

Statement On Airline's Decision to Remove Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II from Plane Last Night

Durham, April 16, 2016: Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, President of North Carolina State Conference of NAACP Branches and the architect of the nationally acclaimed Moral Monday Movement, is fine. When short report was published this morning that he had been removed from a plane at the Washington, DC Airport last night, Rev. Barber's friends have been rightly concerned. To ease their minds, he released this statement:

I was invited to be the keynote speaker at a national interfaith event that launched the 2016 Ecumenical Advocacy Days. Like Moral Mondays, the service was to encourage all people of faith to petition directly those who have the power to reverse the immoral policies against the poor, the marginalized and the racially oppressed people in our society. Protestant, Catholic and other faith leaders had worked for months for the Ecumenical Advocacy Days in D.C. this week. My job Friday evening was to remind us of the similar moral teachings of great religions- love your neighbor as yourself, do justice, and walk humbly with God.

I had preached a sermon, my colleague had led the multi-racial crowd in some spirited gospel and Movement singing and, after some wonderful time hanging out with old and new friends, I went to Reagan National Airport to board an American Airlines plane flying to Raleigh-Durham around 10 p.m. As I boarded the plane, I was overwhelmed with love and the possibilities of new cross-race friendships and moral witnesses. I was also bone tired. Because of my bone-fusion arthritic disability that I have struggled with for years, I am forced to purchase two seats. The airport employees were more than gracious to me, as I boarded the small plane and painfully moved my body around to the most comfortable position I can find, looking forward to a good nap on the short flight home.

A passenger in a seat near me was talking loudly as the plane filled up. I asked the stewardess to request he bring it down a little bit, and she did. Because of my disability, I could not turn my head to see him, but as she left, I heard him saying distasteful and disparaging things about me. He had problems with "those people" and he spoke harshly about my need for "two seats," among other subjects. As I heard these things, I became more and more uncomfortable, especially since he was behind me. The attitude with which he spoke, and my experiences with others who have directed similar harsh, sometimes threatening words, emails, and calls at me, came to my mind. Because he was behind me when he made the comments and because of my disability, the only way I could see him when I tried to speak to him as one human being to another was to stand and turn around. I asked him why he was saying such things, and I said he did not know me, my condition, and I added I would pray for him.

This took place before the plane's crew gave safety instructions. I do not know who made the decision, but a plane official apparently called the police, who came to my seat and said, "Sir you need to leave the plane." I left. The American Airlines team at the desk was very gracious. Many said they were concerned and some said they did not agree with the decision. I told each of them that I was OK. They found room on a flight leaving on Saturday morning. I returned to the hotel where I keynoted the event earlier in the evening. This morning American staff graciously helped me re-board for the flight to Raleigh-Durham.

Virtually all the police officers and American employees were gracious to me. Some were openly troubled by the decision to force me to spend another night away from home. To those of you who were worried about me, I am fine, physically. Yes, I am not at all happy about what I believe were the real reasons I was the one asked to leave. My training and experiences with non-violent civil disobedience, and my deep faith, however, made my decision to peacefully comply with the order to get off the plane an easy one. I turned the matter over to my legal counselors, one here and one in Washington DC.

The Moral Fusion Movement must focus our attention on weightier matters. The struggle against the hatred and fear take priority over matters of my comfort and convenience. I merely want to be treated fairly.

I want to emphasize, virtually all who had to implement the decision to remove me from the plane were embarrassed and upset by it. I thank them, and thank all my friends for the words of comfort and love, and your prayers. Now, let's get back to work, changing attitudes, stereotypes, perceptions, policies and dealing with people's fears and hatred.

Yours in faith,
Rev. William J. Barber II