

**Kansas City at the Mountaintop:**  
**Forward Toward a Moral Agenda for God's Children in 2021 and Beyond**  
by  
**The Revered Dr. Vernon Percy Howard, Jr.**

Part I of III of a series of articles helping to chart a new vision for Kansas City based on a moral agenda informed by Christian faith and the Kingian tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free...”  
-Jesus Christ of Nazareth-

The Rise

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Greater Kansas City, a Human and Civil Rights organization, dedicated to justice, peace, and the fulfillment of the beloved community, now arises to lift our collective voice in a public statement to proclaim a message of vision, hope, inspiration, moral courage, and prophetic challenge amid these current times of calamity, despair, pain, and human suffering among God's human family here in Kansas City and across the country.

The Summons

By the summons of the One whose name we bear, Jesus Christ, and in fulfillment of the mountaintop experience had by our national founder, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 3, 1968, the night before his assassination, we ourselves embark upon this imperative to cast a vision of Kansas City which lifts us beyond and out from the deep abyss of human genocide and communal degeneration so commonly experienced by too many of our fellow Kansas Citizens. We invite and unite with any and all faith partners across religious boundaries who share our principles of the beloved community, justice for all, and peace. We invite all people, of all backgrounds, in all regions of our community, and amongst all sectors of the City, to join us in embracing this vision of that beloved community hoped for but not yet realized by all people of goodwill.

The Grievance

We are deeply grieved amid the faint cries of those in the City, who are victims of the failures and imperfections of our social, economic, educational, political, and religious systems. We grieve amid the callous and obstinate nature of these systems, systems we oversee and sanction, but that contribute to, and often produce, life inescapable from the misery of pain and suffering. We are grieved by the incalculable apathy from our local body politic amid the needless misery of so many of our brothers and sisters. We hear and feel the suffering of those who whimper and groan in Kansas City, and who struggle to breathe both figuratively and literally, within this toxic environment; poisoned by poverty, homelessness, violence, hunger, undereducation, grave health, and the tragedy of the pre-emptive, non-ordained deaths of our brothers and sisters. We

hear their grievances. We feel some measure of their immeasurable grief. And we will not turn away from that grief or their legitimate grievances.

### The Turn

But WE WILL turn to that grief and those grievances, and to a new day. We are a rich, brilliant, learned, beautiful, creative community, spiritually endowed City. But we are also a community and City which must hold true to the challenge of God to fulfill the collective prime moral obligation of any community and City. What is that collective prime moral obligation? It is the obligation of the privileged and the powerful to fashion and transform public and private systems and structures to create a more just community and City so that the most vulnerable and the most afflicted are uplifted. There are thousands in Kansas City who suffer violently due to the imperfections of the systems and structures which serve the privileged and powerful so well. Our challenge and task is to begin with writing a vision – one that can be lifted and lift our aspirations – one that can be a guiding light to help us navigate beyond the inescapable guilt and libel we all share for the current state of affairs. On the occasion of the dusk of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life, as the assassin’s bullet was encroaching him, that matchless prophet, who was unequivocally the most poignant and prolific and God-used moral voice of the nation’s history left a blueprint of “where we go from here.” It was a visionary oracle, prophetic in character, moral in nature, grounded in policy and practice, which offers guideposts to those in this century and beyond who hope for that beloved community and know it is each of our duties to ensure it appears. We are informed here by his vision, but beyond that, by the urgency to creatively and courageously fashion a society which is just for all. We make no apologies for casting vision. Only therein can that lofty estate be achieved.

### The Vision

#### **AN END TO HOMELESSNESS & “JUST” HOUSING WITH DIGNITY FOR ALL**

Upward toward 5,000 people in our midst suffer from homelessness in the Metro’s bitter cold and sweltering heat every night. This number does not reflect uncounted homeless persons who are unsheltered and at-risk, seeking cover with families, friends, or strangers; those who desperately search for refuge under bridges, overpasses, parks, abandoned buildings, allies and street corners. We will not forget the uncounted. They count to us. They count to God. They too are God’s children deserving of the basic unit of protection from creation’s stormy blast. We commend the work of the faithful agencies and philanthropists in our community and City who work so tirelessly to resolve this crisis. We celebrate the resources granted by so many individuals and institutions of goodwill who give of their talent and treasure to meet this challenge. However, in its current form, philanthropy in all of its goodwill and wealth, comforts and aids but does not solve and fix the problems of homelessness and sub-standard housing. Furthermore, the corporate welfare which has padded and eased the pockets of the wealthy and its City skyline has also driven deeper wells of economic dearth for the poor and communities of color from which welfare for the rich is pulled. We call for a renewed collective commitment to create a community and City in which NO PERSON is unsheltered, and NO PERSON lacks safety from nature’s harsh winds. Concurrently, the problems of limited “real” affordable housing, and safe permanent housing of dignity for the

working poor, must be a priority in a City that continues to erect corporate shelter to an ever-increasing downtown skyline. In Kansas City's formal metric, affordable housing is deemed just over \$1,100.00 per month making rent alone far beyond the capacity of the working poor. We call upon our highest collective capacities to create a just volume of housing stock in our community and City where ALL PERSONS, no matter their level of income, have access and opportunity to possess or own a habitat which mirrors and parallels the high dignity of their value as children of God.

