**CHRISTIAN SPEECH**

**FOR**

**WILLIE BURKE**

Hello everyone. It’s no secret that I have been here before, standing in front of you, delivering, what I hope... and intend... would be a thought provoking.... spiritually oriented... inspiring and motivating message. Every year, I do what I can to find a fresh perspective.... learning from the past in order to inform and support the future success of our spiritual home, the Metropolitan Baptist Church. Of course, my mission as a Deacon has been to provide leadership, comfort, solace, and purpose to our brothers and sisters, joined in faith, united in the belief that we are all connected through the wisdom and love of God. I’ve been searching my soul, testing my own personal waters, looking for the best, most articulate, compassionate messages to encourage this congregation, and I have been true to my pledge... to **OUR** mission, for the past \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ years. Every year is different. Every milestone we meet creates new rewards and and ups the ante, posing greater challenges. This year is especially unique... as most of you know, this meeting marks the completion of my tenure as Deacon of our Men’s Ministry (**please revise if this is not correct**).

Each year, I pledge to myself.... and to all of you... to raise my own personal bar.... to go deeper into my studies, to learn from and find authentic lessons in the teachings of Jesus Christ.... to absorb the message... on greater, more purposeful levels.... and to find the words and actions to infuse hope and meaning into the lives of our fellow congregants, and in particular, all of our brothers in our men’s ministry. Whether we like it or not, times are changing. Challenges seem to be more frequent and stubborn.... possibly more threatening... and so we find ourselves in heightened situations in which stress and anxiety can tend to have a more than negative impact on our individual and collective well being. We search for the antidote... we crave a lifeline... we dream of redemption.... if you are in this room... if you can hear my voice...you **KNOW** where I’m going with this.... our solace is within reach right here, at church. Our solutions are right here... in the shared conscience of our group.... our positive plans of action can be found in commitment.... to each other....to the community who needs us... and to our own well being.

Some of you might be thinking, “Well, if being a Deacon... if leading a group, is so great, **why step down????”** Guess what??? That’s the **EXACT** time.... the **PERFECT** reason... to step aside. Term limits serve a purpose.... they teach us to be selfless... to pass the baton... to support and encourage fresh blood... new ideas... and invigorated perspective into our legacy, and to give someone else a chance at revelation. For over **EIGHTY** years, this congregation has worshipped and served, adapted in hard times, and celebrated abundance and blessings. My fellow deacons and I, and of course, Dr. Jefferson, who has served and inspired for the past two plus decades, stand on the shoulders of those that have preceded us. From a small but enthusiastic group of worshippers who came together back in 1938 to today, we have been shepherds in spreading the word of the Lord. I cannot even imagine what my life would have been like had I not brought myself and my faith to serving others through my participation. It was Winston Churchill who said, “We make a living by what we get, but we **make a life** by what we **give**.” Brothers.... our Men’s Ministry serves as our context... it acts as our platform... it supports us and provides the means to connect... to share... and to grow... Isaiah 56:7, reminds us.... “My house shall be called a house of prayer... for all peoples.” We are drawn here in common purpose... let’s use it.

From Corinthians 9: 24-27, we learn, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable. Therefore, I run in such a way as not without aim. I box in such a way as not beating the air, but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I, myself, will not be disqualified.”

Life is a race.... existence is competition... within ourselves, as we ask the questions and seek the answers to what it means to be a fulfilled, complete, purposeful human being. Some appear to be more successful at it than others, but here’s the secret... life is not about competing with others... it’s about **challenging ourselves**... to be more present... to have more faith... to find more tolerance... to be more compassionate...to live life as an example for others that might be lost, to find an anchor... something to hold onto... in order to lift up their own spirits and lives.

Life is not counted in the perishable wreaths we may receive.... it’s counted in the intangibles... in the wisdom we discover.... and share... it’s measured in the challenges we overcome and the strengths we discover. It’s calculated in the mistakes we make.... and then resolve... in the steps we take, individually, and as a collective group of committed men of faith, to leave this world... and our families... our friends... our colleagues....our communities... in a better, stronger place than they’ve ever been. Through our actions, I **know** we will find salvation.

**SALVATION**... that’s a word we hear often... but what is the actual definition??? Let’s find out. Let’s also keep in mind that an important aspect of participating and dedicating oneself to a successful mission is **understanding**... at the most literal and basic level. So many of us go through the motions of commitment without truly understanding what, why, and how we need to do what we do. In a world that gets swept away in the “Hi Tech-ness” of it all, its critical to have understanding... to ask questions... to know why we do what we do... to hold on to the **humanity** of who we are and what we do and to use that clarity to make sure others understand as well. So... the meaning of salvation?? The dictionary gives several definitions, but I will share these two... and I encourage you all to search and research if there are other words and concepts you don’t quite understand or may take for granted....

1. **Salvation**... the act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, destruction, etc.
2. ***In Theology***... deliverance from the power and penalty of sin; redemption.

Our mission and purpose for our Laymen Movement has always been simple, pure, and direct, and that is to strengthen our bond and expand our message and outreach by growing our base numerically, financially, and spiritually. This group has never been about competition between us...it hasn’t been about individual winning, it has **ALWAYS** been about strengthening our own inner lights and spreading that intensity. It has always been about shining that light... **OUR** light... to banish the darkness.... to give practical support and assistance to those that need it most...and through it all get closer to our own salvation. A few years ago, a popular newspaper adopted the slogan, “Democracy dies in darkness.” You know what??? That’s not the only casualty of diminished light.... **Wisdom** dies in darkness... **Faith** dies in darkness... **Hope**... **resolution**... **reform**... **well-being**.... **optimism**... they **ALL** die in darkness... (**If you want to make a joke, you can say**)... come to think of it, just about the **ONLY** thing that **DOESN’T** die in darkness is **MOLD**.... and **WHO NEEDS THAT**??? (**And wait for the laugh**)

In Acts 2: 42, we find, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” ... and in Timothy 1:12, “That is why I am suffering as I am, Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.” Our lives must be about **COMMITMENT**. We all possess the ability to commit. We are who we are because of the people in our lives who were... and are... relentlessly committed... or not... to us. We know what it feels like to have emotional, practical, and spiritual support. We know it feels like a void when we don’t have that consistency and devotion in our lives. The definition of commitment is, “a pledge or a promise, involvement, engagement, fulfillment of an obligation.” To commit is to **give your word** and **KEEP IT**.... and the act of committing begins within yourself.

For the past \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ years, I have explored and practiced the act of commitment in all aspects of my life, and especially, to this group.... notice I say **practice**... we all have **EVERYTHING** to learn... and even when I might have had weak moments here and there, I did my best to remember and hold onto my purpose... I heard the call... and even when that call was faint... I did what I could to pay attention and **listen**. ...To check for the signs within myself in order to serve the greater good. Yes... it’s vital... critical... life affirming... As Mahatma Gandhi said, “The best way to **find** yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” None of us exists in a vacuum. We alternate with having the ability to extend a hand while sometimes needing a hand to lift us up.

Throughout the years of my tenure, I’ve highlighted different aspects of what our Men’s Ministry is about, its make up, and who it potentially serves. I’ve outlined the types of groups that comprise our potential members so that we may identify and find the best way to support our growth... both in spirituality and in numbers.

At one point I mentioned there are five groups to reach.... I would bet we know people in each one or most of these groups... think about it... who do you know that might identify in one or more of these categories.... who do you know that would benefit from the brotherhood we continue to demonstrate?

* The mass of unsaved men
* The mass of cultural Christians
* Men who are or want to be disciples
* Men who are or want to be teachers
* The men who taper wounded and hurting... those with “broken wings.”

With the advent of constant change and the mandate for action regarding the light in which we face perpetual crises in our neighborhoods and communities, the time is overdue to take a stand and to support one another and our neighbors, but first we must heal.... we must find our inner strength... we must have a plan to be stronger... more engaged...more spiritually committed and resolute than ever before.