

Where Do We Go From Here?

As we look to the future, let us ponder this question. The emphasis is upon the *we*. I am addressing the various constituencies of ITC—staff, students, faculty, administrators, alumni, trustees. Where do *we* go from here? I am also concerned about denominational leadership, those who make decisions (including budgets) for denominations that have denominational units. Where do we go from here? The president has answered a macadonian call and is ready to march. But no general can lead a demoralized army to victory. I am neither a messiah or a scapegoat. ITC will move into a new period of growth and development only if those who have vital relationships with her will rally to her support. Where do we go from here? This is the challenge! This is the charge to all of us.

I. Reading the Signs of the Times

These are the best of times and the worst of times. Our ideals are on trial—even so are our gods. These are times which try our souls. But, according to our ideals and our faith, this may also be the best of times. This may be the time when difficulties and adversities become the challenges to noble purposes and to high endeavor in the solution of human problems. This is the time when we may be compelled to look beyond human resources and government budgets to a higher throne, to worship and serve the Supreme Ruler in the universe, the Author of Nature, the Giver of Grace, the Judge of all the earth who will do Right.

This opening testimony is not based upon a pipe-dream—it has been tested in the laboratory of personal experience. This is not a time in the history of black Americans for tent-folding, nay-saying and doomsday prophesying. Somewhere between pessimism and optimism, somewhere between sentimentality and stark realism, there must be an openness to the future which provides a beacon light of hope. The possibility of a different and better future is luring us forward. Our present reality in this country is like a nightmare, but our faith looks back into the collective memory concerning how we came to this place. Our memory of God's support and provisions for us through the sufferings of the past point forward to God's future of hope. "Lord of hosts be with us yet, lest we forget, lest we forget!"

Amongst blacks there are prophets of doom. They have good reasons for concluding that the new administration is not an advocate for poor, black, oppressed people. These leaders, whether they be educators, economists, lawyers, politicians or preachers are almost ready to fold up their tents and look for a burial ground. They do not have the courage to face

hard times, and neither do they have faith in the future. The God of memory is the God of hope. God is a God of promise and He will keep his word. I believe that our future is in the hands of God—that what happens to America depends more upon God than Ronald Reagan. God has exalted and dethroned earthly rulers through human history and yet God remains on the throne—He remains in charge of creation and history. God runs history. He can create the circumstances tomorrow to bring Reagan to his knees.

Among blacks there are also some political opportunists and some clergymen are among them. Some relatively unknown and unsung black economists have suddenly been spotlighted in the mass media. These are they who have become spokespersons for the administration's economic program. The very goals for which blacks have striven for so intently for more than 25 years, which made it possible for these persons to be where they are, are being demolished by executive fiat. Educational opportunities, job opportunities, social welfare and development programs, won by the blood, sweat and tears of black brothers and sisters, are being denounced by these black advocates of the present administration. Because they have made it, they ask why can't everyone do the same?

We cannot make the work ethic do for us what it has done for other Americans in a massive way. The intergenerational impact of white racism will not allow us to wipe out one by one the mark of oppression which holds us back as a people. We cannot have amnesia regarding what America has done to blacks and start *de novo* at the same starting gate. Blacks who agree with the present approach in Washington cannot identify with the plight of black people. There stance can only be understood as a desire for political power and economic gain. We have had false prophets and betrayers before. As human beings, blacks share the sin and selfishness of all other fallen humans. However, we cannot allow these persons to stop our stride toward freedom, nor tone down our quest for social justice. Given the economic plight of black and poor people, any administration in Washington cannot long ignore the plight of our masses. Militarism and Fascism are presently the head winds of an unfolding national tragedy. Enlightened self-interest beckons us to read the signs of the times before it is too late.

It is the task of the black church to bring in a minority report, especially in this time in history. We gladly surrender the majority report to those churches who wish to buy into the establishment. We believe that God is with the oppressed for their deliverance. We see the present situation from another angle of vision. Never before has there been a more serious call for healing and liberation from black churches. We dare not fail our generation. Furthermore, we at ITC have a clear mandate to prepare leadership for generations to come.

When we proclaim a holistic Gospel, we are involved in making life more human. Economic, political, social, psychological, medical, aesthetic, and any human concerns are not "off-limits" to faith. Let the moral majority sprinkle holy water on the *status quo*. Let them worship at the Shrine of the God of success where the God of big business and

the American way of life is enthroned. We will worship the God of Amos and Jesus who hears the cries of the oppressed. Once again the Bible has become a weapon to inflict pain upon black and poor people. We recall slavery theology and exegesis. This is not the first time the Bible has been abused and misused. But in spite of the multimillion dollar electronic church, the God of Success, like the false gods of old will fail its worshippers. In other times and places, the Ceasars, Napoleons and Hitlers have exercised their lust for power, ignored the cries of the oppressed and shook their fist at the Lord above. They have strutted like proud peacocks across the stage of history, but they have vanished into nothingness before the matchless one who sits serenely upon his throne, the Loving, Just and True God.

