

January 15, 2020

*The Board of Directors of the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section,
Issues Statement of Concern*

The International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section (IBS-ELS) is dedicated to advancing the theology and legacy of German pastor-theologian and Nazi resistor Dietrich Bonhoeffer through critical scholarship, engaged pedagogy, and constructive readings of Bonhoeffer's collected writings. While initiated in the United States, this statement expresses the concern, input, and support of members of the Board from English-speaking countries around the world, including South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. We speak noting that Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught the profound relatedness of all human persons and, indeed, of peoples and nations. We therefore feel called to raise our voices in support of justice and peace, and in resistance to every form of unjust discrimination and aggressive nationalism.

As grateful recipients, and now custodians, of the theological, ethical, and political legacy of the German pastor-theologian and Nazi resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we believe all persons of faith and conscience should prayerfully consider whether our democracy can endure a second term under the presidency of Donald Trump. We believe it cannot. In 2017, we issued a statement expressing our grave concerns about the rise in hateful rhetoric and violence, the rise in deep divisions and distrust in our country, and the weakening of respectful public discourse ushered in by the election of Donald Trump. We articulated the need for Christians to engage in honest and courageous theological reflection in the face of the threat posed by his leadership. Over the last three years, the need for such discernment has grown more urgent.

A hallmark of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's legacy is his insistence that we see the great events of world history from "the view from below" (1942). That is, he urges us to see from the perspective of those who suffer. The policies of the Trump administration both threaten and disempower the most vulnerable members of our society, including people of color, members of the LGBTQ communities, Muslims and other religious minorities, immigrants, refugees, the poor, the marginally employed, and the unemployed. Moreover, Donald Trump has now taken ill-advised military action that raises the specter of war. One of the greatest lessons learned from the history of the Christian churches during Germany's Third Reich is that it is crucial to respond to threats to human life, integrity, and community when they first appear, and to continue to challenge them.

As Bonhoeffer scholars, religious leaders, and confessing Christians, we have a special responsibility to name crises and discern responsible actions of resistance and healing. We confess our own complicity in the social order that has produced Donald Trump's presidency, for many of the social and economic injustices we confront predate it. As we take responsibility for these injustices, we resist the policy goals of this administration that have contributed to ever-deepening divisions and growing vulnerability among the marginalized sectors of our population, including the dehumanizing treatment of migrants, systematic attempts to strip rights from LGBTQ persons, the increased rapacious destruction of the environment, the marginalization and assault on communities of color especially through voter suppression, and the economic policies

that have contributed to the largest disparity of wealth in the nation's history. We believe that an honest reckoning with these realities must lead to dismantling the dehumanizing ideologies and systemic inequities in which they are rooted.

We believe that one crucial step in this reckoning is ending Donald Trump's presidency. We do not make this statement lightly. Bonhoeffer's writings have been influential for Christians from a wide range of churches and political views, but we feel called to address the grave moral concerns we have outlined here that call every one of us to account. During this new year, debates and discussion will continue to be held concerning the best way for America to move forward. We believe that the United States has the human resources to provide capable and willing leaders, and that together a more just and respectful future can be forged. Acknowledging that all human community and leadership is a mixture of blessing and brokenness, health and dysfunction, we stand with all those who believe this country deserves and needs a constitutional and peaceful change in leadership. And we commit ourselves to listen to the call and obey the commands of Jesus as we enter the year 2020.

We make this statement, in part, because we know that Dietrich Bonhoeffer - a theologian and martyr - is often cited in times of political contention. We offer the following theological lessons from Bonhoeffer's work as a glimpse into the ways he understood his faith and his responsibilities as a citizen in his own times, and to encourage discernment about how these words might resonate for us today:

- He spoke of God's freedom and human freedom as "freedom *for* others" not "freedom *from* others." (1932)
- He preached that the gospel is "the good news of the dawning of the new world, the new order ... God's order," and therefore it is good news for the poor. (1932)
- He warned that leaders become "misleaders" when they are interested only in their own power and neglect their responsibilities to serve those whom they govern. (1933)
- He warned that when a government persecutes its minorities, it has ceased to govern legitimately. (1933)
- He reminded Christians that the church has an "unconditional obligation toward the victims of any societal order, even if they do not belong to the Christian community." (1933)
- He wrote, "For peace must be dared. It is the great venture. ... The hour is late. The world is choking with weapons. ... The trumpets of war may blow tomorrow. For what are we waiting?" (1934)
- He believed that Jesus's commands in the Gospels - like love your neighbor as you love yourself, welcome the stranger, and love your enemies - are to be obeyed in the social and political realm. He wrote: "From the human point of view there are countless possibilities of understanding and interpreting the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus knows only one possibility: simply go and obey." (1936)

- He wrote, “Behold God become human ... God loves human beings. ...Not an ideal human, but human beings as they are. ... What we find repulsive ... namely, real human beings ... this is for God the ground of unfathomable love.” (1941)
- He wrote from prison, “... one only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life. ...then one takes seriously no longer one’s own sufferings but rather the suffering of God in the world. Then one stays awake with Christ in Gethsemane. And I think this is faith; this is [metanoia/repentance]. And this is how one becomes a human being, a Christian. ... How should one become arrogant over successes or shaken by one’s failures when one shares in God’s suffering in the life of this world?” (1944)
- He wrote from prison, “How do we go about being ‘religionless-worldly’ Christians, how can we be [ecclesia/church], those who are called out, without understanding ourselves religiously as privileged, but instead seeing ourselves as belonging wholly to the world?” (1944)

Signed by the Board of Directors, International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section,

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About the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section

Since its founding in 1972, the Society has pioneered research and scholarship on the life, historical context, and writings of Bonhoeffer. Working in close collaboration with Bonhoeffer’s best friend, theologian and pastor Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s niece Renate Bethge, and scholars in Germany, the Society laid the foundation for the historical and textual study of Bonhoeffer’s life and work in the English-speaking world, culminating in the recently completed sixteen-volume translation of the German critical edition, the *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English Edition*, published by Fortress Press. The Society is now developing a centralized, public, virtual

community, as a more accessible resource for undergraduate students, scholars, pastors, activists, and communities of faith to engage Bonhoeffer’s legacy in concrete ways: www.thebonhoeffercenter.org For more information, please contact the president of IBS-ELS, Dr. Jennifer M. McBride, at jmcbride@mccormick.edu.