

Forward Together: We Are On The Same Boat Now

Keynote Presentation

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Dr. Barber, pointed to a boy on the podium: Our future!

Protocol has already been established. I do want to thank God for all of you who are gathered here this morning, for our Chairman, Bruce Lightner, to all the preachers, elected officials, NAACPers, and especially our youth who are here today. Amen!

And, Let all of us pray for Brother Harold Webb.

(Head bowed in prayer) Gracious God. Whenever you call men and women to declare truth and justice, you take the risk of putting treasure into trash, treasure in an earthen vessel that the excellency of the power might be of Thee and not of us. So hide us behind the cross and cover us in Your blood, that the words of my heart and the meditations of my mouth may be acceptable in Thy sight, oh Lord, my strength and Blessed Redeemer. Amen.

Prophets come in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes they even come as the President of Capitol Broadcasting.

It's good to be with you this morning at the opening of a new decade of the 21st century. We face a sea of troubles this morning, to be sure. But if we could cast our minds back 10 years and watch George W. Bush taking the oath of office and then try to look forward from that to this past January, when President Obama's inauguration forced even the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to stutter, I think we have made some gains. I think we must admit that we could not imagine that we'd be here this morning making this the first year of the first African-American President of the United States.

And the truth be told, it wouldn't have been possible if people like David Forbes and Theresa El-Amin and so many others who started SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee), who laid down that ground work with Dr. King. Dr. King wasn't just a speaker, he was an organizer. He created what he called "Creative Tension".

The truth be told, we have to be very careful how we celebrate him because the bible says in Matthew 23, "we love the tombs of the prophets" but not prophets when they are alive. Dr. King was a warrior of hope and he vowed that we as a people, would reach the Promised Land, and we haven't gotten there yet. But, even Dr. King might not have dreamed that 40 years after his death a beautiful Black woman and her daughters would live in The White House and have pajama parties. Yet, the struggle continues.

Before we go further, let me ask for the prayers of our brothers and sisters suffering in Haiti. I want you to remember that history. Their revolutionary struggle from 1791 to 1804 to overthrow slavery was our inspiration. The inspiration of our foremothers and fathers in slavery. Toussaint L'ouverture and his people's revolutionary army defeated the armies of England, Spain and France.

Pat Robertson needs to shut up! He doesn't need to go to hell, but his words need to be cast to the pit of hell! He suggests that they are suffering because they made a pact with the devil.

Let us pray for our Haitian sisters and brothers. Our rally and cry ought to be "Help Haiti!"

The truth of the matter is, the reason why that devastation is so bad is because of global isolation, poverty and the lack of infrastructure. An earthquake happened with just the same force in 1989 during the World Series in San Francisco. Only 63 people died because we paid attention to poverty and made sure there was infrastructure. Let us do better by Haiti in the days to come than we have done in the past days.

Today as we come, I want to talk about this theme that you have here today: "We Have Come Here on Different Ships, But We're on the Same Boat Now!"

In the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus gathered His disciples, from their individual boats and said for them to get on one boat and let's go to the other side.

I want you to know, that you have chosen a curious theme, Brothers Lightner and Goodmon, because it comes out of a book Dr. King wrote called *Why We Can't Wait* and it was from that book that we first found the words about being on the same boat. When King wrote that book and wrote those words he was looking at historic denial, exploitation and humiliation

of the Negro down through the centuries. And he said some form of payment needed to be made. He proposed, 40 years ago in , that America launch a broad-based, gigantic Bill of Rights for the disadvantaged and a Marshall Plan for the poor and the hurting. He was talking about a “Stimulus” way back then.

He said, “While Negroes form the vast majority of America’s disadvantaged, there are millions of poor whites who would also benefit from this” kind of massive, bottom-up stimulus. He said “The moral justification for the special measures for the Negroes is rooted in robberies of the institution of slavery. But many poor whites, were the derivatives of the victims of slavery. As long as labor was cheapened by the involuntary servitude of the black man, the freedom of white labor, especially in the South, was a little more than a myth.”

Then he went on to say, “We must develop a federal program of public works, retraining in jobs for all so that none, white or black, will have cause to feel threatened. At the present time, thousands of jobs a week are disappearing. Thousands of jobs are disappearing in the wake of automation and other production efficiency techniques. Black and white will all be harmed unless something grand and imaginative is done. The unemployed, poverty-stricken white man must be made to realize that he is in the very same boat as the Negro.”

That’s Dr. King!

