

MAYOR'S PRAYER BREAKFAST

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2000

"PHARAOH'S DREAM"

I.

These prayerful occasions speak to our yearning, our aspirations, to do good together, to honor those who do good in our community and to honor "those ideals which enlarge the human spirit". So we gather today, with you who are charged with public duties, to direct our common prayers for the good of all.

In 1953 President Eisenhower started the National Prayer Breakfast – a "fellowship in the spirit of Jesus". Its mission, at a time when war with the Soviets seemed imminent and disastrous, was to pray for peace. Prayers for world peace had a special urgency at this time.

In 1962 Kansas City's Roe Bartle started this Mayors' Breakfast to honor George Washington and the highest principles of civic leadership. Roe Bartle would be amazed that the Prayer Breakfast now reaches some 116 mayors and the Missouri and Kansas communities they serve. The founding tradition continues -- high principles in public duty are to be observed and praised always.

II.

Times have changed from these beginnings and in many ways the focus of our prayers now must be on our neighbors, their distress and that of their communities.

In part, this new focus is driven by historical forces beyond us. We celebrated the tenth anniversary of the "fall of the Berlin Wall" in November of last year. As a result of the Soviet system's collapse, a powerful disaffection from centralized, statist solutions for social ills has become a global reality. We now realize such solutions are ineffective, and that they suffocate personal, community and national development. The reaction everywhere has been to "privatize" and to hand off many of the tasks governments took on when a socialist, centrist, and statist ideal seemed attractive. "Devolution" is another operative word – the tasks of central government are passed down to local authority and to non-governmental citizen-led groups.

These developments have important moral consequences for our local communities and their leaders. We have been – are being - restored to the responsibilities for our neighbors and fellow citizens that for a very long time we could assume were taken care of in a national or state capital or "some where else".

III.

The Local Investment Commission (LINC) is a product of these changes. Governor John Ashcroft started with welfare reform in 1992 through creation of LINC, an independent citizens' commission charged with oversight of Missouri's social service programs in Kansas City and Jackson County. This initiative was guided by Gary Stangler, Director of the Department of Social Services, and Kansas City businessman, Bert Berkley. Stangler and Berkley are truly LINC's founders.

Governor Mel Carnahan greatly expanded LINC by adding the programs of the department of Health, Mental Health, Education, Labor, Economic Development and Corrections to its responsibility. All told, these agencies spend in excess of \$1.1 billion annually, in Kansas City and Jackson County.

LINC is built on "bottoms up" neighborhood governance and collaboration with successful partners to achieve desired and measurable outcomes for those who need public assistance. LINC stands for local investment – financial and in-kind and volunteer investment in local needs, investment of dollars, talents, and time in local problems.

Thus LINC has brought hundreds of volunteers to work on these issues. LINC has also been successful in securing matching funds from the private and not-for-profit sectors to match state funds. This leverage in people and dollars is now one of LINC's important assets.

For example, LINC acknowledges the power and effectiveness of churches and religious leaders in this work. Kansas City Church Community Organization is a strong partner to build grass roots participation in neighborhood decision-making. Faith Friends is another example of a LINC assisted effort to produce essential mentoring for individuals moving from welfare to work. None of these initiatives is segregated by faith. [Now in U.S. more Muslims than Presbyterians; more Hindus than Episcopalians.]

In all its work LINC tries to be far sighted about the challenges our community faces.

IV.

Consider welfare reform. This national reform was set in motion by approval of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Act in 1996. This federal law made an unprecedented shift in public assistance from home and family-based benefits to work-based programs. It has produced great reductions in the welfare rolls, and some increase in jobs for many formerly on public assistance. These results in Kansas City are among the best in the nation.

For example, the number of adults and children on welfare has declined from 41,600 in January 1993 to 22,000 as of December, a decline of 47.3 percent in Jackson County.

Let us share some misgivings about this success story. Midwest Research Institute is currently completing an extensive study on persons leaving welfare in Jackson County and Missouri. They have found that only two-thirds, or 66% of those leaving welfare left because of employment.

What we do not know is what is happening to the other third, and we do not know how long these persons with jobs will keep them. Steady work is the objective; work retention is a major challenge.

Certainly people are moving from welfare to work. But, people are also moving from being on welfare to becoming the working poor, the “invisible working poor”. The MRI study showed that those who were working had an average income of \$1,000 a month, or \$12,000 annually - barely above the poverty level.

Statewide, 58% of the welfare leavers who are working earn less than the federal poverty standard. In Jackson County, the figure is 53%.

