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Looking

Beyond:

A View From the Edge of Higher Education

An African American Christian Female's Status Report

Yolanda Robinson

For more than a century, the federal government has provided funds in varying amounts to assist colleges and universities in educating African Americans. New forces—particularly the intense focus on economic growth, health care, advanced technologies, and crime—are pressing on society and compete with education for federal attention. The growing need to educate an expanding African American population is, despite its urgency, not at the top of the federal budget agenda. Affirmative action programs and other legislative measures that promote racial equity and reconciliation are unraveling. Affirmative action in particular, characterized by some as a devolution of a social justice policy that was only marginally effective, has drawn attacks by growing numbers of people who resent advancement on the basis of

race. The sustained frontal attack on affirmative action programs and the initial stages of society's retreat from that commitment could be particularly disastrous for African American women.

Federal, state, and institutional initiatives are beginning to dismantle affirmative action programs, which are viewed by some as providing unfair advantages in employment and college admissions for minorities. In addition, the commitment of the United States Congress to reducing the federal deficit will involve budget cuts to African American educational programs. Many politicians and advocates suggest that these initiatives threaten higher education as never before, justifying widespread fear that the opportunities for minorities will decrease.

The general mood of the country at present makes it comfortable for

people who never truly supported equal rights and others who have withdrawn their support to join forces to dismantle access for minorities. The underlying ideology that has created the backlash against racial reconciliation may be a precursor to more severe funding cuts and legislative changes. According to some observers, this opposition to favorable treatment for African Americans is demonstrated by citizens who, concerned about their financial futures, are voting to disengage the government and leaders of post-secondary institutions from the financial support of equal education and social assistance for minorities.

One might venture to say that the most important task facing African American Christian women is to clearly define the role of both church and government—local, state, and

federal—in providing equal education access. The reason is that many African American women understand that they need funding and other educational initiatives to assist them in gaining economic independence. They also understand that their positive contributions to the African American community and to society at large depend, in large part, on their gaining positions of power in the workplace—positions that require post-secondary degrees. Black women look to their churches and to the federal government for access and funding for their educational survival.

Have the church and government provided meaningful avenues for African American women to pursue undergraduate and graduate school degrees? One often hopes in vain for the church to represent the disenfranchised and to express its disappointment that society would legislate exclusionary educational laws. Does the Christian post-secondary school's framework reflect its commitment to the aggressive elimination of race and gender inequities? Is the general disposition of the church leadership—black and white—any different from that of the courts or of state and local governments, which pose such a profound threat to the future of African American women in this country?

Based on current Christian school admissions and hiring practices and policies, the problems of race and reconciliation may still be substantial, but the solutions that would lead to effective racial equity are weak or, in some instances, nonexistent. Previous programs that helped move people toward common

goals and purposes have been dismantled and have not been replaced with institutional initiatives that might provide significant

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support for minority educational admissions and hiring. Thus the current and future opportunities for African American women are dismal. That does not mean that the doors of educational opportunity are permanently closed, but they are much more difficult to enter.

African American women will continue to struggle for marginal inclusion in predominantly white Christian colleges and universities. Investment in minority talent is not the first priority. Rather, technology is the number one focus of curriculum transformation. Reformation of higher education is often reflected in new educational delivery systems, not a larger percentage of African

American students, faculty, and administrators. Some might say that it takes time for significant change, but after decades African Americans are still largely excluded from positions of power within predominantly white Christian institutions. In contrast, in less than a decade those same institutions have garnered resources to create new public policy institutes, technology departments, and distance learning programs that do not include African American women in significant numbers or positions.

The political climate bears on this problem as well. Within the current conservative climate, African American women have had to work harder than ever to gain inclusion in schools and jobs. The conservative climate, reflected in the conservatives' relative gain of congressional seats in the 1992 elections, has prompted advocates for African American opportunity to change their approach to the protection and expansion of educational and social justice.

What must be done? Ideological platforms offered to society must include the voices and unique perspectives of African American women—voices that will build a new frontier. Leaders of Christian churches and coalitions must increase the participation of their African American members. Finally, the church community must increase its efforts to influence policymaking in this regard.

African American men, along with other church leaders and laypersons, must include black women in undergraduate and graduate school departments as deans, top

administrators, and members of boards of trustees. Multiracial perspectives must be reflected in the curricula of the majority of the university offerings rather than being limited to a handful of separate courses that will be the first to be eliminated during budget reviews. Christian institutional leaders can implement a variety of solutions that will reduce the impact of racial inequities in higher education.

As this century ends, it is imperative that Christians understand the negative implications of separate and unequal—white and black—religious post-secondary schools. Unless the church begins to model

behavior that includes the voices of all its members, the future for African American women is bleak, and countless numbers of individuals will seek solace and support from non-Christian sources.

Access to college must be more than a concept. The church has a responsibility to make sure that African American women are moved into significant positions of power. It is immoral and unacceptable that well-educated black women have found and continue to find that they are not afforded the benefits their counterparts enjoy.

Christian leaders—laypersons and leaders—must correct the

persistent and systemic racial inequities in their schools, or African Americans may never be more than marginal and occasional members. African Americans must continue to work toward gaining inclusion in Christian colleges and universities. Otherwise, society will have to pay the cost of thousands of African Americans who were locked outside the walls of Christian schools.

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