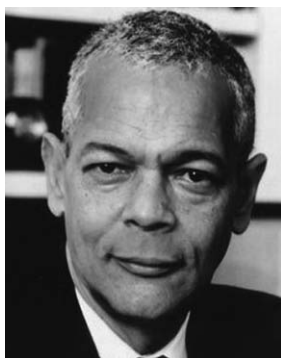


STANDING FOR JUSTICE

AN OPEN LETTER FROM NAACP'S HILARY SHELTON & JULIAN BOND



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Director, NAACP
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Chairman, NAACP

Alongside tens of thousands of courageous Americans, the NAACP has fought for justice for all for nearly 100 years. We've won many victories, but there are other battles still to be waged and won. As Americans, we are united by one premise – that all men and women are created equal.

In the upcoming weeks, we're poised to take another step toward equality and justice for all. Following a strong bipartisan victory in the U.S. House of Representatives last spring, the Senate will vote on legislation to strengthen our nation's hate crime laws. Named the Matthew Shepard Act in honor of a young gay man who was tortured and viciously murdered just for appearing gay, the legislation assists law enforcement in prosecuting anyone who willfully causes bodily injury to another person because of that person's race, color, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.

Somewhere in America a hate crime occurs once every hour. Churches are burned because of the people in attendance or the God worshiped within. People are attacked because of who they are, who they love, what they look like, or where they were born. These crimes terrorize entire communities, and they turn back the clock on our hard fought march of progress.

That's why we are alarmed that a group of extremist clergy members wants to stop this legislation. They falsely claim that the bill would make it unlawful for them to preach against homosexuality. This statement could not be further from the truth.

The law only punishes those that inflict or attempt to inflict physical violence, and our Constitution says that the First Amendment protects everyone, regardless of their point of view. Unless a pastor is also holding a gun or brandishing a weapon, he or she will continue to be free to preach their version of the Bible and exercise their constitutional right to freedom of speech under this legislation.

Everyone deserves equal rights and protections under the law. We must remind ourselves that our rights are not diluted when our neighbor enjoys these protections. Rather, our neighbor becomes our ally in defending our cherished rights.

Dr. Martin Luther King fought for the beloved community – a community built on compassion and justice for all people. The beloved community includes taking a stand against hate crimes. **It's time we take a stand.**

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