“Together,” he said, “They could exert massive pressure on the government to get jobs for all! Together, they could form a grand alliance! Together they could merge all people for goodwill!”

So I need you all to know today that this is not some touchy-feely slogan. It’s not some easy-kind-of-coming-together. Dr. King said in 1967 speaking to a group just like this that it just might be that the only group who could form the massive restructure of American society would be Blacks, Poor Whites, Progressive Whites, Working-Class folks and even recipients of welfare. This may be the only coalition that could shift America’s economic architecture and make the profound changes necessary to care for all of her people.

So this Same Boat theme is a social and political strategy, born out of a serious assessment of the history of injustice and its contemporary reality. These words, spoken from Dr. King's prophetic imagination of a just community, still have relevance and application today.

Dr. King said America needed a Stimulus Plan 40 years ago! But his stimulus plan called for a “bottom-up” approach, not a “banker-down” approach.

Now Dr. Forbes, if we had only listened back then, we would not be in the trouble that we’re in now. Wall Street can’t drive a just society. Capitalism can’t be driven crazy by greed. If you ignore the poor, if you ignore those on the bottom there will eventually be an implosion!

In fact, we’ve been talking about this whole economic crisis wrong. The fact of the matter is, we’ve had a Silent Depression that has caught up with us. A political economist from the University of Maryland said, “What we’re really beginning to experience,” in a article called *America Beyond Capitalism*, “Is a process of slow decay, punctuated by a recurring economic crisis, one in which reforms achieve sporadic gains. But the long term trends of growing inequality, economic dislocation, failing democratic accountability, deepening poverty,

ecological degradation, greater invasions of liberty and growing imprisonment especially of minorities, continues to slowly and quietly challenge the belief in the capacities and moral integrity of the overall system and its governing elite.”

MIT Professor Otto Scharmer said, “There is a blind spot in American economic theory today. It is called 'consciousness.' Our refusal to have an economic theory that looks and sees that we are all integrated and we all really need each other.”

And that’s the big question. We’re going to have to have a review of capitalism as it exists today.

How can the nation’s wealth be ultimately shifted institutionally to benefit the vast majority of people? We can’t live in isolation. For years we were taught what was good for Wall Street was good for your street and our street. But that no longer holds true. We can’t live in isolation. We’re on the same ship now. The same boat now. A boat is nothing without water. There must be an integration. It has to be a coming together.

Martin Luther King said 40 years ago when you ignore the poor, one day the whole system will collapse and implode. And these problems existed, Lord knows, long before Dr. King started talking about them. The mass media today has finally discovered them. They keep saying: “The Crisis! The Crisis!”

Well, there were people in crisis before CNN even announced the crisis! That’s the problem! We are engaged in the kind of attention violence against the people who were in crisis before the crisis was even made public.

When CNN discovered we were in The Crisis in 2008, the poverty rate in North Carolina was 14.8%. Check with my brother Chris Fitzsimon and the other fine people at N.C. Policy Watch. The poverty rate for Whites was 9%, for African Americans it was 20%, and for Latinos was 7.4%. This was a Silent Depression that CNN didn’t report until the Wall Street Crisis got its attention. There were 40 million poor people without health care before the crisis got public attention. There were 50-100 million who were under-insured. There was 9-10% of unemployment in the nation. Millions of people! Almost 20% of African-Americans were jobless BEFORE the crisis was public. Millions of poor children! More than 52% of African-Americans who qualified for stable, low-rate loans, were illegally steered to predatory sub-prime loans before CNN discovered the Crisis.

Then, in the final days of 8 years of Bush, the system imploded.

Now we recognize we are bound to one another whether we like it or not. And since this crisis is out of the ordinary, our thinking has to be out of the box. We need a new economy not just a return to the old one. We need one that recognizes we are all interconnected. One that recognizes that our ship of state will be shipwrecked if we don’t understand that “we’re all in the same boat”.

Not just in economics must we recognize this, but also in education. In education we need to hear clearly, we’re in the same boat.

Now we're in the middle of this discussion about "Neighborhood Schools." A policy which will create schools of poverty.

Let me deal with something upfront. I know that some are tempted to believe that an integrated school system is not even worth fighting for. Some people say, even in the Black community, that our children don't have to sit next to White kids to learn.

Frederick Douglass taught himself to read by tricking White children into showing him the alphabet then pouring over stolen books and newspapers and Black pamphlets by night. He sharpened his skills by teaching other slaves to read the New Testament in secret but he wasn't satisfied with that.

John Hope Franklin learned in Jim Crow Schools, segregated schools, but he wasn't satisfied with that.

