

# *Interview with Rev. Kenneth Flowers*

## David Crumm

*David Crumm interviews Rev. Kenneth Flowers, who has popped up repeatedly in national news media through the years—especially for his courageous partnerships in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots and again in the wake of the 1994 earthquake. He's currently senior pastor of Greater New Mt. Moriah Baptist Church in Detroit.*

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DAVID: Then, flashing forward to 1992 in Los Angeles—

KEN: That was the year of the LA Uprising. Some people call it the LA riots. But those of us who lived in Los Angeles called it the uprising.

DAVID: ...First, I need to ask: You refer to what happened as an uprising, as many people do who live in Los Angeles. Why do you use that term? I know you're not trying to justify such violence...

KEN: Here's why many have used that term, "uprising." This all took place about a year after Rodney King was beaten by police officers—and there was videotape of the beating that was shown around the world. That happened in 1991. Then the trial of the police officers was moved out of Los Angeles and, on April 29, 1992, an all-white jury over in Simi Valley acquitted those four police officers who beat Rodney King.

That's when the city erupted. But what many people don't realize is that this was just the final straw that broke the camel's back. In Los Angeles there had been this mood that African Americans were not treated with the same level of respect and justice as other minorities. Around the time of the Rodney King beating, there was a 15-year-old black girl who was shot in the back of the head and killed by a Korean grocer. The storeowner claimed this girl was stealing a bottle of orange juice. Later the facts showed that the girl had her money out to put on the counter and she was not stealing that bottle of orange juice at all. But the lady thought she was stealing the juice and, in the end, the girl was shot in the back of the head. The girl died and this woman who shot her got off on that charge with no jail time.

Some months after this storeowner got off with no jail time there was a man who was charged with animal cruelty involving his dog. That man received two years in jail. So African Americans were saying: A dog's life is worth more than an African American girl's life? A dog is killed by this man who gets 2 years? And here's a young black woman killed and the grocer gets probation? That was brewing. There were other tensions involving blacks and other minorities as well. Rodney King was beaten and everyone could see what happened there. It was captured on videotape. The whole world saw what happened. People hoped that at last there would be some justice.

Then, in 1992, an all-white jury acquits these four white officers. That's why people in LA thought of this as an uprising. There were all these situations building up and this Rodney King verdict was a final straw.

This uprising wasn't just a tragic state of lawlessness in the city. There was a state of hopelessness, too, and rage. There were so many layers to what unfolded.

DAVID: The city was so tense that day. I remember the national news reports.

KEN: Yes. On the day of the verdicts, I pulled up to my church and there was a plain unmarked police car up in front of my church. I didn't recognize that car at all, then this police officer gets out and he says, "are you Rev. Flowers?"

I said, "May I help you?"

He said, "I've been assigned to you."

I said, "*Assigned* to me?"

He said, "Yes, we've been alerted there could be an uprising depending on how the jury rules—so the chief has assigned officers to pastors who work with groups in the city."

I was assigned a police officer and so were the pastors of these other congregations who worked in the African American Men's Coalition.

I said, "Well, I don't think I'll need you here. We're trying to bring about peace, not conflict. But you're welcome to come into the church with me."

As it turned out, we sat there in the church office with a TV set and watched the verdicts together. The officer was standing right in my office—just the two of us were there when the jury came back—and I'll never forget when I heard those first two words: "Not guilty." I just leaped to my feet. And the verdicts came one after the other: Not guilty! Not guilty! Not guilty! Not guilty! I sank back down in my chair and the words came out of my mouth without my even thinking of what I was saying. I said, "They are going to burn this city down."

This had been brewing for so long that I knew what was about to happen. We had tried to plan this event at the AME church where people could come and voice their anger in a constructive way. But there was no time. The uprising took just a matter of minutes. The officer's radio right there in my office began to go off. We heard a crowd was gathering.

I called my wife and she said she was going to come to the rally at the AME church, but now she wasn't sure she could get there. I told her not to even try to come down for it. I wanted her to stay home with our children.

But I did go to the rally and the mayor came—and it was the first time I had seen Mayor Tom Bradley booed. A lot of African American folk didn't understand Mayor Bradley. Some called him an Uncle Tom. It really hurt to see that. He was trying to help calm the city down and for the first time I can recall, he was booed. This was bad. And it was ludicrous. So unfair. The mayor had nothing to do with that jury.

DAVID: Things got a whole lot worse than that.

KEN: Yes they did. We were at this rally and the mayor had just left—and folk came inside. We heard: "They're rioting right out front!" We walked out of the church. I was with some men from my church and they walked right around me, trying to protect me. Then, right away, my members started saying, "Pastor, you've got to get back inside the church here! We can't protect you out here." At first, I didn't do what they told me. I thought I'd be fine.

But as we walked, we saw the police in full riot gear backing up from the crowd. The police were backing up! This was bad. Folk began throwing bottles, rocks—and I saw fires, too. Someone threw something over my head and it hit a guy standing right behind me. Someone from my church

pushed me down on the ground.

I said, "I need to talk to people. We've got to bring some peace here."

Then, one of my members told me: "Pastor, you can't talk to these people right now." And he was right, of course. This was out of control.

So we got back inside the AME church and the whole church soon was surrounded. Fires were burning all around that area. Then, the lines were cut to the church. There was no outside communication for a while.

When lines were restored and communication was back up, one of the first things I saw on television was a shopping center that I knew was right near where we lived. My heart just stopped because I knew my wife and kids were near those fires. It was about 8 or 9 o'clock in the evening and people were burning a store right near my house!

DAVID: That must have been horrifying. As a parent myself, I can barely imagine—

KEN: It was. It was. But all the phone lines were down. I couldn't get through to my wife. We couldn't step out of that church. It was terrifying. We have three kids now, but back then it was two children and finally I got through to a trustee by telephone who was able to check on my wife and kids. He told me they were safe, but they were down on the floor of our home because so much violence was raging all around them. People were shooting....The biggest pain for me that night was not knowing what was happening to my family back at the house. We had reports of people shooting each other all around us in Los Angeles that night.

I wanted to get home—but at first I could not even get out of this church where we had been staying for safety. It was about 2:30 before I could leave the church. Everything I saw around me was like a war zone. All I could smell was smoke. There were fires burning everywhere I looked. I got home and I rushed in to see my kids and my wife and I said, "Thank you, Jesus, they're OK!"

DAVID: It was a short night for you that night.

KEN: Yes, it was. The very next morning, I had to be at a meeting to try to organize some kind of help. I had very little sleep. I remember driving to that meeting and still fires were everywhere. In 1967, I had seen these frightening scenes in Detroit, but there was a world—an entirely different perspective here. When I had last seen things like this, I was 6 years old. Now, I was a man and I was a leader in this community. I wasn't just supposed to survive this situation—I was supposed to do something to help this community!

Plus, I was praying to God that no one would hurt me or hurt my family. Everything smelled like smoke. Those fires burned from the day of the verdict for three straight days. It wasn't until Friday evening that week that the fires and the looting settled down.

And that weekend, we had services.