

STATE OF THE COUNTRY

To Bishop Adam Jefferson Richardson, the presiding prelate of the Second Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to Connie Speights Richardson, our beloved Episcopal Supervisor, Host Presiding Elder James P. Beatty and Associate Presiding Elder Chester Morris, to all the clergy and laypersons assembled, your Committee on the State of the Country presents the following report:

NATURE, SCOPE AND TASK

Whenever there is great prosperity, there is great inequality. For one very rich man, there must be at least five hundred poor, and the affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many.

Adam Smith

In New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco, in the nation's capital too, even as the snap and frost of winter approached we watched with a growing sense of unease how the numbers of protesters swelled in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Frustration mounted over economic inequality and the rapid pace of its ever widening gulf. On the one hand, the "99 per centers" publicly protested a systemic arrangement in our nation's economic affairs that insured the persistent presence of a permanent underclass. On the other hand, the "1 per centers," those with a self-perpetuating income growth, accounted for the largest concentration of wealth in the hands of so few since the revolution that birthed our republic.

While economic inequality was exacerbated by wrong headedness in Congress over draconian budgetary cuts to programs intended to assist the "least of these," racial inequality erupted once more on a quiet street in a gated community in Sanford, Florida. The alarming insouciance of the police department, evidenced by setting free the shooter of an unarmed 17 year old black boy, unleashed a country wide furor over "stand your ground laws" in more than 20

states in the union. The toxic mix of lingering racial animus and an intractable insistence upon the possession of fire arms spawns a disconcerting divide within the very fabric of our social order.

Meanwhile, political inequality appears to be the goal of the effort that sprung up in state after state to insure that voter fraud would not take place. This pretext was a transparent veil behind which to disfranchise many elderly and minority voters prior to the next presidential election in November. Rather than expanding the likelihood of democratic participation by more and more of our citizens, these measures seek to place political power in the hands of fewer people still. It is alarming to consider what may become of our republic if these strategies succeed.

Regrettably too, gender inequality soiled our airwaves, our state assembly houses and even a congressional hearing concerning the rights of women to health choices that could mean the difference for them between life and death. Most disquieting of all was the role our own state played in this ugly and unnecessary drama, the so called "Republican war on women."

Finally, we must make mention of the widening gap in the scholastic achievement of our children relative to the rest of the world. The failure of American public education is too painful to countenance when the lag of our students in math and science places the nation 25th relative to other nations of the world. We are not number one but number 25 behind South Korea, New Zealand, Australia, Japan and Finland. The solution surely cannot mean our children would be better off if they lived in Luxembourg instead of in the United States

The upshot seems to be that unless we manage to arrest the present drift into inequality we may anticipate greater erosion and disintegration of the common good.

PROCESS AND DATA GATHERING

The global array of satellites has engendered a remarkable facility for instantaneous communication between any two points on the whole surface of the earth. Scarcely can anything happen in Tokyo in the middle of the night that we could not know at the self-same moment in the middle of the day. Newspapers are corollary to the internet and cell phones make any person at all a de facto photo journalist. Cable television news has profited from controversy and nearly any word spoken by national leaders of any persuasion can be twisted to misrepresent and defame.

Data gathering requires the most scrupulous thoughtfulness about sources and a deep wariness concerning paradigms of truth telling and truth letting. Whose “truth” do we imbibe if the sole font of our knowledge is Fox News? Whose “truth” do we consume if the only one we accept is set before us by MSNBC? There can be no substitute for critical thinking, wide learning and the deep reading essential for maintaining the integrity of an enlightened citizenry. Our report is the consequence of mindful observation and engagement in the adventure that is American civilization.

FINDINGS

I. Economic stress and uncertainty abroad throws our own worries into bold relief. Europe stands at the precipice of economic collapse with Germany attempting nearly single-handedly to stay the financial ruin of her neighbors. Meanwhile, Japan struggles with an anemic economy and China hopes to forestall the inevitable slowing of its robust manufacturing base. If anything, these developments demonstrate just how interrelated our own fortunes are with the rest of the world. The American dollar, once king among international currencies, has lost much of the prestige it once had due to the mass of debt we have accumulated over the course of the last

decade. But curiously, the rich have managed to become even richer and the poor, poorer.

