



The Conference of National Black Churches (CNBC)

Background Statement for the 2017 National Consultation

Race and Reconciliation: Part III

Overcoming the Burden of Bias

The Burden of Bias: Causes and Consequences of Racial Inequality in America

We often speak of The Church as if it were a timeless institution. Surely we serve a timeless, eternal God. Yet the church is an earthly institution that finds itself situated in history, poised at pivotal historic junctures. The church is always faced with a critical choice: it can choose either to chafe and wither against the rough sands of time, or to continually rebuild, retool, rethink its mission and message in order to work in and through time to bring about God's just world. Our ongoing relevance depends on the ability of the churches to recognize what time it is and respond skillfully to the challenges that face our people.

The oldest and most pervasive challenge we face is that of bias. In the United States the primordial racial bias manifested as the institution of slavery itself. That bias now manifests perniciously as the systematic inequalities and indignities that black people face in practically every area of life. African Americans and other minorities remain disproportionately poor, incarcerated, under-educated, unemployed, lacking adequate health care, and subject to violence, including violence perpetrated by the state under the pretense of policing. Poor and working class white people face vulnerabilities that lead to anger misdirected at other vulnerable groups. Our nation's political climate continues to foment storms of animosity, all too frequently violent, toward racial minorities and immigrants.

The 2017 Consultation on the Burden of Bias continues the prophetic work of previous CNBC gatherings. Prior consultations have brought together eight historic African American denominations in the USA and the African Diaspora with representatives from national churches of other racial and ethnic backgrounds to engage in honest and thoughtful dialogue, corporate worship and fellowship, and support of collective ministry efforts. In December, 2015, the Conference of National Black Churches convened in Charleston an historic national meeting of leaders from major African American denominations and the majority white Episcopal, United Methodist, Lutheran and Presbyterian folds. The meeting was organized around the theme: "The Healing of Our Nation: Race and Reconciliation. A Cross-Racial Dialogue." The goal of the meeting, which also included key activists from a variety of issue sectors, was to initiate an ever-widening cross-racial, religious

effort to address the racial hurts that been laid so grotesquely at the door of the churches with the massacre at Emmanuel A.M.E. church on June 17, 2015. The plenaries and panels addressed the general matter of “truth telling” as the essence of reconciliation, the state of racial inequality and activism in the various churches and the nation, strategies for national organization, mass incarceration and police conduct, and theological approaches to racism.

In December, 2016 the CNBC continued this path-breaking dialogue with another consultation, “From Anger to Answers: Race and Reconciliation in America, Part II.” That consultation came together in an extremely divided time in our nation -- a time characterized by racial toxicity. The grief of the previous year permeated the gathering as the trial of Dylan Roof was underway during the consultation. They also gathered in the midst of a post-election season that stirred deep concern about our public life and policy trajectories that challenge the moral imperative of a reconciled nation and world. Those gathered picked up the notion that “reconciliation,” “restoration,” and even “reparations,” must begin with the recognition of a racial order that pervades American life -- one that is not always revealed in violent outbursts of anger and hatred, but that has brutal racialized consequences nonetheless.

We call the 2017 Consultation in the midst of further public racial turmoil and unabated racialized inequality. The burden of bias is as real as ever, but the people of the churches should not despair. Rather, the churches are called to recognize that *now* is the time to stand together as a movement, not only to advance a policy agenda to end racial inequality, but to address its psychological consequences. The psychological burden of bias weighs upon all, even those who appear to overcome its objective constraints; those ones are akin to the long distance runner who wins medals despite carrying an unacknowledged fifty pound weight through each race.

The 2017 Consultation will facilitate both the collection and dissemination of racial justice strategies, while catalyzing the face-to-face “truth telling” that has characterized previous meetings and that continues to be so essential to confronting and redressing persistent inequality. The historically black denominations, in partnership with majority white denominations, are uniquely suited for this work. With nationally organized institutional structures connecting countless local churches, these denominations are pipelines to millions of voices of hope and despair, victory and struggle in communities all across the country. Our churches are also places where intergenerational dialogue about the history and future of racial justice struggle can take place most powerfully, as new forms of activism emerge amidst older ones. Finally, since the challenges we face are not only sociological and political, but psychological and spiritual, the relevance of the churches as places of living, working theology should become evident.