

Overture

Pittsburgh Presbytery overtures the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church(USA) to take specific action, not just not in word, but also in deed, to address and improve the worsening plight of the African American male in five specified cities as a pilot initiative pointing toward future and further nationwide intervention.

Recommendation:

Because Micah 6:8 with its powerful words to “Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly” calls us to action and not only proclamation, Pittsburgh Presbytery overtures the General Assembly to specific action in five cities where the plight of the African American male is especially egregious, including one where a future General Assembly will be held:

- Baltimore, Maryland-GA 2020
- Charlotte, North Carolina
- Cleveland, Ohio
- New York, New York
- Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Specific actions we call the General Assembly to adopt include:

- Programs that address recidivism;
- Programs that address and engage local congregational and community members that speak the language of and to African American males aged 6-25 years;
- Programs that empower African American males to develop hireable skills so that all of the Beloved Community benefits;
- Programs of partnership between the congregations, presbyteries and synods of the PC(USA) with established agencies/groups such as My Brother’s Keeper, 100 Black Men of America, Amachi, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, the Boy Scouts of America: Scoutreach, an urban emphasis program, and the Open Table;
- Request synods, presbyteries and congregations to provide resources for the establishment and support of programs within their bounds that provide for prevention and rehabilitation in the areas of substance abuse and job placement and security;
- Request synods, presbyteries and congregations to advocate for policies at the local and state levels that will change the structures that contribute to the demise of the black male;
- Request synods, presbyteries and congregations to celebrate particular black males who are role models and members of extended families for the contributions to the whole society.

Jesus proclaims, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21) Five million dollars is requested to fulfill this overture, \$1,000,000 per city. Realizing that the proposed actions require a financial investment, Pittsburgh Presbytery overtures the General Assembly to access the Hawkins-Buchanan Fund for Racial Justice for at least a portion, if not all, of the five million dollars anticipated to be necessary to support this overture. “The Fund for Racial Justice and Reconciliation is a permanent endowment fund established to support ministries of racial justice, reconciliation and healing in church and society. In the prophetic words of Elder Hawkins, “This is the time to ... follow the present leading of the Holy Spirit ... and put sufficient resources to work as the symbol of our intent to provide real leadership in the challenge of race.”ⁱ Additionally, the Walton Family Foundation may be a

partner and supporter of this effort to address the plight of the African American male through education.

Rationale:

The Time is NOW. Ecclesiastes 3:7 tells us there is a time for everything, including a time for silence and a time to speak. Now is the time not only for speaking but also acting and doing regarding the continually plummeting plight of the African American male. Now is the time for the PC(USA) to adhere to Matthew 25:45 and act on behalf of the least of these, the African American male, as we simultaneously do for Jesus.

In 1990, Pittsburgh Presbytery sent an overture to the 202nd General Assembly urging the Assembly to take notice of and respond in a positive way to the plight of the African American male. The African American male was referred to as "an endangered species" because at that time *The Sentencing Project* reminded America and the Church that there were more African American males between the ages of 16 and 25 in jail and the criminal justice system than there were in colleges, universities and other institutions of higher learning. That overture was adopted by the GA and became known as Overture 90-90.ⁱⁱ Although the overture was adopted, minimal action was taken and documented. Each unit of the General Assembly reviewed the approved overture for action within their own unit. Congregations, Presbyteries and Synods were charged with providing financial support and conducting inquiries. Little is known of those results. The time is now. What are we doing?

In 1999, the 211th General Assembly approved *Facing Racism: A Vision of the Beloved Country*, a comprehensive policy document that was to guide the church's ministry of "racial justice" into the twenty-first century. This document was to aid the PC(USA) to move beyond the task of legally dismantling racism to removing it from our lives and communities.ⁱⁱⁱ The time is now. What are we doing?

We are now living in 2016, twenty-six years since the passing of Overture 90/90 and we find that the plight of the African American male in this country has not improved but indeed has gotten worse as evidenced by:

The shootings and beatings of African American males, including:

- Michael Brown-17 year old, Ferguson, Missouri
- Eric Garner-43 year old, New York City, New York
- Freddie Gray-25 year old, Baltimore, Maryland
- Kimani Gray-16 year old, New York City, New York
- Miles Jordan-18 year old, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Trayvon Martin- 17 year old, Sanford, Florida
- Tamar Rice-12 year old, Cleveland, Ohio
- Tyree Woodson-38 year old, Baltimore, Maryland

Murder as a rising and prolific cause of death in African American males:

- While only 6% of the overall population, Black males accounted for 43% of murder victims in 2011.^{iv}
- Among youth ages 10 to 24, homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males^v

The escalating and excessive incarceration of African American males:

