

The Boston Affirmations

On January 6, 1976 a group of people in Boston put forth a statement entitled "The Boston Affirmations." It has been widely interpreted as a counterstatement to the Hartford Appeal published in these pages in the April, 1975, issue. For this reason, and for the intrinsic interest of the statement itself, the full text follows.—Eds.

The living God is active in current struggles to bring a Reign of Justice, Righteousness, Love, and Peace. The Judeo-Christian traditions are pertinent to the dilemmas of our world. All believers are called to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. Yet we are concerned about what we discern to be present trends in our churches, in religious thought, and in our society. We see struggles in every arena of human life, but in too many parts of the church and theology we find retreat from these struggles. Still, we are not without hope nor warrants for our hope. Hopeful participation in these struggles is at once action in faith, the primary occasion for personal spiritual growth, the development of viable structures for the common life, and the vocation of the people of God. To sustain such participation, we have searched the past and the present to find the signs of God's future and of ours. Thus, we make the following

Affirmations

Creation: God brings into being all life, all resources, all genuine meanings.

Humanity is of one source and is not ultimately governed by nature or history, by the fabric of societies or the depths of the self, by knowledge or belief. God's triune activity sustains creative order, evokes personal identity and is embodied in the dynamic movements of human history in an ever more inclusive community of persons responsibly engaged in all aspects of the ecosphere, history, and thought.

Fall: Humanity is estranged from the source of life.

We try to ignore or transcend the source and end of life. Or we try to place God in a transcendent realm divorced from life. Thereby we give license to domination, indulgence, pretense, triviality, and

evasion. We endanger creative order, we destroy personal identity, and we corrupt inspirited communities. We allow tyranny, anarchy, and death to dominate the gift of life.

Exodus and Covenant: God delivers from oppression and chaos. God chooses strangers, servants, and outcasts to be witnesses and to become a community of righteousness and mercy.

Beyond domination and conflict God hears the cry of the oppressed and works vindication for all. God forms "nobodies" into a people of "somebodies" and makes known the laws of life. The liberation experience calls forth celebrative response, demands responsibility in community, and opens people and nations for a common global history.

Prophecy: In compassion God speaks to the human community through prophets.

Those who authentically represent God have interpreted—and will interpret—the activity of God in social history. They announce the presence of God in the midst of political and economic life; they foretell the judgment and hope that are implicit in the loyalties and practices of the common life; and they set forth the vision of covenantal renewal.

Wisdom: The cultural insights and memories of many peoples and ages illuminate the human condition.

The experience and lore of all cultures and groups bear within them values that are of wider meaning. Racism, genocide, imperialism, sexism are thus contrary to God's purposes and impoverish us all. Yet all wisdom must also be tested for its capacity to reveal the human dependence on the source of life, to grasp the depths of sin, to liberate, to evoke prophecy, and to form genuine covenant.

The New Covenant: God is known to us in Jesus Christ.

The source and end of life is disclosed in that suffering love which breaks the power of sin and

death, which renders hope in the action of God to reconcile and transform the world, which shatters the barriers of ethnic, class, familial, national, and caste restrictions. Meaning and divine activity are incarnate in history and human particularity.

Church Traditions: God calls those who trust the power of suffering love to form into communities of celebration, care, and involvement.

Those called together enact renewing forms of association and movement to the ends of the earth, responding by word and deed to the implications of faith for each age and for us today:

—The early Eastern church celebrated the dependence of humanity upon the cosmos, and of the cosmos upon God, demanding a sacramental attitude toward the whole of creation.

—The Formers of doctrine set forth the meanings of faith in the face of cultured despisers, exposed the frail foundations of various secularisms, and gave new directions to both the faithful and civilization.

—The Monastics assumed vows to exemplify life-styles beyond preoccupation with gain, freedom from familial and sexual stereotyping, and disciplined lives of service.

—The Scholastics engaged secular culture, demanding of each generation critical and synthetic reappropriation of tradition.

—The Reformers preached the work of protest against religious pretense and demanded reliance upon the gifts of divine empowerment.

—The Sectarians nurtured the spirit that cannot be contained by priesthood, dogma, hierarchy, authoritative word, or any established power, and demanded democracy, freedom, toleration, and the redistribution of authority, power, and wealth.

—And today many reach out for wider fellowships, demanding ecumenical engagements and a witness which frees and unites.

Wherever the heirs of these movements are authentic, they confess their sins, worship the power that sustains them, form a company of the committed, and struggle for justice and love against the powers and principalities of evil.

Present Witnesses: The question today is whether the heritage of this past can be sustained, preserved, and extended into the future. Society as presently structured, piety as presently practiced, and the churches as presently preoccupied evoke profound doubts about the prospects. Yet we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who prophetically exemplify or discern the activity of God. The transforming reality of God's reign is found today:

—In the struggles of the poor to gain a share of the world's wealth, to become creative participants in the common economic life, and to move our world toward an economic democracy of equity and accountability.

—In the transforming drive for ethnic dignity against the persistent racism of human hearts and social institutions.

—In the endeavor by women to overcome sexist subordination in the church's ministry, in society at large, and in the images that bind our minds and bodies.

—In the attempts within families to overcome prideful domination and degrading passivity and to establish genuine covenants of mutuality and joyous fidelity.

—In the efforts by many groups to develop for modern humanity a love for its cities as centers of civility, culture, and human interdependence.

—In the demands of the sick and the elderly for inexpensive, accessible health care administered with concern, advised consent, and sensitivity.

—In the voices of citizens and political leaders who demand honesty and openness, who challenge the misplaced trust of the nation in might, and who resist the temptations to make a nation and its institutions objects of religious loyalty.

—In the research of science when it warns of dangers to humanity and quests for those forms of technology which can sustain human well-being and preserve ecological resources.

—In the humanities and social sciences when the depths of human meanings are opened to inquiry and are allowed to open our horizons, especially whenever there is protest against the subordination of religion to scientific rationality or against the removal of religion from realms of rational discourse.

—In the arts where beauty and meaning are explored, lifted up, and represented in ways that call us to deeper sensibilities.

—In the halls of justice when righteousness is touched with mercy, when the prisoner and the wrongdoer are treated with dignity and fairness.

—And especially in those branches and divisions of the church where the truth is spoken in love, where transforming social commitments are nurtured and persons are brought to informed conviction, where piety is renewed and recast in concert with the heritage, and where such struggles as those here identified are seen as the action of the living God who alone is worshipped.

On these grounds, we cannot stand with those secular cynics and religious spiritualizers who see in such witnesses no theology, no eschatological urgency, and no Godly promise or judgment. In such spiritual blindness, secular or religious, the world as God's creation is abandoned, sin rules, liberation is frustrated, covenant is broken, prophecy is stilled, wisdom is betrayed, suffering love is transformed into triviality, and the church is transmuted into a club for self- or transcendental awareness. The struggle is now joined for the future of faith and the common life. We call all who believe in the living God to affirm, to sustain, and to extend these witnesses.

The following members of the Boston Industrial Mission Task Force participated, with some variation of regularity, in the process of drafting this above statement:

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In addition, more than two hundred church leaders, local, regional, theological, and national, of several denominations were involved in the process of developing this statement at various stages. We thank them for their valuable comments and responses.

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