



Dr. King and Justice

By Alan Mills

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2022 Camille Conway Diversity Award Recipient

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The firm's Camille Conway Diversity Award is given each year to the Barnes & Thornburg teammate who most demonstrates the staunch commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion our late partner, Camille Conway, displayed day in and day out. Our 2022 recipient, Alan Mills, is a partner in the firm's Indianapolis office and is the first Black partner at the firm. Alan has been a mentor to several attorneys and has involved himself in numerous diversity, equity and inclusion efforts across the firm.

Certainly, one has to be an American whose head is in the sand if you never have heard of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, knowing of him and hearing him are two very different things. Too much of the contemporary presentation of Dr. King is watered down so that everyone can claim him, even ironically those who do not believe at all in racial justice or racial reconciliation. Often I have thought this "watering down" of Dr. King has been done to allow certain groups to feel more comfortable with him and some of his selective teachings, as opposed to embracing the true revolutionary, and as my former college president conveyed to me over forty-five years ago, the true "pioneering" nature and messaging of Dr. King.

This "watering down" or "Dr. King Light" presentation focuses on just equality and Dr. King's teachings regarding the same. However, at the heart of Dr. King's teachings is that equality cannot be discussed, exist, or even be implemented without justice. And, Dr. King understood that the appearance of equality without justice is merely the maintenance of the status quo. Dr. King described justice as "giving persons what they are due." In short, Dr. King asserted that racist opposition was not the only - or even dominant - reason that racial disparities in income, education, wealth, voting rights, employment, and health exist. He understood that

even many who reject racism “resist” racial justice measures that might have a personal cost. Dr. King stated “[t]he great majority of Americans... are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it.”

Justice is physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually hard because it requires fully sharing power and decision-making with people of color, and erasing signs of racial superiority. We must understand and embrace our co-dependency relationship with each other; one group cannot move forward without the other. In short, justice is like a sincere and meaningful apology. Like an apology, functionally, justice has three parts. First, it starts with a sincere acknowledgment of the harm caused and the harm existing. This demands truth and a faithful commitment to allowing truth to be presented, even if it makes us extremely uncomfortable. Second, it requires a meaningful inquiry of the injured party about what can be done to make this better, to correct the injustice, or to fix the problem. What good is an apology or justice if we do not ask those harmed or hurting how we can make this better? Finally, it implores the ethical and moral commitment to do what is required to make it better, to correct the injustice or to fix the problem. It is only then that there can be justice and true racial reconciliation.

Thus, for us at this firm, it is Dr. King’s revolutionary and pioneering understanding of justice that I ask we consider and commit ourselves to accomplishing. We must inquire, in our individual and public lives, whether or not we are willing to satisfy, in our words and deeds, the three-pronged test of justice. Indeed, as Dr. King so eloquently stated in his address delivered at the St. Louis Freedom Rally in 1957, “True peace is not merely the absence of tension...it is the presence of justice.”