

AN OPEN LETTER TO CAYUGA-SYRACUSE PRESBYTERY

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Fellow Believers in Christ, grace and peace to you.

Let us ascribe glory, honor, and power to God for our creation, preservation, and salvation through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Let us thank God for our calling as presbyters with different gifts and ministries endowed for the continuation of the ministry of reconciliation effected by our Lord himself to bring estranged humanity to the Father. We praise God the Father and God the Son, from whom God the Holy Spirit proceeds to strengthen our faith and intercede on our behalf to the Father with groans too deep for words (Romans 8:26).

We give thanks to the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, blessed trinity for a successful gathering of the presbyters in this judicatory on June 9, 2020. We praise God for the leadership of the judicatory for drawing and managing the comprehensive docket with skill, diligence, decency, and order, and doing so for the first time online. We commend the outgoing moderator for unfaltering dedication to the presbytery going beyond the call of duty and obligation. We congratulate the incoming moderator for a fantastic beginning. As a former moderator, I know how it is to preside over a presbytery meeting for the first time. We cannot thank enough the staff for the effective management of the meeting. We are surely blessed with leadership and management teams.

It was a beautiful gathering of the presbyters of our churches, but when it ended it left me in deep dismay as to what had not been on the docket and what had not happened during the meeting, what was not mentioned, or referred to in any fashion or manner throughout the three-hour meeting. I was deeply disappointed that nothing was mentioned in the meeting about what was going on around the country and the world even as the presbytery sat during the proceedings. This was the first called meeting since the Covid-19 pandemic; it was on the evening of the day of the funeral of George Floyd that the whole world had watched, for it was beamed by international broadcast networks such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C). Millions of black people in the nation, including my wife and I, not that we matter, had spent three hours chocking with tears, literally, as we watched the funeral service. When our presbytery meeting was over, I was amazed that there had not been a single minute, not a word to the hundreds of demonstrators from the churches within its judicatory. Except for one blessed soul, Rev. Beth Dubois, who had said her congregation had been out demonstrating, the presbytery meeting ended without a prayer for the millions of all races standing shoulder to shoulder with black people who were hurting and angry at structural racism. How the presbytery meeting proceeded made it abundantly clear to me that, indeed and truly, this is how the dominant society feels and acts, i.e., it carries on business as usual, even a church judicatory.

My conscience will trouble me forever if I did not reveal that as a black person, I was disappointed, troubled, hurt, and offended by the silence of the presbytery meeting over injustice when the people of all races in the nation and the world were condemning it and saying with

Martin Luther King, Jr. that, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (From “The Letter from Birmingham Jail”). I was sad that the presbytery gathering did not stand with black people when the majority of the young people in dominant society were demonstrating against injustice and inequality. After an afternoon of being choked with sadness, sorrow, and tears, I had an evening in which I choked due to the silence of the presbytery, rather, by the invisibility of black presbyters and Christians in Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery. The Apostle Paul encourages Christians to be champions of empathy, “to mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). Our Lord himself modeled for us empathy: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). Nothing communicates sincere love and concern for the other more powerfully than recognizing and joining them in their grief and sorrow. On June 9, 2020, was there anyone in the presbytery meeting who did not know that black people were sad, hurting, and angry at injustice?

As I was wondering about why the meeting had not shown concern over the events of the day and days, there came to my mind the story our Lord told about a man going on a road who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the roadside. Two clergymen saw the beaten and robbed man, but passed by the other side of the road. Then a man of another race, a Samaritan, saw the robbed and injured man, stopped, dressed the man’s injuries, put him on his donkey to an inn and paid in full all his expenses (Luke 10:30-37). I could not help but relate the silence and inaction of the presbytery meeting to the indifference shown by the religious people in the Lord’s story. I wondered if there were people of a different race in the presbytery to show empathy to the black members of the presbytery and to black people in the country who have been beaten, robbed, and left on the roadside of American history.

As I reflected on the Lord’s poignant story, I recalled my thirty years in this judicatory and remembered a time and place in this very Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery when presbytery meetings were dominated by deliberations over the presbytery coming to the help of those left on the roadside of American history; a time when issues of social justice dominated presbytery gatherings; a time when the presbytery sent overtures to the General Assembly supporting social justice issues; a time when this presbytery was an island where minorities of all types were supported and we felt comfortable to serve in this judicatory. On Tuesday, 9 June, I sat through a presbytery gathering without a prophetic voice. Prophecy is not telling the future, rather it includes denouncing, on God’s behalf, the evils of the day and challenging God’s people to mend their ways and to take a moral and religious high ground, to seek after what God requires of them: “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Instead of taking a minute of silence, or saying a prayer to recognize this historical moment in America and the world, the presbytery chose silence, which is complicity, an inadvertent support of the evil system, standing along the accomplices of evil. No word was sent to the members churches of the judicatory to comfort those hurting from the system, or stand with those demonstrating against evil. No draft copy of an overture to the General Assembly to encourage the highest body to take a prophetic stand for social justice at this historical moment. Simply put, the June 9 presbytery meeting lost an opportunity for witness to the churches within its judicatory and the nation through the General Assembly.

What puzzled me the most was that the presbytery gathering chose to be complicit even after we had read together the Five Great Ends of Church, of which the fifth is explicit about witnessing

for social justice, i.e., “the promotion of social righteousness,” or the prophetic ministry that calls the church to condemn social evil in no uncertain terms. The prophet Ezekiel condemned the leadership that did not warn the people against evil. He said: “But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel’s hand” (Ezekiel 33:8). In challenging times, churches expect to hear from the presbytery leadership: What to do and the direction to follow. If the presbytery remains silent on issues of immediate challenge and concern, the Presbyterian Church makes itself irrelevant to the young people demonstrating today. God holds the church in America responsible for the perpetuation of structural racism, because of its silence. The church has the power of moral persuasion, because the Holy Spirit who convicts, converts, and concretes does so through the voice of the church.

The silence of the presbytery gathering was not only in contradiction to the fifth Great End of the Church, but also to the tradition of the Presbyterian Church USA, and in particular to the Confession of 1967, Part II, The Ministry of Reconciliation, Section 4, Reconciliation in Society, paragraphs 9:43 and 9.44a that calls the church at all levels of its judicatories, and even individual Christians to act whenever social problems arise. It is pitiful that the presbytery chose silence at “a time like this” when data reveals that our titanic Presbyterian ship in America is sinking. Without making itself relevant to society what will the future look like? People need to hear a prophetic voice to restore hope to young people who are jumping the ship. God, through prophet Jeremiah, once asked the leaderships of the time: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” (Jeremiah 8:22). So, I ask too: Are there no Samaritans in Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery? Why does Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery continue to do business as usual when the world is crying out for justice for black people? Again we hear from God through the prophet, “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14). Why did the presbytery conduct its business as usual, as if there was peace in America? Why did the presbytery meeting not recognize that its church members are living in troubled times? The meeting went on smoothly as if the world was not on fire, metaphorically and realistically. The Confession of 1967, calls us to be a prophetic church in times such as these. Here is the section on action in the Confession:

4. Reconciliation in Society

9.43 In each time and place, there are particular problems and crises through which God calls the church to act. The church, guided by the Spirit, humbled by its own complicity and instructed by all attainable knowledge, seeks to discern the will of God and learn how to obey in these concrete situations. The following are particularly urgent at the present time.

9.44 a. God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, God, overcomes the barriers between sisters and brothers, and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary. The church is called to bring all people, to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. Therefore, the church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations,

individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize others, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.

“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).