



United Church of Christ

July 26, 2007

The Collegium of Officers

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Wider Church Ministries

Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco
Office of the Governor of Louisiana
P.O. Box 94004
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9004

Dear Governor Blanco:

I write to ask you to intervene on behalf of six young men of Jena, Louisiana who are being prosecuted for serious felonies for allegedly participating in a fight with extreme racial overtones. One has already been convicted and is scheduled to be sentenced at the end of this month. He faces up to 22 years in prison. Specifically, I ask that you pardon him or commute this sentence. He is Mychal Bell, who was 16 at the time of his arrest, and whose bail was set at \$90,000. He was charged as an adult and convicted of aggravated battery and conspiracy to commit aggravated battery (aggravated based on the presence of his sneakers, which the prosecutor defined as a weapon).

As you know, the recent racial unrest in Jena was instigated by events in September. On the grounds of the Jena high school there is a single tree, and its shade has been generally reserved for use by white students. A black student asked permission from school authorities to sit under the tree, and did so. By the next morning, three nooses in school colors were hung from its branches. Although the school's principal found three white students responsible for hanging these nooses and recommended their expulsion, the superintendent overruled the principal and gave them a three day suspension and the students were never charged with a crime.

Since the hanging of the nooses, there have been many racial confrontations. On November 30, 2006, the main academic building of Jena High was burned down; no one has been charged with arson. On December 1, a black student who attended a white party was beaten (for which a white man was later arrested and charged with simple battery). On December 2, a young white man threatened a group of young black men with a shotgun at a convenience store (for which the black men who took the shotgun away from the white man were later arrested, but no charges were filed against the white man). On December 4, a white student who allegedly made racial taunts and supported the students who hung the nooses

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was knocked down, punched and kicked by black students (for which the white student was treated and released, and six black students were charged with extremely serious felonies and assessed high bail). Court testimony documents that the District Attorney, accompanied by law enforcement officers, addressed a Jena school assembly and threatened protesting black students, saying that if they did not stop the fuss over the "innocent prank – I can...take away your lives with a stroke of my pen."

We are mindful that Jena is the location of a Juvenile Correctional Center for Youth that was forced to close in 2000, two years after it opened, because of widespread racism and brutality. In that place, guards choked a juvenile after he met with an attorney, paid inmates to fight one another, and laughed at juveniles who attempted to commit suicide. The current situation in Jena has the potential to reinstitute this hateful behavior, which I am certain you do not want and that does not reflect the perspective of Louisiana as a whole.

The United Church of Christ has long encouraged tolerance and respect among citizens, and discourages hate crimes of all kinds. Such blatant reversals of justice require your intervention, and I'm sure you would agree that change is needed in all the institutions of local government that have applied two sets of protections and punishments based on race. I plead with you to intervene to bring justice to bear in Jena.

We support you in prayer and with the strength of our membership in Christ. If we can be of service to you in addressing this situation, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John H. Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "J".

John H. Thomas
General Minister and President