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The National Black Church Initiative Vehemently Decries the Actions of the Washington Post

Can we trust the Post with the truth?

*Here is another trusted institution that has violated the civil trust and thus
undermined civil society*

Washington DC – In the previous weeks it has come to light that the Washington Post, one of the country’s foremost newspapers, has been involved in a scandal involving the selling of private dinners with government officials and paper reporters to interest groups. These “salons” were to be held off the record and with little to no control over what might be offered and said to both officials and reporters by those who bought tickets to attend. The steep asking price for a seat at one of the “salons” also insured that those attending could only be either very wealthy or a member of a lobbying committee. The National Black Church Initiative was dismayed and disheartened to learn about this blatant moral and ethical lapse of the Washington Post and wishes to express its immense disappointment in the institution which is supposed to give fair and balanced news to its readers. This further erodes the concept of civil society, where there must be trusted pillars of the community in case of an emergency or a national crisis.

We are appalled by this horrendous lack in journalism ethics because it undermines the Black church’s concerted effort over the past six years to strengthen and build institutions that have integrity, truthfulness and a spirit of serving the public. When one of the nation’s most trusted newspapers deliberately practices a set of ethics which are contrary to its nature then our job

literally becomes impossible. Our theory is simple: people build institutions and when the trust people place in those institutions crumbles it reflects in the cultural personality of the people. Not only will we then not have a civil society, but we will not have a society at all. This is why NBCI has taken the extraordinary step of chastising even the Catholic Church for its abuse cases. NBCI is the only national religious organization that called the Catholic Church's actions wrong, immoral and reprehensible, but it also supported legislation in the New York State Assembly to allow victims of abuse to sue the church for damages.

The question that instantly arises from these "salons" is how a paper can give fair reporting when special interest groups have the opportunity to express their opinions to reporters in a non-threatening arena when the rest of America must clamor to even be heard. It is unfair, unjust and blatantly immoral for reporters to accept money of any sort, and especially wrong for a newspaper to trade on the trust that people place in as if it were a stock. Despite the apologies of those who organized the event the National Black Church Initiative does not believe enough is being done to regain the public's trust on this issue and would like to see the Post take further action in dealing with this blatant disregard for the ethical well-being of this prestigious newspaper. There needs to be a written, full-length, investigative piece on this issue to look at the culture in which this type of journalism is practiced. In short, who or what poisoned the culture at the Post to allow this type of journalistic stink to exist?

The simple fact that the "salons" were even allowed to exist, despite such events occurring at other papers, is an insult to the Post's readers and a worrisome sign that those in charge at the Post are not morally sound enough to be running a newspaper. Despite claims that the flyer, which originally broke the story and said that the event would be a "news-driven and off-the-record conversation. Spirited? Yes. Confrontational? No." and that participants could "build crucial relationships with Washington Post news executives in a neutral and informal setting," was the work of one man, it has been shown that not only was this flier vetted by editors and publishers within the paper, but that ethical questions were raised about the "salons" and duly ignored. How can the Washington Post expect its readers to trust it when it cannot even be depended upon to spot seriously flawed and morally wrong practices and procedures or even listen to its employees who obviously saw that the "salons" were profit driven? These actions cannot be justified even in these tough economic times.

Publisher Katharine Weymouth and Executive Editor Marcus Brauchli have taken responsibility for the idea and execution of the plan, but the blame should not rest there. It has been shown that much of the news staff and executives knew of the idea and only a few spoke up, and said nothing more since they assumed it was acceptable after Weymouth and Brauchli accepted it. This laxidasiacal attitude astonishes the Black church and others who view this as a journalistic sin and prompts us to question the ability of anyone at the Post to discern right from wrong. It is not the way of the righteous man to sit back and observe wrong doings because others say they are right, but instead to take action against morally bankrupt ideas, programs and actions. The church calls upon all that knew about these "salons" to look inside and question whether they are truly leading a life that is ethically sound and within the teachings of building a strong civil society.

Should the public believe that this is the standard way the Post does business and if they are not to believe that, then what is the proof that the Post is running anything less than a press release service for the well connected and the privileged? This creates the same breach of trust the Catholic priests visited upon innocent children since 1959 to the present. Here the church was allowed to oversee the development of children and turned around and abused the child and took full advantage of their innocence. The same can be said of the Washington Post and other journalism outfits that purport to express unbiased truth and uphold the public's trust, but then turn around and hold private meetings with a select few. The public trust that was given to the Post has been irrevocably damaged and they must work hard over the years to come to win that trust back. How can we ever believe the Post again, because we will never know who is paying the Post to publish their stories?

