



March 13, 2024

Dear Fellow Pilgrims,

It has taken me until this present moment to know that I have to write this letter to all of you. Over the past eleven years I have worked with many of you, and I believe that you appreciate and respect truth telling. I would like to share a few things with you about the diminishment of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing that I am certain you will only hear from me. It has been said by a few very wise people that there is a danger in a single story, so I offer you my narrative and leave it to you to determine how to think and feel about the narratives that you hear or have heard about the Center.

Brief Background: Many of you know that the Center for Racial Healing opened in 2017 with great joy and enthusiasm. It came into being following the work done by the Beloved Community: Commission for Dismantling Racism which I chaired. The impact of our work spread across the Episcopal Church in ways that made it possible for the Diocese of Atlanta to be invited to enter into an agreement with the Presiding Bishop to start a center that would offer work similar to what we were doing as a local commission to the entire church. I have the MOU here beside me as I type this letter to you. The Center was mandated by this agreement to be a national and actually international entity as well as continuing to do the work in this Diocese. It was never simply “a ministry of the Diocese of Atlanta.” And within the first year we managed to move beyond the borders of Atlanta by reaching out to all of the bishops and leaders of racial healing work across the Episcopal Church for a major convening that took place in Atlanta. Many of you will remember that marvelous event.

The effort to live into the mandate was not easy because it involved a need for an amazing amount of versatility and willingness to find as many ways as possible to honor the enormous task before us, but we stepped up to the plate. That is, I stepped up to the plate with my one part time (fifteen hours a week) assistant. She was amazing and along with her energy and enthusiasm and a lot of wonderful volunteers we moved ahead to become what the Center was at the end of 2023.

In those six years, we developed many programs that were intentionally designed to teach as many people as possible about the major groups of people of color who are represented in the Episcopal Church and who are a part of the collective oppression of people of color. Our website acknowledges those groups, and we made a concerted effort to make sure that we treated them as fairly as we could and were not simply employing tokenism toward them as is often the case because the tendency is stay in the black and white arena when confronting racism.

We reached out to folks in Honduras and managed to bring a few women to Atlanta for one of our events. Those women continue to speak about the way that they felt respected by our attention to details such as making sure that there were translators for them as well as the North Americans. What a small thing but they were so used to having their language needs being ignored by the church so this act, which was small to us, was seen by them as monumental.

There are so many wonderful stories about the impact of the Center's work both in the local community, across this Diocese, Province IV, nationally and internationally. I do not want this document to be too long, so I will not go into all of that, but it is important for all of you to know that we did a good job of stepping up to the plate and doing the work that we were charged to do.

Dismantling The Center: When I took on the task of developing a Center in 2017, I said that I would do it for five years. I was 70 years old, and everyone knew that. A few weeks after the Center opened, I invited Bp. Wright to come to the Center so I could talk to him about ideas and hear what his thinking was regarding the way ahead for the Center. I knew that I was planning to invite all of the bishops from the entire Episcopal Communion to Atlanta and I wanted to begin brainstorming with him.

He came into my office and before even taking a seat, he asked if I had found someone to replace me, a younger person? I was stunned. I said, "no, I have not been looking for anyone since I have just begun the work." Then for the next twenty minutes or so, he proceeded to explain to me all of the risk factors that confronted the Center which would probably cause it to fail, and I was named as the largest risk factor because of my age.

At the beginning of 2023, the conversations regarding my retiring from the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing began in earnest with our Board Chair, the Rt. Rev. Matt Heyd, who was elected as Bishop of New York after serving as our Chair for several months, Bp. Wright and me. We mapped out a timeline for the national search for a new executive director. I made it clear that I was leaving on December 31 whether we had a new person or not because I was really exhausted and ready to move on to new horizons. I did agree that I would be glad to help the new director in any way that the person would wish, but I was really ready to vacate the work and move on. As a matter of fact, I spent most of 2023 working on letting go. It is not easy to let go of something that you have created and while it was not easy, I was very intentional about working on that and I am pleased with the sense of relief that I had as the

time to leave arrived. My grief at the moment has nothing to do with leaving the work, it has to do with the way the Center is being mismanaged and diminished. I am sorry to see the lack of commitment to continuing to see what this entity that has made such great strides toward creating new narratives might have become under the new leadership of someone with a bit of courage and vision instead of what is currently occurring.

Currently there is no actual leadership. There are no programs except the Dismantling Racism classes that were scheduled before I left. There is a great deal of rhetoric about new directions but no programs that bear witness to what that new direction is going to be. The irony is that the Bishop and his staff are in charge. This is quite interesting since most of them have never taken a dismantling racism course or participated in any Center programming. Actually, it is my understanding that my former staff is basically expected, "to merely keep the doors open." Since there has been no programming announced for this year thus far, and African American and Women's History Months went by with no real attention. It will be interesting to see what happens for the remainder of the year.

This situation did not have to be. We ran the search until it was halted in a very strange manner over disagreements about the salary for the new executive director. We had been given the Bishop's permission to proceed with the search using the salary that we felt needed to be offered. Then some members of his staff called a halt to the search after we were into it and informed us that we made a mistake by not speaking to them. This caught us all off guard because we thought that the Bishop's word was good enough and we had taken him as such. It goes without saying that we were upset and embarrassed. We looked as if we did not know what we were doing, but we had two candidates that we continued to vet, and the search committee arrived at the decision to bring both of them to Atlanta for a second round of interviews.

