

## **AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION**

### **“Gripped by the Gospel” and United Mission**

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## **When we are united in God’s mission, our United Mission will grow.**

Less than eight years after the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King’s speech during the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, shook the nation. Forty-eight years have passed since that historic speech. Many persons, including myself, regard it as the greatest speech of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Estimates of the number of persons gathered that day vary, but a reasonable estimated figure is 250,000. Earlier that year, on June 19, President John F. Kennedy had sent Congress a promised civil rights bill that offered federal protection to African Americans seeking to vote, to shop, to eat out, and to be educated on equal terms. Pressuring Congress to adopt this bill and to consolidate the protest activities brought together major civil rights, labor, and religious groups to organize a massive Washington demonstration. Taylor Branch described the conclusion of King’s memorable “I Have a Dream” speech in these words: The “Dream” sequence took him from Amos to Isaiah, ending “I have a dream that one day, every valley shall be exalted. . . .” (Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, 1988)

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

(Isaiah 40: 4-5, KJV)

Then King spoke a few sentences from the prepared conclusion, but within seconds he was off again, reciting the first stanza of “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” ending, “from every mountainside let freedom ring.” After an interlude of merely one sentence — “And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true” — he took it up again: “So let freedom ring.” Taylor Branch described the scene: As King tolled the freedom bells from New Hampshire to California and back across Mississippi, his solid square frame shook and his stateliness barely contained the push to an end that was old to King but new to the world: “And when this happens...we will be able to speed up that day when all God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!’”

In the last years before his death, King was trying to build an interracial coalition to end the war in Vietnam and force major economic reforms, including guaranteed annual incomes for all. In April 1968, King went to Memphis, Tennessee, to march with striking garbage men. The march had degenerated into a riot. “We’ve got some difficult days ahead,” King said the night before he was assassinated on Thursday, April 4. He was right.

Neither the ending of Jim Crow laws nor the assassination of King ended practices of racial discrimination in the United States. Note this jolting experience of Aidsand Wright-Riggins III when he took a religious studies course at California State University, Fullerton:

I was a Comparative Religions major in college. In a senior project, I sought to show how closely our racial images are wedded to our religious convictions. In front of a classroom of white students, I began a presentation about Albert Cleage’s Black Jesus. As I spoke, I took a picture of the Black Christ out of my briefcase and slowly ripped it to shreds. Puzzled looks appeared on my classmates’ faces as they watched and continued to listen to the presentation. A little while later, I reached into the same briefcase, pulled out a picture of a blonde-haired and blue-eyed Jesus and began to tear up this picture. Before I could make a quarter-inch rip, I was suddenly and violently knocked against the wall, thrown to the floor and kicked in the back and side by three or four members of the Campus Crusade for Christ. I thought that I was going to teach my colleagues something about the nature of religious and racial symbolism. I was the one who learned a very powerful lesson that day. Race and religion matter for people. Often, race matters most.

Dr. King’s refrain, “I have a dream today,” echoes down the decades to us today. We are still called by God through the words of the prophet Isaiah and Dr. King, as well as the experience of Dr. Wright-Riggins. The underlying question to each of us is, “Are we gripped by the gospel?” I believe that when American Baptists are gripped by the gospel, we will respond generously, even boldly, to God’s call. And what does that response accomplish? Read a partial list:

- Your church’s United Mission giving supports your local region, which makes it possible for the region to provide more effective support for your church and others. In fact, most of the income for each of our regions comes from gifts to United Mission. Our giving to UM pays the major parts of the salaries of our region’s staff who provide: • staff service for search committees; • assistance resolving church conflicts; • area ministers to maintain contact with individual pastors and with associations and small groups of churches; • camping ministry; • resources to assist your church in growth and spiritual health; and • education and training of pastors, youth, and lay leaders in congregational empowerment.
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Reminder: If you need a remittance form with your church's name, address, and  
PIN number, please contact your regional office.

THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

*Ron*

P.S. I encourage you to share this letter electronically or in print with others in your church.