

CLASS OF 2006

March 24, 2006

Dr. Michael A. Battle
Interdenominational Theological Center
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Dr. Battle,

At the first senior class meeting on January 31, 2006, most members of the senior class were informed for the first time that Bishop Eddie L. Long, pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, will be the speaker for the 2006 ITC commencement pastor of one of the largest congregations in this country, and an internationally recognized preacher, Bishop Long's questionable administrative practices, theological irresponsibility, and consistent denigration of the value of theological education makes his fitness for speaking at ITC's commencement highly questionable.

Based on these concerns, it is our hope that you will meet with the Senior Class as soon as possible to speak to the concerns that we have in regard to Bishop Long's appropriateness to speak for our commencement ceremony and its implications for the direction that ITC is taking as an institution. Although there are some members of the class who are supportive of Bishop Long's coming, we represent the quorum of Senior Class members who are concerned that based on what Bishop Long has said and done on public record, he may not represent the virtues that ITC should promote as a torch-bearing enterprise of theological education for this nation and world.

One would think that as a graduate of ITC and as a vice-chair of the Board of Trustees for one of our constituent seminaries (Morehouse School of Religion), Bishop Long would be an outspoken advocate for theological education. One would assume that Long would provide a public endorsement of ITC's attempts to create a critical mass of preachers, pastors, scholars, administrators, missionaries, musicians, and educators who are hermeneutically equipped, mission oriented, and theologically sound.

Yet, Bishop Long has repeatedly proven himself to be one who discredits the mission statement of ITC to educate and nurture "women and men who commit to and practice a liberating and transforming spirituality; academic discipline; religious, gender, and cultural diversity; and justice and peace."



We ask the question, what about Bishop Long's ministry supports any value, any lesson, or any practice that we should have learned while matriculating at ITC?

We are reminded of the story published in the Atlanta-Journal Constitution's Sunday paper on August 28, 2005 where public records show Long created a charity that benefited himself more than the people he claimed to serve. The article states,

The charity, Bishop Eddie Long Ministries Inc., provided him with at least \$3.07 million in salary, benefits and the use of property between 1997 and 2000 — nearly as much as it gave to all other recipients combined during those years, tax records show.

It is certainly ethically problematic for a pastor already of considerable wealth to establish a charity that exploits his status as a pastor for his own economic benefit rather than best serve the people he claims to have served.

Furthermore, in the same article, Long is quoted as making statements that seriously call into question his commitment to ITC's vision statement to produce "public theologians - men and women who are intellectually keen, politically sophisticated, economically savvy, culturally sensitive, family friendly, technologically literate, and spiritually astute."

In deflecting criticism about his and his church's practices, Long stated,

We're not just a church, we're an international corporation. We're not just a bumbling bunch of preachers who can't talk and all we're doing is baptizing babies. I deal with the White House. I deal with Tony Blair. I deal with presidents around this world. I pastor a multimillion-dollar congregation.

He further declared, "You've got to put me on a different scale than the little black preacher sitting over there that's supposed to be just getting by because the people are suffering." Statements like these, seriously call into question Bishop Long's role as a servant leader and his methods as a church administrator. Those of us who have been prepared for pastoral ministry have been cautioned to remain humble as we serve congregations and communities of increasing need. As the ITC motto is "Students Enter, Leaders Depart," Bishop Long, it seems, is not a proper model for pastoral leadership as we enter the world to serve.

In addition, Bishop Long possesses dubious gender politics. In a New Birth church newsletter, Bishop Long wrote an article titled "Setting the Women in Order," where he makes clear his position on the role of women. Bishop Long claims,

By nature, women are more sensitive and refined in thought. Because of their intuitive, emotional thinking, a woman may be more receptive to false teaching than men. Intuitiveness is a valuable gift from God and is needed for

balance. That's why satan (sic) attacks women in the spiritual realm.

Despite the fact that ITC is a theologically and ideologically diverse community of varying positions on gender justice, our mission statement declares that ITC students are "to be educated to commit to and practice a liberating and transforming spirituality," "gender diversity," and "justice." As a center of Womanist scholarship in pastoral care, Christian education, and theology, and through the challenges to gendered oppression raised in all of ITC's curriculum from biblical studies to Christian worship, to claim that women are more susceptible to demonic forces betrays what many of us have learned at ITC about gender equality and the maltreatment of women (and Black women in particular) in our churches and communities.

Lastly, Bishop Long has a reputation for discrediting the value of theological education and we need not look further than his comments from the last time he was given the opportunity to speak from an ITC pulpit. In January 2003, at the invitation of then interim President Oliver J. Haney, Bishop Long preached for the President's Chapel Hour. Bishop Long used this platform as an opportunity to berate, ridicule, and discredit our denominational heritages, the value of theological education as a whole, and the faculty of ITC in particular as antiquated irrelevant hindrances from hearing God's voice. The topic of his sermon was "Are You the Anti-Christ?" Although an obvious reference to 1 John 2:22, he preached from 1 Samuel, chapter 3 with emphasis on verses 4-10. In this familiar pericope, Samuel, under the care of the prophet Eli and asleep in the temple, hears a voice call for him, but mistakes God's voice for Eli's. In Long's exegesis of this text, Eli represents the obsolete traditions of the church that prevent believers from hearing the voice of God and following the new movement that God is initiating through Jesus Christ.

