

Race: A time to sleep, a time to act

By Judith Schindler

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Audience listens to education activist Jonathan Kozol speak about school resegregation last fall.
DAVID T. FOSTER III-dtfoster@charlotteobserver.com

Dr. Martin Luther King knew the power of dreams. He dreamt that our nation would "rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'" He dreamt that all children "would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Ecclesiastes taught that there is a time for everything: There is a time to be born and a time to die and there is a time to weep and a time to laugh. I would add there is a time to sleep - when we are weary from our day's work and need the renewal of body and soul that dreams and slumber offer. And there is a time to wake up, when we are weary of our world's ways.

Just as Rosa Parks, the mother of the Civil Rights movement who refused to give up her seat on that bus in Montgomery was "tired of giving in and tired of being treated like a second-class citizen," today we need to be tired of educational and economic inequities that exist in our community. We need to be tired of federal, state and county budgets that place children and educational allocations too low on their list of priorities.

While physically waking up is hard for many of us who are sleep deprived, even more challenging is waking up to our news, to our past and to the painful racial realities we have created. We need to admit our collective wrongs that led us to the racial tensions that exist today and work on all sides to heal them.

We all need to own our Southern history, whether we grew up in the South or not, whether we descend from slave owners or slaves or so called innocent bystanders who did nothing and stand as guilty as the rest. Beyond slavery, there is a litany of wrongs we need to own.

We need to own the sin of bank redlining from the 1930s to the 1960s, through which whole Charlotte neighborhoods were denied loans based simply on the race and ethnicity of the residents. Huge disinvestment and the creation of racially based, economically disadvantaged neighborhoods resulted.

We need to own the wrongs of the 1950s when our federal government created the interstate highway system and our local government allowed those highways to run through African-American neighborhoods - avoiding affluent white neighborhoods such as Myers Park or Eastover.

We need to own the offenses of the 1960s when urban renewal tore down established African-American neighborhoods so that new buildings could be built and an influx of federal community development funds could come our way.

We need to accept responsibility for failing to successfully overcome the far-reaching educational challenges and inequitable classroom dynamics brought about by the court decision of 2001 that brought an end to Charlotte's busing and resegregated Charlotte's schools.

Today, we face the consequences of our actions. The racial mistrust of school board decisions is not about now, but about the decades and centuries of failing to see that "self-evident truth that all men, all women and all children are created equal."

Now is our time to right our wrongs. We need to work together as partners, African-Americans and whites and those of every shade of skin to create a Charlotte of equality. We need to work together, Christians and Jews and those of every faith, to create a city, county, state and country that elevate our most esteemed values. We need to stop dreaming of racial equality and trust, we need to make it so - through Crossroads and Mecklenburg Ministries Sermon Xchanges between our many diverse congregations, through honest dialogues, and through developing friendships that create the bright future we collectively desire. Integrated neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and Charlotte society needs to be our goal.

Boycotting and placing blame will not move us forward in a productive fashion. Neither will blindly following policy at the expense of understanding, especially when trust and relationships are already frayed. Walking, working and awaking side by side to face our tough realities is the path we must take.

Rabbi Judith Schindler is senior rabbi of Temple Beth El and co-chair with Dr. Maria Hanlin of the Crossroads and Mecklenburg Ministries Second Citywide Sermon Xchange, which runs from MLK Weekend through May 2011. To sign up your congregation for a sermon exchange across lines of difference e-mail maria.hanlin@meckmin.org.