

January 6, 1976

The Boston Affirmations

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 resources, all life, 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 inspired 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.

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→ 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 pre-occupation 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 pretence 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 re-distribution 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 worshiped.

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On these grounds, we can not 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.

VECTORS

APRIL 1976

AS VECTORS SHOW DIRECTION OF LINES OF FORCE, SO BIM SEEKS TO UNDERSTAND THE DIRECTION OF TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE.

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE BOSTON INDUSTRIAL MISSION

THE BOSTON AFFIRMATIONS:

THE WHY, WHAT AND HOW

On the feast of the Epiphany (January 6) a task force convened by BIM in late 1974 released the Boston Affirmations. They received front page coverage in the *New York Times*, and were picked up by the wire services, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and most of the religious media. We intended them as a challenge addressed, not primarily to secular society, but to the household of faith — the Church.

WHY WERE THEY WRITTEN?

The initial meetings of an interfaith group of theologians, pastors and laity focused on eco-justice theology, or the relationship between liberation theology (with their emphasis on social justice) and ecological theology.

We began by discerning what is happening in theology, the Church and society. We observed, both in and out of the Church, many feelings of anxiety, frustration and a growing sense of political impotence. People feel increasingly overwhelmed by forces they can neither change nor influence.

Movements are understandably blossoming in both religious and secular circles to provide enclaves of serenity far away from the cares and woes of this world. Although understandable, such moves are still dangerous. For instance, in the Church there is much emphasis on personal salvation, piety and the transcendence of God beyond the affairs of this world. The members of BIM's task force affirm such an emphasis, as long as it is not

used as a means to escape from the difficult social, political and economic issues confronting modern society. The headline in the *Herald American* summed up well the heart of the Boston Affirmations (BA): "Theologians Score Religious Escapism."

The growing feeling of impotence and determinism is an affront to the Gospel message of human freedom, new hope and possibility, as seen in the role of Christ in overcoming the principalities and powers. We do not see either a personal or a social gospel, but only the one Gospel of Jesus Christ which has both personal and social dimensions. To emphasize the one at the expense of the other is to distort that Gospel message and do violence to the biblical record and the history of the Church.

It was extremely difficult for our group to persuade the media that we were not pitting personal spirituality against social action. "Which side are you on?" became the frequent question. An answer of "Both!" often led to bewilderment.

WHAT DO THEY SAY?

The BA were not designed as a critique of what others have said, but as an affirmation of our beliefs. In writing the statement we went back to our biblical roots and the history of Christian thought, including the many rich expressions of the Church. We used the social metaphor as a way to help us understand our biblical and theological heritage.

The first two thirds of the BA consist of a series of theological statements reflecting the key motifs in our religious heritage.

- creative activity of God revealed through the Trinity;
- the fall of humanity, in sin and estrangement;
- the Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and the Covenant God made with them;
- the words of the ancient prophets to the modern day. Then there are references to Wisdom, the New Covenant established in Jesus Christ, the power of his "suffering love," and finally the Church traditions. In the latter, we tried to spell out some of the key ingredients in the new ecumenical Church, borrowing the best from the Eastern and Western Catholic tradition, the Reformers, and the Sectarrians.

In the statement we noted that "the transforming reality of God's reign is found today" in a variety of arenas:

- "in struggles of the poor to gain a share of the world's wealth, . . . and to move our world toward an economic democracy. . . ."
- in attempts to overcome racism and sexism.

Also, God's presence is manifested in the delivery of proper medical care, in humane scientific discovery, in creative family life, in honest government, a fair criminal justice system, etc. By no means did we attempt to offer an exhaustive list of divine activity. Nor were we attempting to set forth a specific social program. We simply tried to offer some clues as to how one locates the activity of God in our world.

We realize that it is always risky and dangerous to speak of where God is at work. It should always be done cautiously, recognizing that we always stand under God's judgment. We should resist the temptation to make any absolute identification between a specific historical occurrence and God's will. The most noble of human intentions and social causes can be perverted and distorted by sin. But unless we have some idea of where God's activity can be found, the biblical message of a living, loving and righteous God is rendered meaningless.

HOW DO WE INTEND THEY BE USED?

In his introduction to the BA Harvey Cox, one of its signers, noted that we did not see them as a replacement for the Nicene Creed. We see the BA not as a credal formulation, but as a stimulant to get people to think about their understanding of the Christian faith.

We see the BA as initiating a process of theological reflection on various levels of the Church, including the local congregation, in raising such questions as: What does the Christian faith mean to me? To put it another way: How would my life — my thinking and behavior — be different if I did not believe in the Gospel message?

Although we welcome the responses from the theological community, we would like to get reactions from the parishes. To assist in that process we have prepared a study guide. We hope that the parish groups would produce their own statements, which we would be delighted to circulate with others. Over the years we at BIM have become more sensitive to the growing gap between academic theology and the local congregation, and we hope that the BA could help bridge that gap.

We hope that groups will look at the social implications and ask — Where is God active in our world? In what way do we see God working?

Furthermore, we hope that people will raise serious questions about the role of the Church. We believe that the retreat from social involvement cannot be attributed solely to the mood of the times, or as a "backlash" against social action. The reasons are far more complex. In the 60's many of the social engagement programs were considered important, but were seen as "extras," and were funded out of the available surplus funds. Due to a variety of factors, that surplus has dried up. As a result, so has the funding of many social action programs. Unless the Church sees social outreach as an integral (not peripheral) part of the Gospel message, virtually all Church-funded social action programs will be eventually dismantled. Hopefully, the Boston Affirmations can assist the congregations in taking that prospect seriously, and designing alternatives to it.

Just as science is too important to be left to the scientists, and politics are too important to be left to the professional politicians, theology is too important to remain solely in the hands of professional theologians. We have to find and develop a functional theology. Theological language should not only provide a rationale for our involvement, but give us a way to discern realities differently (i.e. new perspectives), and as well as to sustain us in our efforts.

The success of the Boston Affirmations will not be judged by the media splashes they receive, nor by the way they withstand the test of time as an independent theological endeavor, but to the degree that they stimulate a person to think seriously about his or her faith, its implications and the difference it makes. We at BIM have dedicated ourselves to promote that process. (The full text of the BA has appeared in a variety of journals. Copies of the full text along with the study guide are available at BIM.)