

An Open Letter to Black Clergy

March 2007

Dear Pastors:

As leaders of the most powerful, respected and trusted institution in our communities, you have the ability to join forces to change the educational landscape for our children. It is clear that the public school system has failed poor and Black children. What is not clear is: How long will we allow this to happen?

As some public officials manipulate statistics to paint a brighter picture, the harsh reality is that too many of our children, despite structural reforms, continue to be denied a sound education. There is no viable action plan. City and state officials have not demonstrated ability or will to transform and improve the quality of education for all children. Of the numerous reforms in public education, none of them hit the core of the problem: Institutional racism. An institution rooted in racist ideology and practices will never completely meet the needs of poor and Black children. We cannot wait any longer.

Why we can't wait. We cannot wait because our children need us now. They are being undereducated. We are losing too many children to the streets, drugs and violence. Many have no dreams, no faith and no hope. We must not be afraid to ask the question: Why should we continue to wait for someone to do for us what we should and must do for ourselves?

Many of you do great things for children in your individual churches. I appeal to you to get together with your fellow pastors to coordinate resources. One goal would be to create a web of support services, academic and social, that would meet the needs of children and families. The adage "united we stand, divided we fall," has never been more true.

Some of you have opened schools. Work with fellow pastors and show them how to do the same. We must work collectively to create alternatives to the public school system. Public officials realize that poor and Black children have little to no choice but to attend neighborhood schools. We must respond by providing needed alternatives. This may mean that we revisit the voucher debate or other public funding sources to support institutions such as yours to do what the public systems have failed to do.

While we strive to establish schools and programs to begin to address the educational needs of our children and communities, we must simultaneously work to transform the public school system. Too many of our children and families depend on public education to totally abandon it. Therefore, we must aggressively work from within to empower the stakeholders: children and parents.

What can be done now? We must get parents into the schools. Challenge your congregations to make their presence felt in their child's failing schools. We share the blame. Our virtual absence from school houses has contributed to their failure. We must return to schools and roll up our sleeves and get to work. This may mean patrolling halls and helping with discipline. This may mean working with untrained teachers and administrators to improve them. This may mean removing incompetent teachers and administrators from our schools. It is true that teachers cannot teach if children are not disciplined. Conversely, children cannot learn in schools if teachers are not disciplined and trained adequately.

In addition, parents must be counseled to take off the veils of denial when it comes to their children's behaviors, abilities and efforts. We must teach parents how to raise children. We must teach them how to work closely with their children and teachers. We must teach them how to support learning from the home. We must teach separated parents to work together to support their children. Parents need support and guidance.

Consider the following actions:

- Create learning centers in your churches. Provide counseling and training for parents.
- Organize meetings with your fellow pastors to share best practices.
- Use your property to house schools and programs that model effective teaching and learning.
- Share your human and physical resources with other churches and community organizations.
- Call upon your congregants to assist you in the design of quality learning based programs.
- Use churches as information and network centers.
- Use the power of the pulpit to protect our children from others and at times from themselves.
- Visit the schools where the children of your congregants attend. Make your presence felt.
- Invite local principals and teachers to your churches for special Sunday services.
- Target some of your sermons to education. It is sinful not to teach our children. Children who get caught in the prison trap are often illiterate and have dropped out or were pushed out of school.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. posed this question in the title of one of his books, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" I ask you to join me and others to step up our efforts to save and educate our children and families. Let us choose community over chaos.

I pray that you receive this letter in the spirit in which it was written.

Sincerely

Bernard Gassaway
Educator & Parent
www.bernardgassaway.com