

# STATE OF THE COUNTRY

*To Bishop Adam Jefferson Richardson, the presiding prelate of the Second Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, to Connie Speights Richardson, our beloved Episcopal Supervisor, Host Presiding Elder Paul Clifford Adkins and Associate Presiding Elder Chester Morris, to all the clergy and laypersons assembled, your Committee on the State of the Country presents the following report:*

## NATURE, SCOPE AND TASK

Politics has rarely been of keener interest to the ordinary citizen as it is in the present moment, a moment that has the full weight and charge of history at its back. No candidate for the nation's highest office has more electrified and galvanized the young and old alike, black and white together than Barack Obama. In the wake of so stunning an upset as that his campaign engineered in Iowa and in every subsequent state primary that he won it should not prove surprising that he should now come under blistering attack and withering criticism. In years past this committee has assayed different issues of profound consequence to our country's people, from race to judicial punishment and from economic inequity to the scarcity of natural resources. This year's report focuses generally on the role of religion in a free society of freethinking people, and upon the role of the black pulpit in the affairs of the nation most particularly. We do not seek to urge people along a single line of choice in the current political scene. We do, however, wish to address how media coverage, for good or ill, either discloses or misconstrues entirely the whole mission of the black church as executed by clergy. Jeremiah Wright is but symptom of the larger problem that continues to afflict the relations of church and state.

## PROCESS AND DATA GATHERING

We begin by referencing the historical markers that animate black preaching specifically but black oratory more globally. This act of remembrance is central to black culture and our employment of it here is appropriate to the exercise we wish to prosecute. Whence, after all, black preaching? The answers of course extend far beyond the scope of our project and an exhaustive response cannot be forthcoming here. Still, we would cite that the earliest instances of black self-assertion under the hostile conditions of slavery sought the favor of Legba, Damballah, Yemanja and even mighty Shango himself. Memory of these and the other orisha, yet unforgotten by the first Africans to land on these foreign shores, survived in North America for as long as it took several generations of Africans to be born in America and not in Africa. In their enthusiastic adoption of the new religion of Christianity, these slaves, men and women without a continent and without a country, determined to see in it a call to the dispossessed, the dislocated and the distressed. And as one learned scholar after another has taught us, it was in the new religion that the fierce and resolved desire for literacy came upon the benighted bondsman. To read, to read the Bible especially, signified a yearning for freedom that was never vain for it was understood even by the coarser lot of men and women that a lettered preacher enjoyed a privileged insight into the nuanced meaning of the “Word” and that it was by the light of that Word that the preacher could open a door onto a new world where all could and would be free one day. Our data is to be found in the written records of our fathers and mothers, the well-documented witness of their lives lived out under lash and sun. We recommend the reading and re-reading with fresh eyes of the works of Equiano, Jacobs and Douglass, of Sojourner and Brown.

In these sources are to be found the distinction between authentic Christianity and the barbarism of the slave auctioneer whose countrymen, with him, dared call themselves Christian, even in the moment that the yelp of children could be heard as they were torn from their mothers for sale into 'Bama or the Carolinas. The years following the great Civil War, a war fought to extinguish slavery from the body politic and the culture of the nation, saw the coming of Reconstruction and the loss of nerve its promise required. The black masses found that they would need more than ever to depend upon those institutions they themselves could create and sustain; chief among these was the black church. Even before the war had come our church, the AME church, was born in response to God's call but also as a protest of the servile conditions to which blacks were forced to acquiesce in the common worship of Philadelphia Methodists.

## FINDINGS

The consequence of this history has produced a militant clergy, answerable not to the princes of this earth but to God alone. Jeremiah Wright is far from unique but he is exemplary. Our duty as black preachers is to preach the incorruptible word of God unashamedly and unapologetically. It is our task not to make friends at the expense of the gospel but to win over the soul of the nation through our call to repentance instead. The well-known distinction applies here as it always has from the time of Jonah and Isaiah. The prophet thunders and proclaims the will of God to Kings and Priests who mistake personal or national interests for divine rule. The prophet knows that this category mistake is the sin of idolatry and that the nation so convicted cannot long sustain the curse that God ordains. It is our task to preach the truth concerning what is damnable in the country's affairs, both without and within. What is damnable about the war, damnable about prisons that abuse with cruel and unusual punishment the guilty and innocent alike, what is

damnable about the practice of state sponsored torture, what is damnable concerning these and all such transgressions is the underlying presumption that state interests are God's interests.

## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Our committee would propose the following goals for our nation's people.

- The recollection of religious duty as distinct from but critical for the proper exercise of civic duty
- The advocacy of deep literacy for our people as an antidote for suspicion, rumor, idle speculation and Biblical illiteracy
- The collective embrace of the responsibilities for the earth's dwindling resources and fragile ecosystems for "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof"
- To resolve to trust our democratic impulses for the sane resolution of our nation's conflicts
- To make real in the world our faith that justice is for the sake of the other, even the other whom we may despise
- To exercise a stewardship of our blessings so others may be blessed, particularly "the least of these"

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Under present conditions and in view of our current political climate we call for an even more aggressive strategy of preaching that makes truth abundantly evident to power. We urge the ministries of our churches here and abroad to a commitment of service that never fails the Word: to seek the lost and to comfort the comfortless. But we admonish every preacher to live by the solemn oath and vow that she or he took when she and he kissed the Bible in the moment of

ordination: to take the authority to preach God's word and not man's nor woman's. It will require that one preach in and out of season and it will occasion consternation and the vilification of one's person by media as powerful as they are public. Nonetheless, we are convinced that we have been called to serve this present age and that the God who has equipped us is sovereign enough in power, wisdom and love to sustain us in the journey. Preach peace in a time of war; preach justice for the enemy and our friends; preach a high regard for the earth's remote regions. The nation's welfare may depend more upon our prayers than upon the man or woman we may elect. For whosoever that person proves to be, our prayers availeth much for the summer, fall, winter and spring and even for November.

If the fury of the Lord is kindled against Washington for failure to heed his call, woe unto us should the blame be ours that we had not joined the Jeremiah of this day to proclaim the wrath of God upon the obdurate of heart and the obtuse of spirit.

Respectfully submitted by the members of the Committee on the State of the Country to the One Hundred Forty-second Session of the Virginia Annual Conference, the 25<sup>th</sup> day of April, in the year of our Lord, 2008,

#### P A S T O R S

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Rev. Ruby Brown

Rev. Debbie Bryant

Rev. Billy Hunter

Rev. Eboni B. Kearney

Rev. Gwendolyn Minor

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