

Robert W. Edgar, General Secretary, National Council of Churches

MR. EDGAR: I'm pleased to be here, not only to say a word of focus and commitment to the legacy of Geno, but sitting side-by-side with all of these colleagues, and especially Stu Eizenstat. Stu was the domestic policy adviser to President Carter, and I was a young congressperson elected by accident in the Watergate years, and had the chance and the opportunity for the four years of the Carter administration -- although I served for six terms -- to work with Stu on many domestic issues, especially water policy that became so controversial in those years. So it's great to reconnect with him, and it's great to be here with you.

As the senator indicated, Rosa Parks died yesterday. I mark my entry into political life and the bridge between my faith life as a pastor in Philadelphia, an urban pastor, who founded the first shelter for homeless women in the city of Philadelphia, I mark my bridge from my faith tradition to politics, based on the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King.

And the civil rights movement had an impact, not just on the black community but on the white community, as well. I grew up in a white suburb of Philadelphia. I grew up in a blue-collar working-class family. But I didn't really see poverty until I was about a senior in high school. And the United Methodist Church had what they called "come see" tours, where they literally put young people on buses and took them into the city of Philadelphia, and into the city of Chester, to see with their own eyes the impact of policies on the poor.

I met Dr. Martin Luther King five weeks before he was assassinated, here in Washington DC. I came to the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where a group of laymen and clergy were concerned about the Vietnam War, and William Coffin was the organizer, former chaplain at Yale and later the lead pastor at Riverside Church in New York. I love what Bill Coffin once said. He said, "God loves you the way you are, but he knows you can do better."

I went into the church having to cross a picket line. And in those days, the Jerry Falwell of that day was a guy by the name of Carl McIntyre, who was carrying a sign that said "Kill a commie for Christ's sake. Crossed that picket line, went into the church, went up into the balcony, and listened to speaker after speaker connect the issues of war and the issues of the poor.

Then a young clergy person came down the aisle, Dr. King, and spoke a word I thought was clear. Later, I read in his book, *Where Do We Go from Here, Chaos or Community*, these words:

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us bare, naked, and dejected, with lost opportunity. The tide in the affairs of humanity does not remain at the flood, it ebbs. We may cry out desperately for time to pause in her passage, but time is deaf to every plea and rushes on. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, 'Too late.'"

"We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence, or violent co-annihilation. This may well be humankind's 22last chance to choose between chaos and community."

The sense that Dr. King had of the urgency of now I think is important to this conversation. I like the way Hubert Humphrey summarized it to. Humphrey had a rare opportunity to speak to a joint session of the House and Senate shortly before his death, and he told a little story on himself. He said, "My wife came up to me one day because I've been known for these long speeches, and she said, 'Hubert, you don't have to talk eternally to be immortal.'"

But then he shared his famous quote and favorite quote. He said "The moral test of government is what we do to those in the dawn of life, our children, those in the twilight of life, the elderly, and those in the shadows of life: the poor, the sick, and the disabled."

Dr. King had a dream, Hubert Humphrey had a dream. I also like the dream of the late Pope Paul II. He said, "I dream of a world where none will be so poor they have nothing to give, and none will be so rich they have 23nothing to receive." The urgency of now.

As a young congressperson, I served as chair of the Northeast-Midwest coalition, looking at the older industrial states. And Geno's leadership was clearly there. Stu mentioned that the ideas about neighborhood, I think it was important at that time in history, after the fifties, after the sixties, in the mid-seventies and early eighties, for government to understand its moral obligation to the urban scene.

And I can remember early in my career being part of the Congressional Clearinghouse on the Future, and listening to people like Margaret Mead and Jonas Salk, and Alvin Toffler, envision a future beyond one-year budget and two-year elections.

Let me share with you a quick statistic that puts, I think, the conversation about the urgency of now, the conversation about recapturing a commitment to the poor, and revisiting the issue of racism in our society, and working both domestically and internationally, for justice and caring about the poor, and caring about the environment, 24and caring about peace. And let me see if I can capture it real quickly.

And its focus is on population, but you need to connect this illustration with consumption of goods. But it helps me to recognize why we must move so quickly. Let me do it here.

The earth as we know it has been around for approximately how many years? Stu, you're smart, you can tell me. How many years has the earth been in existence, and I'll give you within a billion?

