



A copy of the letter sent to DA O'Neill and signed by Ministers Conference President Rev. Joseph Nance and Bishop Todd Fulton.

Ministers miffed at DA's opposition to RJA

BY LAYLA FARMER
THE CHRONICLE

Forsyth County District Attorney Jim O'Neill and leaders of the black community are at odds, following O'Neill's support of a letter calling for the repeal of the Racial Justice Act.

Signed into law in 2009, the Racial Justice Act, known as the RJA, has been controversial since its inception. Proponents of the law say it helps to balance the playing field for those who have been impacted by racial bias, by allowing death row inmates who can prove that race played a role in their sentencing to have their sentences amended to life in prison. The architects of the Act are Forsyth County State Reps. Earline Parmon and Larry Womble.

In the Nov. 14 letter penned by Susan Doyle, president of the North Carolina Conference of District Attorneys and addressed to Phil Berger, president pro tempore of the NC Senate, Doyle railed against the law, calling it a "backdoor deal to end the death penalty in North Carolina."

"...if you do not address this issue quickly, the criminal justice system will be saddled with litigation that will crush an already underfunded and overburdened system," the letter reads in part. "...Do not allow North Carolina to continue this charade on its citizens, your constituents, with regards to the death penalty."

O'Neill signed the letter, as did dozens of other DA's from across the state. Members of the Ministers Conference and Vicinity, a predominantly black organization, took exception with O'Neill's stance and delivered their own letter to the DA last month.

"The inflammatory letter that you signed is very disturbing, especially since your coming into office was predicated upon being a fair-minded moderate and not a flagrant extremist," the Ministers Conference letter reads. "...We are deeply saddened by your actions because we had hoped our leading legal officer would be bending over backwards to ensure racial bias would not factor in any cases, especially capital ones..."

Ministers Conference members joined forces with state and local leaders to stage a press conference at Grace Presbyterian Church Tuesday in hopes of shedding light on the growing dispute.

"Maybe this would work somewhere else, but not here on our watch because we're not going to just sit back and pretend that we don't know who signed the letter," said Bishop Todd Fulton, chair of the Conference's Social Justice Committee. "...We have influence and power through the ballot. If he can't work with us as a community, then he won't have our vote."

Dr. Carlton Eversley, a longtime community organ-



Forsyth County District Attorney Jim O'Neill speaks at a gang prevention event last year.



Rep. Parmon



Dr. Eversley

izer, said O'Neill's opposition of the RJA sends a negative message to people in minority and poor communities, those who are statistically most likely to receive the penalty.

"It actually transcends the political. The question is whether or not the leading legal officer in Forsyth County wants to build a relationship of trust with communities of color," Eversley said. "...If he has a blind eye to racial and class bias, it does not bode well for a working relationship."

County Commissioner Everette Witherspoon was among those in attendance. Witherspoon, who represents the county's District A, said he was "disappointed," but not surprised to learn O'Neill is against the RJA.

"The DA's supposed to be a supporter of racial justice and racial equality in Winston-Salem, not fighting against it," he commented. "I hope Gov. Perdue stands firm and continues to veto the repeal of the Racial Justice Act."

The GOP-controlled General Assembly did vote to kill the RJA late last year, but Gov. Bev Perdue vetoed the measure that would have ended the Act. Although the GOP is seeking enough votes to override Perdue's veto, Parmon said the law is safe - for now.

"As we talk today, the Racial Justice Act is a law," Parmon said. "It remains intact; the effort to overturn it" has failed because the majority of the people in North Carolina wanted the Act."

The fact that O'Neill signed the letter when he represents a county that has had more than its share of racial justice issues is also appalling to many. Darryl Hunt, who is African American, served 18 years in prison after he was convicted

of murdering a white woman in the 1980s. Long before DNA evidence exonerated Hunt, questions about possible racial bias among police investigators already had many convinced of Hunt's innocence. Similar questions have been raised about the case of Calvin Michael Smith, a black man convicted of severely beating a pregnant white woman, Jill Marker, in 1995.

Hunt, a strong proponent of the Racial Justice Act, was on hand Tuesday.

"We're talking simply about justice and fairness," he said. "Everybody deserves justice and fairness. It shouldn't be a political game."

Rev. Willard Bass, first vice president of the Conference and founder of the Institute for Dismantling Racism, said the Conference hopes to raise awareness about the importance of the Act.