The decline in welfare roles also is not equal throughout our community. The percentage of African-Americans on local welfare rolls has increased as those rolls have declined, with whites apparently the principal beneficiaries of welfare reform so far.

Furthermore, the easiest to place in jobs were the first to leave the welfare roles; the hardest to place in jobs – for a variety of reasons – remain.

We have also had to improvise to support these new jobholders with suitable training, childcare and transportation and health care. These costs have yet to be calculated or provided for.

In other important respects, welfare reform has produced uncounted casualties: First, the single mother, usually an African-American woman, and her dependents in the home - children, frail elderly relatives, and disabled adults; second, the care givers, care takers, from various public and not- for-profit services who lacked training and skills to assist single women in making the transition from welfare to work and who for the most part are themselves paid at close to the poverty level; third, the public and private agencies and providers of public assistance who were not prepared to make the transition in their programs from home-based to work-based requirements; and, fourth, the communities and neighborhoods where these individuals and families live. They will confront these casualties face to face as TANF benefits expire in 2002 and we must decide who will pick up the pieces.

These results and casualties are not limited to the inner cities. Troubled families and homes and neighborhoods in decline and abandoned to blight have inevitably spread

to our suburbs. [Have you seen American Beauty, now a leading candidate for Best Picture Academy Award?]

School lunch program vouchers are a rough marker for this phenomenon. Students in free and reduced lunch programs have increased in our suburban school districts.

District	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	Change 90-99
Kansas City	<u>80.2%</u>	69.4%	71.5%	73.5%	69.9%	74.1%	71.5%	71.8%	71.7%	-8.5%
Hickman Mills	<u>14.2%</u>	16.9%	26.2%	28.4%	32.9%	37.2%	41.4%	42.0%	<u>47.5%</u>	<u>33.3%</u>
Center				<u>32.2%</u>	<u>36.3%</u>	<u>42.5%</u>	<u>42.5%</u>	<u>42.4%</u>	<u>45.8%</u>	N/A
Grandview	<u>23.2%</u>	22.5%	24.2%	25.7%	36.9%	34.9%	36.6%	39.1%	<u>42.0%</u>	<u>15.6%</u>
Missouri Statewide	NA	31.3%	32.5%	33.4%	34.8%	35.2%	35.7%	36.0%	<u>36.3%</u>	N/A
Independence	30.6%	26.9%	28.3%	28.3%	30.2%	32.1%	34.0%	30.8%	30.8%	0.2%
Fl. Osage	<u>18.4%</u>	17.8%	16.5%	19.2%	22.7%	23.6%	24.6%	27.3%	<u>27.5%</u>	<u>9.1%</u>
Raytown	<u>11.5%</u>	12.9%	14.6%	15.5%	17.7%	21.7%	23.1%	21.6%	<u>24.5%</u>	<u>13.0%</u>
North Kansas City	<u>14.1%</u>	15.2%	17.5%	18.2%	18.9%	19.7%	19.1%	19.5%	<u>20.1%</u>	<u>6.0%</u>
Libertry	13.3%	14.2%	13.5%	13.7%	13.9%	13.3%	13.9%	12.7%	13.1%	-0.2%
Oak Grove	15.1%	12.8%	16.5%	15.0%	18.0%	15.5%	17.4%	13.6%	15.0%	-0.1%
Park Hill	11.5%	13.1%	12.0%	1.4%	12.4%	11.9%	11.6%	11.3%	11.6%	0.0%
Blue Springs	6.3%	7.1%	7.0%	6.7%	7.0%	6.2%	6.6%	6.8%	8.0%	1.8%
Grain Valley	11.5%	10.2%	11.3%	10.9%	9.4%	11.1%	10.2%	9.1%	7.9%	-3.6%

V.

One may argue that the transfer of some of these public assistance programs to local responsibility, or the termination of programs we have come to rely on, has no moral dimensions. None of us in this room believe such a thing. This transfer merely serves to remind us that the fundamental responsibility to serve and care for those “left out” is on us, their neighbors, the citizens and leaders of our local communities.

This responsibility must include economic development focused mainly on small businesses which create 95% of the new jobs in this country; it must also include provisions of temporary assistance for those who cannot keep up with the rest. We will also find ourselves with increased needs for long-term assistance for the elderly and even younger people who are permanently left out.

Who is left behind?

The very old, poor and needy

The very young, poor and needy

There is not time today to address the rapidly growing number and burdens of the very old. Their lives are longer, with less to do, and fewer people coming along to take care of them.

There is likewise not enough time to consider the very young who are being left behind and who are victims of changes in our prevailing mentality.

