

## The Birmingham Pledge: A Call to End Racism Now

By Jim Rotch

In October 2009, I had the privilege of speaking at the ABA Young Lawyers Division Fall Conference in Birmingham, Alabama. My topic was the Birmingham Pledge, a biracial, grassroots effort that began in the Birmingham community in 1997 to eliminate racism wherever it exists, one person at a time. That talk led to this article.

Racism has been a plague upon our nation throughout our history. It has caused untold misery and suffering in our country and around the world, and it underlies many of the problems we face as a society today. Racism in our country is not as overt or widespread as it once was, but we know it persists. We still find it difficult to talk about the subject; therefore, all too often we don't. Until people are able to talk openly, honestly, and civilly with one another about racial issues, racism in this country will continue. Part of the solution is to create and sustain a national, civil dialogue on race. The Birmingham Pledge has helped facilitate that process.

The Birmingham Pledge was created in November 1997 on my drive home to Birmingham from a leadership retreat in Mobile. As I drove, I became inspired by the retreat and reflected on a lifetime of encounters with racism in my native state of Alabama and beyond. I wondered how we as a society could ever free ourselves of racism's bondage. I began to collect my thoughts on a legal pad. The words I wrote that day, which focused on the inherent worth of every person and the dignity and respect to which every person is entitled, were in a short time adopted by the Birmingham community as the Birmingham Pledge.

After composing the Pledge, my strategy to implement its words was simple: expose as many people as possible to the Pledge, challenge each person to commit to its words, and ask them to sign the Pledge and then send it to a Birmingham Pledge organization. The Birmingham Pledge organization would then record and publicize the signed Pledges. Publication of those who signed the Pledge would produce two important results: (1) to bolster the resolve of those who signed the Pledges to keep the commitment and (2) to encourage others to follow their lead.

In January 1998, the effort to spread and implement the Birmingham Pledge was launched publicly at the annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Unity Breakfast in Birmingham. At the breakfast, approximately two thousand people stood and read the Pledge aloud. From that humble beginning, the Birmingham Pledge, which was boosted by the concurrent growth of the Internet, quickly spread around the world.

### The Birmingham Pledge: Sign It, Live It

- **I believe** that every person has worth as an individual.
- **I believe** that every person is entitled to dignity and respect, regardless of race or color.
- **I believe** that every thought and every act of racial prejudice is harmful; if it is my thought or act, then it is harmful to me as well as to others.
- **Therefore**, from this day forward **I will** strive daily to eliminate racial prejudice from my thoughts and actions.
- **I will** discourage racial prejudice by others at every opportunity.
- **I will** treat all people with dignity and respect; and I will strive daily to honor this pledge, knowing that the world will be a better place because of my effort.

## American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division *The Young Lawyer*

In 2000, Congress passed a Joint Resolution in support of the Birmingham Pledge. In 2002, President Bush issued a proclamation that declared the week including September 15 as National Birmingham Pledge Week. September 15th is the anniversary of the death of four young girls who were killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham.

Today, the Birmingham Pledge movement is led by the Birmingham Pledge Foundation, a not-for-profit organization that initiates and coordinates projects intended to promote civil dialogue about race and advance the cause of eliminating racism. Projects include Pledge drives, youth programs, teacher training, poster and mural programs, educational materials development, subject-related conferences, and many others.

As a young lawyer, **you** can provide the leadership necessary to achieve true racial harmony in this country and across the globe. You can become actively involved in the struggle to eliminate all vestiges of racism and to promote a national, civil dialogue on race and prejudice by utilizing the Birmingham Pledge within your own realm of influence. There are many ways to do that: Visit the [ABA YLD Website](#) for detailed information about projects that can be undertaken in your community. Visit the [Birmingham Pledge Foundation's Website](#) to sign the Birmingham Pledge and learn more about the work of the Birmingham Pledge Foundation. The information on those two Web sites may cause you to think of other creative projects.

Since the American civil rights era began, great strides have been made in eliminating racism. Laws that are designed to provide very basic human rights, e.g., the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, have played an important role in combating racism. These laws are reasonably effective in modifying people's actions, but laws alone cannot change people's hearts and minds—*something more* is needed before racism can end in this country. Racism is not just a black/white issue. With changing demographics of our country, Hispanics and others experience its ugly effects on a daily basis. We must have highly effective tools for appropriate dialogue on the difficult issues of race. The Birmingham Pledge, with its motto "Sign it, Live it," is one of those tools.

### **NEXT STEPS**

Visit [www.abanet.org/yld/thadt/](http://www.abanet.org/yld/thadt/) to learn about the ABA YLD 2009–2010 Public Service Project "They Had a Dream Too: Young Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement," which is designed to educate 11th and 12th grade students about the civil rights struggles that have occurred since the 1950s and to inspire them to become future leaders.

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*Jim Rotch is a partner in the Birmingham, Alabama, office of Bradley Arant Boult Cummings LLP. He can be contacted at [jrotch@babac.com](mailto:jrotch@babac.com).*

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