



The Conference of National Black Churches (CNBC)

A Summary of the CNBC 2017 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 continued 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 called 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 facilitated 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.

The 2017 Consultation delved deeply into five major areas of concern: Healthcare, Criminal Justice, Truth Telling, Education, Church and Community Support, and Economics/Financial Well-Being. In the following, we summarize the thematic orientations of these sessions.

Healthcare

This session examined the impact of implicit bias in healthcare and its implications for patients and health disparities. Dr. Augustus A. White III, a Professor of Medical Science at Harvard University, made a powerful presentation presenting a body of evidence on the topic, and reflecting on his work in healthcare. He explained, among other things, how African-Americans and other minorities are stereotyped in ways that negatively affect the quality of care they receive. Dr. White called for the diversification of medical practice, and the proactive education of doctors, nurses, medical teachers and students, and patients, about the reality of racialized health disparities and negative bias in medicine. A town hall meeting on bias in healthcare garnered many additional insights and imperatives from attendants.

Criminal Justice

The burden of bias is present in multiple powerful ways in criminal justice system. The United States contains only 5% of the world's population, but incarcerates more than 20% of the world's prison population. African Americans and other people of color make up at least half of those incarcerated in America. African Americans are also more likely to be victims of police violence and experience discriminatory policing. At this session, Professor Demetria D. Frank, Associate Professor of Law the University of Memphis presented many other alarming statistics, and addressed the role of racial bias in the production of unfair policing, the school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, the prison industrial complex, the denial of social and politics rights to re-entering citizens, and recidivism.

Truth Telling

This powerful session examined barriers to truth telling among the churches as they mobilize to struggle against the burdens of bias. Of particular concern was the disconnect between the pro-equality language of white church leaders and the actual behaviors of the white faithful in multiple arenas of action. Reverend Hannah McMahan, Executive Director of the New Covenant Baptist Church, spoke compellingly about the historical role of the “fake church” in supporting the culture of lynching throughout the south, and the pressing need for predominantly white churches to lead truthfully and courageously against the racism in their own midst. Reverend Nelson Rivers III, pastor of the Charity Missionary Baptist Church in Charleston South Carolina, highlighted the twin challenges facing the churches: 1) the refusal of truth in the white churches, where any notion of a revolutionary Christianity is denied, and 2) the fear of the truth in the black churches, where many are reluctant to be identified with the revolutionary truth of Christianity. Rev. Leslie Copeland Tune, Director of Communications & Resource Development for the D.C. Baptist Convention, called for the church to truly be the church, not by simply commenting on the social justice movement as it appears on television and in social media, but by actually participating with protest and political pressure on specific legislative issues. Rev. Copeland also raised gender equality in the church as one of the justice agendas that needed to be engaged with seriousness. Rev. Jim Winkler, General Secretary and President of the National Council of Churches, focused on the systemic nature of racism, and the need to confront white supremacy, especially among working class whites, through teaching about racism as the combination of prejudice and power, and resisting the temptation to skip over the truth to get to reconciliation.

Education

Bias affects all aspects of education, resulting in vast inequalities in this area. Populations bearing the brunt of bias experience a lack of access to quality educational resources, and disproportionately live in areas where funding for education is inadequate, school closures are common, and other problems such as violence and hunger distract from the task of schooling. Children in these areas make lower test scores, find less access to higher education, and encounter inadequate vocational systems. Dr. Gregory C. Hutchings, Superintendent of the Shaker Heights School District of Ohio, discussed the roots and consequences of inequalities in education, explored policy solutions, and pointed to ways the church could advocate both for better policy and serve students in African American communities.

Church and Community Support

This session explored the burden of bias as it is present in cross-institutional relations. Productive patterns of collaboration between churches and secular institutions are either enabled or hindered by the attitudes brought into such interactions. Mr. Michael Rallings, Director of Police services of the Memphis Police Department reflected on his experiences with the local church community, including his operation of a clergy academy that facilitates collaborative partnerships between faith-based communities and law enforcement. Dr. James Dotson, American Association of Retired Persons Senior Advisor for Multicultural Leadership, Community, State and National Affairs encouraged churches to engage the full range of needs their members face by working with institutions like the AARP at the individual, community, and national policy advocacy levels.

Economics and Financial Well-Being

At this session, panelists discussed economic inequality and the consequences of financial instability for vulnerable populations. The evidentiary basis of black struggles with poverty, unemployment, and underemployment were central to our consideration. But we also considered hindrances to economic advancement such as predatory lending, discrimination in hiring and promotion, and lack of access to empowering financial planning. How can the unified churches use their singular moral authority to promote economic justice and financial well-being? Bishop Teresa Jefferson-Snorton, Presiding Prelate of the Fifth Episcopal District, CME Church, emphasized the historical entrenchment of a system of class inequality, buttressed by corporate monopolies, corrupt tax codes, and systematic exclusion and exploitation of poor people and people of color. She also called for a new economic structure, built partly on church-based resistance to economic exploitation and support of justice-oriented black businesses. This structure would function without the structural inequalities, including gendered ones, of the current system. Dr. Delman Coates, Senior Pastor of Mt. Ennon Baptist Church in Clinton, MD advocated a “new abolitionism” involving the radical reform of monetary systems that lock African-Americans and other vulnerable populations into cycles of debt.