Martin Luther King, Jr. Breakfast Celebration
Elizabeth Haddix, Speaker
January 20, 2014
Southport, North Carolina

When I asked your committee if there were a particular theme I should focus on today, I was told to talk about myself, the Center's work, and what Dr. King might say about the work to be done. I will attempt to do so, in that order. I grew up in a small, segregated town in Mississippi in the 1970s and 80s. The fundamental contradiction of white privilege and racial oppression, which arbitrarily vested power in those that looked like me and kept me separate from and better off than those with darker skin, created great conflict for me as a child—especially because no one talked with me about it. It just didn't make sense, didn't jibe with the values my parents and church were teaching me, and in fact affected my ability to have a genuine conversation (let alone relationship) with a person of color for a long while.

I wasn't able to articulate it back then, but now I see that the conflict stemmed from this fearful notion of "other" which was supposed to justify who lived in the "nice" neighborhoods and went to the "good" school, but was so at odds with my instinctive feelings about humanity and the purpose our humanity serves. Now I have two children of my own, and they attend a magical little public school, in which they are the very small racial minority. They will be fluent in Spanish before they start middle school. They are, so far, free of the conflict about which I just spoke. I joined the Center's staff in 2010, at least in part, to help build systems that would keep them free.

The Center for Civil Rights was born in 2001, springing from the great minds and hearts of two renowned civil rights lawyers, Julius Chambers and Jack Boger. We are a very small shop, with only two staff attorneys, a Research and Student Programs Director, and two recent law school graduate Fellows who serve two-year terms. UNC Law School students work with us throughout the year, helping us to fulfill the Center's mission, which is two-fold: to confront and dismantle the inequities found in our public schools, in housing and in access to public services and the right to vote; and to build the next generation of lawyers committed to using the law for social change.

It could be said that the Center's core mission – genuine integration in our schools and communities-- is to make possible the Beloved Community that Dr. King so often spoke of. In his first book, Stride Toward Freedom, Dr. King said this about the civil rights movement he was a part of: "our ultimate goal is integration, which is genuine inter-group and inter-personal living." The vision of the Beloved Community was a practical one, bent on progress: for only by learning, working, and living side-by-side would we be able to realize our full potential as a society. The Center strives to fulfill this vision through its education and community inclusion work.

Understanding, as the Supreme Court recognized in 1954, that it is in our public elementary and secondary schools that we learn to be citizens of the world, the Center's education work combats growing resegregation and inequity in educational resources. By 2000, the cross-exposure of black and white students, an important measure of integration which peaked in 1984, was worse nationally than in 1968. The Center grounds its work in research showing that schools with high concentrations of low-income students and students of color tend to have poorer access to quality teachers, curricula, and other educational resources. Research on hypersegregated schools (whether predominantly white or non-white) shows that schools lacking racial and socioeconomic diversity fail to properly prepare their students to participate and lead in a multi-cultural, global society, and burden them with damaging stereotypes of the "other." We concern ourselves with the resegregative trend in schools across our state, which will only deepen with the increase in charter schools and the voucher program the legislature passed last term.

The Center's community inclusion work supports communities who confront environmental justice issues; lack of access to public services like water, sewer, streetlights and paved roads; and blocked access to political power. We use the term "inclusion" as Dr. King would, understanding that inclusion in society means the equal sharing of its benefits and burdens. Inclusion is the supreme antidote to the "other" conflict. Our clients live in predominantly Black communities which over time we found share some common characteristics: the public schools nearest their community tend to be "failing," i.e., less than 50% passing; they tend to have one or more public solid waste facilities within a mile or so of their community; and both the housing stock as well as rate of home ownership tends to be substandard.

Our State of Exclusion study[1], released this year, collected and analyzed current Census data, location points of solid waste facilities, schools and infrastructure for 3,200 majority-African American and Latino Census clusters in North Carolina. We found that our clients are not in isolated circumstances: across the state, residents of Census clusters that are 75% or more African American are more than twice as likely to host one or more solid waste facilities in their community than are residents of majority white communities. So while a county's entire population derives a benefit from the facility, only a small portion of the population – that which happens to be predominantly Black—bears the burdens of its noise, traffic, pollution, odors, stigma and impact on property values.

The reason for this environmental injustice has its roots in the legacy of racism that Dr. King and the movement he was a part of struggled to overcome. Many of these communities formed under Reconstruction, during which newly emancipated slaves settled on the only land available to them: floodplains, outskirts of town, swamp land. Others formed as a result of Jim Crow segregation, when towns that incorporated drew their boundaries to carve out African American communities. You have here in Brunswick County communities with this history: Royal Oak, Piney Grove, Ceder Grove, Kendall Chapel and Dark Branch.

But intentional racism isn't necessarily what causes these communities to continue to be burdened with solid waste facilities and bad roads, or blocked from assignment to "good"

[1] The full report is available online at http://www.uncinclusionproject.org/documents/stateofexclusion.pdf, as well as an interactive map, at http://www.uncinclusionproject.org/.

schools and water lines. Rather, the original intentional segregation (racially restrictive covenants, “steering,” exclusionary zoning) put in motion decades of compounding impacts that continue today: land in these Black communities was less desirable, cheaper, and so that’s where the dump goes. The lack of access to infrastructure meant these communities were unable to attract economic development and thus all the benefits (schools, better grocery stores, etc.) that development brings.

Each local government decision about where to locate the next solid waste facility, water and sewer line, or new school compounds the impacts of exclusion and perpetuates a system of structural racism. Undeniably, individual racism still exists today. Arguably, structural racism-- which is defined not by racist intent of any one actor, but is simply a self-perpetuating system, entrenched by inertia-- harms many, many more people. The decisions about how to assign students and where to locate public schools and solid waste facilities are public decisions, made in your Planning Board meetings, your County Commissioner meetings-- which by law must be open to the public. In those meetings are distributed the public goods and services which we as a society have agreed are important, and about which we make intentional, conscious choices. We are responsible for the foreseeable impacts of our choices.

The gift—and challenge-- given to each one of us here by the civil rights movement we celebrate today is an understanding of our individual and collective power to influence those choices and determine their outcomes. We celebrate Dr. King because his words transported so many of us out of conflict, liberated us from the infernal contradiction we were living in, allowed us to begin to envision the beloved community. We create that community, he told us, by practicing agape—that “overflowing love which is purely spontaneous, unmotivated, groundless and creative”…”the love of God operating in the human heart.” Not to be confused with “color blindness,” a deplorable condition suffered by too many in our experience who in the same breath advocate policies which have foreseeable adverse and disproportionate impacts on communities and individuals of color, agape instead means understanding the history of our varied colors and tongues, understanding our sameness, and then practicing “redeeming goodwill for all.” Dr. King said, “Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community.”

What would Dr. King say today about the work to be done here in Brunswick County? Having spent some time here over the last few years, getting to know some of your residents and the challenges facing their community, I think he would urge you to wake up to the agape in your midst. As Alexa Stanley said yesterday in her invocation, so Dr. King would plead: “Give us the wisdom to know what is right and the courage to do it.” It is not just that, as Rev. Stewart said at the program yesterday, “those in power have fallen asleep.” It is too many of *us* who have fallen asleep. I think Dr. King would urge you to talk about race, talk about reality, and to assume responsibility for the foreseeable impacts of your government’s decisions. He would urge us all to envision the world we want to live in, to disabuse ourselves of the illusion of our separateness, so that we might become the Beloved Community.