

A Pastoral Letter to United Methodists
of the Southeastern Jurisdiction

June 5, 2020

Brothers and Sisters:

As president of the Southeastern Jurisdiction College of Bishops my heart rejoices over the bold, courageous, and compassionate offering of confession, lament, and call to action by our white brothers and sisters of the SEJ College and the gracious acceptance of this act of truth telling as we journey toward the Beloved Community. It is our belief that such actions enhance our work and witness to a hurting community seeking moral leadership in this time of racial upheaval.

We see this statement as a reversal of the sentiments of the letter sent to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by a group of clergymen that caused him to write the eloquent and brutally honest "Letter From a Birmingham Jail."

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>

We have longed for white voices of power and influence to stand with us. It is an amazing gift to hear and work with colleagues joining voices in solidarity with African Americans who have been both prophet and victim. It is only when the privileged who have benefited from the evils of racism take a stand that real change happens. It is our prayer that the church, the nation, and our world will no longer place the burden on the oppressed to liberate themselves. It is impossible to free yourself when the power of systemic injustice has its knee on your neck.

We pray that what follows will serve as a model for our brothers and sisters who have lived a life of white privilege to speak a gracious yet painful word of truth as we journey together toward real transformation, hope, and love in this racially charged atmosphere. We share this work of solidarity with these words from our fellow White Bishops with thanksgiving and hope that others will join us.

Bishop Leonard Fairley

We, the White Bishops of the Southeastern Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church, call upon all United Methodists to stand with and see our Black brothers and sisters.

As White American Bishops, we stand up and stand with our Black Bishops in the Church who have consistently named and called out the systemic and sinful practice of discrimination that has been pervasive in the United States since the first slaves walked the shores of this land. For our failure to join our sisters and brothers we ask forgiveness.

As White American Bishops, we stand up and stand with the Black Communities across our Episcopal Areas recognizing that we who have been in positions of power and privilege have been silent. In our silence we have and do sin. We implore all United Methodists across the Southeastern Jurisdiction of The United Methodist Church to exercise influence and power to be agents of repentance, reconciliation, reformation, and restoration in a system that has failed to bring hope to all God's children of color.

As White American Bishops, we stand up and stand with all persons who live in fear of the very systems designed to protect them.

As White American Bishops, we stand up and stand with all persons whose anger has reached the point of intolerance due to failure after failure to change systemic racial injustice which has created the climate where black lives can be snuffed out without consequence.

As White American Bishops, we stand up, stand with, and stand against any systems of injustice that treat people differently because of the color of their skin. We call on the people called Methodist to live fully into our baptismal vows to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin.

We believe that the soul of our nation needs to be examined which means that each person, individually, needs to engage in self-examination. Self-examination includes educating oneself about the roots of racism from slavery to lynching to racial segregation and Jim Crow to contemporary presumptions of guilt, incarceration, and police violence. Self-examination means scrutinizing one's beliefs, attitudes, and actions. A beginning place is for each of us to read "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" written by Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963. [See link above.]

God calls us individually and collectively to take action.

In our Baptism we are called to accept the freedom and power given by God to resist evil, injustice and oppression however, wherever, and whenever they are present.

We, the White American Bishops of the Southeastern Jurisdiction United Methodist Church, cry out to the people of The United Methodist Church to unite our hearts, our minds, our souls and our strength now to step into this present brokenness by seeing those we have chosen not to see. We do so believing that out of the pain of the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Trayvon Martin, and countless others whose names have faded, that these senseless killings will stop and healing can begin.

Let us now, this day, stand up and stand with our Black brothers and sisters so that we will be united as one body in Christ, redeemed by his blood. May we be one in Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world until Christ comes in final victory.

This is our deepest prayer.

The Holy Work Before Us

We now ask you to join us in recommitting ourselves to non-violently exposing and opposing injustice, racism, and violence even when it resides in our own hearts. We must not allow our righteous indignation and prophetic calls for justice to become spiritually hollow with no moral integrity to speak into a world that is in desperate need of the fresh bread of hope.

We hear and see it in the protests. The world grows weary of injustice where the marginalized become voiceless and invisible living at the mercy of power. If we are unwilling to walk the path of Jesus Christ and truly acknowledge white privilege, then all our statements simply become high sounding pontificated documents joining other statements gathering dust on the selves of empty promises.

With your prayers and actions joined with ours we can answer the cries we hear in the midst of protests—cries of injustice, fear, and anger, that when gone unanswered turn violent. If Jesus is indeed the answer let us dare to see one another as beloved children of the living God deserving of love, mercy, and justice.

We offer our example to the church. In the name of Jesus Christ this is our work and we dare not abandon it or the world because we desire privilege and power over what the Lord requires of us.

Please join us in this holy work of dismantling racism in its subtle and overt forms. If not us, who? If not now, when?

Christ have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

Christ have mercy.