

June 19, 2020

An Open Letter to All Black Presbyterians and Others Who Give a Damn!

Peace My Friends in Christ,

I pray this letter finds you as outraged as I am due to the recent murders of black citizens here in the United States of America. I pray these recent events have disrupted your lives to the point where you feel called to take long-term, corrective and irreversible action to combat systemic racism in this country and in the church.

The recent murders of Mr. Rayshard Brooks, Mr. George Floyd, Ms. Breonna Taylor and Mr. Ahmaud Arbery by police officers and white citizens have moved me to a place where I no longer am accepting of injustice or the marginalization and oppression of black people; not in society, not in the church, and not in the PC(USA).

These recent murders are the result of four hundred and one (401) years of institutionalized systemic racism, an institution that has been tolerated for far too long. We know the root cause of systemic racism - white privilege, white supremacy and the continued theology and praise of whiteness. As a black man existing in America, my skin color does not afford me that same privilege.

Some have questioned and have failed to see how the recent murders of black citizens are the direct effects of systemic racism. Some even feel empowered to challenge the murders by asking, "Where is the evidence that these murders were racially motivated?" Mr. Ahmaud Arbery was murdered on February 23, 2020. It took 74 days for the video of his murder to surface before any arrests were made, confirming that his life did not matter. Ms. Taylor was murdered on March 13, 2020. Mr. George Floyd was murdered a few short weeks after the video of Mr. Arbery's murder was released. Mr. Brooks was killed less than a month after Mr. Floyd was murdered. These heinous actions have added to the far too long trail of black blood that stains the streets of America. The actual question that should be asked is would Mr. Arbery, Ms. Taylor, Mr. Floyd and Mr. Brooks be alive to verbalize their police encounters if they were white?

Systemic racism and the devaluation of black lives is what led to these murders. Centuries of physical, mental, social, and spiritual abuse due to the continued exploitation of black bodies also contributed to these murders. In response to the trauma produced by 401 years of these painful experiences, demonstrations were held in all fifty (50) states and other countries around the world.

I am frustrated, angry and outraged by the continued murders of black citizens in this country. I am however even more incensed by the lack of accountability, the lack of raised voices and the lack of participation by black Presbyterians of the PC(USA). For over two hundred (200) years black Presbyterians have found it necessary to organize themselves to contend with the church's heresy of white racism, yet we continue to struggle to be an effective witness in eradicating white racism in the church.

Let us be reminded of the mission of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus (NBPC); "to serve Jesus Christ, and enrich the black Presbyterian congregations and their communities, through commitment to congregational enhancement, advocacy, social and racial justice; and challenging the Presbyterian Church (USA) when it fails to take seriously the needs of the poor, oppressed, and disenfranchised."

It is the purpose of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus (NBPC) "to Enable-Equip- and Empower people of the African Diaspora, in dealing with current issues that adversely affect or that can enhance their lives in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and society. The purpose includes the following:

- To aggressively combat racism and injustice in the Presbyterian Church (USA)
- To achieve full participation of its members in the total Church and society

Friends I am sad to report that it is us who have fallen short of our mission and purpose. We are **complicit**, we have **compromised** our mission and purpose and we have been **complacent** in taking seriously the needs of the poor, oppressed and disenfranchised among us.

The current membership of the NBPC is only 0.5% of the membership of black Presbyterians in the PC(USA). Although I'm grateful for the 0.5% NBPC membership and the officers who persevere to keep its mission and purpose a living reminder of the challenge before us, I am disheartened that not even the mission and purpose of the Caucus has been enough to call black Presbyterians to unify. Are we that apathetic that we are unable to dialogue and come together to combat racism?

I am also disappointed by the lack of black Presbyterian participation in the governance of the church. Though we have more visible black leadership than in past years, our participation in the governance of the PC(USA) remains visibly low. The membership of our black churches continues to decline as our elder members die.

HOW CAN WE BE BETTER? HOW CAN WE DO BETTER! As I visit and participate in governing councils around the country, I observe the following:

- The noticeable absence of black commissioners attending Presbytery meetings.
- Black Elder commissioners are not visible in key debates on the floor of the Presbytery.
- The lack of black commissioners leading the power committees of the Presbytery.
- NBPC chapters lack voice and vote as members of Presbytery councils and cabinets.

I learned as an engineer, in for profit corporations, that you measure those characteristics that support goal achievement and are most important to the bottom line and improvement to the organization. Participating in the governance of the PC(USA) is a critical step. Let's hold ourselves accountable to achieve full participation in the governance of the PC(USA). Then and only then can we impact the long-lasting change necessary in the church and society.

Now is the time that we take our work seriously. Demand changes in the Presbyterian Church (USA) polity and directives that promote an inclusive community of justice, love and peace; a church community that represents the ministry of Jesus. I call you to change direction. DON'T HESITATE, PARTICIPATE.

WHAT CAN YOU DO? START NOW!

- Join the NBPC and work with other Presbyterians to combat and dismantle systemic racism in the church and society. Let us not wait another 200 years.
- Actively work to eliminate the root cause of those issues that adversely affect the lives of people of the African Diaspora in church and society. Let us not pass these issues to the next generation UNRESOLVED.
- Motion all governing bodies in the PC(USA) that a member of the NBPC shall be elected with voice and vote. We are encouraging all people of color caucuses to join us.
- Require that all Matthew 25 churches **shall** commit to achieving all three (3) parts of the three (3) legged stool model listed below. For without all three parts, how can we achieve congregational vitality when members of our communities are marginalized and oppressed due to systemic poverty and structural racism?
 1. Building congregational vitality
 2. Dismantling structural racism
 3. Eradicating systemic poverty
- Change the decision-making process from majority rules per Robert Rules of Order, 11th Edition to the process below requiring all motions to meet all three of the following before it is approved:
 1. Majority vote
 2. Consensus
 3. No one is harmed by this action
- Join the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) established in 1915 by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the organization responsible for identifying the themes for Black History Month. Dr. Carter G. Woodson felt it was important to publish information about black life, history and culture to the global

community. Dr. Woodson believed it was imperative to learn about all cultures which is why he is also known as the father of "multiculturalism."

As followers of Jesus, if we cannot model God's beloved community in the PC(USA), then how are our communities expected to value each other and live in peace? How will we, black people, and other people of color mark this point in the history of our church? How do we respond to those before us on whose shoulders our foundation is built? This is not a new song for us, and forward action must start now! US Representative Ayanna Pressley once said, "The people closest to the pain must be closest to the power." I call you to accountability, I call you to participate and I call you to join me in unity as we come together to realize God's beloved community, for such a time as this.

In God's radical hope that we love one another,

Thomas H. Priest, Jr.

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National Black Presbyterian Caucus, President