

“A Call for Unity”

The following is the signed statement, sometimes referred to as “A Call for Unity,” that Martin Luther King, Jr. chose to respond to while in the Birmingham Jail. The eight ministers had published a similar statement that winter as "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense" (also called “The White Ministers’ Law and Order Statement”) That document had listed eight chief claims:

1. That hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions.
2. That there may be disagreement concerning laws and social change without advocating defiance, anarchy, and subversion.
3. That laws may be tested in courts or changed by legislatures, but not ignored by whims of individuals.
4. That constitutions may be amended or judges impeached by proper action, but our American way of life depends upon obedience to the decisions of courts of competent jurisdiction in the meantime.
5. That no person’s freedom is safe unless every person’s freedom is equally protected.
6. That freedom of speech must at all costs be preserved and exercised without fear of recrimination or harassment.
7. That every human being is created in the image of God and is entitled to respect as a fellow human being with all basic rights, privileges, and responsibilities which belong to humanity.

The signers of the statements were diverse not only in their religious affiliations, but in their various responses to the issues of segregation and race relations, and their own responses to King’s criticism of them were also diverse. The Episcopal bishop, Charles Carpenter, for example, had opposed integration within his diocese, and two years later would work strongly against the Selma to Montgomery March, yet he did work for better relations between white clergy and those of color. Roman Catholic Bishop Joseph Durick, more of a moderate, on the other hand, would eventually become an outspoken advocate of integration and be publically attacked for it. Rabbi Hilton L. Grafman, as a Southern Jew, had always seen their actions as attempting to promote racial unity—he himself had worked for better relations between Jews and Christians, and remained silent until the 1970s before he expressed his frustration that people now assumed him to have been a bigot. Methodist Paul Hardin, likewise, had been working for racial integration in the Methodist churches of his conference, and had been an outspoken critic of the Alabama governor, so he chose not to defend himself after King’s letter, reasoning that it would only make things worse. Presbyterian Edward V. Ramage, often described as a humble peacemaker, argued that the eight had written the letter for fear that violence was about to break out, and he would be forced out of his pastorate by segregationists in 1965. The Baptist pastor Earl Stallings, the only one to be commended by King, had preached racial justice sermons in his church and would continue to advocate for racial justice for two more years in Birmingham, before his wife’s health issues forced them to seek another pastorate.

PUBLIC STATEMENT BY EIGHT ALABAMA CLERGYMEN

April 12, 1963 [Good Friday]

We the undersigned clergymen are among those who, in January, issued "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense," in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed.

Since that time there had been some evidence of increased forbearance and a willingness to face facts. Responsible citizens have undertaken to work on various problems which cause racial friction and unrest. In Birmingham, recent public events have given indication that we all have opportunity for a new constructive and realistic approach to racial problems.

However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely.

We agree rather with certain local Negro leadership which has called for honest and open negotiation of racial issues in our area. And we believe this kind of facing of issues can best be accomplished by citizens of our own metropolitan area, white and Negro, meeting with their knowledge and experience of the local situation. All of us need to face that responsibility and find proper channels for its accomplishment.

Just as we formerly pointed out that "hatred and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions," we also point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems. We do not believe that these days of new hope are days when extreme measures are justified in Birmingham.

We commend the community as a whole, and the local news media and law enforcement in particular, on the calm manner in which these demonstrations have been handled. We urge the public to continue to show restraint should the demonstrations continue, and the law enforcement official to remain calm and continue to protect our city from violence.

We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations, and to unite locally in working peacefully for a better Birmingham. When rights are consistently denied, a cause should be pressed in the courts and in negotiations among local leaders, and not in the streets. We appeal to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense.

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[Episcopal] *Bishop of Alabama*

Joseph A. Durick, D.D.

[Roman Catholic] *Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Mobile, Birmingham*

Rabbi Hilton L. Grafman

[Reformed] *Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama*

Bishop Paul Hardin

[Methodist] *Bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference*

Bishop Nolan B. Harmon

Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church

George M. Murray, D.D., LL.D.

Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama

Edward V. Ramage

Moderator, Synod of the Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States

Earl Stallings

Pastor, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama