JEFFERSON
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TRUTH IN LOVE

‘Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste’

By Parris J. Baker
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Editor’s note: Following is the second of a three-part series on Catholic social teaching and Black Liberation Theology.

On Aug. 28, 1955, Emmett Till, then a 14-year-old black adolescent, was murdered by two white men, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, in Money, Mississippi. Almost 65 years later, on May 29, 2020, Mr. George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, was publicly murdered by Derek Chauvin, a former Minneapolis, Minnesota white police officer. The deaths of Emmett Till and George Floyd contributed to a refrain far too familiar to African Americans: the painful witness of the recurrent cycle of death of black people at the hands of white men.

These continuous violations of civil and human rights, including the right to life, for Black people and other Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), have signaled “a national alarm to real and present dangers, for all Americans, and must be countered in a spirit of determined conversion.”[1] Our nation and the world have witnessed, again and again, the pejorative disregard for Black life and the damning effects of institutional and individual racism in America.

However, as with so many other recurrent racial atrocities, there is always present the opportunity for change. Historic racial injustices, infused with the accumulated frustrations of Black people and members of other oppressed groups and allied supporters has periodically driven our nation to points of inflection. The paradoxical remark, “never let a good crisis go to waste,”[2] must guide our quest to discover meaningful solutions to the race problem in America. It will be

irresponsible and inhumane to wait for the death of another Black person. However, lurking deep in our subconscious is our belief that there will be another unnecessary death of a Black person at the hands of unabated white supremacists. There always has been.

Challenged with the Covid-19 pandemic and the intensifying racial tensions involving the killing of George Floyd, a diverse group of religious leaders in Erie County, called together by Bishop Dwane Brock, formed the United Clergy of Erie. The purpose of the group was to strengthen interpersonal relationships among religious leaders to collectively construct Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Beloved Community."[3] Included in the United Clergy of Erie were the following people:

1. Bishop Dwane Brock, International Presiding Bishop of Covenant Ministries International Fellowship and pastor of Victory Christian Center, Inc.
2. The Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Erie.
3. The Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York.
4. Darryl Craig, founder and director of Blue Coats and pastor of House of Prayer of Erie, (HOPE).
5. Derek Sanford, pastor of Grace Baptist Church.
6. Danny Stanton, Bishop-Elect and pastor of Friendship Baptist Church.
7. The Very Rev. Melinda Hall, Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. Paul in Erie
8. Parris Baker, pastor of Believers International Worship Center and associate professor at Gannon University

The United Clergy of Erie, whose mission mandate was "promoting safety and solidarity," partnered with UPMC Hamot and various interdenominational groups and for-profit and nonprofit organizations to distribute 50,000 protective masks and Covid-19 healthcare information in the ZIP codes 16503, 16504, and 16507. In these three areas were the highest incidence of Covid-19 related cases with Black and brown populations in Erie County.[4]

The group's purpose was to identify the requisites for racial reconciliation and rapprochement. The following "AAA" framework guided the conversations and planning of the United Clergy of Erie:

> 1. Acknowledge, do not apologize, for the history of your ethnic, religious, or racial group in the establishment and practice of racism, discrimination, and racial exploitation.
>
> 2. Apologize for personal apathy, complicity, or indifference to issues of race, racism, and exploitation.
>
> 3. Active human agency in our congregants for the instillation of faith, hope, and love.[5] Commit to use our personal evangelistic platforms to advocate for institutional change and to actively participate in the change process.

On June 4, 2020, an estimated 27,00 people marched to and filled Perry Square to protest George Floyd's death. White and black religious leaders of various faith traditions repented for personal apathy to racist ideology and pledged commitment to combat racism, however it presented itself. A second evening of prayer was held on Aug. 7, 2020 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Below is the transcript of the racial reconciliation speech delivered by the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese: (*Reprinted with permission)*

> I am Bishop Sean Rowe of the Episcopal Dioceses of Northwestern Pennsylvania and Western New York. The Episcopal Church was founded

in 1789, but our origins in the Church of England before the American Revolution mean that the first Anglicans in North America arrived in the 16th century, and our first congregation was established in 1607. It was our arrival that precipitated the theft of the land on which we stand today, the ancestral lands of the Erie and Seneca people.

