



GEORGIA NAACP

Francys Johnson, State President

Statement on the Current State of Legislative Affairs in Georgia *The Time is NOW for a New Civil Rights Coalition*

It's time for us to have an honest conversation about the current state of affairs in Georgia right now: our civil rights, and the civil rights of too many of our brothers and sisters, are under attack. We are beyond reading about an extremist bill introduced by one state lawmaker or another. We are beyond hearing a hurtful or shameful soundbite from one of our elected officials and simply shaking our heads before moving on with our day.

We are under attack. Right now, there are at least eight bills in the state legislature misleadingly called religious exemptions bills, though their true intent is to make it legal for people, businesses and even taxpayer-funded organizations to discriminate against others. By the time these words make it into print, there may be even more bills introduced!

We are under attack. Earlier this month, an elected official in our state extolled the Ku Klux Klan as virtuous – and our Governor refused to even speak out.

Let's be honest: a lot of these bad bills we're seeing are aimed at hurting those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. Our LGBT friends and neighbors have seen their civil rights finally take some important leaps forward in recent years, and many aren't happy about that. So they seek to use the cloak of religion as a method of holding back those civil rights.

But these types of bills threaten all of us. These types of bills could be used to harm single mothers, religious minorities and the most vulnerable in our communities. They may be crafted with an eye toward hurting LGBT people, but they stand to hurt us all.

It's a threat we've stared down before. Earlier this month, I spoke on a panel with several other civil rights leaders from across Georgia. The panel was convened as part of the release of a new report from the Leadership conference Education Fund that looks at how arguments centering on religious exemptions have been used for centuries now to deny minority communities their civil rights.

As I prepare for that panel, I was struck by how little our opposition has changed over the centuries. Two hundred years ago, our ancestors were told that god created separate races. The Bible was misconstrued and twisted to support arguments for slavery and segregation. God's Word being twisted – sound familiar? We hear that today, but around other issues.

One hundred years ago, as the women's suffrage movement advanced, the Bible was again twisted. Opponents of women's rights said that women simply couldn't accept their ordained place in life as domestic caretakers. They said suffrage represented a threat to family values. Sound familiar?

How are we to respond to these attacks?

For too long, our common civil rights movement has coalesced around one particular threat or another. Then, when the bill is passed or when a victory is achieved, we easily fall back into our respective silos.

For too long, those in the civil rights community have chosen the comfort of remaining silent while others come under attack from the same forces that threaten all of us. It's easier sometimes to save our energy for our own fights, and not draw attention to ourselves; it's easy not to expend that political capital, or risk those corporate relationships. But it's not right.

Extremist lawmakers are threatening our livelihood. They're threatening the well-being of our state. It's time for our civil rights movement to link arms and form a long-lasting coalition. A Coalition that is not centered around just the eight bad religious exemption bills we're fighting right now. A coalition that is not disbanded after passing a certain bill. Rather, a coalition that is ongoing and vocally engaged at every turn of the way. Policymakers who seek to harm one community – who seek to use divisive tactics to deprive others of their civil rights – must know that by picking a fight with one community, they will face a collective response from all of us.

We are strongest when we all stand together. It's time for us to reclaim our future and speak truth to those who seek to deny anyone their basic civil rights.

-Rev. Dr. Francys Johnson is a lawyer, minister, and the president of the Georgia NAACP. The Georgia NAACP is the State's Oldest and Largest Civil and Human Rights Organization. With an unbroken presence in urban centers and rural counties, from the mountains to the coast since 1917, the NAACP advances the Mission of eliminating racism through Public Policy Advocacy, Direct Action, and Litigation.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

100 Edgewood Avenue, SE, Suite 1610, Atlanta, Georgia 30303

Office: (404) 577-8977 | Fax: (404) 577-4593 | Email: president@naacpga.org

www.naacpga.org