Because of these changes in what is called our post-modern culture, many reject conceptions of objective truth; we deny personal responsibility and we discard traditional standards of public conduct. We have produced a generation, as one friend says, that doesn't know how to nurture, and their offspring that "fails to thrive". [We can see the physical consequences of "failure to thrive" at Children's Mercy Hospital.]

We have a naïve belief that properly managed and staffed schools are the answer, indeed the whole answer, to these dreadful conditions and to the dysfunctional communities in which our children live. Some wish to look back to a time when our schools were thought to have provided a "first class" education ever to the new comer. The historical record is much less satisfactory (New York Times, 2/2/00).

But even at their best, the schools can't do it. A child living in an inner city – or a suburb of dysfunctional families – is in school only so many hours. It's the rest of the day – and the rest of the family, the rest of the neighborhood – that is the big influence and the big problem. ["What No School Can Do", by James Traub, *The New York Times Magazine*, 1/16/00, page 52.]

Even before a child gets to school he or she may be "set back". Some of you are familiar with the U.S. Department of Education's report card on the youngest students issued last week. It concludes that the poorest children entering kindergarten start with several disadvantages compared to the better off classmates: They don't know their letters and numbers, they are less well behaved, and they suffer more health problems. Single "working and poor" women with children have little community to rely on and lack the means to do anything about their situation.

We anticipate the mounting intensity of these trends as TANF benefits expire in 2002, as we worry about an inevitable down turn in the economy. Real welfare reform will be tested when our unemployment rate returns to "normal" levels.

VI.

The local community at large must provide the answers. Roger Wilkins, a native in our town with family ties to *The Kansas City Call* said it well in the *Sunday Kansas City Star*:

"In the old days, we had a strong sense of community, but it was flawed. Today, perhaps our central task is to reconstitute this sense of community in a richer way. Black children now heading for destruction must be nurtured, protected and taught to read. Teens sliding into ennui and deep trouble need guidance. Young adults need help in getting into the economy.

Many people with fond memories of the old days couldn't see the cotton fields from city parks. These days the cotton fields are here – across the park, around the corner, or just

over the bridge. There are things for our new successful class to do beyond complaining about (the very real) glass ceilings.

If we figure out how to do those things there will be pride and dignity aplenty – and this time, outside the closet, where the air is fresh and clear.”

Are we ready? Remember Pharaoh’s dream (Genesis 41) and the lessons of the seven fat and seven lean years, of the lean and hungry cows who came up out of the water and consumed the fat cows. Are we in the seven fat years? Are we thinking about the bad years which may be ahead?

[An aside on our foster children – The orphan trains and the parade of children on the Valencia Theater stage in Macon, Missouri – “Little Orphan Annie” – Her goblins are the “lean cows” of Genesis.]

Some months ago a large gathering of religious leaders – from all faiths – considered the public expressions of religious belief and commitment by the candidates for president.

The outcome of their discussion was dismay and criticism of the candidates’ statements representing false piety – sham piety – in public officials, and their determination to seek expression of authentic piety through meaningful actions.

Our two models for such actions are Washington and Lincoln. We celebrate their birthdays this week. We honor them in this event because of their deeply felt convictions about public right and justice.

Both men were restrained in their invocation of specific religious dogma. [See for yourself in Redeemer President by Allen Guelzo]. But they were committed to realizing the unique opportunity this nation offers to all those who live here and all who come to live here.

Washington and Lincoln are representative of a unique American tradition valuing decentralized individual action providing “the persons closest to the workplace with rights, powers and capabilities to control their own destiny in work and in their personal lives.” Both men understood that if we accept and understand one another and work with one another in these settings, we are likely to change ourselves and to effect positive change around us. Both understood the long path from acceptance to tolerance and finally to that shared compassion which animates the best in us.

The vision of the community that comes from such leadership is straightforward. We borrow it from Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians which concludes in part:

“So that there might be no division in the body/but that all its parts might feel the same concern for one another. If one part suffers, all suffer together; if one flourishes, all rejoice together”. (1 Corinthians 12:25)

My friend, Dorothy Fauntleroy, tells a story of her life since retirement as CEO of Swope Ridge Geriatric Center. She disclaimed opportunities for international missionary work. She said her mission was here – that we must act in the neighborhoods close to home.

All of us have this local mission – to be concerned for one another, to care for the suffering parts. We pray here so that we will all flourish; so that we will all rejoice.

So that all will flourish; so that all will rejoice. Amen.

Landon H. Rowland
2/23/00