

# An Open Letter to Hillary Clinton Regarding Religious Freedom for Black America

Dear Secretary Clinton,

**T**oday in the United States more than ten million people of African descent face a crisis of catastrophic proportions. Life in our major post-industrial centers can be poor, nasty, brutish and short. When it comes to the black underclass America's two major political parties appear to have achieved a rare unity in their record of bipartisan indifference. It is for this reason we, clergy and intellectuals who serve the poor, Democrats and independents, appeal to you. The black church has served the poor for over two centuries; our response to Christ's call to care for all people has strengthened the black community and contributed to civil society in important ways. Freedom to do all this must be guaranteed to the Black Church. Those who would oppose our right to live by the teachings of the Bible set themselves against the interests of the poor.

Almost 80 percent of 41 million black people are members of historically black churches. As leaders of the Pentecostal-Charismatic wing of the black church, we are requesting a meeting with you to discuss some of the critical issues in the black community: education and employment, religious freedom, violence, and justice for the unborn...

It is the responsibility of the church to speak out in defense of the dignity of the poor as part of our public witness. Our Lord, Jesus Christ, proclaims in Luke 4:18:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free...

The black church has, since the time of slavery and right through to the Civil Rights Movement, taken this charge from Jesus Christ as our political mandate. As servants to the poorest of the poor; we are particularly eager to hear how as president you would address our concerns. We are confident that you, a highly experienced and very savvy candidate, know full well the importance of the black vote in this election cycle. We know that you will not make the political mistake of taking the 69,000 black churches in the US for granted.

### *Education and Employment*

The first issue that we would like you to address is education and employment. One writer has observed that as entry into labor markets has become increasingly dependent upon education and highly technical skills we are witnessing, perhaps for the first time, a generation of black youth ill-equipped to secure gainful employment even as productive slaves. Poorly educated black men's place in the labor market has deteriorated markedly since the middle of the twentieth century. As the economy has been transformed by the rise of information technology wages for unskilled labor have stagnated while those at the top of the income distribution have earned more and more. At the same time jobs have disappeared from the inner city due both to the offshoring of jobs to the developing world and to deindustrialization, the migration of jobs to the suburbs. As a result, poor black men have found themselves facing incredibly dismal prospects for employment: The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in the second quarter of 2016 the unemployment rate for white men aged 16-19 was 15%. The rate for young black women was almost twice that at 27%. But the rate among young black men surpassed that for both white men and black women at an astonishing 33%. One in every three young black men was unemployed in 2016. This is a bleak prospect for these black men. History has shown that federal programs intended to address employment issues have often failed to benefit blacks. It is not enough to make obligatory appearances at black churches, we need you to articulate a coherent policy agenda for the black poor.

## *Justice for the Unborn*

Secretary Clinton, we are also very concerned about your position regarding unborn children and the black church's commitment to defend them. In April 2015 in a speech before the National Organization of Women you stated "Far too many women are still denied critical access to reproductive health care and safe childbirth... Laws have to be backed up with resources and political will. And deep-seated cultural codes, religious beliefs and structural biases have to be changed..." For political leaders to call for changes in citizens' beliefs is reminiscent of totalitarianism. In our view, such a proposal constitutes a denial of our religious freedom.

The vast majority of black churches hold biblical teaching, which is eternal, as authoritative for doctrine and practice. Abortion is the deliberate destruction of a human life in its most vulnerable state. Biblical principle and natural law, both of which prohibit the taking of innocent human life, compel our concern about the increasing moral complicity with abortion. For the same reasons that we as black Christian leaders oppose racism, unjust wars, capital punishment and euthanasia, we oppose the violent denial of life to the unborn through abortion. It is our view that human life is a gift of God that we are called upon to protect, nurture and sustain, because we are created in God's image. Therefore, our opposition to abortion is a logical outgrowth of our view that there must be justice for all. Particularly relevant is the innocence of the unborn child. The Bible places an extremely high value on human life and particularly on the lives of the innocent who are under the special protection of God. Those who take the life of the innocent violate a key biblical principle as well as a fundamental principle of natural justice.

Abortion in the black community has had a catastrophic impact. Nationally there are 365 black babies aborted for every 1,000 that are born. Blacks account for roughly 38% of all abortions in the country though we represent only 13% of the population. In New York City, the situation is absolutely dire. According to a report prepared by the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, in 2013 there were more abortions among black women in the city, 29,007, than there were black babies born, 24,108. Both nationally and in New York City, the abortion rates among black women are much higher than among any other demographic group. (This claim has been fact-checked by Politifact and deemed to be accurate.) In New York City more black babies are dying in their mother's womb than are being born. In 2008, Secretary Clinton, you took the position that abortion should be rare, and you emphasized "by rare I mean rare." But Black babies are dying at terrifying rates. How do you justify your unconscionable silence in the face of such destruction of innocent black life? Don't black lives matter? What policies would you pursue as president to reverse the soaring abortion rates among black women?

