

In Times of Crisis

A sober approach to the world situation must begin with the assumption that the initial basis of unity for the world must be laid on a stable accord....

The task of building a world community is man's final necessity and possibility, but also his final impossibility.... [It] will be in actuality the perpetual problem as well as the constant fulfillment of human hopes.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1944)

I have walked that long road to freedom.... I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.... I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

--Nelson Mandela (1994)

During the past thirty-five years there have been a number of events that brought a sense of crisis to prison communities. Some were experienced as a devastating loss of hope while others brought fear and a feeling of despair. At least one brought us face to face with an extreme sense of evil that we thought not possible.

Quite often when critical events happen the first concern is with family members. When the first World Trade bombing took place several inmates had relatives who worked there and immediate concern with their well-being was evident. When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1969, there was a deep sense of despair and loss of hope. When the Attica riot took place in 1971, it shook the foundations of our basic belief about the human condition. The AIDS epidemic of the '90s brought much fear before an understanding of the disease was developed.

The recent destruction of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, symbols of the U.S. economy and military strength, was the latest "shaking of the foundations" that probably will alter our world view for decades to come. Nelson Mandela's "long walk to freedom," and Reinhold

Niebuhr's image of a world community, remind us that our visions of hope are always fragile, yet possible. What this recent tragedy means to people in prison is yet to be determined but, the future of the world community will be of critical concern to all humankind.