

Michael A. Battle*

VISIONARY SERVANT LEADER

It is with gratitude and humility that I express to each of you present today my appreciation to God and to the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) family for the tremendous honor of serving as the seventh president of this distinguished institution of higher education. ITC focuses on the theological education of women and men who will provide academic and spiritual leadership to the Christian church and the global community.

To Drs. William R. Harvey, president of Hampton University; Eddie Moore, president of Virginia State University; and Elnora Daniel, president of Chicago State University, I express gratitude for the opportunity each of you provided in developing my career. Thank you for the example you set as academic administrators for whom excellence was the minimum standard and competence was a prerequisite and not a goal. I owe a tremendous debt to Dr. Henry Young, former professor of theology at ITC and current professor of systematic theology at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. Dr. Young submitted my name for consideration by the ITC presidential search committee. Having taken a course in process theology from you as an undergraduate student at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, you have followed my career since undergraduate school. Thank you, Dr. Young, for your confidence in me. As God is my

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Editor's note: This inaugural address was delivered on October 15, 2004, in the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, Morehouse College, Atlanta.

helper, I will not let your confidence down. I owe unwavering appreciation to Dr. Joe Ratliff, chair of the ITC Board of Trustees at the time of my nomination; to Bishop Thomas Hoyt, chair of the search committee; and to Bishop John R. Bryant, current Board chair and member of the search committee. To each of you and to all members of the Board, the faculty, students, staff, and friends of ITC, I commit to and express my gratitude through faithfulness to the mission and ministry of ITC. Finally, I extend specific thanks to my parents and my family for demonstrating that God does not call us to impossible tasks because God makes possible the successful completion of every task to which we are called. My father, now deceased, taught by example that God has the right to expect of us and from us hard work. He also taught that your family and the people whom you are called to serve in life and in ministry also have the right to expect hard work. I now take this personal privilege of asking Linda, my wife of thirty-two years, to stand. Thank you for being the exceptional you that you are.

For the next few minutes, I would like to talk about ITC and the special responsibility it has in theological education. ITC is a consortium of six denominational seminaries whose mission is to educate Christian leaders for ministry and service in the church and the global community. ITC educates and nurtures women and men who commit to and practice a liberating and transforming spirituality; academic discipline; religious, gender, and cultural diversity; and justice and peace. There is no other theological institution in the world like ITC. ITC serves as a remarkable example of ecumenism in action. The cooperation of six seminaries with distinctive traditions demonstrates an unprecedented collaborative spirit operating among Baptist, United Methodist, African

Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Additionally, while not at seminary status, there is a growing Lutheran Center currently engaged in active conversation with the Episcopal Church to enlarge the presence and participation of Lutheran and Episcopalian students at ITC. This will not only add to the denominational diversity of the campus, it will also add to the ethnic diversity.

ITC graduates occupy pulpits and other key positions in churches of all sizes, in all types of communities, and at all levels of denominational hierarchy. Just this past summer four alumni were elevated to the office of Bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church. ITC is the largest regionally and nationally accredited graduate school of theology among the Historically Black Theological Seminaries in the United States.

Because much has been given to ITC, much is required from ITC (individually and corporately). We have an enormous responsibility to God and to the ministries from which our students come and to which they will go forth in service after they have completed rigorous academic preparation. Working at ITC is not just a job, it is a calling to which we must be committed. Students come to ITC to be equipped not just to engage in the existential challenges we confront in this temporal world. They come to be equipped to engage in spiritual warfare where the consequences are eternal and the challenges are eschatological. It is the capacity to view existential moments through the lens of eschatological hope that creates the context for prophetic ministry. Prophetic ministry is more than social and political commentary on the way things are. It is ministry that seeks to transform the way things are to the way they ought to be. Beyond transforma-

tion, prophetic ministry is redemptive and restorative. One can learn the lexical definition of transformation, redemption, and restoration in any academic context. One can learn the theoretical frame implied by and which can be inferred from these terms from any academic context. The expectation of a seminary education is that there is intentional emphasis placed on foundational and fundamental spiritual formation that celebrates experiential knowledge of transformation, redemption, and restoration.

Spiritual formation is essential to each of the constituent seminaries that comprise ITC. It is also essential to the Lutheran and Episcopal communion as well as to the students at ITC who are from denominations ranging from Apostolic Pentecostals to Unitarians. Also, in an effort to enhance our emphasis on spiritual formation, the denominational seminary chief executive officers participate with the academic affairs division of ITC in the assessment of student development and progress.

While most of our graduates will enter either the parish or teaching ministry, many will enter ministry in healthcare, public service, social service, community development, military and institutional chaplaincy, and other forms of service. In our current classes there are physicians, dentists, nurse practitioners, lawyers, an assistant district attorney, successful entrepreneurs, successful elected officials, and a host of other professionals. Many of these students come to ITC for theological infusion to ground their work and lives. For these students, spiritual formation is as essential as it is for the graduate who will pastor a church, serve as a director of Christian education, or a director of music and liturgy.

I am honored to serve as president of ITC where every day I witness women and men engaged in serious academic

discipline and a liberating and transforming spirituality. Because of my great respect for this institution of higher learning, I committed, upon accepting the call to serve, to work on three major tasks in my first year. The first task was to work with the faculty, staff, and students to assure the continued accreditation of ITC. It is with great appreciation to God and the hard work of the ITC community that ITC's accreditation both regional and national is secure. We must now continue to do all in our power to maintain our accreditation status with our current programs and in all new programs we develop. The second task was to work with the faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for ITC. I am pleased to announce that after a full year of assiduous effort, long hours and unwavering commitment, the six strategic task forces appointed in September of 2003 and the strategic plan steering committee have submitted eight strategic goals which, after the Board's approval later today, will become the foundational frame for a comprehensive ten-year strategic plan for ITC. The third goal was to examine the possibility of developing a case statement to test the probability for a capital and endowment campaign. Working with Coxe Curry and Associates we have developed the case statement and are now waiting the assessment of the probability for a capital and endowment campaign.

Bishop Bryant, members of the Board of Trustees, constituent seminary presidents and deans, faculty, students, staff, administrators, alumni/ae, donors and all stakeholders in ITC: I submit to you that our best days are ahead of us, that together we will be faithful to the call of God and to our responsibilities to the church, and that we will continue to be an example of ecumenism in action.

