THE MEANING OF THE BLACK CHURCH

—By Reuben A. Sheares, II—

In talking about the black church, even in talking about black people in this context, we are talking about creations of American culture, the backdrop against which one has to perceive both the black church, as well as the life and existence of black people, and the ways in which racism has manifested itself in the life and culture of American society. That racism, which has manifested itself in a variety of forms and which continues until the present, has taken the form historically, traditionally and originally in terms of chattel slavery. It was followed by that 100 year existence in the form of legal segregation, and continues to manifest itself in our culture in a variety of subtle ways (and I would argue that one of the chief expressions of which is the ghetto), and that whenever racism has manifested itself, it has been characterized by at least three or four things. One of these is separation, one is subordination, one violence in its maintenance, and the last a variety of subtle ways of blaming the victim.

During the last 300 to 400 years, as this treatment has gone on in American life and culture, there has been some degree of variation to it, but if you look at slavery from its beginning and at its depth and look at present realities, the characteristics of separation, subordination, maintenance by violence and all kinds of ways of blaming the victim continue to operate. And it operates almost across the life and breadth of the culture, manifesting itself within the life of almost all institutions within the culture.

You remember the way it was said in the Dred Scott Decision in 1848, that black people had no rights which white people were bound to respect. In such an environment the black church related to that condition, to make possible the survival of a people under duress, but at the same time and related to the interest of survival, it also laid the foundations and brought forth the deeds of liberation of the people.

Sometimes I look back on what our mothers and fathers in the faith did, and I'm fully aware of the fact that, by God, I just wish that they were more militant than they were. But even being as old as I am and growing up in South Carolina back in the 1930's, I just know that between 1930 and 1951 we didn't dare have the boldness in '33 that we had in '51. It was just that kind of way in which the hostility in the environment and the socialization processes said to you, "You've got to bide your time." But the foundations were always there, and they made it possible for people to continue to believe in themselves and their own worth and dignity as people in the presence of God, even if everything else in the environment conspired to tell you you were not. The beginnings of laying the foundations of a community were being made.

The black church became the basis upon which so much else in the black community was built. Other kinds of benevolent, social and helpful institutions emerged out of that reality, because it became at a point in time the one institution that was owned, controlled and directed by blacks, and even that freedom had to be modified at times. The black church continues to work for the survival of black people, but it also works for their liberation and their development. So the black church has always had to be, in its own way and in its own form, a protest organization. It has always had to be that voice which said, "no," to what the culture said it ought to do, or said, "yes," to developing some other possibilities for themselves and their future. And it acted on that in a variety of ways, so that in the black church, on the whole, we've not had the luxury of deciding whether or not we were going to be pietists, on the one side, or activists on the other; somehow the people just don't even give you those choices too much, or how are you going to deal with the priestly as over against the prophetic? You've just got to blend it all, because in a sense the black church as an institutions in the black community, has tended to be one of those pervasive institutions, pervasive in the sense that it has to deal with the whole warp and woof of the life of the people and of the community.

Now, the black churches aren't all alike. They differ theologically. You've already discovered that there are within that category those that are of black denomination totally, whereas some black churches are in predominately white denominations, and all kinds of other mixes. The one thing they all had in common was in being true to the black experience. Today we find increasingly the emergence of a kind of black ecumenist that is parallel to or sometimes at odds with the other kinds of movements or the ecumenical movement. As within the black community. Christians of various kinds are finding that basis for their life together, rather than being together as Baptists or Methodists, or whatever else they happen to be. In the material which Dr. Catchings sent to you, from RISK magazine, pieces written in the 1960's, you get in touch with that time and that expression of black thought and concern.

A Letter to the President

Rev. Dr. Phillip R. Cousin President
The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
475 Riverside Drive New York, New York

July 27th, 1985

Dear Mr. President:

The forthcoming "Fifth National Partners In Ecumenism (PIE) Conference," to be held on September 24-25th, in Washington, D.C. appears to be deliberately rescheduled in opposition or competition to the Congressional Black Caucus, unless there is a specific purpose and/or message that is to be presented for their consideration.

While it appears that the planning committee which met earlier in 1985, and made several excellent decisions, which subsequently projected the theme to be
"Can Freedom Ring?" with emphasis on the Black Church and Economics, is being woefully neglectful of the fact that the Black Church throughout America is and has been seriously affected by the housing crisis that has taken a heavy toll on the inner cities across this country, has not even been considered by the leadership of PIE or the Black Church itself.

Before members of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., or the Assistant General Secretary seeks to convene a National PIE Conference, some very effective action needs to be implemented in favor of providing the desperately needed Housing legislation, to address this demand throughout the Nation, for it to set the stage adequately for consideration of "CAN FREEDOM RING?"

It is important that the President is reminded that this matter was introduced and warmly accepted for further action by the Minority Caucus, at the recent Chicago Conference, introduced by your humble servant.

"PIE, Partners in Ecumenism, as a movement of Black Church leaders and lay, cooperating across denominational lines to inspire, inform and organize us so that we can provide viable solutions for the problem caused by racism, sexism, and classism. We are resourced by the National Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches, several denominations, foundations and individuals."

Yet, while the U.S. Congress and the House of Representatives are deliberating over the passage and required influential support for H.R. 1, the "National Housing Act of 1985," neither these Church bodies nor PIE has considered the urgency of housing as the causes of crime, hopelessness, despair and frustration, due to the need for decent, safe and sanitary housing conditions. Is it possible that the Church community is satisfied for the people to return to the caves? If so then where will the Church be for the future? How will the Church community continue to reach the people? And how will the Church carry out its mission to God's children? Where is the Church leadership taking God's children if they are not properly housed?

Today, when Partners in Ecumenism could be active in the Church's role of economics for affordable housing and home ownership, to be the number one example in the U.S.A. that would produce manpower training and employment opportunities for economic security and stability, and result in the Church community being responsive and effective, the leadership is woefully lacking or absent with clouded vision and foresight.

In my role as the Chairman of the Harlem Urban Nehemiah Housing Coalition our position has been that of providing affordable housing has become without question, one of the most serious problems of the Nation.

While interest rates have traditionally been the major element of this problem, they are only a part of the multitude of factors that have caused the widest gap between average incomes and housing expenses in our Nation's history.

During the 1980s more than 17 million householders, who are currently under 35 years of age, will be potential homeowners or home buyers. Of these, only 1.3 million or (7.6%) will be able to afford homes. The balance must secure affordable rental housing. Also of these 17 million, 11 million are now younger than 25 with lower earning power and therefore a substantial part of the rental market. Where is the Church community prepared to assume this required responsibility and leadership for God's children?

Yet with these statistics neither the Black Church, PIE or the Church community is prepared to present "Economics" in terms of the drastic and dire need that takes its toll on the very security and growth of the Church, or the future of the Church to carry out the work we are ordained for. This is and should be the main priority of PIE's role in relationship to the Black Church. Or better still it should be the duty of the Black Church to seek the support of PIE and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., for their respective communities and congregations, for the youth and the elderly, the destitute and the handicapped, in the byways and the hedges.

Best wishes for continued success.

Sincerely

Rev. Dr. David N. Licorish