: After Ferguson, they decided that they needed to change the way that they police the community. So, when I heard it, it was like a breath of fresh air. It's almost like we now going to get some justice with the police.

Narrator: THIS IS DIG, SEASON TWO, THE MODEL CITY, from the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Newsy. I'm ELEANOR KLIBANOFF.

Narrator: It's December 2016, in a crowded municipal auditorium — folding chairs, a projector screen, a truly massive painting of Native Americans and settlers hanging on the wall.

[Someone introduces police chief Steve Conrad on a mic]

Narrator: LMPD Chief Steve Conrad takes the podium.

Chief Conrad: Thank you for getting it started so well. I want to thank you all for being here.

Narrator: These kinds of government forums don't usually draw a crowd, but today, many of the seats are full. And it's all thanks to one man.

Chief Conrad: I heard earlier today the bishop was going to bring a busload full of people. And I thought, well, I'll believe it when I see it. Well, I saw it...(laughter)

Narrator: Lyons used his church bus to bring community members to the forum.

Chief Conrad: Very belatedly, he gave me some advice to make sure we had food tonight. We were hoping that he ordered chicken, the best we could do was cookies and peanut butter crackers. (laughter)

Narrator: Bishop Lyons remembers that forum well —

Bishop Dennis Lyons: It probably was the first time they had that many Blacks to attend. They never had seen that many Blacks to attend a meeting of that sort.

Narrator: I've been to a lot of these kinds of forums over the years as a reporter. Peanut butter crackers, lukewarm coffee, community members laying out their concerns — city officials taking diligent notes — nothing ever really changing.

Narrator: But at these forums, Chief Conrad is leading the critique. He says the relationship between the police and the Black community in Louisville is broken. He acknowledges his own department's role in that. He says things could not and would not proceed the way they had in the past.

Narrator: Chief Conrad isn't with the department anymore, and he didn't respond to our request for comment. But he laid out his philosophy across a series of forums like this one. He says if the department can't earn the community's trust —

Chief Conrad: We're going to have an awfully hard time making Louisville a safer city and making it the place you all want it to be.

Narrator: Conrad says they've gathered the community here today to share details of their ambitious new reform plan that is going to build trust between police and citizens, by emphasizing community policing and sharing power with the most-policed communities.

Narrator: And they weren't going it alone. In fact, they were getting help from the highest levels —

Chief Conrad: President Obama saw what happened in Ferguson...And he felt a need to personally get involved and personally do something.

Narrator: President Barack Obama had commissioned a task force to help the country figure out a path forward from Ferguson. That task force had consulted experts, hosted forums, and heard from communities across the country. All to create a roadmap for policing reform, laying out exactly how a city could rethink its whole approach to public safety.

Narrator: It was called 21st Century Policing and Louisville city leaders...loved it. Conrad said they saw this plan as a gift —

Chief Conrad: That, if properly implemented, could change the way we operate in Louisville, could change the way our officers interact with people in this community, and

my hope is that together, we'll not only make our community safer, but we will improve the relationship between police and the community we serve moving forward.

Narrator: Bishop Lyons got a copy of the task force report — in fact, he still has it, sitting on his desk, as tattered and torn as a well-loved teddy bear. The Bishop, this pastor, this man of God. He called the 21st Century Policing report “the Bible.”

Bishop Dennis Lyons: I saw the seriousness of President Obama wanting to get to the root of the animosity between the people and the police... And it was outlined, line by line, precept by precept. And I said, this is it.

Narrator: LMPD announced at this forum that they had already overhauled training and revised departmental policy to better reflect the values of 21st Century Policing.

Narrator: They were going to emphasize procedural justice —

Chief Conrad: You have an interaction with the police and you come away from that interaction, or come away from that feeling like you were treated fairly.

Narrator: And shifting from a warrior mindset to a guardian mindset. Here's LMPD's Eric Johnson —

Major Johnson: Police are, they're not trying to be some kind of occupying military force that's coming to conquer your neighborhood.

Narrator: This stuff sounds wonky, but it's actually pretty simple. Everyone across the city, no matter what neighborhood they live in, would get the same treatment from the police — policing that's about your protection, and safety. Officer Friendly — not Officer Bang Down Your Door In The Middle Of The Night or Officer Rip you out of your car in front your kids over a traffic offense.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: If they had left everything else out of that 21st century and say, OK, we just got to do number one. We gonna build trust with the community and at the same time maintain public safety, that would have been a healing for especially the Black community.

