

Progressive National Baptists partner for social justice

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ST. LOUIS (RNS)—Leaders of the Progressive National Baptist Convention announced plans at their annual session in St. Louis to work on enhancing voting rights and criminal justice reform through partnerships with like-minded organizations.

Members of the social justice team of the historically Black denomination also traveled to nearby Ferguson Aug. 9, the last day of their meeting, to mark the ninth anniversary of the death of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager whose fatal shooting by a white officer prompted protests that energized the Black Lives Matter movement.

In an interview, Convention President David R. Peoples said supporting the Brown family and the Ferguson community is one example of how the denomination is pursuing justice issues.

“We want to make sure that wherever injustice takes place, wherever our people are oppressed and don’t have a fair shake, we’re going to speak out, we’re going to speak truth to power,” he said. “We’re not going anywhere until those things happen and positive change occurs.”

In his remarks the previous day at a news conference, Peoples said the organization would continue to follow in the footsteps of Martin Luther King Jr., who considered the Progressive National Baptist Convention his denominational home.

“We won’t stop until what Dr. King said, until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream,” he said.

Alternative to white Christian nationalism

Progressive National Baptist Convention leaders differentiated members of their denomination from Christian nationalists.



Willie D. Francois III is co-chair of the social justice arm of the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

“What a tragedy it is that so much of what it means to be a Christian has been co-opted by white nationalists,” said Willie D. Francois III, the co-chair of the convention’s social justice arm.

“But there’s something about the rebellious imagination of folk like us, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, that says we have political priorities that aren’t limited to policing who people sleep with and policing what women do with their bodies. The Progressive National Baptist Convention is actually pro-life, because we care about bodies before they are born all the way through the tomb.”

During the meeting, the convention adopted a resolution saying the

denomination “strongly denounces any ... who refuse to support the results of the 2020 presidential election” and anyone who supports the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

Reduce gun violence

Darryl Gray, the convention’s director general of social justice, said the denomination will work with Amnesty International USA to provide training and other resources on gun violence intervention to the denomination’s churches.

The Progressive National Baptists approved a resolution that said the two groups will “work to reduce gun violence in communities across the country, while advocating for the passage of federal legislation titled the Break the Cycle of Violence Act, which will provide federal funding for community organizations conducting gun violence prevention work.”

Francois said the broader gun violence concerns of the denomination include greater accountability by police departments.

“We went today to Ferguson to stand in solidarity with this family to practice the presence of God to practice the ministry of presence because we are tired of blue privilege, blue terror and blue violence,” he said. “It is not enough for us to talk about gun violence in our communities without also talking about gun violence that we’ve normalized, and that’s police gun violence.”

Gun violence in general should be viewed as an American issue, not a Black issue, Francois added. He said the problem needs to be solved with improved access to jobs and better schools rather than larger police forces.

The denomination also plans to partner with the Faith Leaders of Color Coalition, which is seeking state and federal action to end the death

penalty. Progressive National Baptists passed a resolution with the same aim.

“I stand here arm-in-arm with the Brown family, clergy and people of faith who are intentional about being participatory in our policy efforts,” said Joia Erin Thornton, national director of the coalition.

“We want to bring forth results that promote equity and opportunity for those who are historically disenfranchised in their communities and who are over-policed and often selectively policed.”

Voting rights, a longtime agenda item of the denomination, continued to be addressed, including with a resolution calling for passage of a 28th amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would make voting “a permanent right for adult US citizens and residents.”

In an interview, Peoples condemned “strange tactics that are used to make sure that people are denied or deterred from voting,” including people of color.

“We need to find a way to make sure that voting is easier and not harder,” he said.

Support voting rights

At the news conference, several Progressive National Baptist leaders agreed on the need to further address voting rights.



Frederick D. Haynes III is the new leader of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition and pastor of Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas.

"We've come here 58 years after the voting rights bill was passed to say we're going to revive it," said Frederick D. Haynes III, the new leader of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition and pastor of Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas.

Peoples cited the continuing partnership with the AFL-CIO on voter mobilization.

"We won't stop until the AFL-CIO and PNBC continue to push back voting suppression, till everybody gets a chance to vote," he said at the news conference. "Even those who have paid their time, they have a right to vote. We won't stop until everyone can realize the dream to vote, understand all of us are God's children."

Francois added that the voter registration work with the AFL-CIO will be organized around their organizations' policy priorities.

“We are tired of politicians asking us, and benefiting and pimping our robes and pimping our collars, for their agenda,” he said. “If they want our votes, they need to sign on to our agenda.”

At last year’s annual session, the denomination joined forces in a renewed partnership with the prominent union, decades after the two groups worked together to lobby for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed discriminatory practices in hiring and voting, respectively.

The denomination also reiterated criticism it first expressed in June when the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action in admissions by American universities. It said the ruling will be a motivator in get-out-the-vote efforts for the 2024 election.

“We believe this is not the final word on race-specific affirmative action, and our advocacy will mirror that conviction,” the convention said in a resolution. Progressive National Baptists will continue to partner with historically Black Christian universities and churches “to ensure the growth of the Black middle class.”