### **HIGH QUALITY, EQUITY EDUCATION FOR EVERY CHILD K-12**

We also know that too many of our children and youth are impacted by education systems that are underfunded and under-resourced, dis-empowered, and sometimes mismanaged. We know, as well, that the children who receive insufficient pre-school instruction and readiness begin their kindergarten years already lagging behind. We commit ourselves today to the principle of equity for all our children at every stage of their development and the practice of budgeting and policy which guarantees early childhood development for every child and full and proper safety nets which fill the gaps income inequality create in the lives of the poor. Full access to technology services/infrastructure, software, and hardware in underserved homes and communities is a must in order to ensure another generation of children are not left behind in dreaming and aspiring to their God-given capabilities. Furthermore, during this COVID-19 season and beyond, as distance learning is now and likely will be a necessity, we declare that every child should have the proper hardware, hot-spots and supportive help for a successful education that is inferior to none.

Our parceled system of education delivery, while practical as pertains to the various segments of municipal boundaries, is also unfortunately a map of educational inequity and achievement. Equity in education is a civil right and a transcendent human right often denied based merely upon a child's zip code, family income or paternal/maternal bestowal rather than content of their character and capability. It is not just toward Black children that only about four of ten of their classes is led by an instructor who is highly qualified. Nor is it a measure of their ability, that their average ACT score is a full eight (8) points, or only two-thirds that of their white counterparts. This is a Civil Rights issue with which we cannot sit silent about or comply with. History will judge us for having not challenged this systemic and structural inequity amid the plethora of Blacks ascending to economic wellness in this current age of Black exceptionalism, with letters behind our names, yet orange suits the wardrobe for too many of our young men.

This should not be so. Our society is far too advanced in academic and scholastic pedigree to allow the continuation of ineffective and inefficient educational systems and institutions to impede quality and equal education for all. There must be an immediate mobilization of intellectual, legal, financial, and institutional resources to strategize and execute plans for the accreditation of all districts and schools in Kansas City and no rest until such time as it is achieved and maintained. Furthermore, the impediments to equity for the poor caused by "educational cherry picking" as independents and privates lift and enroll the highest achievers while leaving those who struggle isolated to fend for themselves, is mean, callous, and destructive. Let's be clear, there will be no peaceful society and long-term economic sustainability for business and enterprise of the whole of the city unless and until there is just, fair, and equal education beyond race, zip code, and economic

strata. The educational condition we currently face is a crisis that must be attended to immediately if the next generation is to escape the vices of poverty and mass incarceration. A local consortium of leadership in the City and from among the districts must be assembled to tackle this problem head on without competitive angst but with congenial aid.

### **“REAL” FULL EMPLOYMENT & LIVING WAGE FOR EVERY WORKER**

One of four (25%) of children in Kansas City, MO live in poverty. For Black children it is even worse. The correlating realities to poverty such as health deficiencies, the technological divide, and violence and crime compound poverty's pain for these our young children who are left with the crumbs of the wealth of the privileged and often find themselves in a pipeline for homelessness, ill health, imprisonment, or early death. Kansas City's overall poverty rate is 17.2% which translates to 1 of every 5.8 residents living under the poverty level and equals over 81,000 Kansas Citians. The City is encroaching nearly double the poverty rate of the nation which is 10.5%. These realities are further exacerbated by the aforementioned “mythical metrics” used to measure poverty. For instance, the poverty line for a family of 4 is about \$26K – half the income needed for basic financial security. This means the formal metrics used do not accurately measure the severity or reality of the pain and suffering poverty is inflicting upon lives, families, and homes.

Many Kansas Citians, especially African Americans, do not have to imagine the impact of such “mythical metrics” upon their everyday lives. Black and Brown people are the most victimized by these false and unjust metrics, but also remain quagmired in systemic and structural racism related to this issue of economic disparity and income inequality. For instance, of the referenced 81,000 poor Kansas Citians approximately 37,000 are Black, just above 28% of the total estimated 135,000 Blacks in Kansas City, the highest poverty rate of ANY racial demographic in the City and more than three times that of whites. More than four of every ten people living with poverty in Kansas City is Black. Hispanics are not far behind with the second highest poverty rate which is 26%. The poverty rate for whites is 9%. The inequities in suffering and well-being manifest naturally in other indexes such as median household income also. The median household income for Blacks in KCMO is approximately half that of whites. The Urban League of Greater Kansas City's 2019 State of Black Kansas City publication notes that median net worth of households for Blacks is \$17,600 while for whites it is \$171,000! Beyond the racial component, women and children are the most severely impacted by economic inequities straining many families' ability to cope effectively with the challenges of securing and sustaining health and wellness our faith informs us is ordained by God. There are more policies which can alleviate such needless pain and suffering.

Can our collective conscience carry this any longer? Can we continue as a City to be satisfied and complicit with such inequity and despair among our brothers and sisters who are created in God's image just like the healthy and wealthy are? We challenge ourselves to end poverty and income inequality. We must galvanize our collective moral conscience and determination to ensure every worker earns a living wage, every person desiring to work has access to a job no matter the

economic or educational status of the individual. Our collective wealth and wisdom can do this. Love and justice require it.

Look for Part II of the Series Next Week.