Narrator: Conrad said that the events in Ferguson had revealed how urgent and important this work was. Not just because it would feel good, or because they wanted to head off similarly catastrophic protests. But because they HAD to do it — they had to have legitimacy in the eyes of the people they police.

Chief Conrad: That authority comes from you, and we have got to make sure that you feel like we have a legitimate reason to have that authority.

Narrator: Louisville was forging a new path forward for its police and citizens, a path that valued transparency, accountability, trust, legitimacy, that cared how you felt after a traffic stop, and wanted to make sure everyone was treated equitably.

Narrator: This was music to Bishop Lyons' ears. And he wasn't alone. 21st Century Policing was a big deal in Louisville at that time. The newspaper wrote about it, the department hosted these forums, and the Mayor talked about it at press conferences.

Narrator: Back in 2016, a lot of people were getting on board with 21st Century Policing. Like Dave Mutchler, the president of the police union at the time —

Dave Mutchler: When you read that report, and you read the recommendations, you know, if you actually sit back and reflect on it, you can say to yourself, 'Well yeah, this is what police should be doing.'

Narrator: And also Rashaad Abdur-Rahman, an outspoken critic of the police department —

Rashaad Abdur-Rahman: It all seemed good.

Narrator: At the time, Abdur-Rahman worked for the mayor as the Director of the Office for Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods, which tries to tackle gun violence as a public health issue. In that role, he had a pretty contentious relationship with LMPD.

Rashaad Abdur-Rahman: I talked to a lot of kids who view LMPD as an occupying force, who can tell you stories about harassment until you're blue in the face. Until your stomach is queasy.

Narrator: And he's not a big believer in police reform as a concept.

Rashaad Abdur-Rahman: If we're talking about what it takes to actually change such a thing? Well, I'm not sure policing can be reformed in general.

Narrator: But he saw the 21st Century Policing plan as a form of harm reduction —

Rashaad Abdur-Rahman: So okay, we're going to be talking about moving from a warrior to a guardian, you know. We're talking about some of the mental health components, some of the community engagement components... It all seemed positive.

Narrator: The federal government agreed. The Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, also known as the COPS Office, was looking for cities that were putting 21st Century Policing into action.

Narrator: Because — here's the thing. The federal government actually has very little oversight of local police departments. They can step in if there's evidence that a police department is

routinely violating its citizens' civil rights — but most would rather it not get to that point. So they need to incentivize police departments to *want* to do better.

Narrator: That's what 21st Century Policing was — an attempt to convince police departments to reform themselves: before a tragedy, before protests, before federal intervention. In April 2016, DOJ COPS director Ron Davis visited Louisville to applaud their early efforts.

Ron Davis: So what I've seen over the last day and a half has been astonishing, has been amazing, and there's a lot of lessons for me to take back.

Narrator: He spoke at a press conference during his visit, surrounded by city leaders.

Ron Davis: One is I've seen as a very diverse community trying to face collectively with the challenges that are faced with every community in this country, challenges of public safety, challenges of building trust between the police and the community.

Narrator: Davis said he was particularly impressed with one part of Louisville's plan to implement 21st Century Policing:

Ron Davis: They shared with me a chart that shows every pillar, every recommendation, the evaluation that's being done, what can be done, where there's challenges, what are the obstacles, how they work through it. And this is very impressive.

Narrator: He's referring to LMPD's 21st Century Policing workbook. We obtained a copy of this workbook through an open records request and he's right — it's very impressive. A color-coded organizational dream, laying out in excruciating detail exactly how the city planned to reform its police department.

Narrator: Less than two years after getting this plan, LMPD had documented 351 different reform initiatives that they were either already doing or had launched as a result of the report — efforts that were going to help them build a better, safer, more equitable police department. These workbooks indicated that meaningful change was already happening in Louisville, Kentucky. Just a few examples —

Chief Conrad: We're doing a reintroduction to the concepts of community oriented policing.

Narrator: They started doing peace walks with the Chief in the highest crime neighborhoods.

Mayor Greg Fischer: "We are among the first cities nationwide to put our crime data online."

Narrator: They had implemented an early warning system to detect officer misconduct.

Robert Schroeder: We implemented the first pilot body camera program in LMPD's 5th division. [fades under]

Narrator: They were going to start warning the community en masse before they launched targeted crime fighting strategies.

Narrator: They even started a clergy police academy — Bishop Lyons helped sign up pastors. Lyons hoped this training would help the police feel comfortable calling on the clergy to help de-escalate tense situations and serve as community ambassadors. They were given t-shirts and certificates.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: And we said, wow, we can use this to really build trust. We got all these guys — 100 some pastors. They can come to the scene and the police respect them and mom and them respect them.

Narrator: One of the biggest changes at LMPD thanks to 21st Century Policing was the creation of a brand-new, full-time community policing unit —

Chief Conrad: That will be focusing its efforts on building trust and legitimacy in our most troubled and most challenging neighborhoods.”

Narrator: LMPD was adding 10 new, grant-funded positions to create this unit, focused on building relationships —

Chief Conrad: “We're going to work with these citizens to build a sense of community, a sense of neighborhood. We're going to work with them to overcome these issues.”

Narrator: The community policing unit handed out Christmas presents and books to kids, and created a mentorship program for young girls. They even applied for a \$90,000 grant to buy an ice cream truck to help them build relationships in the community. They didn't get the grant.

Narrator: Then there's this Instagram video they uploaded. A police officer stands in front of an LMPD Hummer with a full DJ set up. The video is captioned quote,

[Music comes up from the instagram video: he's playing The Chainsmokers & Coldplay - "Something Just Like This"]

Narrator: [reads] Community Policing Unit's Officer Jason Moseley is also known as "DJ Justice"! Definitely something you wouldn't expect when *this guy* pulls you over.”

“I want something just like this” [music ends abruptly]

Narrator: The Clergy Police Academy, the Community Policing Unit, the open data, the body cameras, the 351 different reforms — all of this was Louisville's attempt at building a new relationship between the police and the most-policed communities — Black communities — the West End. It was a new day in Louisville.

Narrator: All of this was so impressive that, in mid-2016, they got an even bigger endorsement of their work. City officials were invited to the White House, to be honored along with 14 other cities. At a community forum, Conrad portrayed Louisville as a model city for policing reform.

Chief Conrad: And we were invited to be one of fifteen cities in America to essentially implement the plan and model the way for the other 17,000 police departments in this country.”

Narrator: Louisville was going to model for the rest of the nation how to proactively, voluntarily reform a police department.

Narrator: I’ve spent most of the last year working along with reporters from the national news network, Newsy, to dig into all those reforms LMPD documented. LMPD knew what to do to build a better, safer, more equitable police department. They knew where the problems were. They knew what the solutions were. They even knew how to implement those plans.

Narrator: They had the support of the federal government, they were given grants, they had visits from consultants¹ to help make this happen. There was a real commitment from city officials, and real momentum on the national level. This was the moment that Louisville declared it was choosing reform and proving to the country that it was possible.

Narrator: Bishop Dennis Lyons really, truly, earnestly believed Louisville could be that model city — but — that’s not exactly what happened.

Bishop Dennis Lyons: Louisville may have been a model city, but it’s all according to who... lens were they looking through...Because if you came to Louisville and asked the residents, especially in the Black community, they would've found out that it was not a model city.

Narrator: So — where did it all go wrong?

[mini montage — Ends on male voice: “What was the cost of that crime reduction?”]

Narrator: That’s next time on Dig, Season Two: The Model City.

Female voice: This season of Dig was reported by Eleanor Klibanoff with the Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting and Carrie Cochran, Karen Rodriguez, Maia Rosenfeld and Maren Machles (MAIR-en MACK-less) with Newsy. It was produced by Eleanor Klibanoff. Edited by Kate Howard, Laura Ellis and Ellen Weiss. Data reporting by Rosie Cima (Chee-mah) and Mark Fahey (FAY-hee). Production assistance by Rip Rinehart and Chris Julin (JOO-lin). Field producing by Zach Cusson (KOO-sahn), Mai Nolasco-Carranza (MY No-LASS-koe Cah-RAHN-zah), Tyler Franklin and Chelsae Ketchum (CHEL-see KETCH-um). Kojin Tashiro created our theme music, with Ryan

¹ [Theron Bowman \(consultant\) interview](#)

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