



**CBI Stakeholders Breakfast
December 9, 2010**

20 years ago, I like others before and after we moved to Charlotte, in part based upon the buzz of Charlotte being a dynamic, New South city on the move, and brimming with opportunity. In so doing, we added not only to the dynamism, but also to the racial and ethnic diversity of Charlotte. By contributing to the rapid growth of Charlotte, we knowingly or unknowingly added to the challenge and complexity of our community. While rapid growth of any kind presents its own set of challenges and stresses, rapid growth of a racially and ethnically diverse nature within a Southern context complicates and intensifies certain of those challenges and stresses. Chief among the challenges is how a southern city handles racial and ethnic difference. The heritage of southern cities as it relates to racial and ethnic difference is different apart. Well over 200 of Charlotte's years were spent with different apart being the prevalent and preferred approach. Codified by civil and criminal code and reinforced by social convention, different apart was as natural as the air that you breathed and the water that you drank regardless of the fountain. Different apart was literally in the ground of Charlotte. It served as the premise by which water treatment plants, sanitation plants, and the airport were placed. It served as the psychological rationale for the cutting of interstates 77 and 85, permanently disrupting and dividing in tact African-American neighborhoods. Different apart was expressed through restrictive community covenants and social club practices.

Like a teenager, with a crisis of identity and the awkwardness of managing growth spurts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg exists within the tension between Different Apart and Different Together. Try as some might to dismiss this notion, just the past 20 years have demonstrated that we are but one incident away from Different Apart. We are one questionable police shooting of an unarmed African-American by a Caucasian police officer away. We are one civil rights court case away. We are one sheriff's election and recall away. We are one pupil assignment plan away or even most recently one school closing away.

In far too many times and occasions, Different Apart is our default. It's what we're used to and resigned to. It requires very little of us. For some, it is even preferable and perhaps would be even more preferable if true equity were possible. However, history reminds us that separate is never equal.

While "Different Apart" may be Charlotte's default, Different Together must be Charlotte's aspiration. Charlotte's progress has occurred when she has embraced "Different Together." Subsequent to the Swann vs. Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools

decision, Charlotte-Mecklenburg's embrace of Different Together is Better set the framework for Charlotte's beginnings as a New South city. It was continued when Ron Leeper and Sam Smith chose Different Together and led the community to choose Different Together in embracing district representation. In 1996, when several questionable police shootings of unarmed African-Americans by Caucasian police officers threatened to tear apart the fabric of our community, Charlotte, through its elected and civic leadership chose Different Together is Better. This served as the context for the formation of the Community Building Task Force, which would later become the Community Building Initiative. For the past 13 years, we have sought to enhance the capacity and to intensify the commitment of individuals, organizations, and institutions to achieve racial and ethnic equity and inclusion. The choice of Different Together is a choice of both capacity and commitment. The choice of Different Together necessitates a commitment coupled with the capacity to enact and fulfill what the commitment requires.

Charlotte is very much confronted with a defining moment. The question is will we choose Different Together or Different Apart. Today, we want to wrestle with what it means for us to choose Different Together is Better.

Second Part

Let me thank you for your active, reflective, and engaged presence today. Different Together is Better is more than a slogan. It is an aspiration towards which we are challenged to stretch, reach, and sustain. Our continued viability and more importantly preferability on the global stage is dependent upon our embracing the belief that Different Together is Better. The Charlotte that is today is based upon decisions that were and were not made. The Charlotte that will be tomorrow will be based upon the decisions that we make or don't make. If we value different together being better, then there are some decisions that we must make individually and collectively. These choices will require conscience, courage, and character. I choose this course because I want Charlotte to be my daughter's first choice rather than last option.

Passing the torch is not synonymous with extinguishing the fire. We are called to serve every generation that we are privileged to be alive. The challenges and opportunities before our community require the engagement of us all. It calls for the continued engagement of all of us who are past members, past chairs of any and all organizations and institutions, past CEOs, past mayors, councilpersons and commissioners, etc. To all of us the question is raised, "Must we be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas?" May our answer be, "Sure we must fight if we would reign increase our courage Lord. We'll bear the toil, endure the pain supported by your word."

Bishop Claude Alexander, Jr.