Before we could get to that second step, the Bishop halted the entire transition process on the grounds that he did not know what we were doing. This was a very strange statement for us because the Board Chair had emailed the entire process that we were planning to follow for the transition to him and he made notes and sent them back to us and we sent the final plan to him. I have copies of all of those emails, so I am sure that I did not imagine this process. But due to this and other conflicts around scheduling meetings without adequate time for the participants to adjust their schedule, the Bishop halted everything and then did not speak to any of us about the process for the better part of November.

The candidates were on hold waiting to hear from us. Needless to say, we were caught in the space of trying to manage this internal conflict without sending the message to the candidates that they might not want to come here to work. But thanks to our amazing search committee chair, we managed to make it through that phase with them. Of course, it did not matter because by then the Board Chair had resigned because the process was not moving forward in a productive manner. He did not resign because he was too busy.

Along with this halting of the search process were two other things that were devastating to us. The first one was the Bishop's announcement in the late summer that while the Diocese would pay a portion of the new executive director's salary for 2024, the Center would have to begin to pay the cost for maintaining the building which was about \$50,000.00 per year. Up to this point we had not paid anything for the building, but in 2017 the first \$100,000.00 that came from one of the Diocesan funds which was supposedly for the Center turned out to be earmarked to do all of the delayed maintenance on the building that needed to be done and not one penny was spent on anything that had to do with the operation of the Center. And in 2021, the Center spent \$40,000.00 putting in all of the equipment to make it possible to have a virtual presence. The Center could not afford to pay \$50,000.00 a year to be in that building and did not need to because there were several offers for space that would have been free. That was an issue that was to be worked out by the transition team which did not really have a chance to function because the entire process was usurped by the Bishop.

One other matter that needs to be clarified is related to the Center becoming an independent entity and getting its own tax-exempt 501C-3 status which we had slow walked because we thought it a more arduous task than it turned out to be.

But as we continued to experience the negative vibrations that were being sent our way, the Board decided that we should pursue the route of becoming independent. Though many thought that this was a process that would take a year or more, we sought legal counsel and got it done within four months. You need to remember that we had been told since the beginning, that the Center should aim toward becoming an independent entity, but when we shared that we had done this work and gotten the tax-exempt status it was met with a sense of horror by the Bishop and his staff. Some of this seemed to be generated by the fact that the Diocese did not get to write the by-laws and dictate the process. This is very confusing because one wonders how an entity is to become independent when someone else devises their by-laws.

But as we experienced more hostility and negativity, we stepped up the process of trying to create a path to independence for the Center. We moved ahead with the things that we needed to do such as thinking about the support services that we would need. We opened a bank account for the new entity and received a few contributions that were placed in that account. But later we had to close the account after the entire transition process was taken over by the Bishop and he became the board chair and executive director. We closed the account and donated the money to several organizations that are in the justice and healing business, and we have clearly explained that to the Diocese.

We had an amazing treasurer/fiancé person with a long banking history who along with our Executive Assistant were consummate record keepers, so all of our financial issues were handled well. But there seemed to be great suspicion about our finances and questions were asked about our way of handling money that indicated a distrust of us which was insulting and caused our treasurer to resign. There was no reason for any of the questions and behavior

around this issue of reporting and handling of our finances beyond being on a search for things to discredit the Center in some way.

Finally: There is much more that I will simply summarize here by saying that the Bishop went to my former staff, the Center Board and the Search Committee saying things about me that were unprofessional and hurtful. As a matter of fact, members of the Search Committee would not repeat them to me because they wanted to spare me the hurt. This was quite remarkable for me to hear because I cannot imagine why someone would offer what appeared to be enthusiastic public accolades for me and then would be so disparaging in private. It will be a long while before I recover from the last six months of my work which should have been a time of celebration and preparing for the next chapter for myself and the Center. I became quite ill as a result of the toxicity and stress from it.

I filed a Title 4 Complaint against Bp. Wright for ageism, ableism, microaggressions and abuse of power which was dismissed and characterized basically as a personality conflict. I have inquired of the two female bishops and one female clergy person who made that decision about how they reached the conclusion that everything that I had outlined in my sixteen-page complaint narrative, which was supported by letters from two other persons, deserved to be dismissed instead of at least investigated further, but thus far no one has chosen to respond to me.

In the Title 4 Complaint, I asked for the Bishop to apologize to all of us for the diminishment of the Center. And for him to tell us why he felt it necessary to behave in this manner and to explain what he thinks racial healing work is about. I am still interested in that happening.

I understand the notion that Bishops Diocesan can do whatever they wish because of their authority. But this is a serious problem when you put some types of behavior by some bishops in conversation with the Baptismal Covenant as well as the idea of simply doing things decently and in order. I hope that there is not an intent to allow abuse and disrespect inherent in that notion of power.

Moving On: This Sunday, I am participating with my Society of St. Anna the Prophet Sisters, my sons and a few friends in a Liturgy of Transition and I am moving on to the amazing opportunities that are before me. I have much to celebrate. I am thankful for the blessings of much love and care, and the chance to be healed from the trauma of the past few months. I am thankful for the racial healing work that I have done for eleven years in this Diocese, and fifty years altogether, and the way that it has spread across the entire country. I pray that we will continue to search for every chance to do good and to be well. I know that the work will continue whether there is a Center for Racial Healing or not. Thank you for your listening hearts. All Will Be Well.