



September 17, 1984

STATEMENT OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN CHICAGO

A. CHICAGO 1984

As religious leaders, we wish to express our deep sorrow and regret, shared by many in Chicago, over heightened manifestations of division in the city along racial lines. This division burdens us at the very time that we must successfully manage, in our city, a difficult period of transition born of economic, social, and political changes that require a new vision and program for the future.

With the planning and energies of the city administration, with cooperation from business and labor, and with initiatives on the part of many communities within the city, Chicago is moving toward building an economic base for the future. But the strains of this transition exacerbate inter-group tensions and suspicions at the very time when fresh understanding and new cooperation is needed.

Our social diversity continues to increase with each successive wave of immigrants. Chicago is proud of its ethnic diversity which has enriched our life as a community and broadened our experience of the wider world. E pluribus unum – out of the many, one – is a United States motto. But social or ethnic diversity can also lead to conflict when it becomes the focus of fear and intolerance or is manipulated to maintain group power, material gain or prerogatives. Such social conflict and hostility impacts quite negatively on the quality of life in our cities and impedes the actual resolution of real problems. In this respect, the maintenance of amity is, at one and the same time, a practical necessity for great cities, and one of the most important moral and religious issues of our time for modern urban America.

We regret to find divisions along racial lines even in the councils of city government, which severely impede their ability to resolve vitally important matters in a rational and productive way. Our city faces problems today that did not begin with this administration and are not confined to Chicago. These problems were not caused by differences of race, nor can they be resolved in a climate of interracial rivalry. They require a fully deliberative and internally cooperative government.

Economic change in Chicago is affecting the quality of life among our people. From the closing of the stockyards to the closing of some steel mills, productive industries once basic to Chicago's working communities have been declining, retooling, and choosing to move to other labor markets. Service industries, which have afforded work for many city families, are no longer growing at previous rates. Restrictions in public service affect especially the poorest among us. We must provide affirmative and responsible ways to develop the kind of strong economic climate in Chicago that will benefit all of its citizens.

In past decades we began to address our social and economic problems through such measures as civil rights legislation and socio-economic programs. This strategy too is undergoing change as we see the limitations of these measures. To provide real benefits for the needy citizens in our city and to reverse the decline of their neighborhoods, we need strong initiatives in all sectors of our local economy.

It is time for new levels of understanding and cooperation within our local communities and among them. It is time for new efforts of cooperation with our government and its agencies. We need to make good use of the opportunities and resources available at this point in our history. The people of Chicago cannot afford to wait!

B. ROLE OF CHURCHES AND SYNAGOGUES TODAY

Religious institutions have the responsibility to make people aware of the benefits and challenges that diversity brings to our Chicago community. We acknowledge that at times even our churches and synagogues are marked by divisive attitudes of the sort that now mar and impede the life of the city. These attitudes exist in every neighborhood, and the members of our congregations serve as leaders on both sides of governmental disputes.

That is why our churches and synagogues have an important role to play at this point in time. This issue is not peripheral, but central to the activities of our congregations. It bears on our own lives as well as on the rest of the population.

It is time for us to reaffirm the founding principle of our society and a fundamental and universal belief of our religious communions: the dignity and worth of every individual. This implies the dignity and worth of every ethnic and racial group in our community. We believe in our capacity to develop greater unity and more harmonious living situations.

At the same time we acknowledge that individuals and local communities also have serious limitations which reveal themselves in inter-group conflict and the refusal to seek or acknowledge the common good of the city whose fortune or fate we all share. As religious leaders we wish to point beyond competition among individuals and among groups to the higher good that must be acknowledged and assured for the whole community.

In our common religious tradition, we have the strongest possible warnings that divisive attitudes affect the very validity of our religious functions. Our offerings may well be rendered unacceptable to the Lord unless we work towards social justice, establishing and maintaining proper relationships among all who live in our community (see Isaiah 1:12-16). When we accept the serious divisiveness that exists in our midst, we share and indeed add to the tragic schism that is taking place within our society. We seek not to participate in or contribute to the wounds of divisiveness but to heal them and to promote the basic unity of the social body.

Our very identity as Jews or Christians is bound up with the attitude and approach we take towards “strangers,” those who are different from ourselves. The Book of Leviticus counsels love of the stranger (Lev 19:33-34), while the Gospel of Matthew promises salvation to those who show hospitality to strangers but threatens judgment to those who do not (Matt 25:31-46).

As religious leaders we have the opportunity to lead people beyond the narrow boundaries of their private lives to serve the higher good of this community. Our religious values are not limited to personal morality and religion but include the responsibilities of a social morality that flow from a belief in the dignity and worth of all people under God.

In the past our participation in Chicago affairs tended to be limited to participation in some civic programs. The time has come, however, for us to participate in a whole range of social and economic issues. The quality of life in this community will depend on the extent to which all residents of Chicago are participants in building up this community. Through our churches and synagogues, we can make positive and lasting impacts.

