

CONVO XVII
Breakout Group B
Social (Socially Responsible; Theologically Sound)
December 3, 2015
Minutes

Dr. Michael Brown, Presenter

Moderators:

Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie

Bishop Wilfred Messiah

Bishop Richard F. Norris (in absentia)

Respondents:

Dr. Miriam Burnett

Mr. Lamont Gibson

Mrs. Jackie Dupont Walker

The meeting began with Devotion led by Bishop Wilfred Messiah.

Dr. Michael Brown, Interim President of Payne Theological Seminary, gave a comprehensive presentation on Social Issues Facing the Church.

Using the mission of the African Methodist Episcopal Church as a starting point for the discussion, Dr. Brown acknowledged that we know what we do and for whom we do it. However, these questions remain: What is the impact of our mission? How do we measure the outcomes?

As a way to examine our social impact, the presentation offered four resources for social engagement.

The Bible

Tradition

Experience/Revelation

Reason (what can be proven)

Some highlights of the presentation include:

1. The concept of reading the Bible from three worlds:
 - The literary world. – What the text says literally.
 - The world behind the text – Historical interpretation of the text.
 - The world in front of the text – Reading the text for where we are now.
2. The Anatomy of a Theological Claim – an exploration of the various components that inform our theological claims, like tradition and experience, for instance.
3. Theological Norms
 - The dignity (dignitas) of all human beings.
 - The spiritual needs of all human beings.
 - The social equality of all human beings.
 - The physical needs of all human beings.

Finally, the presentation challenged the audience to think about fundamental theological norms and their implications. For instance the claim, “All human beings are affirmed and have worth in the eyes of God” is a norm that may challenge our current traditions.

Remarks from the Respondents:

Dr. Miriam Burnett highlighted the need to put action behind the discussion. Furthermore, the conversation regarding “all” people should include people who are differently abled because of economic exposure, educational exposure, and environmental exposure. She raised the issue of health inequality as an issue the AME Church should address internally, culturally, and organizationally.

Mrs. Jackie Dupont Walker gave historical context to the brand of the AME Church using the contributions of A. Phillip Randolph and Madame C. J. Walker who were a part of the AME Church. She stressed that AMEs today stand in the world in front of the biblical text. To that end, Mrs. Walker raised the following question, “What have we done with the AME brand in our faith walk in African Methodism?” She highlighted that what is written about social action is well crafted in the AME Discipline, and that 90% of it has been fulfilled. Going forward we must look at the wording and make it real for the legacy we have inherited and what it means for the next generation.

Mr. Lamont Gibson encouraged the audience to inform our local communities about the discussions at the CONVO. He stressed the crisis of our young people dying at the hands of police officers and as a result of other violence in our community. Mr. Gibson cited that it is critical to note that our young people do not believe that their lives matter. The AME Church should prepare to create new legislation around the Black Lives Matter movement.

After the remarks from the respondents, the audience was invited to participate in an open discussion and Q&A. The comments overwhelmingly centered on the word “all” in the mission statement of the AME Church. Participants pushed for the need to clarify what is meant by the term “all” and whether our actions, policies, practices, traditions, and worship, in fact, include all people.

Comments included topics such as:

Divorced people; embracing the Black Lives Matter movement; differently challenged people; the Hispanic community; non-AMEs; gender; addressing the dignity of our congregants who are suffering from gentrification; fully embracing the concept of “all” beyond our denominational definitions in order to develop a comprehensive approach to ministry (social, economic, political, etc.); and a serious concern for the mental health of our congregants who are facing many challenges living in society as African Americans.

After a lengthy discussion, Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie called for the body to submit recommendations for consideration.

The following recommendations were submitted:

Bishop Wilfred Messiah, Presiding Prelate, 17th Episcopal District

The church must be intentional about local implementation of the recommendation made at the Connectional level.

Dr. Teresa Fry-Brown, Historiographer and Executive Director of the Department of Research and Scholarship

1. Give permission to reestablish the Faith and Order Commission under the auspices of the Department of Research and Scholarship.

2. The Faith and Order Commission will develop, discuss and formalize AME positions on theological, sociological, physical, economic, ethical, spiritual, pastoral, liturgical, and human sexuality issues and concerns.
3. The Faith and Order Commission will facilitate and inform local church, Episcopal District and Connectional discussions and legislative implementation of deliberations.

Dr. Willie C. Glover, Connectional President of the Lay Organization

Recommends the empowerment of social action globally by revising the template for general distribution of social action news, as it was done at the [Council of Bishops] held in New Orleans, LA. The revision would increase knowledge of the theological norms that exist in our congregations.

Jackie Dupont Walker, Connectional Officer Social Action Commission

That the AME Church adequately resource the social action and social advocacy work of the AME Church, and review the current structure of the Book of Discipline and create an ad-hoc committee to recommend changes as needed.

Dr. Miriam Burnett

That the church address the social determinants of mental and physical health, including, but not limited to economic stability, education social and community context, social and geographic environment.

Rev. Dr. Marion Morton Crayton, 2nd Episcopal District

Because we, as AMEs, affirm the dignity of all persons, our church must be intentional about providing accommodations for all persons who are differently challenged so that they can participate fully in the everyday life of our local churches worldwide.

Reverend Dr. Gregory G. Groover, Sr., New England Conference, 1st Episcopal District

The AME Church should be in active dialogue and relationship building with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Winton M. Hill, III, Presiding Elder, Dover District, Delaware Annual Conference, First Episcopal District

That the 50th Session of the General Conference recommit and reaffirm our position that our church is a church of liberation and reconciliation by intentionally making our churches inclusive of people who choose same sex marriages [or] integrated marriages, and [that] all people are deserving of dignity. In order to meet the spiritual needs of all people and to demonstrate our history of social equality for all people, we request that all language that excludes Christian people from the security of being full participants in the church be amended. This is undergirded by the theological position that our savior Christ died for all people.

Dr. Betty W. Holley, Presiding Elder, Ohio Conference, 3rd Episcopal District

We should become more intentional in our involvement in ecumenism.

Dr. E. Gail Anderson Holness, Esq., 2nd Episcopal District and Rev. John H. Burns, II, 4th Episcopal District

That the Church form a Commission on Racial Reconciliation to intentionally deal with the racial issues facing people globally. The commission is charged to address the following issues inclusive, but not limited to liberation, homelessness, substandard education, unemployment and underemployment of people of color around the world.

Dr. Jennifer Leath, Assistant Professor of Religion and Social Justice, Iliff School of Theology

We recommend developing a common approach to biblical interpretation founded on an awareness of the historical context of the biblical text as well as the impact of our contemporary lenses. This approach to biblical interpretation must be based on an awareness of the ways that theological, reasoning, experiential/revelatory, and textual engagement are at work. In doing this, we must maintain clarity about the dignity of all people and special regard for those who are oppressed in various and intersecting ways. These oppressions include, but are not limited to forms of systemic and individualized discriminations of the basis of race, region, caste, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.

Respectfully Submitted,
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