

## **A Call to Address the Benign Neglect of the Black Churches of the Diocese and to Strengthen Their Interrelationships**

### **Submitted by:**

The Rev. Canon Dr. Jean Baptiste Ntagengwa, The Rev. Julian Fredie;  
The Rev. Zenetta Armstrong, The Rev. Harry Jean Jacques, Alfred Massiah, and Carmelina Lespinasse of Church of the Holy Spirit, Mattapan;  
The Rev. Rospignac Ambroise, Cynthia King, Vilma Johnson, and Junie Ambroise of St. John's/St. James, Roxbury;  
The Rev. Evan Thayer and Keitha Llynette Hassell of St. Augustine's/St. Martin's;  
The Rev. Leslie K. Sterling and Steven Mascoll of St. Bartholomew's, Cambridge;  
The Rev. Edwin Johnson and David Bresnahan of St. Mary's, Dorchester;  
The Rev. Monrelle Williams, PhD and James Dilday of St. Cyprian's, Roxbury; and  
Cherell Coppin of St. Mark's, Dorchester.

**Resolved**, that the 235<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, in response to our mission strategy to reimagine our congregations and build relationships, commends the Racial Justice Commission (RJC) to appoint a committee of representatives from historically Black churches in our diocese to address the benign neglect—through overt and systemic discrimination; unequal treatment; and the disparate impact of circumscribed decision-making—of historically Black churches by our diocese; and be it further

**Resolved**, that this committee fully represents the Black churches of our diocese and provides opportunities to address their own internalized racism, work collaboratively rather than competitively, and develop the capacity to flourish through a discernment process of deep listening and study of shared histories, mutual goals, and collaborations; and be it further

**Resolved**, that all important diocesan decisions about any of the Black churches that might affect the welfare of more than one Black church be discussed first at the Summit of Black churches—a monthly meeting of representatives from each of the seven historically Black churches in the Diocese—or in the committee appointed by the RJC to address benign neglect; and be it further

**Resolved**, that this committee will bring its discoveries and recommendations for the way forward for the Black churches of our diocese to the RJC to present to Diocesan Convention 2021; and be it further

**Resolved**, that we, the gathered leaders of the diocese at this 235<sup>th</sup> Convention, aware of the sin of racism and its dehumanizing impact, condemn racism in all its forms and expressions, and recommend all clergy and lay persons in our diocese to work to systemically dismantle it; and be it further

**Resolved**, that through the Canon for Immigration and Multicultural Ministries, the Bishop's Office and this diocese will equip and empower congregations to build relationships by providing opportunities for safe, courageous conversations among all churches.

### Explanation

This resolution is not a fixing of the past, nor an apology, rather it is an acknowledgement of the current state of emergency in which the Black churches of the Diocese find themselves—suffering inequities and facing potential disappearance—and of our mandate as a part of the Jesus Movement

to represent the kingdom of God on Earth. It will formalize the accountability and commitment of the Diocese to the strengthening of the Black churches for the future. This will be a living process, shaped by life on the ground, as circumstances present themselves. For such a time as this, it is a moment of change and a small step in the right direction.

As the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power connecting everything that stands against love.”

This is what lies at the heart of this resolution—the Beloved Community—and the resolution seeks to set the historically Black churches on a journey to tell the truth about the discrimination and patterns of bias as we have experienced it in this Diocese.

In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic through which we have been living for the last several months, we recognize we live in a VUCA world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous, and this certainly impacts our life together. As congregations, the Black churches are very diverse, with many immigrants, and the need to build cultural competence across the Diocese is real. The resolution seeks to address this need.

In Isaiah 58, we read, “Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; You shall be called the repairer of the Breach, the Restorer of Streets to live in.”

This resolution asks the Diocese to partner with the historically Black churches in a new way, as “Repairers of the Breach.” Through this partnership, these churches will continue our witness, reimagine our ministries, and build inter-congregational relationships that will challenge us to examine, live out, and be realistic about our viability. Through this partnership, the Diocese will live into its mission strategy and enable equity, inclusion, and participation. As a Diocese, we can build bridges of care over the chasms of society’s indifference and give the Black churches seats at tables where decisions are made. This committee would seek to educate members of the Black churches, prepare them for service, and ensure access to opportunities to serve. Shirley Chisholm reminded us that if there is no seat for you at the table, bring your own folding chair. This resolution seeks to eliminate the need to do so.

#### Statement Against

While the goals of this resolution may be lofty and laudable, especially considering the racial climate of this day and age, such work suggested by this resolution is not needed in our Diocese. We are not racist. As a Diocese, we have elected Black bishops and have Black and Brown people as Diocesan senior staff. In response to our mission strategy, the Diocese created a new position, the Canon for Immigration and Multicultural Ministries, and hired a Black person for that position. Last year, the Diocese passed a resolution declaring that we are a Safe Haven—a resolution that condemns racism in all its forms and expression. The Diocesan policy professes equal opportunity, and so, there is clearly no need for this resolution. The Diocese will continue to sympathize with our siblings in the historically Black churches, to support the Black Lives Matter Movement, and to be there when these churches need us.

#### Implementation Requirements

An endeavor of this significance, the creation of a committee fully representing the historically Black churches of the diocese, will necessarily require significant expertise, time, and resources

as it undertakes this important and urgent work. By commending the establishment of this committee to the RJC, these churches will have the opportunity to access the support needed so that they may use their considerable gifts, strengths, and resilience to address the internalized oppression and deep hurt that is part of their history. The Canon for Immigration and Multicultural Ministries will serve as a liaison between the committee and the RJC and will bring the committee's recommendations suggesting a way forward as part of the Jesus Movement.