

Statement Issued by the Board of Directors of the International Bonhoeffer Society – English Language Section, February 1, 2017

Comprising scholars and religious leaders from the United States, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, the purpose of the English Language Section of the International Bonhoeffer Society is to encourage critical scholarship in conversation with the theology, life, and legacy of the German pastor-theologian and Nazi resistor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. While initiated in the United States, this statement expresses the concern, input, and support of our members in many countries that are demonstrating and protesting around the world. We speak noting that Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself 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.

The United States has undergone an unusually contentious, bitter, and ugly election that has brought us to an equally contentious, bitter, and ugly beginning of the presidency of Donald J. Trump. While it is impossible to predict what lies ahead, we are gravely concerned by the rise in hateful rhetoric and violence, the deep divisions and distrust in our country, and the weakening in respectful public discourse. Some of the institutions that have traditionally protected our freedoms are under threat. In particular, this election has made the most vulnerable members of our society, including people of color, members of the LGBTQ communities, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, the poor, and the marginally employed and the unemployed, feel even more vulnerable and disempowered.

The German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer is quoted often in such times, for he spoke eloquently to such issues. His entire theological and political journey was shaped by his conviction that the church is only truly church when it lives for all God's children in the world, and that Christians fulfill their faith as Christians only when we live for others. Members of the Bonhoeffer Society hope to make a faithful contribution to our society in this ominous time.

The best way to understand Bonhoeffer's possible message for our times is not to draw direct political analogies between his time and ours, but to understand the meaning of how he understood his faith and his responsibilities as a citizen in his own times and discern where these words might resonate for us today:

- 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 admonished Christians to “speak out for those who cannot speak” (1934) and reminded 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)
- In his book *Discipleship*, 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. Do not interpret or apply, but do it and obey. That is the only way Jesus' word is really heard. But again, doing something is not to be understood as an ideal possibility; instead, we are simply to begin acting.”(1936)
- He wrote: “I believe that in every moment of distress God will give us as much strength to resist as we need...I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are not in vain and

that is not more difficult for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds. I believe that God is no timeless fate but waits for and responds to sincere prayer and responsible actions.” (1942)

- He wrote: “Is there a political responsibility of the *individual Christian*? Individual Christians can certainly not be held responsible for the government’s actions, nor dare they make themselves responsible for them. But on the basis of their faith and love of neighbor, they are responsible for their own vocation and personal sphere of living, however large or small it is. Wherever this responsibility is faithfully exercised, it has efficacy for the polis as a whole.”(1941)
- He wrote: “... 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... 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)

In the coming time, we will seek to live such a life of witness, not only for the sake of our country, but because our Christian faith calls us to do so.