**Attendees of ABHMS’ ‘Space for Grace’ Urged to Correct Injustice, Create Change**

**VALLEY FORGE, PA (11/9/15)**—From shedding tears to roaring with laughter, attendees at American Baptist Home Mission Societies’ (ABHMS) national Space for Grace gathering held at the Hilton Los Angeles Airport hotel Wednesday through Saturday experienced a wide range of emotions, as powerful preachers and speakers urged them to examine their own lives and accept the call to correct injustice and create positive change in their communities.

During opening worship, the Rev. Susan Sparks, professional comedian and pastor of Madison Avenue Baptist Church, New York City, wrapped in humor her “get-rid-of-the-trash-in-your-life” message. To illustrate humans’ tendency to judge others, Sparks shared the story of a cross-country Harley-Davidson motorcycle trip in which she and her husband were turned away from a hotel because they were mistaken for members of the Hells Angels.

“We don’t rent to your kind,” said the woman at the desk. When Sparks revealed herself as a pastor, the woman responded, “The Bible says not to lie.” The next day, Sparks returned with her business card, telling the woman: “The Bible says, ‘Judge not.’”

During a morning Bible study, “Restoring Human Connection: Race, Sexuality and the Bible,” renowned theologian-author-speaker-activist Brian D. McLaren discussed injustices committed throughout history in the name of Christianity. To illustrate the concept that “Every culture has the capacity to project its own anxieties and fears onto a minority group to somehow feel better about themselves,” McLaren shared a story from his experience at a conference in Africa.

At the African conference, McLaren said, attendees laughed at each comment by a particular man from the Batwa [“pygmy”] tribe—a disenfranchised people who are typically excluded from such events. When McLaren asked the reason for the laughter, a woman from the Tutsi tribe responded: “Isn’t that funny? I didn’t know those people could talk.”

The Rev. Dr. Raphael Gamaliel Warnock, social activist and senior pastor of Atlanta’s historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, implored those at a Thursday luncheon to emerge from their comfort zones and address racism, sexism and homophobia.

“God has a way of flipping a script for us, right when we think we have it all figured out,” he said. “It’s in the context of this kind of creative agitation that the Holy Spirit does its best work. There are no pearls without agitation, irritation and aggravation. … I pray that God will grant us the courage to get under each other’s skin and to tell the truth.”

Noting that many individuals attend church and Christian conferences to be soothed and comforted, he said, “That sounds more like an hour in the Jacuzzi than time with Jesus. Jesus comes to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted.”

In a Friday plenary session, the Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Thompson, assistant pastor at Allen Temple Baptist Church, Oakland, Calif., stressed that, while she’s thankful for food and clothing programs, acts of charity are not acts of justice.

“When trying to walk the walk of justice,” she said, one must be willing to do the following: name the injustice; actively work to decrease the likelihood that it will recur; stand together in confronting it; ask critical questions regarding the reasons it is permitted to exist; and constructively state how to right it.

When people question the reason that God doesn’t address unjust laws, God responds: “I did—I created you,” she said. “You must be willing.”

God’s word delivered at Friday’s lunch through the Rev. Dr. Marvin A. McMickle, president of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, Rochester, N.Y., and Judson Press author, brought attendees to their feet with spontaneous singing of the traditional “When We All Get To Heaven.” McMickle preached about Peter, James and John’s desire to remain on the holy ground of the mountaintop following Christ’s transfiguration. He maintained that they were satisfied too soon and should have waited to rejoice until Christ’s resurrection.

“Who can’t be a good Christian in special places?” McMickle asked rhetorically. “We want to stay in church, but we need to get out of our churches and go to the street corners.

“I’m challenging you, that when you leave here,” he continued, “to find the place where God is sending you to after you’ve been fueled up.”

In a Saturday plenary, the Rev. Dr. Robert Scott, pastor of Central Baptist Church, St. Louis, Mo., said that, because of sin, humankind is living “a veiled existence,” or “failing to see with clarity.”

“In Ferguson, the citizens had been living a veiled existence until August 9, 2014—the death of Mike Brown,” he said. “On that day, the veil was lifted.”

Like Israel breaking the covenant and worshipping false gods, only to be delivered time and again by God, “we worship the idols of the culture―we fall prey to the idols of the culture,” he said. Then we cry out to God, he delivers us, and we repeat the cycle, he said.

“Living beyond the veil requires us to do the work of repentance,” Scott said, adding that people resist repenting because it requires giving up something cherished.

It requires, he said, a “180-degree shift in your thinking, action, words, behavior and stance with God.”

The gathering culminated Saturday evening in a gala banquet celebrating Dr. Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III, who retired in October after 24 years as ABHMS’ executive director.

Space for Grace featured exhibits by Christian painters, photographers, multimedia and other artists; late-night shows by Christian entertainers; a Labyrinth; and more than a dozen afternoon learning experiences, such as “Prophetic Voice: Proclaiming a Missional Gospel with Grace and Power,” “When God Calls Us in the Midst of a Crisis” and “Windows of the Heart.” Attendees were called to worship each night in various ways, including gospel and folk music by Kim and Reggie Harris; drumming in the Japanese Taiko style; and a six-piece Mariachi band.

For more information about ABHMS, visit [www.abhms.org](http://www.abhms.org/).

*American Baptist Home Mission Societies—the domestic mission arm of American Baptist Churches USA—ministers as the caring heart and serving hands of Jesus Christ across the United States and Puerto Rico through a multitude of initiatives that focus on discipleship, community and justice.*

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