

Saturday, May 30, 2020

# An Open Letter to the Commonwealth of Kentucky

*Dear White Christians,*

Events of recent weeks have broken the heart of all faithful followers of a loving God and Jesus, the Prince of Peace. While we decry the violence and senseless destruction of property in Louisville and across the nation, we must humbly and unrelentingly understand AND WORK TO HEAL the long-term systemic violence of white privilege and white preferences that makes rage and anguish one of the few avenues left to communities abused decade after decade. With the words of our mouths we have declared our opposition to such abuse, but we have yet to repair the breach with transformative action. Sisters and brothers, we cannot imagine that the current suffering of so many black and brown families is what God imagines for our salvation. Indeed, there can be no salvation for any of us if we fail to recognize and change the pervasive, persistent, pernicious infiltration of tolerance for racial violence among our institutions, churches included.

Systemic racism is not the thoughts or even the actions of an individual. The violence it breeds is the crushing trauma to black and white that makes shooting of black bodies expected, and the rage such unjust killings incite the only response. Such violence is the poisonous, inevitable fruit of the tree of hatred rooted in centuries of manufactured “whiteness;” a division solely aimed at maintaining power and wealth on the back of black and brown human beings.

To the extent that communities of faith have been complicit in this abuse and violence we are doubly ashamed. As followers of God who chose to incarnate in a brown, outcast, minority religious body and taught that all persons were precious in God’s sight, we have much to atone for in turning the savior of the world into a savior of some, the lighter the better. If not overtly white-preferential, we as institutions have always partnered with the empire of white wealth and white power, all built on the suffering of black and brown bodies. We have repented in words and some deeds. But it has not been enough and as Isaiah 58 reminds us, what good are all our festivals and prayers if they are built on the abuse of others? How can God hear anything but the cry of the mothers weeping in Ramah—or Louisville, or Minneapolis, or Ferguson-- for their children?

Further, it must be said that the actions of fear perpetrated by so many white Americans, have also been systemically cultivated in our society. These fears have been taught to insulate and then deflect white recognition of the disease we are all afflicted with. In this sense the white perpetrators of violent acts, recent and historic, are victims of lies told to them about whom to fear and why; lies told and repeated to maintain an inequitable power to white people, and turning their best impulses of love and protection to corruption and denial of their neighbor. When we train

ourselves to deny the humanity of others we destroy God-given humanity in ourselves. We are all diminished by continuing to disregard the disease of racism, but it has been brown and black citizens who have died because of it.

To achieve the radical Christian transformation we must go by way of confession and repentance. We must confess that we have been conveniently ignorant for too long of the suffering caused to our neighbors, our family, our colorful world of humans made in God's image. We call on individuals and churches to erase this complacency. Resources for reading, denominational curricula on anti-racism, and other ways to begin conversations about change are readily available. In faith and for the sake of God's people, we call on all settings to engage deeply in learning. Repentance means to "turn around." Let us turn to understanding and sources of knowledge we have previously avoided or ignored.

We call now for a spiritual season of prayer and fasting. Not the fasting from food. "Is that the fast that I choose?" says the Lord. No. A fast from injustice and a fast from ignorance is what we must offer to restore the integrity of our worship. Let us confess to the ways that each of us, some by privilege, some by choice, have not done all we could to root out the poison tree growing in our midst. Let us ask God for the concrete tangible ways we might heal the fear in ourselves that drives such violence to others. Let us fast and work with all our might to heal those who have been so hurt for so long. We need much prayer. Our churches and our people are sick with worry and sick with a fatal killing disease. Let our prayers be acts of justice and lovingkindness and reform, not words alone.

In the coming days, the Kentucky Council of Churches will be working diligently to address these issues both within our fellowship and across the Commonwealth. Bishops and Conference Ministers are mobilizing in each tradition to supply needed avenues for response and we urge you and every faithful Christian to pledge your support to such leadership. Take on study, endure the discomfort, learn what was hidden from you. As they become known to us, we will post these resources on our website, [www.kycouncilofchurches.org](http://www.kycouncilofchurches.org).

The Kentucky Council of Churches will also be formulating an action plan to engage state leaders and ecumenical partners in a coordinated plan for change. The moral reformation that we institute for ourselves we will also expect of our governments, city, and state, and we hope to be an engaging force for such reform.

White privilege is a disease that has killed far more than any other pandemic, and wounded the souls of so many more, black and white. We cannot and we will not sit idle while brothers and sisters suffer. We urge you to trust God, love like Jesus, and be transformed in the renewing of our collective heart and mind: For the sake of Christ Jesus who died for our life, let us not be hearer's of the word only, but faithful, persistent, builders of God's Kin-dom on earth.

***In humility and sorrow,***

*Rev. Kent Gilbert, President*

*Rev. Dr. Don Gillett II, Executive  
Director*