

THE WAY FORWARD
Letter from Birmingham Jail Anniversary Event
Monday, April 15, 2013
Most Reverend Shelton J. Fabre

I am delighted to be a part of this panel discussion and to share a few brief thoughts on The Way Forward. It may seem strange for me to begin a presentation on The Way Forward by first focusing on our past history. However, for many reasons remembering past history is a necessary element of any attempt to undertake The Way Forward. As we re-focus on how to move forward with regard to Civil Rights as we mark the Fiftieth Anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther Kings' Letter From Birmingham Jail, as we have done during these days we must first remember our collective past history. However, we do not remember past history simply because we want to wallow in past misery or open old wounds. The reason we remember the past as we seek a way forward coincides directly with the saying of the American philosopher George Santayana, who said, *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,"* and with American author, Ellis Cose who stated, *"The past matters . . . The reason is not that such knowledge will necessarily lead to good policymaking, but that ignorance will surely lead to bad."* Therefore, at all times, the history of the struggle for Civil Rights is worthy of remembering so that in no way do we repeat our painful history, and so that our current ongoing efforts do not lead to poor policy. While acknowledging past history there are those who also actively state that *"The past should stay in the past"* and thereby dismiss any attempt to recall past events. I certainly agree with this statement to a certain extent, however I would indicate that the only way to have *'the past stay in the past'* is to remember the past so as to NOT repeat past mistakes or inequities in the present or the future. To totally forget our past

history places us in the danger zone of actually resurrecting it as we allow the passage of time to wash away the lessons learned and thereby repeat past wrongs. **Therefore, my first indication about the Way Forward is to always maintain an adequate historical memory that prevents us from the false attractiveness of regression or repeating past injustices and mistakes.**

Acknowledging our past, we are now fifty years removed from the turbulent times of the active struggle for Civil Rights in our history. The process of learning to live together in harmony as people of different races and cultures continues. Because of Civil Rights legislation beginning in the 1960's, our society has today achieved a noticeable level of transformation, such as: there is more diverse leadership in public and private sectors; many more doors of opportunity are open; and certain legal remedies for injustice are now in place. We must continue to work with the civil government to assure adherence to these laws and to foster continued advancement. However, I would contend that while adherence to civil law has progressed, there is an ongoing challenge with regard to The Way Forward that remains to be accomplished and people of faith and religious institutions, such as those gathered here and now, are in a position to advocate for this. Going forward as people of faith and as religious institutions, we must continue to remember that our task is not only simple adherence to law, which is a good thing and ultimately the goal of civil government, but our task is to also **to engage in the continuous struggle for the conversion of human hearts in the area of Racial Harmony and Civil Rights.** Civil legislation brings about adherence in action, but only religious people and institutions can change hearts and minds, which also confirms the actions that one undertakes. Our goal is far deeper than simply adherence to civil law, which is nonetheless

praiseworthy and good. Our task as people of faith is the conversion of hearts to make Civil Rights and Racial Harmony not only an outward public manifestation in civil society, but to also make Civil Rights and Racial Harmony an inward, private value that transforms not only our actions, but attitudes and intentions as well. We must accept the responsibility **and** the hard work of our own ongoing conversion, and then seek to engender in others a conversion. We must allow God to transform our own hearts, and then work with him to transform the hearts of others. **This is my second point regarding the way forward: it is the conversion of human hearts, first our own, and then the hearts of others.**

How is it that we transform hearts? How do we raise the call to conversion in society today? We live in an age that lauds the ability to accomplish tasks without encountering another person. There are all kinds of technological advances that make it possible for us to address our needs without encountering another person. We consider it advancement when tasks can be accomplished without any interaction with another person. However, when things go wrong with technology there is an innate desire, even an outright demand on our part, to encounter, to actually speak to, another person to make things right. *“Don’t tell me to press 6 for the next automated menu. I want to speak with a person -- now!”* In a similar fashion, to live in authentic peace, justice and harmony with one another, to convert hearts, The Way Forward requires that we must speak with, listen to, challenge and be challenged by other humans, and preferably in direct interaction with them. This is difficult in a contemporary society that is marked by personal isolation, increased **person-less** encounters, and fewer and fewer opportunities to challenge stereotypes with personal interaction. There is no ‘app’ that on its own will accomplish this, there is no blog that will on its own bring this to pass, there is

no voice mail that on its own will accomplish The Way Forward with regard to Racial Harmony with the same level of accomplishment that can be brought about through ongoing, positive, person to person encounters between people of different races and cultures. It is thorough positive, direct personal interaction that we both grow ourselves and then foster growth in others. **Thus, my third point with regard to The Way Forward is that the best and most enduring advances in the area of Civil Rights and Racial Harmony come by way of positive, ongoing, direct interaction between people of different races and cultures.** We must find opportunities to converse openly and productively with one another about these sensitive, but crucial matters.

In conclusion, let me state that the reason that we continue to need to embark upon The Way Forward is clear. Racism, prejudice and intolerance still rear their ugly head in our society and in our personal lives. Like an iceberg, below the surface of our society are patterns of injustice embedded in the American psyche that are engendered and fueled by local and national occurrences that are plastered on TV, light up computers screens, and are sometimes 'twisted and spun out of control' by vitriolic blog comments. Recent atrocities between people of different races, ongoing mistrust and injustice, and widespread apathy regarding the living conditions of those who are poor and marginalized in our country are pertinent examples of the racial turmoil that festers below the surface today. Such conditions demand that we forge The Way Forward, which can be accomplished by: 1. remembering our past history; 2. accepting the challenge as people of faith and as religious institutions to convert hearts and not just actions; 3. to advance this change of heart through direct interaction, one person at a time.

Thank you.