Just because the Post's ombudsman called the paper out it does not rectify this grave journalism sin that the paper has committed. Truth is the foundation of a society. We cannot write or argue eloquently concerning the wrongs of our fellow man when our own sins hang off our shoulders like a worn shirt.

NBCI is prompting all institutions of good will to learn from this scandal, and be constantly vigilant in weeding out false reporting in neighborhoods and newspapers across the country. This should be a lesson to all that one must be constantly vigilant in finding the truth and not simply content with sitting back and accepting that those who bring us the news are always thinking of our best interest. The truth is like a bright and shining light; if you reveal it it can expose you and others and also it can expose those who are constantly arguing how good they look in the sunlight. The truth is also very dangerous. Those who are committed to the truth must reconcile their life with death because truth practiced to the nth degree can only lead to death. Jesus Christ becomes our perfect example about someone who so committed to the truth that he was willing to die for it and now he represents it. NBCI has pushed all of our preachers to urge their congregations to write in to the nearest major paper and tell them that they will not stand for lobbyists and others getting an unfair advantage and a friendly ear from a newspaper. The very idea should appall anyone who believes in the freedom of the press and the values that America and journalism were based upon.

What is even more appalling is that this is not out of character for the Washington Post. The Post has a long history of morally unsound reporting, especially when it comes to race relations. In fact in Prince George's County, a predominantly Black county bordering Washington, DC, they have lead a drive to create distrust in Black officials that lead the county. A truly serious case of this occurred when the Post accused Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson of embezzlement and corrupt politics in their article "Sweetheart Deals" published July 6 of 2008. This article was published on the front page of the paper as fact, and yet no charges have ever been brought towards Johnson and no proof has ever been truly fostered to back up their story. An in depth analysis of this travesty can be found at www.stopwashpost.com, however it should also be noted that the Post has a long and turgid history of warping facts to fit their own political means.

After exhaustive research a group of pastors came to the undeniable conclusion that the Post had intentionally twisted and distorted the facts about the case, making it appear that Johnson and the residents of Prince George's County were inept and of a lower class. What other reason could there have been for this than the simple fact that the majority of Prince George's County is comprised of well educated, Blacks and is economically viable? Because of this reason the Post has systematically tried to undermine, distort and politically cripple him to satisfy a political agenda that they constantly pursue some politicians who refuse to carry their water. If all races got the same treatment in the Post then this might be understandable, however, time and again we see that that coverage of whites is routinely more positive than coverage of blacks. For example the recent arrest of white Alexandria Police Chief David Baker for drunk driving, a crime he has admitted too and been charged with, has gotten relatively little coverage in comparison to Johnson's front page, A section spread that included two full pages with graphics and pictures. Why, when both these men are prominent public officials, is a story about a crime that truly occurred shoved into a side story in the Metro section and yet Johnson's supposed crimes are splattered across the front page. This type of reporting clearly shows that the Post has a racial bias and that their writing continuously has no moral compass or grounding.

It is not just the cases on Johnson and the "salons" however that proves this point -- though these are some of their worse offenses. The Washington Post has continuously and repeatedly looked down upon and written poorly of minorities. There is even documented evidence of them treating their minority staff with disregard. In Jill Nelson's book *Volunteer Slavery* the Black journalist describes her time spent working at the Washington Post and the terrible way in which the paper treated its Black employees. She also shows that the paper continuously reported on Blacks in a negative manner. Nelson showed that the Post was insulting not only to its Black readers, but to their Black employees as well. Not much seems to have changed since her time there as the first Black writer for the Sunday magazine.

In the paper published by local pastors in Prince George's county and found at www.stopwashpost.com the group conducted a study with local journalism students. They requested that the students review the Washington Post from the period of June 22 to July 23 of 2008. The students were to look for negative and positive images and words of African Americans in the Post to see if the paper was covering them in both a positive and negative light. What the students found was truly shocking. During that time 196 negative images of African Americans appeared in the paper and only 26 positive ones. This is a striking difference to say the least, especially when one takes into consideration that most of the positive images were of Barrack Obama. To further this point it should be noted that PG County was terribly represented within the pages of the Post as well. The county was portrayed negatively 55 more times than any other area in the DC metro vicinity. While PG County may have issues it does not have that many more than any other county.

