



The Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi

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*"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ,
and has given us the ministry of reconciliation"*

– 2 Cor. 5:18

September 15, 2010

My Sisters and Brothers in Christ

I write to invite you and your congregation to walk with me and this diocese on a journey that will take us deep into our past in both this church and this state. It will be a journey of some difficulty, but I believe the soul of our church is at stake.

We are about to begin a period of five or six years where we will note significant anniversaries in our common life in this state. The 150th anniversary of the Civil War will be observed in places throughout this state during the years 2011-2015. For better or for worse that watershed event in our history has shaped every one of us and our Episcopal Church in one way or another.

Secondly, during that same period of time we will mark the 50th anniversaries of events that within the lifetime of many of us created the State and the Church in which we now inhabit. Just within our State of Mississippi, the Civil Rights Movement left remarkable moments of witness that will be observed during these same five years. For example:

1961 – Freedom Riders travel through the South to Jackson

1962 – James Meredith enters the University of Mississippi

1963 – Assassination of Medgar Evers

1964 – Murders of Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney in Neshoba County

1965 – Passage of the Voting Rights Act

Anniversaries of all kinds ultimately call forth from the observers significant questions of identity and meaning. What does it mean to be married for 37 years? How has my life and identity been shaped by that experience? Besides mere survival, how has my life and our diocese been shaped by my 10 years as your bishop? And what does our common past tell us about our common future? My sense is that as we pass through these significant anniversaries in our state's history, similar questions will be evoked naturally.

The State of Mississippi and the City of Jackson are marking the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Riders with a week-long observance May 22-28. Again, that anniversary commemoration is a time to listen to stories, to come to terms with our past, to mark the dramatic progress in race relations since 1961 and to carry the learnings of our past into our common future.

After consultation with our Task Force on Racial Reconciliation, I am proposing that the Diocese of Mississippi use the occasion of these anniversary commemorations over the next five years to renew our commitment to the very hard, frustrating and often tedious work of racial reconciliation in this church and this state.

There are many ways that the initiative can take place locally:

- the development or renewal of a relationship with a congregation with a predominantly different racial or ethnic makeup;
- local research into the ways that both slavery and the civil rights movement impacts the congregation. Sometimes there are local historical reasons that our churches remain defacto segregated;
- discovering the extraordinary rich history that has been lived below the radar of most Mississippi Episcopalians. Do you know the Episcopal roots and contributions of Piney Woods School and Okolona College?
- providing the occasion and setting for the telling of stories and what it meant to each of us as our lives crossed through these significant historical moments;
- encouraging a conversation about the role of race in our common life, including the implications of this nation's dramatic racial realignment over the next 40 years;
- Investment in local initiatives such as Mission Mississippi

On a diocesan-wide level, we will be expanding the times and locations of our anti-racism workshops. As you are aware, Diocesan Council in 2006 made this training a prerequisite for the holding of any diocesan leadership position. Now that there are plans for anti-racism training to be held in a location near you, encouragement of local leadership's participation will be very important.

At my request, St. Andrew's Cathedral on Saturday will be hosting a diocesan-wide Eucharistic liturgy for repentance, healing and reconciliation on Saturday, May 21, 2011. Details will be provided as we move closer to that day, but I hope that this service can be an iconic moment in our common life as disciples of Jesus Christ who have been given the ministry of reconciliation.

Research will continue on the way that the Episcopal Church in this diocese has benefited from the institution of slavery. That work, began in 2007 with the first efforts shared at Diocesan Council in Natchez, has attracted national attention from both historical and ecclesiastical communities.

As we move through these significant days of demarcation in our history, the Task Force on Racial Reconciliation will be offering a variety of resources to you – everything from speakers to printed materials – to assist your efforts. No one will be able to say that they didn't know what to do or how to do it.

Finally, let me say a word to those who wonder why we keep "digging up the past." As a native of this state for 61 years, I have lived through the events mentioned above, and I am acutely aware of how far we've come. In fact, because of our often tortured past, we have been forced to confront directly the evils of racism while many others have hid behind a veil of denial. I am enormously proud of our efforts to this point.

But I also know that stain of racism that still infects my own heart and soul. I am not proud of certain thoughts and feelings that I find within me in unexpected moments. The acknowledgement and confession of those things done and left undone in both my present life and in my (our) past is critical to my healing.

It will not be easy to return to parts of my (our) past. The temptation is always to call the past the past and move on. However, the past in both our individual and corporate lives, left unexamined or ignored, will control us in very unhelpful ways. My redemption and freedom requires the cross of accountability. As Mr. Faulkner once noted, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

We will talk more about this and I'll be glad to answer your questions at Clergy Conference in October.

Again, thank you for all that you do.

Faithfully,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Duncan M. Gray, III", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Rt. Rev. Duncan M. Gray, III

DMG:pj