- Nearly 3 million black adults were arrested in 2012^{vi}
- As of November 2015, blacks make up 37.8% of the jailed population but just 13.2% of the U.S. population.^{vii} Of the 526,000 black males in state and federal prisons in 2013, 14.3 percent, or roughly 75,000, were between the ages of 18 and 24.^{viii}
- There were 261,500 black people in local jails in mid-2013.^{ix}
- In 2012, Black males were 6 times more likely to be imprisoned than White males.^x

Deteriorating educational and employment opportunities for African American males:

- Blacks make up 32% of the students being suspended and/or expelled from grade schools, while blacks make up 16% of the student population^{xi}
- During the summer months (June-August) of 2013, just 17% of black teenage boys (ages 16-19) were employed, compared to 34% of white teenage boys.^{xii}
- Overall in 2013, half of young black men (ages 20-24) were employed, compared to over two-thirds of young white men. This employment gap persists as men get older.^{xiii}

Moreover, it is as true now as it was more than three decades ago that “in the United States African American men are still involved in the establishment of significant firsts, such as: first jailed, first killed in the streets, first under-employed, first fired, first confined to mental institutions, first imprisoned, first lynched, first involved with drugs and alcohol, first misadjusted, first denied medical treatment, first in suicide, first to be divorced, first denied normal benefits of this country, first to be blamed for [the] Black problem[.]”^{xiv}

These statistics continue to demonstrate that the African American male is an endangered species, perhaps even bordering on extinction. The time is now. What are we doing?

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.” writes Martin Luther King, Jr in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*.^{xv} Our efforts to date have been small steps toward changing the plight of the African American male. We recognize that these steps were necessary to bear witness to the kingdom of heaven on earth. But now there is true urgency in taking larger steps and really moving forward. The time is now. What are we doing?

Our Confessions, the Creeds by which we practice our faith, recognize racial injustice as contrary to the Gospel and call us to action:

Confession of 1967: “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...” 9.43

Belhar Confession: “We believe that God has entrusted the church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ; that the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, that the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the church is witness both by word *and by deed* (emphasis added) to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells. ... We believe that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which

implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.^{xvi}

The time is now. What are we doing? Because discipleship necessarily involves advocacy, the PC(USA) Office of Public Action calls us to action: “We must be willing to challenge the culture that tells African American boys that their lives are worth less than the lives of white boys. We live in a culture that attempts to justify itself by claiming “self-defense” when we really mean fear and bigotry, or pride or individualism . . . Churches must provide a moral compass for the nation by getting outside their buildings, engaging in their communities and shaping public policies that will move our whole nation towards justice, peace and reconciliation for all people...”^{xvii} We contend that discipleship is also action. The time is now. What are we doing?

Time and time again, history has proven that regardless of the identity of the person bringing a contagious disease into a community, everyone there is affected by it; likewise, failure to implement means of rectifying the practices that have led to the crisis of this endangered segment of humanity is an invitation to the deterioration of all people-regardless of sex, race, color, or creed, and the church can no longer ignore the wide recognition of this social tragedy and fail to lead in the development of comprehensive ministry programs to ameliorate the destructive conditions that currently threaten the African American male.^{xviii}

ⁱ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/racialjustice/hawkins-buchanan-fund-racial-justice/>

ⁱⁱ Overture 90-90, *Minutes*, 1990, pp. 94, 523, 784

ⁱⁱⁱ Parson’s Cover Letter, http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/peacemaking/pdf/facing-racism.pdf

^{iv} http://www.heinz.org/UserFiles/File/AA%20Men%20and%20Boys/my_brothers_keeper_task_force_report_to_the_president.pdf, page 6

^v Ibid.

^{vi} <http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2015/may/05/ben-carson/more-black-men-criminal-justice-system-college-pre/>

^{vii} US Census bureau - quickfacts.census.gov

^{viii} <http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2015/may/05/ben-carson/more-black-men-criminal-justice-system-college-pre/>

^{ix} Ibid

^x http://www.heinz.org/UserFiles/File/AA%20Men%20and%20Boys/my_brothers_keeper_task_force_report_to_the_president.pdf, page 6

^{xi} US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights-Civil Rights Data Collection

^{xii} http://www.heinz.org/UserFiles/File/AA%20Men%20and%20Boys/my_brothers_keeper_task_force_report_to_the_president.pdf, page 6

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Howard University Institute for Urban Affairs, *Urban Research Review*, vol. 6. No. 1, 1980

^{xv} King, Jr., Martin Luther, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Massachusetts, Beacon Press, 2010

^{xvi} http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf

^{xvii} Nelson, J. Herbert, “A Call for More Than Judicial Remedies to the Killing of African American Boys and Men”, [Advocacy as Discipleship, August 21, 2014.](#)

^{xviii} Overture 90-90, *Minutes*, 1990, pp. 94, 523, 784