

Apology by Don Livesay on behalf of the Lake Union Conference

As president of the Lake Union Conference, it is a special joy to be here to give you a greeting on behalf of all the membership of the Lake Union Conference, with my fellow officers standing here. But I want to read a statement to you that's been on my heart for some time. I want to go beyond just reading; I want to go to the statement that is very important for this celebration.

Over the past several months with the leadership of the Lake Region officers, we have celebrated the milestone of the establishment of this conference. A review of the conversations in the early- to mid-1940s reveals key reasons why that major change and approach to the ministry to the Black community took place. It was seen that the mission to the Black individuals in this country would be more effective with Black conferences. It was seen that leadership development could progress better with Black conferences. But we all know there was an additional factor.

A simple, honest look at the segregated church of the past — the segregated General Conference cafeteria, the Negro Department of the General Conference that was first directed by White men, the segregated hospitals that led to the death of Lucy Byard, the dismissive attitudes and actions — these, and more, issues were also major contributors to the establishment of the Regional work. That simple and honest look reveals the recalling of history and takes in a simple heartbeat of time.

Let us recognize that the Church at that time failed the Black community, specifically the many pastors who were loyal to the mission, the teachers, the members who stayed true to the message and mission of this Church in spite of its deep and many failures. Some might attempt to excuse the behavior of the Church, through those years, because of the culture of society of that specific time. One could say that the White church, the White members, the White leadership merely reflected what was going on around us; but God has not called His Church to reflect the evil of the world. God has called the Church to reflect His character, to treat each other in love, with the Golden Rule, in respectful ways, and to honor each other as all of God's children.

But if only, if only, our failures were just in the past. The election of President Barak Obama would seem, by many, as a monumental step in progress of crossing over the barrier of race relations. It was a point in history that many, both Black and White, thought would never happen. But it is clear that even that significant event did not mean that we have arrived. Awareness of our lack of racial equality and social justice has been heightened, and Black lives have been needlessly and carelessly taken in Ferguson, New York, Baltimore and other locations, both recently and through the years past, and now even in Charleston.

We have been stunned as Clementa Pinckney, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Cynthia Hurd, Depayne Middleton Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lee Lance, Daniel L. Simmons and Susie Jackson were gunned down, in the sanctuary, of their historical church as they simply sought to seek God as His children in Bible study and prayer. And, because they were Black...

How could it be? Through this enormous tragedy, the world has seen another depiction of hatred. But the world has also seen godly and heroic grace expressed by family members of those victims who through their pain, their tears, their anger and their loss have reached beyond humanity into the very courts of Heaven and expressed to that hate-filled murderer their forgiving grace. How could it be?

So as we celebrate 70 years of the Lake Region — the progress, the mission, the tens of thousands of people brought to the Lord who may not have ever heard the message, children educated, the expansion of the message and mission of God's remnant people, I come to you with my fellow officers of the Lake Union with a heart that compels us to not only bring our joy in the success of Lake Region but also to bring a personal and an official apology to our brothers and our sisters of the Lake Region Conference on behalf of the Seventh-day Adventist Church of the Lake Union.

We apologize with sorrow for the failures of the Church in regard to race for individuals disrespected, for the lack of time taken to understand, for the mistreated, the leadership marginalized, and for students of our college who were only able to sit with Black students in the cafeteria, for Lucy Byard, and for the slowness, reluctance and the stubbornness to do the right thing. We are sorry that we as a Church did not rise above the sins of society that day, and we are sorry for the lack of progress our Church has made in the last 70 years in the establishment of the Regional work.

Our apology is from our hearts, but we recognize an apology is not enough. We are also committed to seek deeper, more meaningful understanding of each other, more sensitive approaches, more inclusive and stronger partnerships that will make us more united as God's people and for His cause, that we may come closer together, march together arm in arm, then and now, and then someday together into the Holy City to spend eternity with our God and with each other.

There are many here who have and continue to suffer under racism. I thank you for the patience that you've had with your Church. I thank you for pioneers like Elder Bradford, and so many others, who were misunderstood and, yet, stood for what was right in a godly way. President Jones, thank you for allowing me to have a few minutes to express our hearts on this. May God bless the Lake Region Conference and all of our Lake Union conferences as we quest together to go home for Jesus.

Response by Elder Clifford Jones on behalf of the Lake Region Conference

On this historic occasion, in the wake of what took place this week in South Carolina, the fact that we were all shocked, shaken and shattered by these senseless killings of innocent brothers and sisters who were simply aspiring to dig deeper into the word of God only to have their lives senselessly snuffed out, we want to thank our Union president for his courage, for looking at the history of our people in this Church, God's remnant church, and for offering this heartfelt and meaningful apology.

Mr. President, on behalf of the officers, the departmental directors, pastors, Bible instructors, principals, teachers, all of our committee members from the Executive Committee on down, and on behalf of the constituency of the Lake Region Conference, I'd like to say that we accept your apology. And as you stated, an apology is good but let's work aggressively and vigorously and intentionally now to eliminate this surge of racism that is so prevalent and pervasive in our lives, yet even in our Church. Let's work to that end.