## *Violence*

**J**ust as urgent as our concern about the deaths of innocent black babies is our outrage over the nightmare of young black men killing each other and being killed by police officers. Time and again over the last four decades, a few police officers appear to have acted on their implicit racism with lethal results. Unarmed black people, overwhelmingly black men, have been killed by police officers in communities all across the nation. Perhaps most bitter is the fact that in many cases the use of lethal force and police brutality against black men, and some black women, has been carried out with impunity. While the names of Philandro Castile, Tamir Rice and Eric Garner are all very fresh in our minds, their cases were preceded by those of Rodney King, Amadou Diallo and Eleanor Bumpurs. In many of these cases, though the police officers involved were acquitted or not even indicted, city governments have paid very large settlements for wrongful death suits filed by the victims' families. Here are a few examples: New York city paid the family of Amadou Diallo \$3 million and Eric Garner's relatives \$5.9 million; Rodney King won \$3.8 million from the city of Los Angeles; Tamir Rice's family settled for \$6 million. The City of Chicago has paid \$210 million for wrongful death suits over just four years. These settlements clearly acknowledge the egregious injustice done to these unarmed men. However, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation over half of all murder victims in 2015 were black and, in the cases where the race of the perpetrator was known, nearly 90% of them were killed by other blacks. The Wall St. Journal reports that 5,942 black men were murdered in 2010. Given the carnage in the black community and the sometimes egregious behavior of law enforcement officers, how would you, as president, address this calamity?

The structural failures which stalk inner-city communities and promote nihilism and violence among our young men are a challenge to the courage and faith of the black church. As the primary institution of our neighborhoods, the church has the resources to minister to these young men both materially and spiritually, to give them hope in the future and a path to a new life. The work of the black church in our poor communities is of the utmost importance and the importance of our freedom to operate in accordance with our faith cannot be overstated.

## *Religious Freedom for Black America*

Religious freedom is a precious right that we, as the leaders of the Black Church, must defend vigorously. While our society benefits in immeasurable ways from the principled and kindly lives of Christians and other people of faith, in particular as they serve the vulnerable in our midst, clearly our faith also brings us into conflict with secular society. It is at this very point that the brilliance of the framers of the United States constitution is evident, because they designed a system that guarantees people of every faith, as well as those of no faith at all, the right to follow their conscience. The highest courts in this land have gone on to defend the right of people of faith to honor the dictates of their religion unless there is a pressing need on the part of the state to intervene. The religious freedom laws currently in force ensure the right of the Black Church

to fulfill its calling to faithful observance of our sacred texts, and the right of all other people of faith to do likewise. At the same time, they protect the rights of atheists, agnostics and indeed, people with every possible position on religion.

Yet in this very nation demagogues have dared to accuse people of faith of promoting Jim Crow laws when they seek to safeguard their freedom to obey their conscience and follow the teachings of their sacred texts. There is no analogy between the apartheid of Jim Crow and the religious freedom laws in force across this country. It is the very same faith that is protected by religious freedom laws that inspired our black ancestors to lead the movement for the abolition of slavery and the end of Jim Crow apartheid in the American South. It is absurd to demean the defense of this faith as the equivalent of the injustices that we have fought and overcome.

The drive to normalize immoral sexual behavior has inspired some to dishonor the memory of courageous blacks who experienced the unique horrors of white supremacy, slavery, rape, terrorism and apartheid in the U.S. Their argument that religious freedom laws are historically and existentially equivalent to Jim Crow laws rests on false assertions. Partisans who make these arguments have declared war on the truth of the black experience as well as on the freedom of faithful Americans to follow their consciences.

A well-financed war is now being waged by the gay and lesbian community in the US and abroad on the faith of our ancestors. Furthermore, there are some in your party who seek to criminalize our biblical texts as hate speech. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., we do not invite conflict. However, in cases where questions of conscience and religious freedom are at stake, we are prepared, for the sake of the gospel, to suffer the consequences of standing on our convictions. We must resist what Pope Francis has called the ideological colonization of people of faith. We do not organize to suppress the freedom of other groups. We do, however, insist upon having freedom to fulfill our call to righteous living and service to humankind.

