January 15, 2015

An Open Letter to Presidents and Deans of Theological Schools in the United States

At its annual meeting at Shaw University Divinity School in Raleigh, NC, African American Presidents and Deans of theological schools in the United States issued a call for action in light of the current state of social justice in the United States of America.

One of our leaders, a founding member of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), noted that the socio-economic and political realities that led to the establishment of SNCC at Shaw University 54 years ago are actually eclipsed by the realities of this day. In 1960 there were lynchings and robe-wearing Klansmen. Today lynchings occur, but in different forms. Klansmen today bivouac without robes and hoods. Slavery still exists but under the auspices of a prison industrial complex. Discrimination thrives, with no intent or program for relief. As was true in the 1960s it is time for citizens of good conscience to once again rise up and rally to the cry for freedom and justice for all.

From a manger in Bethlehem, a Bantustan in Soweto, a bus in Montgomery, a freedom Summer in Mississippi, a bridge in Selma, a street in Ferguson, a doorway and shots fired in Detroit, a Moral Monday in Raleigh, an assault in an elevator in Atlantic City, an office building in Colorado Springs, a market in Paris, a wall in Palestine, a pilgrimage to the shrine of Rincon and a restoration of ties between Cuba and the United States on December 17th, the kidnapping and assault of young school-aged girls and the reported killing of 2000 women, children and men in Nigeria, a new generation of dream defenders, a transgender teen’s suicide note, to our abuse of the environment—God sends a sign—a Kairos moment. The racial climate in the United States, and the respect for our common humanity everywhere, is clearly in decline.

How can Americans acquiesce, remain silent, passive and neutral as African-American men and women are slain in the streets of Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland and beyond? How can people of conscience be still when African-Americans quake with fear to walk without harm in their own cities and towns? How can we remain docile when leaders of our nation, especially the United States Congress abdicate their civic and moral responsibility to set a tone of civility and humanity?

How can we abide a justice system, which is neither blind nor equitable? How can we suffer a justice system that victimizes African Americans and Latinos by jailing them disproportionately? How can we sit idly by while our children are slaughtered in the streets without provocation?

How can we as United States citizens claim that we are “created equal” and that we are committed to “freedom and justice for all” while injustice is rampant in the land?

How can we continue with business as usual in our theological schools in the midst of so many egregious injustices?

We believe that citizens of good conscience must arise and call our nation to assess and address the rising tide of injustice throughout our legal and criminal justice systems. There must be restraint to those who shoot, kill, and maim innocent young men and women in the streets of our nation. And so . . .
We call upon the leaders of our nation to reaffirm the founding principles of this nation: liberty and justice for all.

We call on all freedom-loving Americans to reaffirm a commitment to “the beloved community,” where the freedom and rights of all are respected and protected.

We call on the United States Congress to set a civil and moral tone in the way they respect our twice-elected president.

We call on leaders on the national and local levels to join citizens of good will to reject practices, legal and adjure, which mar the American dream of liberty and justice for all.

We call on our churches and every house of faith to challenge their members and communities to live out an inclusive commitment to love God, self, the neighbor-enemy, and creation across any and all boundaries that would dehumanize, alienate, and separate.

We call on all Americans of good conscience who gather across the country to speak out for liberty and justice for all . . . always. As our modern day prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. noted, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

We invite our colleagues—presidents, deans, and leaders of all divinity and theological schools—to arise from the embers of silence and speak up and speak out as the prophet of old, “let justice run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24). We encourage you to endorse this statement by responding in your own particular context to our theological call to action with curricular programs, public forums, teach-ins, calls to your congressional leaders, writing op-ed pieces, and more.

We recognize this Kairos moment and stand in solidarity for “liberty and justice for all.”

Yours in the struggle,

African American Presidents and Deans in Theological Education
List of Signatories

Dr. Willard W.C. Ashley, Dean of the Seminary, New Brunswick Seminary

Dr. Brian K. Blount, President, Union Presbyterian Seminary

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Dr. Vergel Lattimore, President, Hood Theological Seminary

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