My own parents grew up in segregated schools. I went to segregated kindergarten. My parents were recruited to integrate the schools in Washington County. They met with Black and White teachers at Elizabeth City State University, as they planned for integration that was years too long in coming. But segregation was wrong and they knew it was wrong. I knew it was wrong.

Our mothers and fathers built the most successful freedom struggle in the history of the world with what they learned from Jim Crow schools. But they always knew there was something wrong. There's something wrong with being in a nation that says, "We the People" then you segregate the people who are the most precious among you, which are your children.

The concept "Neighborhood Schools" sounds nice linguistically. But politically it was born as a part of Nixon southern strategy, to split blacks and whites politically to insure that there would never be an integrated political coalition like the one that caused North Carolina to elect President Obama.

You need to understand this history because we are seeing it being used again. Why do you think the new Wake County School Board has made a big to-do about being Republicans in what is supposed to be a non-partisan Board interested in the futures of all our children? Why do you think Karl Rove, one of the authors of *Division*, is visiting North Carolina right in the middle of this?

That's because "Neighborhood Schools" sounds right. It sounds like your kids might get 10 extra minutes of sleep. But underneath there's a history of divisiveness. Governor, you know that history. You talked about it some. NAACP won *Brown vs Board of Education*. It took a long time to get desegregation in the first place! Don't forget that! 54 was the ruling. 55 the Court had to rule again, and it was a stranger ruling: "With all deliberate speed." How do you be deliberate and speedy?

Then what the state of North Carolina did was create the Pupil Assignment Act of 1955 which gave local school boards the power to assign students on the basis of vague criteria that let districts remain segregated without mention of race.

Then North Carolina came up with the Pearsall Plan in 1956 that created arrangements that fostered segregated schools with our public dollars. According to historian David Cecelski, these measures allowed local school boards to delay desegregation for more than a decade - - longer than many other districts in the deep south.

In the late 1960's, when the Pearsall Plan began to leak a little around the edges because of the good work of NAACPers across the state, people like my mama and daddy, North Carolina began a plan, named ironically the "Freedom of Choice Plan" that in practice almost always meant segregation.

It took another NAACP victory in *Swann vs Mecklenburg* in 1971, when a legal team led by our friend and mentor, Julius Chambers, before North Carolina finally began trying to meet its constitutional duty to desegregate our schools. In *Swann*, the Supreme Court said, "At long last, school boards had an obligation to overcome residential segregation and deliver the promises of *Brown vs. Board of Education*." For 17 long years, the State of North Carolina broke the law of *Brown*. The Wake County Diversity Policies, developed in the wake of *Swann*, by brave educational leaders, Black and White, had become a regional model for southern metropolitan areas coming out of 100 years of rigid Jim Crow housing, zoning, lending and schools.

So don't ever forget where we've come from and how hard it was just to get here! Let me set the record straight, because a lot of bloggers say a lot of things that are not true. The truth is, what we care about is high-quality, well-funded, constitutional schools with experienced high-quality teachers for all of our children, rich and poor, Black and White, Asian and Latino. That's what we fought for and that's what we will fight for.

We believe that all of the children of Wake County, of New Hanover County, of Wayne County, of Mecklenburg County, of every county, deserve the best schools in the world. All of them! We believe red or yellow, black or white, EVERY CHILD is precious in God's sight.

What we know from history and from the facts that under the guise of "Neighborhood Schools," which is nothing more than another name for resegregation, that resegregation is the enemy of school excellence.

It's not that complicated!

Research shows that schools in which large majorities are poor and segregated become failing schools. Right now we have 39 failing high schools in North Carolina. Let me say to all of our Legislators, we know where they are. You know where they are. The Honorable Howard Manning has, in no uncertain terms, spelled it out repeatedly to you.

If these failing schools were in suburban communities, we would have fixed them even if we had to take some of that lottery money, we would have made sure they got fixed.

But you know why we haven't fixed them? Because these 39 high schools are 70 to 80 to 90% resegregated, high poverty, high teacher turnover, low student performance and underfunded. It is a crying shame! We know where these schools are. We know what they need. But we have refused to do right by all of our children!

The issue is not . . .the issue has never been whether our children got to sit next to White children. That's a misrepresentation. The issue is whether we let some of our schools become Pools of Misery and Failure, that sinks our schools and the precious cargo they carry. The historical data proves that "separate but equal" doesn't work and it's unlawful.

