

**UUA Continental Conference on Urban Ministries
Building Our Faith; Building Our Cities
March 2011**

**Keynote Address: "The Challenge of Modern
Ministry in the Prophetic Tradition"**

by Imâm Talib Abdur Rashid Imâm Al-Hajj

Following another musical selection, "So Glad I'm Here," by the conference choir, the Rev. William Sinkford, Director of the Department of Congregational, district and extension services, introduced the keynote speaker for the evening. Imâm Al-Hajj Tâlib 'Abdur-Rashîd is the spiritual leader of one of the oldest extant Sunni Muslim congregations in America, the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood, Inc., located in Harlem, New York City.

The Imâm spoke on "The Challenge of Modern Ministry in the Prophetic Tradition." He suggested that there is "a crucial topic for religious leaders in this time - Christian, Jewish or otherwise." He called on people to "ask you to attune your inner ears and adjust your inner vision and reach out with your hearts, with your inner feelings, and to see and hear and feel the suffering and the desolation prophesied by Isaiah. Do you not see the vast human suffering resulting from the manipulation of societal forces and temporal power? Do you not hear mother earth's cries as she breathes with lungs crowded with pollution and nurses her ozone layer wounds ...can you feel her anguish as her flora and fauna are ravished by the unscrupulous? No, some might say. I see nothing, I feel nothing, and I hear nothing... I can not hear the voice of the man, woman or child lying right next to me in society in agony. So how could I possibly hear the earth?"

He continued, "It might disturb some of you to hear me say it. But I believe fervently in the reality conveyed the words of Andrew Hacker in his book "Two Nations" ... Hacker quotes Benjamin Disraeli the philosopher, who upon viewing the disparity between the rich and the poor in England, described them as 'two nations...who are as ignorant of each others' habits, thoughts and feelings as if they were...inhabitants of other planets.' Hacker," said the Imâm, "declares this description as absolutely relevant to America's two races of people..."

"I speak," said the Imâm, "of the Americans of European descent and Americans of African decent. The Commission on Civil Disorders declared in 1968, 'our nation is moving toward two societies - one black, one white, separate and unequal.' Yet, Hacker states, 'these two separate societies have existed from the start.' ... in every city we have a dual society. Two economies. Two housing markets. Two school systems. This duality has brought about a great deal of injustice..."

Hacker demonstrates," said the Imâm, "with statistics and facts, the corrosive effect of racial discrimination on American life, including employment, education, politics, and crime. This book clearly illustrates what Malcolm X meant when, thirty years earlier, he countered Dr. King's pronouncements of the American dream by stating, 'we don't see an American dream. We have experienced the American nightmare. Although King spoke in 1968 and Hacker wrote in 1994, their words are still true today. "

For the believer, the worst human condition is disbelief. Well, the prophet Mohammad said, 'poverty breeds disbelief.' When we look at the prosperity abundant in America for the past several years, we realize that for one out of nine people, to be poor is not just a shame, it is also a sin. When we see the effects of unrepentant violence against poor people of color, erupting from the mouths and guns of America's children - be they in middle America or the inner city - we must realize that something is morally wrong here, something is sinfully wrong. ... The nation as a society appears to have gone astray from the laws of the Creator of the heaven and the earth, not as rhetoric, but as practice. "

I submit to you that it is because the prophetic voice of guidance, the voice rooted...in almighty God... is too quiet in this time and place. The letter and spirit of the divine law...as articulated on the tongues of the prophets, seems not to reverberate loudly enough down through the corridors of time into the twenty first century. The silence brought about by the lack of actualizing that word, is deafening. And this is the fault of religious leadership. Again, Dr. King said, 'the problem with religious leaders is that too many times, they function like the tail light on an automobile rather than the headlights.'" Religious leadership differs from political leadership...it is obligated to echo the prophetic voices of the ancient past and to reach back and bring these voices into our times, not out of context, but applicable to our place and our circumstances. "

The challenge of modern ministry, particularly modern urban ministry, is to reflect prophetic tradition in our actions, to reflect the prophetic voice in these times, and to engage communities of faith in a dynamic application of divine law to modern human problems that are in reality, eternal human problems. Further, it is to stand and to inspire the faith community to stand for true justice, and to comfort those in need who desire to speak truth to power and to organize themselves in opposition to those who would listen to the voice of Satan, counseling...abuse over compassion and selfish individualism over humanity. ... Our Creator is inspiring people to step forward and.... proclaim truth," the Imâm said. "...proclaim justice...in this time. "

I am less naïve than I used to be...I know that what I am speaking of...is frightening for some if not many who are in positions of religious leadership, particularly those in comfortable positions of ecclesiastic splendor, or those who aspire to comfortable positions of ecclesiastic splendor. Many of us have heard the call to serve God and humanity and have responded by accepting the burden of being a reverend or priest or Imâm. Too many have done so stepping into what we thought would be a large puddle, instead finding it a vast ocean, teeming with uncomfortable challenges and dangers to our

envisioned elevated status in the society of man. For centuries, modern day pharaohs have co-opted those with the potential to echo the prophetic voice of Abraham and Moses in our time...I always remember that people of faith, and young people of faith, pushed the issue of civil rights, and human rights, in our society. This was the result of the actions of young people of faith. And there are those who opposed good-willed people of faith who seek to make life better for everyone. The friends of Satan have muted or weakened the prophetic voice, whose expression has never failed to benefit humanity."

