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We Dare Not Postpone Action by Christian Churches Together [2] | April
Church leaders respond, 50 years later, to Kings " Letter from Birmingham
Jail."

In January 2011, members of Christian Churches Together in the U. S. A. met in Birmingham, Ala., to examine issues of domestic poverty and racism through the lens of the civil rights movement and by reading together Martin Luther King Jr. s " Letter from Birmingham Jail." As they gathered in the 16th Street Baptist Church under the beautiful Wales Window portraying the black Christ, which replaced the window blown out when the church was bombed in 1963, these contemporary church leaders, representing the broadest Christian fellowship in the country—36 national communions and seven national organizations, including Sojourners—realized that apparently no clergy had ever issued a response to Kings famous letter, even though it was specifically addressed to " fellow clergymen [sic]." In 2013, to mark the 50th anniversary of Kings letter, Christian Churches Together released its thoughtful response, which we excerpt below. —The Editor

WE CONFESS. As leaders of churches claimed by more than 100 million Americans; as Catholics, evangelicals, Pentecostals, Orthodox, Historic Protestants, and members of Historic Black denominations; as people of many races and cultures: We call ourselves, our institutions, and our members to repentance. We make this confession before God and offer it to all who have endured racism and injustice both within the church and in society.

As church leaders, we confess we have tended to emphasize our responsibility to obey the law while neglecting our equal moral obligation to

change laws that are unjust in their substance or application. All too often, the political involvement of Christians has been guided by the pursuit of personal or group advantage rather than a biblically grounded moral compass. We confess it is too easy for those of us who are privileged to counsel others simply to "wait"—or to pass judgment that they deserve no better than what they already have.

We confess that we are slow to listen and give legitimacy to those whose experience of race relations and social privilege in America is different than our own. We keep the "other" at arms length to avoid hearing the call to sacrifice on their behalf. Our reluctance to embrace our "inescapable network of mutuality" underscores Dr. King's observation that privileged groups seldom give up their advantages voluntarily. For example, it is difficult to persuade most suburban Christians to demand that they strive for the same quality of education in our cities that they take for granted in their own schools. To the extent that we do not listen in love, our influence in society is limited to "a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound"

We confess that we often prefer stability to upheaval, even when upheaval is the necessary precondition for the establishment of justice. We confess that we often avoid the fiscal, emotional, and spiritual costs of changing our beloved institutions—even when called to do so by our Lord and Savior. Our churches and denominational structures thus fail in critical ways to model the "creative psalm of brotherhood" invoked by Dr. King. Recent efforts in the Christian community toward "racial reconciliation," though laudable in intent, tend to stop short of Dr. King's vision of true justice and fellowship. Sunday morning remains the most segregated time in our nation.

WE RESOLVE. We proclaim that, while our context today is different, the call is the same as in 1963—for followers of Christ to stand together, to work together, and to struggle together for justice. Inspired by Dr. King, we resolve courageously to face the injustice that is within ourselves, our institutions, and our nation. The church must lead rather than follow in the march toward justice. We also claim the strong biblical tradition that rejects selfish individualism. Biblical faith teaches that we are made for community; that we are our brothers and sisters keepers; that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Biblical faith demands that Christians place the common good above individual privilege. As Dr. King insisted, this biblical summons to justice for all is also rooted deeply in the best of our American ideals, however imperfectly our nation has lived them.

In response to this high calling on the church to join God's work of redemption and reconciliation, we resolve to work together to expose, confront, and transform the devastating legacy of systemic racism as it manifests itself in education, criminal justice, employment, housing, child welfare, and other practical arenas.

This includes reform of an educational system that perpetuates the injustice of abysmally inadequate urban, largely minority schools alongside excellent majority-white suburban schools.

This includes reform of a judicial system that intersects with one-quarter of all African-American men, with a devastating impact on families and communities.

We will risk being called extremists to refuse to postpone for another generation or three the just reality of quality education for all our children.

We will risk creative tension to show our people that biblical justice demands prompt, vigorous change. We dare not postpone action to a more convenient time when government budgets are flush and all complexities are resolved. We call on our members, as well as our government, to demand justice in our courts and schools in this generation and end the scandal of ongoing racial discrimination. We resolve to "not merely be a thermometer that record[s] the ideas and principles of popular opinion," as King put it, but "a thermostat that transform[s] the mores of society."

Looking inward, we also resolve to work diligently toward the goal of becoming a church that is anti-racist.

This requires self-examination. We resolve that our member churches will seek to discover and intentionally reflect upon their own histories of implicit and complicit participation in racial and ethnic injustice.

This requires communicating. We resolve that our member churches and organizations will participate in intentional dialogue about the sin of racism and the pervasive effects of systemic racism within the church and the larger society.

This requires action. We resolve that all member churches be encouraged to adopt anti-racism mandates, including policies that include anti-racism education and programs for local church members, staff, and volunteers.

This requires equipping. We resolve to educate church leaders and local church members on ways to speak truth to power, organize their communities for nonviolent resistance, and participate effectively in legislative advocacy against manifestations of systemic racism.

This requires collaboration. We resolve to connect diverse denominations in

working together to dismantle racism in church and in society, partnering and sharing resources and costs associated with doing anti-racism work. This requires relationship. We resolve to cultivate opportunities to develop authentic relationships with people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. By humble listening and honest sharing, we will develop the empathy that gives energy to action.

All of this requires God working among us. We resolve that, in our worship, we will celebrate our unity in Christ. We will confess, both corporately and individually, the race-based exclusion, oppression, and sin we have perpetuated. We resolve to allow worship to form us in such a way that we might bear the fruits of deep repentance—for some, recognizing our participation in racism; for others, speaking truthfully and forgiving boldly; and for all, seeking justice and right relationships with our brothers and sisters.

Inspired and ennobled by Dr. King's vision, may the fruit of our Christian unity be justice. And may the fruit of justice be to draw all people to know and glorify the God of justice.