Schools segregated by socio-economic status inevitably undermine our goal of high-quality experienced teachers for all students. Schools where poverty is concentrated breed teacher burnout because it's hard work. Research shows that experienced teachers transfer to easier assignments. Schools for poor children are schools where teachers start. . .but do not stay.

For more than thirty years, the educational research almost speaks with one voice on two things. First, schools where poverty is concentrated undermine the performance of all students regardless of their individual wealth. Secondly all students, regardless whether their students are affluent, middle-class, or poor, perform at a higher level in schools with diverse classrooms. So it's really about class and race.

What many mean by "Neighborhood Schools" is a school where the price of admission is the ability to pay a gigantic mortgage. What this crowd wants to do, Governor, is take our tax money, and essentially create private schools paid for with my money. Of course they claim it won't be true segregation like the old days. You know 100% Blacks over here in the schools with hand-me down books, supplies, equipment and buildings and 100% Whites over in the well-funded schools. No, this crowd will be happy to have a handful of kids with some darker skin. It's okay if the "vanilla" is sprinkled in with the "cinnamon." What they really want are resegregated schools, funded with public money, so their children only mix with the kids from their posh neighborhoods. Will somebody say, "Not on my dime!"

When we, especially in the south, get bogged down in the emotional debate about whether our public schools should be segregated or integrated, whether we should have a high concentration of poverty in some schools or whether we should have high concentration of race in some schools, we should remember the ugly past we have come from.

We should not want to return to that in any form or fashion. We may have come over here on different boats but we're on the same boat now!

Then, folks have the nerve. I don't know how to call it. I'm from the country. I don't know how to call some things. The word is, a lie. Do you all know how to make that cuter? Do you know any better words? There are some in this crowd who are lying. The New York Times magazine cover story in February, 2008, reported that the Wake County Schools were a national model for purely class-based education. All over the country educational leaders brag on Wake County Diversity program. Between 1997-2007 Wake County Schools doubled the percentage of black students performing above grade level from 40% to 82.5%.

This was not achieved at the expense of middle-class students. And anyone who says so is lying. Their scores went up too. In Wake County, 86% of the students in the current Diversity Program, right now, attend schools within 5 miles of their homes. And 99% attend schools within 10 miles of their homes. I'm from Washington County. I had to drive 25 miles and I drove the bus! I got up with the chickens!

Of course diversity is not enough. Diversity is a means to an end. It's only part of the battle. Wake County Schools have much to improve upon. But one thing's for sure. They can not spare time and energy following the "Neighborhood Schools" crowd's route to resegregation. We know that diversity of our schools makes our schools stronger. We already know that. We have better things to talk about than where the this crowd would take us.

But we've got to fight them! If we don't fight them, if we sit back and allow them to take us down this driveway to division, we give them permission to undermine all the other things we know need to be improved.

The reality is, if this school board were serious about student achievement, they would leave diversity alone. That's a false dichotomy to suggest one negates the other. What they, and every other school board in North Carolina should be focusing on, are ensuring diverse classrooms for all children, equity in funding, high-quality teachers, smaller classrooms, with strong support for math, science and parental involvement. That's where we need to be focused.

Instead they are trying to insert into the public policy of North Carolina that it is good educational policy to place poor children into Neighborhood Schools in areas where the legacy of race discrimination is self-evident, thus condemning our poor children to the most underfunded, most segregated, most poverty schools. That's dangerous! That's wrong! And we believe, it's unconstitutional!

This crowd in Wake County is not alone. School Boards across America are intentionally or passively allowing the resegregation of schools faster than we did in the 1970s. If you don't believe it can happen in Wake County, in New Hanover County, drive 46 ½ minutes from this hotel to Wayne County. We have a public school system which has created a School attendance area that is 99.9% Black, in a city that's 50-50 Black/White. Seymour Johnson Base is in the heart of Goldsboro, but the School Board buses kids 8 miles out past Goldsboro High to another high school outside of the city. What the Wayne County School Board has done is killing economic development in our area. It's killed our ability to recruit jobs. It's only 46 ½ minutes from this hotel.

The truth of the issue is people use the ploy of the Neighborhood Schools are wrong. It's a wedge issue. Their compassion is too limited. Their purpose is too narrow. Their heart is too selfish. And their motive is too rooted in the past from what America and the South are trying to leave behind.

Don't tell me diversity didn't work! I'm the result of diversity. My great-grandmother was a full-blooded Tuscaroran Indian. My aunts and my uncles were mulatto and white. My granddaddy was blacker than midnight, a coal miner from West Virginia! I didn't get these good looks until somebody got integrated!

