

Bishop Harry Jackson Offers 7 Keys to Racial Reconciliation

The recent national crisis and racial tension have underscored that America seems more divided than ever. On the one hand, President Obama believes that our differences are just being exposed. On the other hand a few of us feel that the president and Attorney General Holder exacerbated the race problem. In some ways, both views are right. How could that be? America has come a long way since the lynchings of the '50s and days of Selma. However, we have a ways to go in terms of race, poverty and class.

We could not have expected the president, alone, to work miracles with an issue that has plagued our nation from its beginning. Our political leaders can only do so much. All the institutions in society must work together to move forward, but the church has always had a special role to play. While segments of the American church have historically been blind to the sin of racism—and even justified slavery by distorting Scripture—other parts of the church have led the way in ending racial injustice.

So how can the church take the lead as we look for ways to draw Americans closer together and build greater understanding among the growing variety of ethnic groups that make up our great “melting pot”? Last week Thursday, Jan. 15, I helped convene a meeting of over 150 ministers who met at the Potter’s House in Dallas, for a powerful closed-door conclave called The Reconciled Church: Healing the Racial Divide. Collectively, we represented a diverse group of significant leaders from across denominations and ideological backgrounds. These leaders represented over 40 million American Christians.

The purpose of that meeting was to reach consensus on how we can promote peaceful reconciliation and to collaborate on how

bridges can be established for a brighter economic future in our communities. As social entrepreneurs and influencers that are building tremendous ministries that address underlying cures for race, class and poverty problems. Our nation deserves better models of spiritual leadership. We have the opportunity to change the course of history within the American church and affect the globe. Our time is now.

The group believes that “Healing the Racial Divide” in our nation is achievable in the next 15 to 20 years by using what we dubbed “seven bridges to peace.” These bridges of peace serve as a framework for a lasting model of unity that is built on our concern for the well-being of all people. All of us agreed that the American church has been divided along class and racial lines. Therefore, we signed a covenant of reconciliation and committed to the process of healing the racial rifts within the church. Essentially, we agreed to multiply our good works and make them more multi-ethnic.

What became apparent during our time is that America’s clergy—those who remain devoted to the Word of God—are deeply invested in healing the divisions in our society. If we take unified action in moments of tension, we can do a much better job exhorting people to productive action than the mainstream media, which remains addicted to confrontation, scandal and shining the spotlight on the worst in human behavior.

We can take a cue from some of the most successfully reconciled organizations in our nation today: professional and college sports, which though not perfect, remain far more integrated than most churches and neighborhoods. Such organizations share a clear, common mission: to win, and each player is recruited for his or her ability to contribute to that goal. I believe if America’s clergy can continue to gain understanding from one another, we can build a sense of common purpose and solidarity across racial and ethnic lines among our churches and in our communities.

At the end of the day, the people in America's urban centers are not so different from those in the nation's suburbs and gated communities. We all carry the image of God and desire respect, the benefit of the doubt and opportunity to advance in life. And I believe America's pastors hold the key to cultivating this kind of understanding. We have the opportunity to change the course of history within the American church and affect the globe. Our time is now.

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