One grievous example of open contempt for religious freedom within your own campaign was revealed by a recent revelation from Wikileaks: key players on your staff have sought to subvert Catholic teaching on sexuality by planting externally funded groups in the church to advance a politically correct agenda. What would you do as president to guarantee that religious freedoms are balanced against civil rights rather than being trumped by them?

Our concerns about religious freedom are not limited to issues here in the United States. According to John L. Allen, Jr. author of *The Global War on Christians*, “In September 2009 the chairman of the International Society for Human Rights, Martin Lessenthin, estimated that 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world are directed against Christians.” Since the beginning of your tenure as Secretary of State, most of the Christians of northern Iraq have been internally displaced or become refugees. There are now fewer than a quarter million Christians in Iraq; there were as many as 1.6 million in 2003. In Egypt, more than 50 churches were destroyed in coordinated attacks on a single day in the summer of 2013. The Christians of

Syria numbered 2 million before the civil war in 2010. Now half have left Syria and many of those who remain are displaced. How would a Hillary Clinton administration address the persecution that many Christians are facing around the world and particularly in Africa the Middle East?

Finally, we must point out the value of the Black Church's being *free to publicly serve our neighbors and our communities* in accord with the Christian faith as a *knowledge and wisdom tradition*. The Presiding Bishop of the Church of God in Christ, Bishop Charles E. Blake, in his historic address at Princeton University Chapel in 2015<sup>1</sup>, argued for the essential importance of religious freedom for the black church's service to the poor in our communities. Will black pastors and intellectuals be free to lead and guide our communities in accordance with our widely accepted faith-based knowledge tradition? How will your policies encourage or discourage our authority to lead?

We urge you to accord the Black Church the same respect that would be conferred on wealthy white donors by meeting with our internationally recognized leaders such as Bishop Charles E. Blake, Bishop Frank Madison Reid III, Bishop Paul E. Morton, Congressman Bobby Rush, and Bishop James Dixon. In doing so you will have the opportunity, in collaboration with our premier institution, to engage with some of the most serious issues confronting the black community. We request that you set a place and time, during your first 100 days in office, where we may meet to learn more about your position on these issues. Then we will be better able to inform our community about what they can reasonably expect from a Clinton administration.

In the Service of Our Lord,

Presiding Bishop Charles E. Blake  
Church of God in Christ  
Los Angeles, CA

Bishop Dr. Frank Madison Reid III  
African Methodist Episcopal Church  
Baltimore, MD

Dr. Jacqueline C. Rivers  
Seymour Institute for Black Church & Policy Studies  
Boston, MA

Bishop James W. E. Dixon  
Baptist Church  
Houston, TX

Bishop Lemuel F. Thuston  
Vice Chairman  
General Assembly  
Church of God in Christ

Apostle James I. Clark, Jr.  
Church of our Lord Jesus Christ  
Director of Social Justice, Economic &  
Racial Equality Commission

Bishop Gideon A. Thompson  
Church of God  
Boston, MA

Bishop Tyrone L. Butler  
Church of God in Christ  
New York, NY

---

<sup>1</sup> Bishop Charles E. Blake, *Defending the Religious Freedom of the Black Church*, available at [seymourinstitute.com](http://seymourinstitute.com)

Bishop Felton Smith  
Church of God in Christ  
Nashville, TN

Bishop Talbot W. Swan  
Church of God in Christ  
Springfield, MA

Chairman Linwood Dillard  
Church of God in Christ  
Memphis, TN

Pastor Michael Golden  
Church of God in Christ  
Hampton, VA

Reverend Dr. Jamal H. Bryant  
African Methodist Episcopal  
Baltimore, MD

Reverend Vernard Coulter  
Missionary Baptist Church  
Boston, MA

Reverend Charles R. Harrison  
United Methodist Church  
Indianapolis, IN

Pastor Egobudike Ezedi  
Empowerment Christian Center  
Boston, MA

Professor Frederick L. Ware  
Howard School of Divinity  
Washington, DC

Malcolm R. Rivers  
Seymour Institute  
Washington, DC

Reverend Dr. Alonzo Johnson  
Church of God in Christ  
Columbia, SC

Reverend Dr. Rozario Slack  
Church of God in Christ  
Chattanooga, TN

Pastor Jamie Perdomo  
Iglesia Cristiana Nueva Vida  
East Boston, MA

Reverend Arthur Porter  
Church of God in Christ  
Denver, CO

Reverend Ronald C. Potter  
Jackson, MI

Dr. Jamal D. Hopkins  
Pasadena, CA

Donna Desilus  
Azusa Christian Community  
Boston, MA

Reverend Mark V. Scott  
Azusa Christian Community  
Boston, MA

Affiliations are listed for identification purposes only.