PRESS RELEASE

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GOVERNOR SHERRILL, RAISE YOUR VOICE LIKE A TRUMPET: NEW JERSEY'S CHILDREN DESERVE JUSTICE, NOT SEGREGATION.

By Rev. Elorm Ocansey

SOMERSET, N.J. — There comes a time when silence becomes complicity, when neutrality becomes cowardice, and when those entrusted with the public good must be confronted with the very injustice they have sworn to overcome. In Isaiah 58:1, God commands the prophet to raise his voice like a trumpet, to hold nothing back, and to declare the rebellion of a people who profess righteousness while tolerating injustice. Today, I find myself compelled by that same prophetic command—to expose an injustice that has endured for generations in the very classrooms where our children are supposed to discover the promise of New Jersey.

For me, that moment came Thursday, October 22nd, as I sat inside a New Jersey courtroom and listened to an attorney, paid with our tax dollars, defend the state against allegations of racial segregation in our public schools. I could scarcely believe what I was hearing.

"**Enrollment data doesn't prove liability of segregation**," the state's attorney argued, contending that the lower court should have ruled in the state's favor by dismissing the case in the first place.

Imagine that. In a state that prides itself on diversity, equality, and progress, the government argued that the racial separation of our children, however evident in school enrollment records, was not enough to establish its constitutional responsibility.

Then came a revelation from the plaintiffs' attorney that captured the gravity of what was unfolding: **"Alarmingly, the state wants to resurrect separate but equal."**

Those words should trouble the conscience of every New Jerseyan. More than seven decades after Brown v. Board of Education rejected the doctrine of separate but equal in public education, civil rights attorneys are once again compelled to confront its shadow in a New Jersey courtroom. Governor Mikie Sherrill, is this what justice looks like in New Jersey?

In 2018, when the NAACP New Jersey State Conference and Latino Action Network challenged the racial segregation embedded in our public education system, we contended that New Jersey's reliance on municipal boundaries to determine school enrollment perpetuates unconstitutional segregation. This is not some distant chapter of American history. This is happening in our own backyard, under a government that professes its commitment to civil rights. Yet the state continues to contest its constitutional liability. Have we learned nothing from the generations who marched, prayed, suffered, and died so that Black children would no longer be separated from their neighbors by the color of their skin?

On Sunday, October 25th, I had the privilege of hearing the Rev. Dr. DeForest B. Soaries Jr. preach at the historic St. Luke Baptist Church in Paterson, New Jersey. His sermon drew from Isaiah 58, the very passage that has since weighed heavily upon my spirit. As I listened, I reflected upon what I had witnessed in that courtroom. The prophet's words were no longer simply an ancient command to a distant people. They had become a present summons to my own conscience.

I thought about the prophetic elders who came before me, those who understood that the pulpit was never meant to be a refuge from the world's suffering, but a platform from which to confront it. They carried the Gospel into the streets, schoolhouses, courthouses, and halls of government. They understood that faith without justice is an empty performance, and that the preacher who sees oppression yet refuses to speak has abandoned a sacred responsibility.

It is in the legacy of these prophetic elders, and under the weight of that same calling, that I now feel compelled to raise my voice like a trumpet.



Prophet Isaiah spoke to a nation that knew how to perform righteousness while neglecting justice. Its people fasted, worshiped, and sought God's favor, yet tolerated oppression. Through Isaiah, God rejected their empty religious performances and demanded something greater: to break the chains of injustice, release the oppressed, and remove the burdens that kept people in bondage.

That is the message of Isaiah 58. And that is the message New Jersey needs to hear today. Governor Sherrill, the measure of justice is not found in the eloquence of your speeches, the diversity of your administration, or the promises printed on campaign literature. It is found in the lives of the people your government serves, especially children who have neither the political power nor the financial resources to demand better for themselves. Our children cannot eat political promises. They cannot learn from ceremonial declarations of equality. And they cannot build a better future on the foundations of an educational system whose racial divisions have persisted for generations.

Isaiah 58:6 speaks of God's desire to free the oppressed and break the chains of injustice. I ask whether our government can claim to uphold equality while defending a system that civil rights plaintiffs argue continues to separate children along racial lines. We cannot continue to hide behind municipal boundaries while pretending those boundaries have no consequences. We cannot speak of educational opportunity without confronting the housing patterns, economic inequalities, and public policies that determine where children live and learn.

Isaiah 58 does not permit us to substitute explanations for action. It calls us to repair what is broken. In Isaiah 58:12, the prophet envisions a people who will rebuild what has been ruined and restore the foundations of their communities. They will be known as those who repair broken walls and restore the streets where people live. What a beautiful vision for New Jersey: not a state divided by invisible lines of race and class, but a commonwealth willing to repair the breaches that history has left behind. Governor Sherrill, this is your opportunity to help repair that breach.

Your administration did not create every inequality in New Jersey's education system. Nor can any governor dismantle generations of segregation overnight. But your administration must decide how it will respond to the evidence, the constitutional questions, and the families demanding change.



The children of New Jersey deserve more than another decade of litigation. They deserve leadership willing to confront the divisions that have shaped their educational opportunities.

Since beginning my theological education at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, I have had the time and privilege of serving as a substitute teacher in the Franklin Township School District and the Bernards School District. These are two communities with strikingly different racial and ethnic demographics. Yet, having stood before their classrooms, I can testify to a truth that transcends those differences: our children are far more alike than the boundaries separating them would suggest.

They share the same dreams of success, the same desire to belong, and the same popular culture that shapes their imaginations. They laugh at the same memes, listen to the same music, and look toward the same future with hope. What separates them is not their humanity, but the geography and public policies that determine where they live and learn. For ZIP codes and municipal boundary lines to stand in the way of their mutual learning, understanding, and development is a moral travesty. New Jersey's Constitution prohibits segregation in public education, and we ought to do everything within our power to confront and dismantle the structures that perpetuate it.

Isaiah 58 calls us not merely to recognize what is broken, but to become repairers of the breach. That calling cannot end at the church doors, the courthouse steps, or the boundaries of our legislative districts. It must follow us wherever public decisions shape the lives of our neighbors. I do not know every path that public service may yet call me to walk. But I know the conviction that must guide each step: justice must never depend on a child's ZIP code, opportunity must never be confined by municipal boundaries, and equality must be more than a constitutional promise.

Whether from the pulpit, the classroom, the community, or the halls of government, I intend to continue raising my voice like a trumpet. For the worship my God desires is not the appearance of righteousness. It is the practice of justice. And our children have waited long enough.

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