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Bishops release letter on sin of racism, urge reading in parishes on May 15

by James Solheim

The bishops of the Episcopal Church have released a Pastoral Letter on the Sin of Racism, adopted at a special meeting of the House of Bishops in March, and urged it be read throughout the church on May 15. (see full text in *Newsfeatures section of ENS.*)

In a covering letter to the bishops signed by co-chairs of the drafting committee, Bishop Edward Lee of Western Michigan and Bishop Arthur Williams, Jr. of Ohio, the bishops are asked to solicit and gather responses to the letter from parishes and individuals that would be shared at a Bible study session at the church's General Convention in August. "In this way, we continue to treat the issue of racism as a social and spiritual condition and not merely as a legislative matter," the letter said.

Among the suggestions emerging from table discussions during the House of Bishops meeting, the committee suggests that bishops indicate their personal commitment to the covenants described in the letter, discuss the letter at diocesan conventions or in special meetings in the diocese, create a committee or task force responsible for implementing the letter or use a personal inventory to expose racist attitudes.

Prejudice coupled with power

"The essence of racism is prejudice coupled with power," the letter contends. "It is rooted in the sin of pride and exclusivity" and it "perpetuates a basic untruth which claims the superiority of one group of people over others because of the color of their skin, their cultural history, their tribal affiliation or their ethnic identity." That kind of lie "distorts the biblical understanding of God's action in creation, wherein all human beings are made in the image of God" and it "blasphemes the ministry of Christ who died for all people."

The pastoral asserts that "a new moment of choice is upon us...shaped by a fresh understanding of our baptismal calling...by the persistent and pervasive racism of our day, an evil that clings so closely that it seems to be part of our very flesh." In a determination to "move beyond pious and easy resolutions," the letter proposes specific steps in a covenant, including an acknowledgment that "our mission involves not only changing hearts, but also engaging ourselves in seeking to transform a socio-economic system." The

covenant also pledges "a high priority on the development of strategies for the recruitment, deployment and support of persons of color" and the "development of liturgical expressions that reflect the church's racial and ethnic composition...." A standing committee of the house will "implement and monitor the fulfillment of this covenant."

"Escalating violence in America illustrates the complexity of racism," the letter says. "At the heart of the matter is fear. We fear those who are different from ourselves, and that fear translates into violence which in turn creates more fear. Institutionalized preference, primarily for white persons, is deeply ingrained in the American way of life...."

It will take more than a pastoral letter on racism to eradicate this sin but "we are hopeful that this step will add to breaking down the barriers that divide us on the basis of racial differences and will be one more way to help us employ our freedom in the maintenance of justice," Lee and Williams said in their letter.

A model for dioceses and parishes

The pastoral letter is part of an emphasis on racism over three triennia in the life of the church, beginning with the controversial decision to hold the 1991 General Convention in Phoenix, despite Arizona's rejection of a holiday to honor Martin Luther King, Jr.

The pastoral letter emerged from intense and highly personal discussions of racism at the regular meeting of the House of Bishops in Panama last September. "We made a conscious attempt to enter into the realities of racism without just giving a document for reaction," said Lee. By "holding our own feet to the fire" in sharing personal experiences in small groups, the committee is hoping to provide a model for dioceses and parishes to address the sin of racism.