What is ITC? The need to survive had a great deal to do with the birth of ITC, but the will-to-survive is not adequate to keep us together.

There is a clear mandate to explain in factual and simple language the nature and mission of ITC. ITC is often misunderstood. It is not a consortium or a cluster of autonomous seminaries which are independent. The relationship of the several denominational units is much closer. The denominational units obtain their sustenance and life from their mutual association and relationship to ITC. They are members of one body and their relationship to each other is one of interdependence. They "in-exist" in ITC.

It is essential that the denominations own and support ITC. It prepares leadership for these church bodies. These sustaining denominations (Baptists, United Methodists, United Presbyterians, Church of God in Christ, African Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal) have a stake in the quality of theological education ITC is able to provide. The basic support for ITC must come from these denominations. This support must come from the denominations directly. The denominational deans, trustees and others charged with the day-by-day operation of ITC can in no way compensate for the commitment required of the entire denomination at ITC.

Black churches need an institution like ITC. We must have more and more educated men and women to provide a comprehensive ministry through black churches based in our communities. It would be prohibitive to try to launch another institution to do what ITC is prepared to do. We cannot depend upon others to prepare effective leadership to meet the need for ministry to black people. ITC in its association with other institutions of higher education for blacks is poised for a breakthrough. ITC is to theological education what Howard and Meharry are to medical education for blacks. We cannot afford to lose any of our professional schools or our colleges. We are and will be for the foreseeable future highly dependent upon our black professional schools for leadership. Black churches cannot fail to let the few standard divinity schools we have languish and die. Our future as families, communities, as a people depends upon the type of leadership we prepare to lead our people. ITC is the largest venture in black theological education in the nation. It is a member of Atlanta University Center, also the largest consortium of

black institutions of higher education in the world. We are preparing to work closely with the Morehouse College of Medicine. ITC must not *survive*—it must *prevail*.

ITC is not merely a breakthrough in minority theological education, it is a great ecumenical triumph. All the denominations at ITC have entered into each other's life and are seeking to develop a unity in worship and service in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Since we have an open charter, there is no reason why other denominations may not join ITC. There are several denominations which now are in serious conversation with us. We are inter-denominational. Denominations maintain their own identity in an ecumenical context. We learn to share and grow together as our traditions enrich each other. Graduates of ITC should have no difficulty in cooperation with others in a common ministry. ITC is not cursed by the narrowness of sectarianism. Our faculty and students live, work and play together in a thoroughly ecumenical climate.

In sum, ITC is one graduate, professional, accredited theological school. As a Center we are a member of the AUC, ATS, ATA and several other similar organizations. We are able to offer divinity degrees: M.Div., M.R.E., D.Min. and S.T.D. Presently, the advanced degrees (D.Min. and S.T.D.) are offered in a cooperative relationship with ATA schools. Potentially, we will be able to offer inter-disciplinary and inter-professional degrees in cooperation with the Atlanta University, the Morehouse School of Medicine and all institutions of advanced learning in the Atlanta area. We are beginning serious conversation with the medical faculty concerning leadership development in family practice/pastoral care, human values and medical ethics. We are seeking membership in the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. We would hope to offer M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in religious studies. There is no where, presently, in this country where blacks may obtain a terminal degree on the level of the Ph.D. in a predominately black university setting. We cannot replenish our own theological faculties and our departments of religion with persons who view faith in solidarity with the oppressed. It should be clear to all that those who write the books and control thought as well as the media, will sway the masses. It is up to institutions like ITC to turn this situation around.

ITC is one institution, with one central administration, one faculty, one student body and one mission. Its location is in the heart of the Southeast where most leaders for black churches are born and bred. This provides ITC with an unusual opportunity to recruit, educate and send forth to the nation and to the world our very best.

We must all seek to make ITC strong. It is ITC and not the several denominational units which finally must bear the responsibility for the success or failure of the entire enterprise. If ITC is *weak*, there can be no success story for any denominational unit. If ITC is strong, we will be able to deliver quality education to all our students and their denominational bodies. We all will share in the results.

Program and Outreach:

ITC has a staggering and unmatched potential in volume of work and level of performance. Our success can be great, but our failure can be deadly. I come from a denomination which has the strength to support an institution like ITC by itself. One black Baptist church in D.C. is building a unit to its structure which doubles the annual budget of ITC. I make a special appeal to my Baptist brothers and sisters to rally behind our work here. But as an ecumenical theologian and administrator of ITC, my appeal goes out to all affiliated and unaffiliated denominations to support this unusual resource of the Church. Remember us in your prayers and write us into your budgets.