II. When Trayvon Martin was shot to death by George Zimmerman the hue and cry that followed exposed the raw nerve of racial discord. Its intensity only heightened when some commentators suggested that the incident was not racially motivated but sparked by a concerned citizen's determination to protect the security of his neighborhood. It was apparently lost on these benighted souls that the neighborhood to be protected included relatives of Trayvon Martin himself. By what absurd logic is a neighborhood to be protected from the very persons who constitute it as a neighborhood in the first place? The withering answer is coded to the blackness of Trayvon Martin. Blackness it seems cannot supply the condition for being a neighbor.

We note in this connection the confounding resolve of the NRA to promote laws in every state that would make any person holding a fire arm free to dispense vigilante injustice. This rancid brew will dissolve the public peace and foment a vitiating social unrest.

III. Republican led state assemblies have busily proposed laws to require their citizens to show a photo ID card before they may be permitted to participate in their own government by voting. The difficulties that attend securing such a card are prohibitive for too many and the consequence is that discouraging voter turn-out enhances the prospects of right leaning candidates. The political calculation behind the photo ID laws can be perceived even by a blind man. The presidential campaign of 2012 may very well swing in favor of Mitt Romney against Barack Obama if these initiatives should pass uncontested.

IV. The perversion of legislation must surely be obvious to anyone when Virginia's state legislature proposes that women must undergo a state sponsored procedure called "a vaginal probe" before they may be accorded medical remedies for women specific maladies. Many women

and men have referred to these legislative assaults upon women as state sponsored rape. Similarly, one congressional panel even convened a hearing to consider the role of contraceptives in women's health without bothering to ask women to testify. Indeed, when Sandra Fluke came forward to offer testimony she was refused. The subsequent public outcry caused the committee to reconsider but not before Ms. Fluke was vilified on cable radio in the most obscenely disparaging way.

V. The global marketplace is ever more competitive. It will require a highly skilled, superbly trained, and finely educated workforce. Education is indispensable to such a task and our present methods are woefully inadequate. We must rethink standards, pedagogies, methodologies and how we prepare teachers to off-set the tragic decline in our children's performance in math and science. Colleges across the country see an entering class with fewer of the proficiencies which at an earlier time were safely assumed. Failure for these students is ordained when primary and secondary schools fail to equip them for advanced learning. It may be taken as axiomatic that when our students fail the nation itself fails.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Our committee would propose the following goals for our nation's people of faith.

1. To practice the faith that instructs us to the proper care and concern for the "least of these." Structural inequality is sin at the institutional level. It is not just individual sin but a national disgrace. Repentance will require active political engagement.
2. To make discourse concerning our legal foundations, constitutional and otherwise, a national priority. How do guns and the death penalty contradict the biblical

injunction to love one's neighbor? Should being black be a disqualification for being one's neighbor? This form of dialogue may require a course correction the founding fathers could not have imagined.

3. To protest laws currently under consideration to curb voter participation. To urge our representatives and delegates to loose these new bonds for freedom's sake.
4. To rally opposition to state laws requiring women to undergo medically unnecessary procedures that intrude upon their privacy and to guard their infrangible right to make decisions concerning their own health without state interference.
5. The deepening of our national resolve to make education our highest priority, to fund it properly, to richly reward and acknowledge the most gifted and productive teachers, to secure the nation's destiny among the nations by securing our children's future by enlivening curiosity, enflaming imagination and enlarging the rule of reason

RECOMMENDATION

The black church has always already been the site of uncommon courage, at once bold and determined to inspire the lurching of the nation from sin to redemption. It is her calling to speak truth to power, and to be a prophet to representatives, senators and presidents. We recommend the church fulfill her mission to the people by exposing the injustice of inequality in all its interrelated forms. Let us seek the just and equitable distribution of the earth's resources. Let us honor the just and fair appropriation of our neighbor's cares and woes. We urge persons of genuine faith to order their lives for the sake of others and not against others. We demand a

proper respect and regard for womanhood as the very image of God. Let that man so arrogantly predisposed to tell women what is best for them look to his own fault as if he would ever suggest to God what God ought to have done yesterday and what God is to do tomorrow.

We recommend the church prosper the nation by minding the proper relation between religion and a government for free people, of free people and by free people. Finally, we recommend that education receives the church's highest commendation and her holiest remonstrations before the throne of grace, so that our children learn to love God with that love with which God loves himself; a love so wise, a love so good and a love so sublime.

Respectfully submitted by the members of the Committee on the State of the Country to the One Hundred Forty-sixth Session of the Virginia Annual Conference in the year of our Lord, 2012.

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