We are proud, we Episcopalians, that our church was born in the same fervor of liberty that produced the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We learn in Sunday School and in seminary that the same men who founded the country founded our church, and we take pride in the long list of Founding Fathers, presidents, and captains of industry who are Episcopalians. Until far too recently, we have even taken pride that our church, unlike many others, did not split during the Civil War. That is to say, our church was more afraid of conflict than of the sin of slavery.

Our church's complicity did not end when the slave trade ended. Many of our congregations and dioceses were enriched by donations from members who made their wealth not only in the slave trade, but also in banks that enforced redlining, in corporations that exploited Black workers, and in many other practices that enriched white people at the expense of Black people.

While the Episcopal Church strives toward equity and justice today, there is no question that our ministry in many communities is possible only because of wealth taken from Black people and communities. Those ugly facts of history are part of the reason that our glorious churches, like the one you see behind me, have always been too white, and that too many of our historically Black congregations came into being because their members were excluded and segregated by their white sisters and brothers in Christ.

The Episcopal Church's story is deeply bound up in colonialism and enslavement, but we are not the only predominantly white church that must come to terms with the sin of racism. When I look at photographs of the religious leaders of Erie in the heyday of the ecumenical movement in the 1950s, the faces around the table are nearly all white. But we know that many of Erie's leading religious voices were not invited to those meetings and were not included in the earnest pronouncements about unity that were crafted there. And that was not just a problem in Erie.

To the lasting shame of the white church, the reason that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had to write a Letter from Birmingham Jail is that eight white clergy, including an Episcopal bishop, two Roman Catholic bishops, a Baptist, a couple of Methodist bishops, a prominent Presbyterian and a leading rabbi, made a public statement telling Dr. King

> to wait for racial equality – to pursue it through the courts, to negotiate, to stop the protests that were making white people so angry and uncomfortable. Perhaps this will sound familiar to you when you reflect on some of the responses that we have heard to this summer's protests against racism and police brutality.
>
> In June, when we gathered to mourn the killing of George Floyd, I said that our country is suffering from a disease that has sickened us since our founding – the disease of systemic racism and white supremacy. Our predominantly white churches, too – especially a church like my own, that was founded alongside this nation – are suffering from the same disease.
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> We must examine our history and our present-day realities and acknowledge the ways in which we benefit from the racism that kills our Black siblings. Racism is a sin, and today I confess it and promise to my Black colleagues and to all of you gathered here and to Almighty God that we will do the work we need to do to repent of it once and for all.
>
> Thank you, Bishop Brock, for inviting us on this long journey toward becoming the "Beloved Community."

Over the next 18 months, a host of small interracial, interdenominational discussion groups met to have a series of conversations on race and religion. COVID-19 precautions limited where, when, and how group members could interact. However, a substantial number of individuals engaged in incredible risk-taking and shared intimate, sometimes painful details of their lived experiences focused on race, racism, and privilege. In these listening sessions, we discovered that it was not our racial or religious differences that created barriers. It was the amount of time and distance between personal interactions and engagement that fueled our fears and prejudices. From those gatherings participants experienced three amazing and obvious revelations:

> 1. First, building bridges that would traverse racial chasms would require members of all groups to be intentional in their motivations and consistent in their participation. Racial rapprochement would not be a "quick fix" process.
>
> 2. Second, efforts to "listen to learn" rather than "speak to be heard" would require patience and courage.
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> 3. Third and most important, we discovered that in our humanness, we are more alike than we are different. Central to our shared humanity was a tremendous faith in God. This faith was consistent in both Catholic and Protestant traditions.

References

[1] Bishop Shelton Fabre, Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux and Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. https://www.usccb.org/committees/ad-hoc-committee-against-racism

[2] British Prime Minister Winston Churchill receives credit for this phrase.

[3] Martin Luther King, Jr. described the "Beloved Community" as a society where "caring and compassion drive political policies that support the worldwide elimination of poverty and hunger and all forms of bigotry and violence. At its core, the 'Beloved Community' is an engine of reconciliation." https://thekingcenter.org/what-we-do/beloved-community-teach-in/

[4] Read Baker, P.J., et al. (2020). Faith, Fears, and Facts. African Americans, Vaccinations, and the Fierce Urgency of Now for BIPOC Communities. *Jefferson Education Society*. Erie, PA. The Minority Community Investment Coalition (MCIC) was incredibly instrumental in combatting COVID-19 and increasing vaccination rates in black and brown communities in Erie County.

[5] 1 Corinthians 13: 12-13 (New Living Translation): Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. 13 Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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