

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY, CLERGY AND CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS**

### **Thoughts While we were Being Handcuffed, and Processed at the Wake County Jail on June 15 after Engaging in an Act of Nonviolent Civil Disobedience**

Reverend Dr. William Barber II, President, North Carolina NAACP, National Board NAACP,  
and Pastor, Greenleaf Christian Church  
Reverend Dr. Nancy E. Petty, Pastor, Pullen Memorial Baptist Church

Dear Friends and Neighbors:

People who are arrested and taken to jail inevitably ask one another what brought them there. As you may know, we were arrested on June 15 for civil disobedience in protest of the decision of the anti-diversity majority of the Wake County School Board to abandon our nationally recognized diversity policy. As we prayed, sang, and sat in jail, police officers and fellow inmates asked why we had been arrested. Perhaps you have wondered this same thing. And so we write to you today to explain ourselves.

Some wonder why we have persisted. Why we did not stop after we had our two minutes of time in front of the board. Why we did not accept the anti-diversity majority's decision to end the diversity policy. The answer is that the decision of the Wake County School Board majority to destroy the socio-economic diversity policy is morally wrong. We hope to be heard in the spirit of love that brings us here and to promote a deeper public understanding that all of the children are our children, equal in the eyes of God and worthy of the best school system that we can provide.

Martin Luther King expressed this well in his letter from the Birmingham jail: "In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self purification; and direct action."

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path? You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored...Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!'...This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.' We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that 'justice too long delayed is justice denied'." (MLK, Letter from the Birmingham Jail)

We have collected the facts. The relationship between racial re-segregation, poverty concentration, and reduced student and school performance in North Carolina is clear. Virtually all of the 44 lowest performing high schools are segregated: 40 of the 44 are racially isolated, predominantly non-white schools, most by very high percentages. Forty years of education research establishes that high-poverty, racially-isolated schools hurt children's life chances.

We have tried to negotiate. For at least the past four months, we have stood in lines for over two hours to sign our names on a sign-up sheet so that we could speak for two minutes. We have stood in lines to secure our "ticket" to attend the Board meetings which are "mandated" to be public meetings. We have sought to work within the bounds of their rules while they continually violate and change the rules. We pleaded for a 45-minute presentation by the NAACP, an organization with a century of experience and widely recognized standing on issues of education, race and inequality. The board majority leadership would not even permit the full board to vote on this, let alone give us time to explain our concerns. We have sought redress of our grievances.

We have sought self purification: to be clear in our intent and true to our desire to listen. Moral leadership has provided the insight and energy to move us toward one America and keep us from going backward. This same moral force must fight to hold on and advance these victories today. Along with the prophet Isaiah we ask, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6) We have listened. We have listened while the Board majority has refused to listen to the data of their own survey (to parents of Wake County students) that confirmed that 90% of parents were "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with their child's school placement.

And now we have pursued direct action-nonviolent civil disobedience. In the best American traditions, from Henry David Thoreau to Ella Baker to Martin Luther King, Jr., we recognize the necessary place of civil disobedience: breaking a small and unjust law in order to protect a larger and broadly significant law, honoring the very spirit of law by yielding to punishment in order to meet the necessity of an urgent moral crisis. We seek to make a moral and spiritual witness that we feel is urgent, necessary, and right.

Our actions are a call to the community. There is a tragedy unfolding in Wake County, but it is not confined to Wake County. What is happening in Wake County is a national issue. The shadow of re-segregation is falling across the state of North Carolina and the nation. And it represents a clear call to our community-Black, White, Latino, Asian-to employ all the moral, political, and legal means at our disposal to stop it before it's too late. Now is the time for us to stand together. Public education is for the people - all the people. This right established in our North Carolina Constitution in 1868 was created by an extraordinary coalition of whites and blacks - of lawyers and farmers - of those adept at politics and those who had only recently experienced freedom. This right - still a part of our constitution - ensures that every child in Wake County Schools will have an equal opportunity to a sound, basic education. The majority Board refused to acknowledge this right in its policies. It is shirking its legal and moral duties to the children and to all of us.

In 1954, the NAACP's forty-year march through the courts overturned the doctrine of "separate but equal" in the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* decision, which said that separate schools impose a "badge of inferiority" and have "no place in the field of public education." The NAACP penned this victory in the fresh ink of equal justice and moral authority, and was supported in its position by major religious bodies and the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. State Department. For many years afterward, local citizens of Wake County and across the country labored to persuade their communities to follow the law of the land. Wake County complied with the law only after nearly two decades of struggle. And then it took years of hard work and courageous decisions by public officials to create a nationally recognized diverse system, though hardly perfect.

Now, in 2010, we are asking the citizens of Wake County to say to our School Board: "For Our Children, We Must Never Turn Back." We must act now with nonviolent action. We must continue to present the facts that an injustice exists; we must continue to try to negotiate; we must search our souls and conscience and stand on our convictions; we must utilize our moral authority and pursue our legal rights, and we must take nonviolent action as our conscience directs us. There is a role for everyone in this moral and political struggle, whether that is praying for justice, gathering information, speaking out to our churches and communities, organizing our precincts, marching in the streets, or even going to jail. Along freedom road, we will meet many friends, learn many things, and come together in a spirit of fellowship. We ask you, to join us, in this fight for justice for all our children!

In the Spirit of Love and Truth,

/s/

Reverend Dr. William Barber II, President, North Carolina NAACP, National Board NAACP,  
and Pastor, Greenleaf Christian Church

/s/

Reverend Dr. Nancy E. Petty, Pastor, Pullen Memorial Baptist Church

###