"Our community does not know that much about the Racial Justice Act, so we want to continue to educate people," said Bass, who added that the Conference will offer a workshop on the RJA during its Martin Luther King Day celebration. "By having more awareness in the community and educating citizens, we'll be in a better position to organize."

Ministers Conference leaders resolved to continue fighting for support of the RJA.

"There's certain things that are too important to go away," said Dr. Serenus Churn, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church. "Human life is at stake ... we, have the grit and the will and the determination and the ability to outlast even this situation."

O'Neill could not be reached for comment by Chronicle press time.

NEWS CLIPS

Compiled from staff wire and submitted reports

Twin City Little League sign-ups

Twin City Little League is holding sign-ups for young players every Thursday from 7 - 8 p.m. at Hanes Hosiery Recreation Center, 501 Reynolds Blvd., every Thursday.

Starting this week sign-ups will also be conducted every Saturday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Twin City Little League Complex, 2801 New Walkertown Rd., For more information, call Vanessa Westberry at 336-749-8094 or Melinda Warren at 336-486-3632.

Civil Rights Center to host MLK panel talk

The International Civil Rights Center & Museum in Greensboro will commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday with a special panel discussion titled, "Dr. King's Vision in the Twenty-First Century: A Conversation with Religious Leaders." The event will take place on Monday, Jan. 16 at 6 p.m. at the Museum, 134 South Elm St.

Leading the panel discussion will be the Rev. Dr. C. Vernon Mason, a noted civil rights activist, educator, and former attorney. Rev. Mason is best known for his leading contribution to a number of high-profile legal cases regarding Bernhard Goetz, the Howard Beach incident, Tawana Brawley and others in New York City that generated headlines during the 1980s.

"We have to integrate the church into the legal, political and economic strategies of today," said Rev. Mason. "We certainly must have this center in our communities

throughout the country by having church leaders who are prepared to guide our people in that regard. Dr. King left us a legacy of service. He showed us that we must not be afraid to challenge the status quo."



Dr. Mason

Other panelists include: William Aiken, a Buddhist practitioner for more than 35 years; Rev. Dr. Arnetta Beverly, pastor of St. Matthews United Methodist Church in Greensboro; and Max Carter, director of the Friends Center and Campus Ministry Coordinator at Guilford College.

Local church choirs are also scheduled to perform selections of inspirational music. Admission to the event is free and open to the public.

For more information, contact the Museum at (336) 274-9199 or visit www.sitimovement.org.

Festival Stage to stage "Oil City Symphony"

Festival Stage of Winston-Salem continues its second season with a revival of the Off-Broadway hit musical "Oil City Symphony," playing Jan. 27-Feb. 19 at the Hanesbrands Theatre in downtown Winston-Salem.

For "Oil City Symphony," the theatre has been transformed into a high school gymnasium, where four graduates of the 1960s have reunited to give a concert in honor of their beloved former teacher. The now middle-aged amateur musicians, whose combined talents "represent 127 years of total studying time," take the audience on a tour of every musical genre from classical piano to Top 40 to rock.

"Oil City Symphony" ran for 626 performances at the Circle in the Square Theatre Downtown from 1987-1989, winning the Drama Desk Award for Best Ensemble and

the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Off-Broadway Musical. Festival Stage's production features two of the four original cast members and co-creators: Mary Murfitt, who also directs, and Mike Craver, composer/performer in last season's Festival Stage hit "Lunch at the Piccadilly."

For tickets, a complete schedule and or other information, visit www.festivalstage.org.

Environmental League gives General Assembly bad grades

The NC League of Conservation Voters released its annual Conservation Scorecard this week, scoring NC Legislators on environmental issues since 1999.

This year's scores are the lowest they have ever been. The Conservation Scorecard gives each state legislator a score of 0 to 100 based on his or her votes on key environmental bills in the recent session of the General Assembly.

This year's scores indicate just how aggressive the new leadership has been in rolling back the environmental protections that make North Carolina a great place to live and do business, League officials said.

The average score in the House for the 2011 session was 43%, down from 67% for the 2009-2010 average; the Senate average was a mere 27%, compared to 69% in 2009-2010. In the House, the average score for the 27 new representatives was 35%, drastically down from the outgoing legislators' lifetime average of 73%. The Senate scores were even more shocking with the 15 new senators averaging just 18% as compared to their predecessors at 70%.

"Legislators in the 2011 long session made poor choices when it comes to protecting our natural resources and quality of life," said Dan Crawford, director of governmental relations for NCLCV.