

Public Testimony by Rev. Alfred Babington-Johnson to the Metropolitan Governance Task Force 1/5/24

Mr. Chairman Hornstein and members of the Commission. I am Rev. Alfred Babington-Johnson the CEO of the Stairstep Foundation and Convener of His Works United, the largest ecumenical coming together of African American churches in the State of Minnesota.

We are currently engaged in litigation against the Met Council based on its housing and land use policies. The Council, by action and inaction, has not encouraged or allocated subsidized housing development appropriately, consequently advancing racial segregation and causing economic disadvantage to the Black community.

The perpetuation of segregated communities has, as a negative outcome, demonstrable social disparities. Any analysis of these disparities, often labeled as social determinants, finds African American people being at the greatest disadvantage on metrics that track health, wealth, education, or life expectancy. These outcomes are not inevitable but come about because of contemplations and actions consistent with the rationale of a Supreme Court that issued the Plessy v Ferguson decision in 1896. That Court put forward the notion that separating accommodations for whites and blacks was legitimate if those accommodations were equal. It took more than half a century for a more sober court to reject that sophistry and cry out in Brown v Bd Ed of Topeka, Kansas, that separate is inherently equal.

More right thinking was prompted by the marches and protests led by the African American community and Black Pastors together with labor leaders and motivated whites who carried the legacy of their abolitionist forbears. Fruit from this tree was landmark legislation: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 to end racial discrimination, The Civil Rights Act of 1965 seeking to protect voting rights, and then to end the decade, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which included Title VIII the Fair Housing Act.

This Act called for recipients of federal funds to affirmatively further Fair Housing. This was intended to unite what the Kerner Commission earlier termed the two Americas that were, in fact, separate and in fact unequal.

Here, Mr. Chairman, we come to the crux of our testimony today. After a sterling performance in advancing fair housing in the 1970s, the Met Council lost the focus of affirmatively pursuing equal housing opportunities throughout the metropolitan area.

If this august body were made up of elected officials, then our voices of discontent at the Council's actions, inactions, and unintended consequences would be met with accountability at the ballot box. The appointed nature of this body insulates it from the concerns, opinions, and disappointment of the members of the districts the council purports to represent.

The stakes are too high. The issues are too critical to allow metropolitan decision-makers to operate without regard to the wishes of the governed. We need an elected Metropolitan Council.