The Episcopal Diocese of East Carolina
The Right Reverend Robert S. Skirving, Bishop

Thursday, June 4, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

Earlier this week, I joined a peaceful protest in downtown Kinston, where I live. It was organized by a local group of young people, and I wanted to be present to support them, to bear witness to all that would happen, and to listen to the passionate cries of those who are angry and in pain, as they protested the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and countless other black lives.

Sometimes, I have remained silent in situations when I could have spoken. Sometimes, I have spoken and my words have failed me or have been inadequate. Today, as we struggle with the realities of COVID-19 and racial tensions, I feel bound to write to you. I pray that these words, offered humbly, will prove to be ones that God’s Holy Spirit has shaped.

- I write to condemn the unjust killings of George Floyd and so many others at the hands of our police and to call for reforms to policing and criminal justice systems in places where that work must still happen, and I write to affirm my support for all of the just and compassionate police officers who put their lives on the line each day to protect our communities.

- I write to condemn those who riot in our streets, causing damage to private and public property and inciting terror in our communities, especially as we continue to suffer from the economic devastation and fear generated by COVID-19, and I write to affirm my support for all who publicly and peacefully protest, calling for change to unjust and racist systems that still plague our common life.

- I write to condemn the polarized political climate of our current day, and I write to affirm all who work tirelessly to build bridges across partisan divides in order to more fully serve the needs of every citizen of this nation.

Accompanying this letter, please find a statement signed by many of the Bishops of Province IV of The Episcopal Church, including me, that more fully addresses the work our Church must do to combat the sins of racism and white supremacy. I commit to working with my fellow bishops and with Dr. Catherine Meeks of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing in Atlanta, to find ways of advancing this work in our own dioceses.

After consultation this week with many of the clergy and churchwardens of our Diocese, I want to announce two important initiatives. This week, we have taken steps to renew the membership of East Carolina’s Commission on Racial Reconciliation with the goal that they will lead us in more fully becoming God’s Beloved Community. We have also begun work on a liturgical resource rooted in our Baptismal Covenant and for use by all of our congregations when we return to public worship, intended to engage us in committing to the mission to which God calls us in this present time.

May God’s Holy Spirit continue to bring peace and healing to those who suffer and patience to those who have already waited too long. In this Season of Pentecost, may we be a people ready to listen and to act.

Yours in Christ,

Rob
Statement from the Province IV Bishops of The Episcopal Church

We, the Bishops of The Episcopal Church in Province IV, lead dioceses most of which were historically part of the states of the old Confederacy. As bishops in this region, we are well aware of the historic persistence of racism toward our black sisters and brothers. While such racism is not confined to our southern geography, its history with “Jim Crow” under its various guises over the years reminds us of the profound work left undone by our continued failure to fully address the sins of racism and white supremacy in our country.

Recent events are a shocking reminder of what we have left undone. The white vigilante murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia; the unwarranted killing by police of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky while she was sleeping in her own bed; and now the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota also at the hands of police, scream out to us of our work left undone. Sadly, these racist murders are by no means the only ones, and they were not committed simply by a few bad actors. What we are seeing is the work of a conscious and unconscious system designed to deny dignity and safety to some of God’s children.

The demonstrations across our country indicate that people have had enough. We believe all people of good will and love of neighbor should insist that this behavior by police and white vigilantes end now. Their actions tarnish the reputations of the many wonderful women and men who serve as police officers. We need national leadership who will work to make the changes necessary in our justice system, so such brutality becomes a thing of the past.

We call on all in civil authority to step back from military-style responses to these demonstrations because they only serve to escalate tensions even further. What will reduce those tensions is a commitment by our elected leaders to lasting, tangible changes in law enforcement methods and in the laws governing them. We also invite our clergy and parishioners to recommit themselves to live into the Beloved Community, as Dr. King articulated it. We believe that this is what justice and mercy require as they are reflected in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Province IV Bishops signing (In alphabetical order)

John Bauerschmidt, Bishop, Diocese of Tennessee
Scott Benhase, Bishop & Vice-President, Province IV
Greg Brewer, Bishop, Diocese of Central Florida
Brian Cole, Bishop, Diocese of East Tennessee
Peter Eaton, Bishop, Diocese of Southeast Florida
Russell Kendrick, Bishop, Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast
Frank Logue, Bishop, Diocese of Georgia
Jose McLoughlin, Bishop, Diocese of Western North Carolina
Henry Parsley, Visiting Bishop, Diocese of South Carolina
Phoebe Roaf, Bishop, Diocese of West Tennessee
Sam Rodman, Bishop, Diocese of North Carolina

Brian Seage, Bishop, Diocese of Mississippi
Rob Skirving, Bishop, Diocese of East Carolina
Kee Sloan, Bishop, Diocese of Alabama
Dabney Smith, Bishop, Diocese of Southwest Florida
Morris Thompson, Bishop, Diocese of Louisiana
Mark Van Koevering, Bishop, Diocese of Lexington
Andrew Waldo, Bishop, Diocese of Upper South Carolina
Terry White, Bishop, Diocese of Kentucky
Rob Wright, Bishop, Diocese of Atlanta