Bishop Long was clear that in order for us to follow this "fresh move," we must sever ourselves from tradition and the denominational heritages that we draw from for theological insight. To not do so, is to be the "anti-Christ" because to "deny" this new movement (of which Bishop Long considers himself a leader) then you are denying Jesus Christ himself. To make such a suggestion at a seminary that prides itself on an ecumenical spirit that celebrates the virtue of denominational heritage and tradition is the ultimate disrespect to the founders of our constituent seminaries and the ecumenical vision that birthed ITC.

He then moved to the New Testament and claimed that God allowed for John the Baptist's head to be severed because in order for the people to follow Jesus, they had to be "severed" from his influence. Similarly, Samuel should have "severed" himself from Eli, because Samuel's dependence on his caretaker made him unable to detect God's voice when he heard it. This highly irresponsible exegesis and appalling theology is compounded by his use of this interpretation to dishonor the very faculty who has challenged us to listen for God's voice in new ways. Bishop Long ridiculed the faculty so harshly that several faculty members bitterly walked out.

What Long failed to understand in his exegesis is that if it weren't for Eli, then Samuel would not have known what to do when he heard the call from God. In verse nine of

this passage, after a period of confusion, Eli realizes what has happened to Samuel and offers him direction for receiving the revelation that God intends for Samuel to hear, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" Samuel follows Eli's direction and God brings revelation to Samuel's ears. For Bishop Long to disrespect the faculty of the ITC, a highly respected, highly qualified, highly committed group of individuals who have made great personal and professional sacrifices to teach us and thousands of other graduates of ITC, bespeaks Long's lack of respect for ITC's heritage as a whole, for it is the faculty who is on the front line for preparing us for ministry, however we are called to serve.

Yet, the revelation that God gives to Samuel has great bearing on the prevailing concern we have about Bishop Long's preaching for ITC's commencement. God tells Samuel,

See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them (1 Samuel 3:11-14, NRSV).

In revisiting God's revelation to Samuel, we wonder why we would ask an alumnus of ITC who through lack of scholarship and respect for our heritage has consistently misrepresented the values of this institution to return without accountability.

Dr. Battle, we understand that you received a list that was supposed to reflect who the Senior Class wanted to speak for commencement. While there is some confusion as to how the list was compiled, what is certain is that the invitation for the commencement speaker comes from your office. Therefore, amidst Bishop Long's deplorable behavior on public record, it is of concern to us that you would deem Bishop Long fit to send us forth on our day of commencement to teach and preach a "liberating spirituality."

At Tavis Smiley's *State of the Black Church* symposium in February 2003, less than a month after Bishop Long's visit to ITC, Smiley asked Dr. James Cone, the father of Black liberation theology, if the Black Church had become too political and strayed away from its primary mission. Dr. Cone cautioned that the Black Church has not been good at thinking about what its nature and mission is. Cone made the case that the question the Black Church must ask itself whether it is called to save its own life or whether it is called to lose its life for the sake of others. Dr. Cone continued,

The Black Church is concerned with saving its own life because it is interested in the gospel of success. The cross is it at the center of the gospel, because the cross is not a gospel of success ... I feel today, with so much focus on building buildings and all the other humungous things that we do, that we fail to see that the cross is at the heart of what the Black Church ought to be about.

He concluded by stating, "I am concerned that the church doesn't get too concerned about its own survival because Jesus said, people who seek to save their life shall lose it. But if you lose your life for the sake of the least of these, then you'll find your life."

Many of us entered ITC during a turbulent and uncertain time, unsure as to who the president would be, what faculty members would remain, and whether our degrees would be accredited. Yet, we remained vigilant, hopeful, and committed to ITC because of the unique contribution to theological education that this seminary provides. We applaud you, Dr. Battle, for steering ITC to a place of stability through a wilderness of doubt. At this stage, however, it seems that we of the ITC community are at a point of thinking about, reflecting on, and re-evaluating our nature and mission as an institution.

The invitation of one to speak for commencement who has consistently ridiculed, and mocked the values that God and the ancestors of this institution created ITC to stand for, is a sign to the Senior Class that ITC may be moving in a direction that betrays the legacy that preceded us.

We request an opportunity for us to meet with you in regard to the concerns that we have outlined in this letter on Tuesday, March 28th at 12:00 noon and 5:00 pm. Of course, we request two meetings in order to accommodate both day and night students. We thank you for hearing our concerns and look forward to being in further communication with you.

In service of the living Christ,

The 2005-2006 Senior Class of the Interdenominational Theological Center

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cc: ITC Board of Trustees
ITC Faculty
ITC Staff
ITC Alumni Association
ITC Constituent Seminary Deans
ITC Student Christian League
ITC 2006 Senior Class

Enclosures

Printout of Atlanta Journal-Constitution article (August 28, 2005)
Copy of "Setting the Women in Order" from New Birth church newsletter
Recording of Bishop Long's sermon in ITC Chapel from January 16, 2003
Signatures of senior class members who endorse this letter
Recording of James Cone, State of Black Church (February 2003)