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AN OPEN LETTER TO THE AMERICAN PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION

We, the members of the **Black Psychiatrists of America (BPA)**, are writing to the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to express our strong disagreement with the misrepresentations made by a few members of your association with regards to Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, the invited Convocation speaker for the 164th Annual Meeting of the APA in Hawaii this May, 2011. We are especially troubled by the accusations that remarks attributed to him with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict constitute anti-Semitic comments.

The Black Psychiatrists of America appreciates and supports the APA's decision to stand firm and invite the Nobel Peace Prize winner, an international humanitarian, in order for him to bring the same message of truth and reconciliation he shared at the 2010 meeting of the American College of Psychiatrists. The APA is a professional organization comprised of members of different ethnic, cultural, religious, and racial backgrounds as well as different professional, philosophical and world views. The APA is a "big tent" under which many different groups belong. Many of the members of our own association, the BPA, also hold membership within the APA and are deeply offended by the position that some other members of the APA have taken with regards to the Archbishop's appearance and presentation at this year's annual meeting of the APA. The BPA, like the APA, is a member organization that is clearly aware of the need to be cognizant of the "differences" that exist among and within our organizations' membership. We respect the right to have different opinions and beliefs as well, the right to have those differences respected regardless of whether or not they are in agreement with each other.

As members of an ethnic group that has experienced and continues to experience firsthand the oppression of others, we certainly do not argue with the right of these psychiatrists to express their feelings and opinions regarding the Archbishop being a speaker at the APA

BPA MISSION

The mission of the BPA is to address issues affecting the Mental Health of African-Americans and to provide a forum for continuing education for those who provide psychiatric care.



meeting. However, we find the words and actions that have been displayed and the manner in which they have been exhibited by those few psychiatrists specifically targeting the Archbishop's appearance, totally unacceptable.

As only the third speaker of African descent and the fourth person of color invited to speak at an APA Convocation since 1956, we are deeply troubled by the idea that one group would not recognize that recent comments (e.g. "his dark side") and threatened behaviors by psychiatrists, are at the least, offensive to African Americans, especially those who are also dues paid members of the APA. We think that to essentially dismiss the great work done by the Archbishop to fight apartheid and to heal his racially divided nation after its downfall is also unacceptable and intolerable. He has been recognized internationally for his efforts to heal South Africa during some of its more turbulent times. It is our understanding that this is what the Archbishop has been invited to speak about at the APA meeting and nothing more.

As both psychiatrists and descendants of persons forcibly brought to this nation and called "slaves" during the period of our ancestor's "humanicide", we strongly identify with the Archbishop and his message. His work and his message of truth and reconciliation would seem, to us, particularly appropriate for the group that desires so much to have the Archbishop, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, disinvited by your association and who also threaten to demonstrate against him because they are offended by their interpretation and/or misinterpretation of something he is alleged to have said in the past.

This group's desire to "have it their way" suggests not only a lack of awareness of the cultural implications of their actions but an utter disregard for other members of the APA who may identify with the speaker and his message. Surely, we psychiatrists, who work to help our patients make mature, rational, and respectful decisions in difficult situations, should have no difficulty with having disagreements without the particularly vitriolic and dishonest communications that have been occurring recently on the APA's own member listserv and in recent editions of "*Psychiatric Times*".

The BPA specifically takes issue with the following statements that have been made regarding Archbishop Tutu:



1. The text of a speech he gave at a managed care meeting in 1999 (the Fourth Annual Summit on International Managed Care Trends) has been used to suggest that he has spoken out in support of “for-profit” managed care systems as a solution to the world’s health care problems. The Archbishop, in fact, did not even mention managed care one time in this entire speech. He spoke to the need of a “moral universe based on a delicate network of interdependence, not exploitation”. He advocated for the promotion of good health as a primary concern for prosperous economies in a moral universe.
2. It is reported that the convocation speaker is budgeted to receive an honorarium in the amount of \$39,000 for the upcoming speech and is being suggested that this is somehow **not** in keeping with honoraria paid to recent convocation speakers in the past, including Dr. Charles Krauthammer (2003) and Tom Wolfe (2004), both of whom “created consternation among a sizeable segment of our membership” as has been implied in a recent APA Assembly paper proposed by the newly elected APA President-Elect as well as others. This information regarding the honorarium further maligns the Archbishop and is grossly misleading. Other controversial speakers at past APA meetings, including Patrick DeLeon (Past President of the American Psychological Association) who is a strong advocate for psychologists having the right to prescribe medications as well as for Scientologists, both representatives of groups that have not necessarily held the image of psychiatrists in a positive light. There is no evidence that there were any major requests or aggressive actions such as planned protests to “disinvite” them as is the current case with Archbishop Tutu over something that he **may** have said now being called “anti-Semitic”.

Further, we find it interesting that the President of the American College of Psychiatrists, Dr. John Oldham, who is also the current APA President-Elect, chose to invite the Archbishop to speak for this organization at their meeting last year. There were no petitions to disinvite him or threats of protest by its membership and he is speaking on a similar topic this year at the APA. It is our sincerest hope that the actions of a few, who have chosen, as is their right, to protest the Archbishop’s appearance at the May 2011 meeting and who did not rise up in protest against previous speakers, does not reflect a willingness to behave in one way when the speaker is not of African descent and another way when he or she is.



Archbishop Tutu was not invited to speak about his personal political stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He was invited to share his story of facing a great societal evil at a time when most of the Western world gave only lip service and passive support to the cause. Time after time, he put his life on the line and stood up against apartheid, a system that codified every vile element of racism and oppression of one group by another. Like other great people throughout history who have held unpopular views on the important issues of their day, Churchill, King, and Gandhi, to name a few, he is an important part of the historical record of speaking truth to power and his views or alleged views on one issue must not diminish his great accomplishments in other areas.

It is BPA's expressed desire that this entire incident serves as a teachable moment to us all. The history of African-Americans in the United States of America affords us a unique perspective as having been an oppressed people, much as our Jewish colleagues have regarding the history of their people. We celebrated the APA's decision to issue position statements on Racism and Cultural Diversity as a step forward in healing the wounds of bigotry and intolerance for differences within the APA's own membership. The recent threatened actions, however, by a small group of members who feel they must relate half truths and misrepresentation of the facts because of their belief that they have been "personally attacked and defamed" will not go unchallenged by those APA members who support the invitation to Archbishop Tutu to speak at the convention. Nor will they go unchallenged by the BPA either.

In the context of this challenge it is our sincerest hope that the issue pertaining to the Archbishop is not serving merely as a "scapegoat" for another, yet to be defined agenda, as so often has been the case whenever people of African descent have been involved in alleged controversial situations. We have, as a people, often historically been used as the cannon fodder for "others" who have axes to grind that at times are totally unrelated to the issues at hand. Further, the BPA in the spirit of "*truth and reconciliation*" seeks to encourage the APA and its membership to listen to "better angels" in order to resolve any differences that may exist within its membership and utilize the skills of conflict resolution and address this issue through civil discourse. When the dust settles, what would have been accomplished by this entire process if it fails to seek understanding and resolution in a healthy and productive way?



The APA, in the process of its own self assessment, must come to grips with the fact that not only is the BPA watching but the entire world as well is looking at how the association chooses to handle the disregard and disrespect of an invitation by the President of its own association to a highly respected Nobel Prize recipient known internationally as a man of God and of peace.

Respectfully submitted,
Black Psychiatrists of America
April 7, 2011