A good city may not be one in which all problems have been solved once and of all, but rather one in which all people are able to participate in the problem solving process. Democracy is not a luxury for the wealthy, but the prerogative and responsibility of all citizens, the poor as well as the rich, the less fortunate as well as those of influence and power.

A call by the churches and synagogues for all citizens of Chicago to participate in the building of a city that has moral and ethical values at its foundation raises a challenge which is within the capacities of our people. We can realize such a city when we work together in unity.

C. ACTION STEPS

Building community to solve the problems highlighted by our diversity is the first step towards solving other social and economic problems of this community. The following are the initial action steps that churches and synagogues intend to take in order

to carry out our responsibilities towards the people of Chicago. They include our own transformation as well as changes in our urban society.

1. We will oppose any rhetoric of racial superiority. The promulgation of theories or positions of racial superiority by any member or by any group in this community must be labeled as outside the boundaries of acceptable discourse in our admittedly pluralistic society. Nothing is more damaging to the social body than such rhetoric, even if it is being used simply to mobilize the energies of a special social group for otherwise productive purposes. Further social damage occurs when one group's rhetoric of superiority is tolerated while another's similar rhetoric is opposed. All such rhetoric must be opposed by all the religious communities corporately and uniformly – without exception.
2. We will ensure that our worship and our assemblies are places where strangers feel welcomed. This implies overcoming the fear of strangers and developing a community where they are accepted, where differences are not rejected. It does not mean diluting our religious and moral beliefs and values. We are most faithful to our tradition when we welcome others as neighbors, as brothers and sisters.
3. We will promote and use language that bespeaks community. The language we use has considerable impact on the life of our city and its people. We are what we say we are. Language which stresses separateness or superiority of one group over others is unacceptable in our religious traditions and must be confronted wherever it appears. Our congregations need to become places where our language about other groups in our society is held accountable. We need to stress the language that upholds our common humanity, the language of family, brotherhood, and sisterhood.
4. We will build coalitions across racial lines. Contemporary social progress, especially in cities, has often been the result of coalitions. The religious communities have frequently been the first to form trans-racial and trans-ethnic coalitions. We need them now. We see this as we share mutual concerns about such human needs as hunger, child care, teenage pregnancy, health care, and education. The religious communities of Chicago can serve as public monitors of these important facets of life in Chicago. Vital coalitions can have a great impact on the development of social and economic policies designed to meet the deep human needs of our city. Coalition building is appropriate because we are bound to each other by common values and traditions. It is necessary because our interests and our values are closely intertwined.
5. We will dedicate ourselves to a ministry of reconciliation. The fact that alienation is at times the experience of every human being does not lessen its pain or its seriousness in our city. As instruments of God's power to heal and to save, we are called to bring reconciliation, to make peace, wherever we find that conflicts arise and alienation is experienced. We acknowledge at the same time our own

need for God's healing so that our own minds and hearts can be changed and purified in order that we, in turn, can become ministers of healing.

6. We will make space available for political discourse. A benefit which the churches and synagogues will provide the city is making available "neutral space" where political leaders can discuss their differences freely under the umbrella of a religious coalition. Such an environment will free participants from immediate scrutiny by the public and free them from some of the restraints within which discussions between the representatives of polarized groups often take place.

Providing neutral space is not an effort to cloak politics in secrecy. This assertion will be credible only if the offer is being made by a coalition rather than an individual church or synagogue. The sole purpose is to provide for an off-the-record conversation in a more relaxed setting. By providing such an environment, we will make possible the building of productive political coalitions and thereby remove the need for the posturing and polemics which frequently exist in a polarized public atmosphere.

7. We are willing to assist in the development of a new vision for Chicago. Because of our dream of a united community and our awareness of the needs of the people of this city, we are willing to cooperate with others – such as leaders in government, business and labor, local organizations and educators – in the development of a new vision for our community, one that takes into consideration the needs of all. Such a vision must stretch us beyond our present perspectives, on the one hand, and be realistic, on the other. For such a vision to be effective, it will mean taking into consideration community economic and social planning as well as development projects. By its very nature, it will stretch our imaginations until we can encompass in our purview all citizens of this community on an equal basis.

D. CONCLUSION

The churches and synagogues of Chicago obviously cannot solve all of the city's political, social, and economic problems, and this is not our intention. We lack not only the resources and skills to do so, but the mandate as well. We do, however, have a responsibility to model and critique the tone of social discourse and the quality of spirit that we believe is essential for our city.

We are in a period of transition. Decisions will be made in the next few years that will affect the long-term future of Chicago. If these decisions are to be effective and wise, they must not be made in an environment of hostility, group separateness, polarization or extreme self-interest on the part of any of us.

The religious communities of Chicago can be "the soul" of the city. We represent, or we should represent, the spirit that binds us together even in the midst of our

diversity. There are no greater challenges facing us today than overcoming the polarization and lack of a united spirit that exist among us. It is incumbent upon us to address these matters with a sense of urgency, and it is important to begin this now. We are willing to take up the challenge and to establish the kind of environment for a community in Chicago that will benefit the generations yet to come. The tradition of this city – like the history of the phoenix – provide us with hope for the future.

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