It is clear that the Washington Post is out to make money, and while that is the purpose of all businesses, the Post should be a news source first and a business second because of the faith and trust people place in their hands. The Post uses underhanded tactics that routinely show that the paper is hypocritical and has no grounds for being trusted. Take their lack of reporting on their own corporate issues as an example. The Washington Post routinely publicizes articles on the

poor business ethics of others, but when the Communication Workers of America cited the Post for having unfair business practices they barely put pen to paper. It is this kind of hypocrisy that has led to the Post losing the trust of its readers and other press outlets, which can clearly be seen in the dramatic decrease in Post readers over the years.

It should be clear that over the years the Washington Post has repeatedly fought against an emerging Black community. They do not want Prince George's County or minorities to succeed and so through the routine publishing of negative articles and images they create the idea that the county and its administrators are inept and do not know what they are doing when it is clear that this is not the case. The despicable and morally bankrupt tactics cannot go on any longer. The Washington Post has a duty to the public to report the truth, not what they want the truth to be. These "salons" are just another step in the downward direction the Post has been taking for decades now, and just prove that it is not just Blacks who are being unfairly wronged by the reporting in the Washington Post, but every person who reads the paper and believes that the stories are not being influenced by outside sources. This represents a culture of journalistic corruption.

Strengthening the pillars of civil society means that all institutions must have a majority of trust in them, but the public is growing increasingly intolerant to the bias reporting of both print and broadcast journalism. They are demonstrating this type of dissatisfaction through refusing to buy newspapers at a rate that will allow newspaper to survive. In a free society you need newspapers with integrity. Everyone knows that the business model that has ushered newspapers across the centuries is no longer viable with the advent of the internet. As a result newspapers, within the next five years, may become an endangered species. Recently the veteran news reporter Dan Rather, who is suing his former employer, CBS, over the issue of reporting the truth, stated that newspapers and television should receive a bailout from the government. One should be assured that this would be the kiss of death for journalism in America. Can you imagine those news outlets receiving government assistance and then turning around and criticizing the government? It is the same ideals that surround the current scandal of the "salons." You cannot bight the hand that feeds you.

This is not simply important for moral reasons either. Despite the Post's many problems they do serve a purpose within the DC area and that purpose is to report the news. However, with newspaper sales slipping dramatically the Post reported its first loss in 20 years. In addition their other business interests are losing money as well. As discussed before one of the reasons is because readers do not know if they can trust the paper anymore. After years of slanted journalism the Post has lost touch with its readers. This is made even clearer by the desperate move to sell these "salons" in order to turn a profit. Despite obviously being wrong, the Post is in such dire straits that they over looked the moral implications of running the "salons" in order to get the money they are losing from losing the trust of the people. While many other factors are affecting the sales of newspapers, it cannot be helping that the people of Washington, DC and the rest of the country are losing faith in their papers.

This is not just a DC phenomenon, it is a wide spread problem being lead by major papers like the Washington Post, Boston Globe and Atlanta Constitution. Recent PEW polls indicate that

over 50 percent of people do not trust the news sources they are reading or viewing for solid information. What kind of state do we find ourselves when the people of America cannot trust their news sources? These “salons” are simply a symptom of a moral malaise that hangs over print and broadcast journalism. Another poll shows that only seven percent of Americans trust the news media all of the time. Newspapers are meant to give us the news, and yet Americans do not believe that they can trust them. The reason for this is that papers like the Washington Post have betrayed their readers trust over and over again and allowed for special interests and personal objectives to influence their writing and work.

The Black church, like any other institution of moral appeal that has duty to promote civil society, is doing whatever it can to maintain what little authority that we continue to have with the public. We must never allow any institution to be so greatly compromised, like the Post has been, as to threaten the general welfare of a society’s moral framework.

About NBCI

The National Black Church Initiative (NBCI), a coalition of 16,000 African-American and Latino member churches works to eradicate racial disparities in healthcare. In addition to our member churches, we have 18,000 sister churches. NBCI is a faith-based health organization dedicated to providing critical wellness information and preventive health screening to all of its members. The African-American community ranks first in eleven different health risk categories. NBCI’s purpose is to partner with national health officials to provide health education, reduce racial health disparities, and increase access to quality healthcare.