That's why when I say "WE," I don't just mean Black people. And I don't just mean the NAACP! The NAACP is not a Black organization anyway. It's a Civil Rights organization made up of all kinds of people. But we, all of us who care about our children's futures, must refuse to turn back. We can't return to the past. Instead, we have to answer Dr. King's question,

the one he asked us before he died in his last book he published: “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?”

Dr. King talked to us as adults. He asked grown up questions. And we’re grown ups now! All of us who had parents who labored in the struggle know that they were the grown ups then. You know from raising children, they always want to talk about whose fault it is. “Momma he started it! Daddy he started it!” The grown up question is “Where Do We Go From Here?”

We have it all right here. We have within our grasp the basic building blocks of a new freedom movement. It’s the Obama Coalition. African Americans, Latinos, Whites, Native Americans and Asians. It’s our best churches. It’s our labor and environmental groups. It’s the thousands represented by the Jones Street People's Assembly.

That’s why I’m calling all of you and everybody you know, to the Mass People’s Assembly on Saturday morning, February 13th. We will gather at Shaw University where 50 years ago the students said “We’re gonna deal with some of these issues.” The flyer is on your table. The theme of this year's Jones Street Assembly is simple: *For our children: We must never turn back. We must say no to resegregation. We want better, diverse schools, good jobs and economic investment and less prisons.* That’s why we must come together.

You must understand the Neighborhood Schools resegregationist crowd did not target Wake County because the schools don’t work. They targeted it because they do work and the potential is here to make them better. They stirred up this school resegregation issue in Wake County specifically because of successful socio-economic segregation of Wake County Public Schools has become a national model that threatened to reinvigorate the spirit of *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

And you must understand that their goal is to split the Obama Coalition. That’s why Mr. Rove is coming to Raleigh. He loves Division. And I’m not talking about long division. I’m talking about how to get his people elected, even if they have lost the majority vote, by 5 to 4. He loves dividing people by race.

But I stopped by to tell you, we’re about to make him lose count. When you look around this room, look around and see all the people you love. Think about the life of Dr. King. We know that the movement wasn’t just about him. It wasn’t just about one man. It was made up of a community just like the one this diverse crowd represents. It’s made up of all of them

That’s why Dr. King said analyzing history, analyzing economics, analyzing education, we may have come on the different ships, but we’re on the same boat now.

I’m going to conclude here. But I’ve done some research on boats and ships and sailing. I’ve found out that boats and ships can be used for a lot of things. Boats and ships can be made to float. Boats and ships carry people. Boats and ships carry supplies. Boats and ships can rescue people. But in all of my reading, I found out that boats and ships are not meant to go backwards. If you ever see a ship going backwards, it’s a haunted ship! The only way a ship can go backwards is if somebody turns it around.

Well, we’ve come to far to turn this ship around. We may not be where we’re going but we’re not where we’ve been.

We've crossed the sea of slavery.

We've crossed the sea of Jim Crow and we can't turn this ship around.

My daddy was a sailor in the Navy. And he told me that sailors used to teach that on every ship there are spirits of passengers past. He said sometimes when they're on the ship you can hear them talk to you. Seems like I hear some talking on our ship!

Seems like I hear Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman saying "Don't turn this ship around!"

Seems like I hear Thurgood Marshall and Adam Clayton Powell saying, "Don't turn this ship around!"

Seems like I hear Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker saying "Don't turn this ship around!"

Seems like I hear Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Mary Mcleod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt saying "Don't turn this ship around!"

Seems like I hear J.W. Hood and Abraham Galloway and John Hyman saying "Don't turn this ship around!"

Seems like I hear Medgar Evers and Martin King saying "Don't turn this ship around! Go forward together!"

We've come too far to go back now! We're a little bit closer than we were yesterday! I see land on the horizon. I see the shores of justice on the horizon. I see opportunity on the horizon but we can't turn around!"

Forward! Together! The God of our weary years, the God of our silent tears says "Don't turn this ship around!"

No matter how rough the seas, even if it gets dark! Forward! Together!

We've come from the outhouse to the White House! Forward Together!

Our children's future depends on it! Don't turn this ship this boat around! Forward Together!

This is no time to be drugged out! This is no time to be spaced out! This is no time to take a time out!

Get on board! Let's go forward! Together! All hands on deck!

Not gonna to let economic injustice turn us around! Not gonna to let the school board turn us around! We're on the same ship now! Not gonna to let ANYBODY, ANYBODY, ANYBODY, ANYBODY turn us around!"