A special appeal is extended to black Christians and churches. We often hear complaints about ministers who do not address the total needs of their people. In order to design and execute a total ministerial program, ministers must be educated and trained. The divine call is essential, but it is not adequate for today's ministry by itself. Without the divine call a minister should not go, but the call should be followed by preparation for leadership. This is our business at ITC.

ITC is a multi-million dollar operation, as is all institutions of higher learning. We must consider ITC as a part of our stewardship. I appeal to you as pastors, teachers, doctors, lawyers, parents and friends, do not let the institutions that have nurtured our suffering race in mind and spirit languish and die. We must become more than a consumer people. We must now give and share for the sake of our children.

Outreach: We expect ITC to improve in every direction. In structure, in management, in fiscal responsibility, in academic performance, in quality of student performance and faculty development we expect constructive change. We are especially concerned that we improve the quality of ministry in our churches. Several denominations have entrusted in our hands the theological education of future church leaders. These denominations have the right to expect outstanding leadership to flow from ITC. We must not betray this trust.

The men and women who are educated and trained for ministry at ITC must be the finest leaders of our churches. We must prepare them to minister to the haves and have nots, to the rich and to the poor, to blacks and whites, Asians, Africans, native Americans and Hispanics—to all sorts and conditions of human beings. The goal of their ministry must be to make life more human. Our ministry must be to the whole person, soul and body. It must be a ministry to persons and communities in all areas of life.

Some areas of outreach must be:

(1) *Family Life*—in all its forms and all persons involved (women, men and children). The family tragedy in Atlanta centers around the children, but all members of the extended family are involved.

(2) *Criminal justice*, the relation of law to justice and equity, the question of prison reform. We must be concerned that there is equal justice for all. Police brutality and all matters related to law and order with justice must be addressed.

(3) The *political economy* is the basis for much of the hardships of black and poor people. The systematic attack by the Reagan administration against programs for social betterment of the underprivileged has opened the eyes of many people. Ministers will need to be sensitive to the manner in which these factors relate to the conditions in their communities.

(4) We will need to address the problems of those families and individuals who are the victims of an oppressive system. Many of these have developed pathologies and need therapy. We must address mental illnesses, drug abuse, alcoholism and sex exploitation in our midst.

(5) Many of our youth are talented in the fine arts, in sports as well as in the humanities and the sciences. Our task as ministers will be to discover, encourage and counsel our youth. Our future depends upon the nurture and growth of young men and women.

It should be quite clear that preparation for this type of ministry, only outlined here, will require serious study and adequate field experience. Furthermore, it will require mastering the classical theological disciplines as a basis for such a ministry of outreach. Considerable orientation in other disciplines must also be a part of the academic program.

II. Theological Perspective

I am a theologian of the church. For more than 25 years, this has been my task—an interpreter of the doctrines of the Christian creed. This I have done, having mastered the biblical, philosophical and historical foundations of the Christian Faith. During the last 12-15 years, black and liberation theology have claimed much of my attention. Ethics and comparative religions have been incorporated into my reflection. I now believe that the true initiatives of theological thought comes not from Euro-American theological centers, but from the context of minority experiences in the West and from the Third World. The truly ecumenical program of theology exalts the liberation motif in solidarity with the oppressed. Thus, I bring a theological perspective to my work as theological educator.

We stand theologically, over against most seminaries in this country, where concern for the minorities and the poor is on the fringe of the curriculum. For us, that reading of the Gospel, as liberation, must occupy center stage. It must inform everything we teach and the manner in which we perceive our ministry to the churches and to the world.

Suppose theological education in North America had been influenced mainly by the political theology of Rienhold Niebuhr or the Social Gospel of Rauchenbusch rather than by the psycho-theological stance given its classical expression in Paul Tillich's system. It is worth mentioning that Tillich's earlier writings in Germany were in Christian socialism. But in his America period, his work links theology with psycho-therapy. He abandons the concern for structural evil and specializes in the treatment of "anxiety."

A political-ethical-social action program of theology would have led us in a different direction. We chose rather to deal with personal anxieties

than to develop our theology and ministry around sinful social structures. This is the reason why liberal theological seminaries are now ill-equipped to counter the simple-one-dimensional vertical Gospel of the electronic church or to diffuse the recent onslaught of the moral majority.

The black church, on the other hand, has been forced by the suffering of black people to wed ethics and eschatology and to formulate its mission on the basis of the whole Gospel. ITC has the largest black theological brain trust in the nation. We have a mission to all the churches and seminaries in the nation, the Third World, and most of all the West. Will we continue to reflect the thoughts and actions of others or will we claim the leadership which is ours? ITC—who knows but that you were called to the kingdom for such a time as this? It is much easier to be a theological clone than it is to be a constructive theologian or a bold exegete. This is likewise true of institutions. To depart from tradition is to take risks. It is a major task and it is controversial. If you decide not to do business as usual, you must provide justification for venturing out on your own. The issue for ITC is whether we will play it safe or will we do what needs doing by us at this time in history.