MR. EIZENSTAT: Well, I don't want to get into the theological argument --

(Laughter.)

MR. EDGAR: Most scientists say the earth has been around for about 5 billion years, give or take a billion. I know there is a debate about "intelligent design." My answer to that is that God is an intelligent designer and that's why he designed evolution.

(Laughter.)

But the earth has been around for about 5 billion years. But what's interesting is, it was in 1830, about the time of the gold rush 25in California, 30 years before the Civil War, that we reached the first billion population on planet Earth. That took us about 100

million years, give or take a few. Human life as we know it probably is less than that, but we reached a billion people on planet Earth by 1830.

It was in 1930, just a few months after the stock market crashed that we reached 2 billion brothers and sisters on planet Earth.

And then 30 years later, when I was still in high school, in January of 1960, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon were vying for the presidency. The population of this fragile planet reached 3 billion people wanting access to clean air and clean water.

15 years later, at age 31 when I got elected to Congress by accident, with the help of John Dean, Ehrlichman, Richard Nixon's resignation -- I was one of those Watergate babies -- I arrived and was sworn in in 1975, standing next to Morris Udall and Peter Rodino and a number of other members of Congress. It only took us 15 years to reach 4 billion people. I served six terms, 12 years, ran for the United States Senate, got the silver medal for running for Senate, left Congress in January of 1987, and then there were 5 billion people on planet Earth.

The United Nations says that on or about October fifteenth, 1999, we reached 6 billion people on planet Earth. And if we were to look at the population today, October, 2005, we'd have approximately 6.5 billion people on the planet.

What this statistic means to me is that more than one half of all the people who ever lived on planet Earth are alive today. And that God is calling us to an unusual moment, where we are called to address issues.

We literally live in a world that's different from the world we were born into. And we're the first generation that gets not to predict its future; we are the first generation that gets to live its future, change its future; if we make the wrong mistakes, the nuclear issue, we'll destroy the future; if we don't address the issues of climate change and global warming, drip by drip we will destroy not only our future but the future of future generations.

But very few of the elected officials in Washington understand the exponential change of population, or the challenges that we face on planet Earth. Geno understood these pressures, and he understood the urgency of now, the urgency of addressing the issues that we face.

So, let me conclude by saying I think this symposium marks an opportunity for us. And the opportunity is to take advantage of Katrina, tsunamis, Rita, and Wilma, in a post-delay, post-Frist, post-Rove, post-arrogance society. This symposium gives us a chance to say, "How do we readjust and retune our thinking so that we understand the urgency of now, we reclaim the moral high ground, and we begin to set some principles in motion.

I would hope that because we have seen the face of poverty, and the face of racism, in the same week that Katrina occurred, the Census Bureau tells us that 37 million Americans are at or below poverty level; 28 million of them are children. We know that 47 million Americans have no health care. We are called to this moment domestically and internationally.

I would suggest a couple of things. One, we need to ask the Eisenhower Foundation to start a campaign to reinvent the Kerner commission, and to take this moment to take another look at the issue of racism and poverty.

Secondly, we need to set some principles of rebuilding New Orleans and Mississippi, but recognize that those principles have to be used in every city of our nation. And we can't waive Davis-Bacon, we can't waive affirmative action, we can't waive environmental rules and regulations. We need a set of principles for rebuilding so that the poor and the working poor are not frozen out of our cities and our communities.

And I would also humbly suggest this may be a time for us in America to set, parallel to the United Nations' millennium goals, a set of domestic millennium goals. How many children can we get off of the poverty rolls by the year 2015? How many children in America can we give quality education? Our public schools are still financially separate, and financially unequal, in the quality of the delivery of public education.

Can we ask the churches in the faith communities, the synagogues, and mosques, to join together to revitalize public education, healthcare, and an urban commitment to neighborhoods, similar to that of Geno's?

We need to work hard together today to make a difference. One of my favorite quotes, I'll leave you with this, is that "We are the leaders we've been waiting for." Often we think that the leadership is gonna come from presidents or from politicians. Geno reminded us that it's the average, ordinary person who makes the extraordinary contribution to our time. Rosa Park did this, Martin Luther King did it, Geno did it, we can do it. Thank you.