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A MISSED OPPORTUNITY: Let us honor the children who survived the 1963 bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church

*By Tamara Harris Johnson
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On the eve of September 15, 2013, fifty years to the day of the fateful bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that resonated around the world, Bishop James L. Lowe, Jr., Pastor of Guiding Light Church, and his wife, First Lady Pat Lowe, hosted a discussion/healing session for the survivors of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing. After listening to their unbelievably poignant stories, I am compelled to write this letter.

This City, State and Nation have hosted numerous events commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Civil Rights Movement. While there were several catalytic events that led up to and were part of the “Movement,” the prominent event that has been highlighted and upon which much focus has been given is the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four little girls, wounded some, and impacted the lives of numerous children who survived and all of the families concerned. During this year’s commemoration in Birmingham and around the world, we witnessed program after program discussing, reenacting and commemorating the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. It began with the recognition of the Four Little Girls who died in the bombing. It evolved into the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal for these little girls, while two of the little girls’ families questioned the appropriateness of the award. The two dissenting families ultimately decided to join in the commemoration events (although it was often referred to as a “celebration”) out of respect and love for their siblings that died. According to Diane McWhorter in her Op Ed piece titled “[Civil Rights Justice on the Cheap](#),” Sarah Collins, sister of Addie Mae Collins, stated, “I’m letting the world know, my sister didn’t die for freedom. My sister died because they put a bomb in that church and they murdered her.” The City of Birmingham passed a Resolution, months prior to the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal, acknowledging two little boys who were murdered on that same day and asked for their inclusion in the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal. They were not included. City Officials and citizens objected to the omission of the two little boys being named as co-recipients of the Congressional Gold Medal, resulting in their being included in future public acknowledgments. Programs were held highlighting the “justice delayed but not denied” trial of one of the bombers of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The “foot soldiers” were acknowledged; the children who marched were acknowledged. So much discussion was had over who should or should not have been recognized and the manner in which this recognition should have taken place, i.e., Congressional Gold Medal, reparations, honorable mentions at programs, etc. We had fifty years to get it right. Yet, in looking back on all of the events, did we miss an opportunity to publicly recognize a significant group of individuals who were directly

impacted, yet seemingly forgotten, by the events of that awful day? Unfortunately, I think we did. Very little attention has been paid to those who were children at the church during the bombing who, but for the Grace of God, survived.

The fact that the survivors lived is the only factor that separates them from the four little girls who died. The survivors are living eyewitnesses of the accounts of that day. Many of them have not talked about their stories, privately or publicly, until this week. Most of them have not even been asked about their stories!!! The traumatic experiences of the survivors are equally profound, yet in different ways. If you are a spiritual person, as I am, the belief is that the four little girls found peace. Their lives were cut short, in a horrific way, yet their precious little souls were released from their physical bodies in a most appropriate place, i.e., a place of God. The survivors, however, have had to deal with this tragedy, many in their own private way, ever since the bombing. Their lives were directly impacted. The families of everyone in that church on September 15, 1963, have been impacted. The survivors have valuable stories to tell. They have unrecorded histories in their heads.

The survivors of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church had an opportunity to gather together at Guiding Light Church, some for the first time since the bombing 50 years ago, to share and reflect on the events of that day. All did not want to share. Some were not able to share, as September 15, 1963, represented such a private “hell” for them. It was apparent that all remained affected by what happened. Remember, these were children at the time, the youngest being Leria Lowe Jordan who was five years old when she was attending Sunday School inside the church on the day it was bombed. There was not a very large crowd in attendance at Guiding Light Church when the survivors told their stories, as it conflicted with a concert downtown.

In addition to the raw emotion and power of the individual stories, all accounts were similar in these respects: 1) The children had been dropped off at church by their parents to attend Sunday School, with parents intending to join them for church services following Sunday School; 2) At the time of the bombing, these children did not have any relatives with them other than siblings – also children – who had been dropped off, as well; 3) Immediately following the bombing, there was utter chaos; 4) Police arrived on the scene almost immediately; 5) As some of the children were running out of the building, they were greeted by policemen who cursed them, called them the “n” word, and telling some of the children to go back inside the building; 6) Each of the children attended school the following day; 7) Most of the children never received counseling; 8) All of the survivors were impacted directly by the bombing and this impact has manifested itself in their lives, to this day; 9) Most of the survivors had not discussed the events of September 15, 1963, until this event at Guiding Light Church – 50 years later; 10) All of these survivors have overcome their personal demons of hatred and fear and have become productive citizens in their communities – citizens who provide service to others – not without the permanent scars of that day; 11) Several of the survivors have been called to the ministry; 12) All of the survivors expressed gratitude to Bishop Lowe and Guiding Light Church for acknowledging their sustained pain and giving them an opportunity to share their feelings – the first step of true healing.

The survivors who attended the panel discussion at Guiding Light Church were: Bernardine Matthews-Layton, Cynthia Webb, Barbara Cross, Junie Collins Peavy Williams, Phyllis Matthews-Marbury, Joey James Regal Favor, Jevenair Marshall, Johnathan Jones, Bettye Lowe Ellington, Leria Lowe Jordan, Kenneth Long, Dale Long and Bishop James L. Lowe, Jr. What has been expressed to me by some of the

survivors is disappointment that they were not mentioned at the numerous programs and events that were held when the main discussion was that of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing.

Many of them traveled from other parts of the country to show solidarity and support for each other, and to witness an attitudinal racial transformation that has taken place in the City of Birmingham. We missed an opportunity to acknowledge publicly those who survived. We missed an opportunity to hear first-hand, eyewitness accounts of what happened on September 15, 1963. We missed an opportunity to express to the survivors that they, too, matter, and that we have not forgotten their private suffering while we acknowledge the cause of their suffering.

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