Annie Rawlins, the daughter of a clergyman, said, 'there are religious leaders whose congregations expect them to address matters of social justice when they loom up on the horizon. And there are leaders whose congregation does not expect them to address matters of social justice. As I look at all of you, I see that this is a vast, diverse group here. And even though this is a conference on urban ministry, I don't think that everyone lives in the inner city. And when you leave Chicago, and go back home, some of you can look at your congregation, and you see other things...those of us who say, 'I have a faith commitment as a leader, we need to understand what we are opening up for. What did the prophets open themselves up for? "

I do want for all of us to reflect on the reality of what almighty God is requiring of us. When we look to the earth, and we see these vast and teeming problems, people of faith usually say, 'it's the others,' and we rarely look and say, 'maybe the problem is us, and we're not doing the job of asserting the prophetic word and tradition so as to keep these other forces in check. So I ask almighty God to strengthen us and to guide us. The seeking of forgiveness for sins is an action that religious leaders should be foremost in doing...we should be constantly turning to our Lord and asking for forgiveness of sins small and large, and encouraging our congregants to do the same. "

We must cultivate within our hearts, sensitivity [and] power, not the power of self-aggrandizement but power to serve, power to identify wrongs, power to change wrongs, power to provide those who look to us for guidance, with a voice that reflects those powerful voices that are still echoing from the scriptures."

Imâm Al-Hajj Tâlib 'Abdur-Rashîd concluded, "I want to thank all of you for your time and attention, and I pray for all of you as I pray for myself, that we be found worthy by the one who created us, for this awesome responsibility that has been placed on our shoulders. For if we are not found worthy, and we fail in our responsibility, than the ones who will suffer will not be you and I, but our children, and our children's children...this is our children's century, not ours...the children are on the way in. And we have a responsibility to them to uphold the prophetic word, teach the sacred law, and as the prophet said, to change that which can be changed with our hands, and if we cannot change it, to speak out against it, and if we feel we can not speak out against it, to at least resist it in our hearts."

Warm and appreciative applause greeted the Imâm's remarks. The Imâm will remain at the Urban Church conference and will facilitate feedback discussions on his keynote address during the weekend.

Keynote Speaker Background: Imâm Al-Hajj Tâlib 'Abdur-Rashîd is the spiritual leader of one of the oldest extant Sunni Muslim congregations in America - The Mosque of Islâmîc Brotherhood, Inc. The Mosque, which is located in Harlem, New York City was founded in 1964. It is the lineal descendant of The Muslim Mosque Inc. founded by the late, esteemed, and martyred Al-Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz (Malcolm X), after his departure from the organization known as the Nation of Islam, and acceptance of the authentic Islâmîc faith.

Imâm 'Abdur-Rashîd is the foremost student of the Founding Imâm of The Mosque of Islâmîc Brotherhood Inc., the late and esteemed Shaykh' Allâma Al-Hajj K. Ahmad Tawfîq. The Shaykh was a pioneering Muslim American scholar and leader, educated in academies and universities in the United States and Egypt. The Imâm was a student of Shaykh Tawfîq for 17 years, and received ijâza (traditional Islâmîc license to teach) from him, in the fundamental areas of Arabic language and grammar (Nahwâ), and Islâmîc Sacred Law (Sharî a). The Imâm is also an experienced Pastoral Counselor (Mushâwar). He served as the Religious Representative of Shaykh Tawfîq from 1975 until 1988, when his teacher passed away.

Now in his 11th year as Imâm of The Mosque of Islâmîc Brotherhood, Al-Hajj Tâlib 'Abdur-Rashîd is the Chairman of the Justice Committee of The Majlis Ash Shûra (Council of Islâmîc Leaders) of New York. He is a board member of A Partnership of Faith in New York City, as well as The Temple of Understanding, The Chancellor's Interfaith Advisory Committee for the New York City Board of Education and The Bertram Institute on Religion and Poverty.

Imâm 'Abdur-Rashîd is an internationally respected speaker, who has given lectures and addresses at the United Nations, Parliament of World Religions in the United States and in South Africa, as well as Christian and Jewish seminaries, churches, mosques, and synagogues in various parts of the country.

The Imâm has been the subject of a feature article in the New York Times, and his work is featured prominently in the books American Islam, by Richard Wormser, and Working On God by Winifred Gallagher.

He was the Muslim Chaplain at Sing-Sing prison for over a decade, and is in his 22nd year of prison ministry. The Imâm serves humanity as a counselor to and advocate for Muslims with AIDS, as well as victims of domestic violence and abuse. He describes himself as a "religious activist" focused upon social justice and human rights issues, dedicated to the establishment of Islam in North America, the creation of an indigenous

Islâmic intelligentsia, and the upliftment of Americans of African descent to a level of sovereignty and dignity, on par with all members of the global family.