2nd Corinthians 4:7-9 TLB

*But this precious treasure—this light and power that now shine within us-is held in a perishable container, that is, in our weak bodies. Everyone can see that the glorious power within must be from God and is not our own.* *We are pressed on every side by troubles, but not crushed and broken. We are perplexed because we don’t know why things happen as they do, but we don’t give up and quit.**We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get up again and keep going.*

Why The Justice Dialogues

In its midyear review of 2020, CNN had this to say, “2020 has changed everything. And it’s only half over.” Many would agree with that assessment and a brief overview of the provided timeline of the first six months of the year provides insights as to why. If July is any indication, there is little reason to anticipate that the second half of the year will be any less tumultuous than the first. The Trump administration continues to double down on efforts to deploy federal troops into American cities to silence and arrest protestors—a move that is viewed by many as an attempt to provoke fear, deflect attention from the inept handling of the coronavirus pandemic, appeal to a “law and order” base and tilt the nation’s justice system toward fascism. This month also marks the 30th anniversary of the American Disabilities Act, and while great strides have been made, significantly more needs to be done to ensure that this nation understands that disabilities do not equate to inabilities.

July bore witness to the passing of civil rights icons Emma Sanders, C.T. Vivian and John Lewis—all tireless fighters for racial equality, social justice and the right to vote. Yet, with less than 100 days left to what will certainly be a contentious presidential election, there are growing concerns about the misuse of technology, inadequate polling sites, voter suppression, foreign and domestic interference, along with concerns that the incumbent might refuse to vacate the office when/if he loses the election.

Hurricane season is upon us and in the face of COVID-19, there are no national strategies to protect first responders and residents in the event of another natural disaster. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage with more than 4.1 million confirmed cases in the U.S. resulting in nearly 150,000 deaths. Despite CDC forecasts of between 160,000 to 175,000 U.S. deaths by mid-August, Betsy DeVos, backed by the Trump administration threatens to defund public schools who fail to open. This threat to children, teachers, cafeteria workers, counselors, janitors, parents and family members comes in the wake of the administration’s announcement that the Republican convention will be canceled because according to Trump, “there's nothing more important in our country than keeping our people safe, whether it's from the China virus or the radical left mob.”

There is little reason to expect current Covid-19 related trends to improve. But we do anticipate that African Americans, Latinix and Indigenous people will be disproportionately represented in cases and deaths. 30 million Americans are unemployed as a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic and millions face homelessness as the moratorium on evictions comes to an end this month. Despite all these things, so-called leaders continue to politicize and weaponize all collaborative actions that might effectively halt the health, race and intersectional injustice pandemics devasting human lives.

Borrowing from the writings of the 19th century clergyman Theodore Parker, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, ‘the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’”  The American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) knows that it is up to those of us who have demonstrated our commitment to faith and social justice to bring healing and transformation to the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

One of ABHMS’ responses to the crises facing our nation is to convene The Justice Dialogues. As the convener, our work is to ***connect*** thought and faith leaders, activists and sages who are already committed to and engaged in actions that are addressing racial and intersectional injustices in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. In the spirit of genuine relationship, we connect these valued and gifted partners with one another and ***cultivate*** spaces for creative meaningful dialogues. In so doing we call upon God’s holy presence to cooperate with the expertise, zeal and wisdom of all participants to generate the transformative ***change*** we all seek.

Since 1824, ABHMS has been on the front lines of ministry and social justice. This is our heritage and it is reflected in our actions against slaveholders, our involvement with the underground railroad, our commitment to teaching Black children even when it was illegal to do so, and our church planting and provision of schools for Navajo, Crow, Hopi, Creek, Seminole, Delaware, Shwano, Kickapoo, Sac, Choctaws, Chickasaws and Fox tribes in Oklahoma, California and Arizona. It is reflected in our actions during WWII when we ministered among Japanese Americans who had been forced into internment camps. After that war we collaborated with Church World Services to relocate thousands of refugees to safe homes. Because we strive to put our faith into action, ABHMS has long been on the right side of history; it is the cornerstone upon which ABHMS has been built. We have never been silent in the face of injustices and we will not be silent now.

This moment in time demands that we connect with our vast networks throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico including churches, colleges, universities, seminaries, community leaders, chaplains, leaders of specialized ministries, and Asian, Indian, Latino, Haitian and other language group leaders to collaborate for the change that is so desperately needed. Drawing on resources such as the Christian Citizen, ministrElife, social media and Judson Press to attract and hold the attention of a national audience, ABHMS will use our technological and financial expertise to amplify the voices of those who participate in The Justice Dialogues. We call on the collective wisdom, dreams and experiences of all participants so that together we can:

* Engage in mutual spiritual discernment and support
* Construct a framework for allyship, action and meaningful dialogue
* Provide opportunities for sharing, listening and learning
* Identify available resources and those that need to be developed
* Pursue opportunities for coalition building to increase the impact of efforts to dismantle and defeat racism and its intersectional injustices

The Justice Dialogues provide a unique opportunity to converse about and expose the fault lines of America’s capitalism along the lines of race, class, gender, age, sexual identity etc. while building coalitions to address them. Through The Justice Dialogues, ABHMS is convening a nationwide, multi-cultural, intergenerational audience of likeminded partners to experience allyship, spiritual support and opportunities through the exchange of thoughts and perspectives. Participants at The Justice Dialogues include wisdom bearers, sages, activists, pastors, writers and networkers throughout the USA and Puerto Rico. Some will identify as American Baptists, some may not.

The Justice Dialogues will focus on the type of coalition building that generates ideas and opportunities that lead to allyship and enhanced collective impact. We will offer opportunities to meet each month throughout 2020. Each gathering will have a theme (e.g. faith and activism, the March on Washington, 2020 election or voter registration) and participants will be invited to submit their ideas for themes. In our role as convener, ABHMS will make the final decisions regarding themes to ensure a continued focus on building coalitions to fuel the work that others are doing. ABHMS’ ministrElife, social media and webpages will cooperate to provide a repository where our valued partners can share their resources (e.g. events, blogs, webinars, books, needs, petitions, fund raising etc.). Visit <https://ministrelife.org/> to join the vibrant Justice Dialogues community. If you are not already a ministrelife member, we encourage you to take this opportunity to join.

Following our first meeting on Wednesday September 16th from 1:00 to 3:00 Eastern time, we will be asking participants to remain engaged through the end of 2020. We will collectively reflect to discern what The Justice Dialogues will look like in 2021. Other opportunities for re-engagement or discontinuing participation in The Justice Dialogues may also occur.