

Pastoral Letter from the NEJ College of Bishops

We, the College of Bishops of the Northeastern Jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church, prayerfully stand with our pastors, members and churches during the aftermath of the recent deaths of unarmed African American people at the hands of law enforcement officers and citizens across our nation. We decry the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and countless others.

The racist system and structures that permeate every facet of life in the United States including health care, employment, education, wealth, the criminal justice system and housing infects our churches as well. In the face of these injustices we often embody the words of the prophet Jeremiah by treating “the wound of God’s people carelessly, saying ‘peace, peace’ when there is no peace” because there is no justice. (Jeremiah 6:14)

The devastating effects of racism are many and every time we forget that each person is made in the image of God, we are all harmed. We have witnessed the murder of African Americans numerous times in the past in this country and it seems when the protests pass, we go back to our old ways and progress gained becomes lost. Ideas and systems that support white supremacy continue unchecked in our churches, communities and national politics. Human suffering among people of color that we have witnessed recently, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, is yet another reminder of the inequities in our racist society that has continued because we have been slow to work for justice.

In the long history the people called Methodists, when we have not been our best selves we created the Central Jurisdiction (a segregated conference of African American Methodists). When we have been our best selves, we have labored for abolition, voting rights, civil rights and most recently we have been working to end mass incarceration.

The 2016 Northeastern Jurisdiction Conference entered into the “Call to Action” to address our complicity in perpetuating a culture of racism and white privilege in our church. We initiated many proactive steps to address the systemic racism in our jurisdiction. However, it has fallen short and needs to continue with even more urgency and passion.

The white bishops of the NEJ, in consultation with the bishops of color, declare the following:

We confess the racism and white privilege that is a part of our denominational heritage and our organizational system.

We pledge to take personal responsibility to challenge theologies and practices that promote or accommodate structural and systemic racism and replace them with systems of justice and equality. We call upon our baptismal vows to remind us to “renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, to reject the evil powers of the world and repent of our sin.”

We pledge to repent of our personal racism, our failure to hear the cries of our brothers and sisters, our silence in the face of racial injustice, our valuing of law and order, possessions and power more than lives, and our complicity with police violence. We will follow our statement

on “Criminal Justice” as found in our Social Principles, which calls for an overhaul of our justice system.

We pledge to be accountable to our sisters and brothers of color, engaging with them in a process of reconciliation for our churches in order to bring change to our denomination’s system and structure.

We pledge to bring our prophetic voices to the public arena, lead our congregations to confront our racism and call for the accountability of all law enforcement officers who abuse their positions of power, authority and privilege. If while performing their duties they violate the law, they should be terminated. We further pledge to work to transform our criminal justice system, and create a denomination that exemplifies equality for all.

We pledge to further educate ourselves, our leaders and members in order to dismantle those systems for the sake of all God’s children. We encourage Annual Conference leadership from each conference in the Jurisdiction to engage in a four-week Bible Study sometime in the fall so together we may discern how to equip clergy and laity to address the evil of racism from a faith perspective.

The NEJ College of Bishops, a multi ethnic group, hold our jurisdiction in prayer during this challenging time. We are also marching with you on the streets of our cities, naming the names, calling out our public leaders for advocating violence against peaceful protestors, and mobilizing our churches for action and response. It is our prayer that this time of crisis will become an opportunity for transformation and that the church can be a moral light that leads to peace with justice. Together we can accomplish this through the power of the Holy Spirit.

References:

A part of this pastoral letter was adapted from a recent statement by “Faith in Action” a national community-organizing network, that gives people of faith the tools needed to fight for justice and work toward a more equitable society (faithinaction.org)

“The Baptismal Covenant” – Book of Hymns, page 34

“Call to Action” – www.nejumc.org/resources.html

“Humanizing Criminal Justice” #5031, 2016 Book of Resolutions, page 490