



Ways to “Come Alongside” the Black Churches of the New York Annual Conference

June 29th, 2020

The killing of George Floyd, Breona Taylor, Tony McDade, Elijah McClain, Rayshard Brooks, and countless others by police in the last few months, and the disproportionate infection and deaths due to Coronavirus (COVID -19), have once again highlighted systemic racism and white privilege that for too long have devastated communities of color in this country. The call for justice reaches far beyond accountability from the police. It reaches into every facet of our communal life including the Church. The time is surely upon us when we must dismantle the ways in which our denomination has been complicit in maintaining and in some cases promoting systemic racism and white privilege as the way to affirming and living out the words of our founding father John Wesley when he said: “Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness”. It is to this holiness that we must be a witness to the world, and we must seize this moment and this opportunity to rid ourselves of this millstone that for far too long has hindered our Christian witness.

In one of his most recent statements, Bishop Bickerton explicitly pledged to do the following:

"I pledge to **come alongside** those of you who have, for far too long, felt unheard and marginalized. I pledge to keep the conversation, the words, and the actions in front of us and to not let it fade. I pledge to lead with you and for you. And I pledge, as a part of that leadership, to admit mistakes, seek forgiveness, and listen deeply."

Historically, in the New York Annual Conference, Black churches, which include Brown communities that identify with the African Diaspora, have suffered from systemic racism and questionable practices by City Society. We have been burdened by huge edifices that are impossible to maintain, in communities that have been demoralized and destabilized by white flight, deindustrialization, and displacement under the rhetoric of urban renewal projects. The United Methodist City Society (UMCS) has profited from these sales, significantly growing its endowment at the expense of just reinvestment into the Black and Brown communities where those churches were located. To receive assistance, Black and Brown churches either have to accept ecclesiastical mortgages

or navigate matching grants. The UMCS has failed to consistently follow its own policy where ecclesiastical mortgages are not required to be repaid for churches that remain within the connection. Its matching grant policy is particularly problematic for churches with limited resources and/or lack of members to meet the sweat requirement.

Data shows that there are significant disparities in salaries between Black and Brown pastors and their White and Asian peers. For years Black and Brown clergy have been denied churches with high paying salaries because the churches were located in affluent White neighborhoods.

Black and Brown pastors experience abuse when appointed to Cross-Cultural/Cross-Racial appointments and are required to teach their abusers to be anti-racist. As an elder who is serving a predominately White congregation recently pointed out “we are appointed to pastor those who hate us.” The New York Annual Conference owes a debt to its Black and Brown congregations and clergy.

We are encouraged by Bishop Bickerton's stated commitment to dismantle institutional racism in both church and society. We call on all white leaders of the New York Annual Conference to join in this commitment. Nevertheless, we are conscious of a long history of good sentiments, intentions, and spoken commitments being offered without tangible fruit as a result. To make sure that words and pledges do not become, once again, a transparent fig leaf to cover the nakedness of our inaction, Titus 3:14 reminds us, “And let our *people* also learn to maintain good works, to *meet* urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful. Accordingly, we ask that the following directives be implemented immediately by the Annual Conference.

- Cancellation of Ecclesiastical mortgages and a Jubilee Moratorium on paying apportionments for 7 years in an effort to balance the inequity that the Black churches have suffered due to economic, denominational and moral injury as expressed in the aforementioned examples of institutional racism.
- Checks and balances for the United Methodist City Society -
 - 1.) Include permanent ex officio membership representing BMCR on the City Society board.
 - 2.) Creation of an external review Board, determined by CCORR, to ensure a fair and equitable decision-making process. This Board will review all funding decisions made by the United Methodist City Society and be invested with the power to demand corrective measures. The review board will include the District Superintendents of the areas of the applicant churches, a BMCR representative (2 votes), and a representative from the Conference's Commission on Religion and Race (2 votes).

- Provide funding for COVID19 testing sites located within our communities, and specifically in our Black churches. Racism is a public health crisis. Due in large part to a lack of access to adequate healthcare, Black people are disproportionately affected by the COVID19 pandemic. In the same ways that the UMC worked effectively to combat Malaria in the world, the Church should again be at the forefront of the efforts to quell this global pandemic.
- Equity in Compensation and Accommodations for Black pastors.
 - 1) Align salaries with the efficient and effective pastors regardless of race. CCORR will collaborate with GCORR to establish a mechanism that interrogates and redefines effective and efficient pastors intentionally applying an implicit bias and anti-racist lens.
 - 2) Improve the living conditions of Black & Brown clergy. The parsonages for many of the Black churches to which Black pastors are appointed are dilapidated, unkempt, and unfit for living. Establish District Parsonage Task Force in collaboration with the District Boards of Trustees to ensure the upkeep of the local church parsonages.
- Cross-Cultural/Cross-Racial Readiness - In 2001, the 202 Session of the New York Annual Conference approved guidelines titled "THE VISION, FOUNDATION AND GUIDELINES FOR CROSS-RACIAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL APPOINTMENTS IN THE NEW YORK CONFERENCE". Being that CCORR's primary goal is to challenge and equip leaders in the United Methodist Church and beyond in the work of dismantling racial discrimination in all its forms, CCORR will be tasked to update these guidelines to include, but not limited to, anti-racism training for all predominantly White congregations to be completed and presented to the next called session of the New York Annual Conference. <https://www.nyac.com/files/forms/crosraci.pdf>
- Provide proven evidence of anti-racism work by those who serve on the following decision-making committees:
BOOM, Board of Trustees, City Society, Conference Committee of Finance and Administration, Personnel Committee, Conference Staff, and the Cabinet. (A list of evidentiary measurable proof will be created by the Bishop, CCORR, and BMCR)
- An initiative must be developed to create a pipeline of future Black and Brown clergy.
 - 1) This includes mentoring, scholarship resources, vocational discernment, and internship opportunities for promising candidates from within our congregations.

2) The Young Clergy Debt Assistance Program, created in 2014 by our late Ebony Bishop Martin D. McLee, gives funds to several young clergy persons each year for academic debt relief. It has yet to award a grant to a single Black clergyperson. This is not just a failure of oversight. Our conference does not currently have Black clergy who are within the age range to qualify for this program. The cabinet has not included young Black clergy in its revitalization plan. The Bishop and his cabinet must actively recruit Black clergy who are under the age of 40.

- For decades the NYAC has benefitted from the gifts of its Black members without just and equal treatment or recompense. BMCR is seeking to have four percent (4%) of the conference budget redirected to BMCR for two quadrenniums as reparations. Funding after this stated period will be agreed upon by the executive committee of NYAC BMCR and the Annual Conference.

As the Bishop quoted in his June 26th correspondence titled “Steps Towards Dismantling Racism”, “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.” -Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We, the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, cannot continue to give lip service. We do not want cheap grace in the form of empty promises and apologies. We do not want the church to decide for us, we decide what we want and need. It is time for action. As Dr. King also once said, “Justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

*"Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."
Matthew 5:37*

In the name of the Liberator, Jesus the Christ,

Rev. Sheila M. Beckford, BMCR-NYAC Coordinator
Veronica Darby, Vice Coordinator
Rev. Dr. Laurel Scott, Secretary
Deaconess Gail Douglas-Boykin, Program Director
Michelle Stanley, Treasurer

If you wish to add your name in support of this letter, click here:

<https://forms.gle/5CrEiVJ5ah19Wg1b6>