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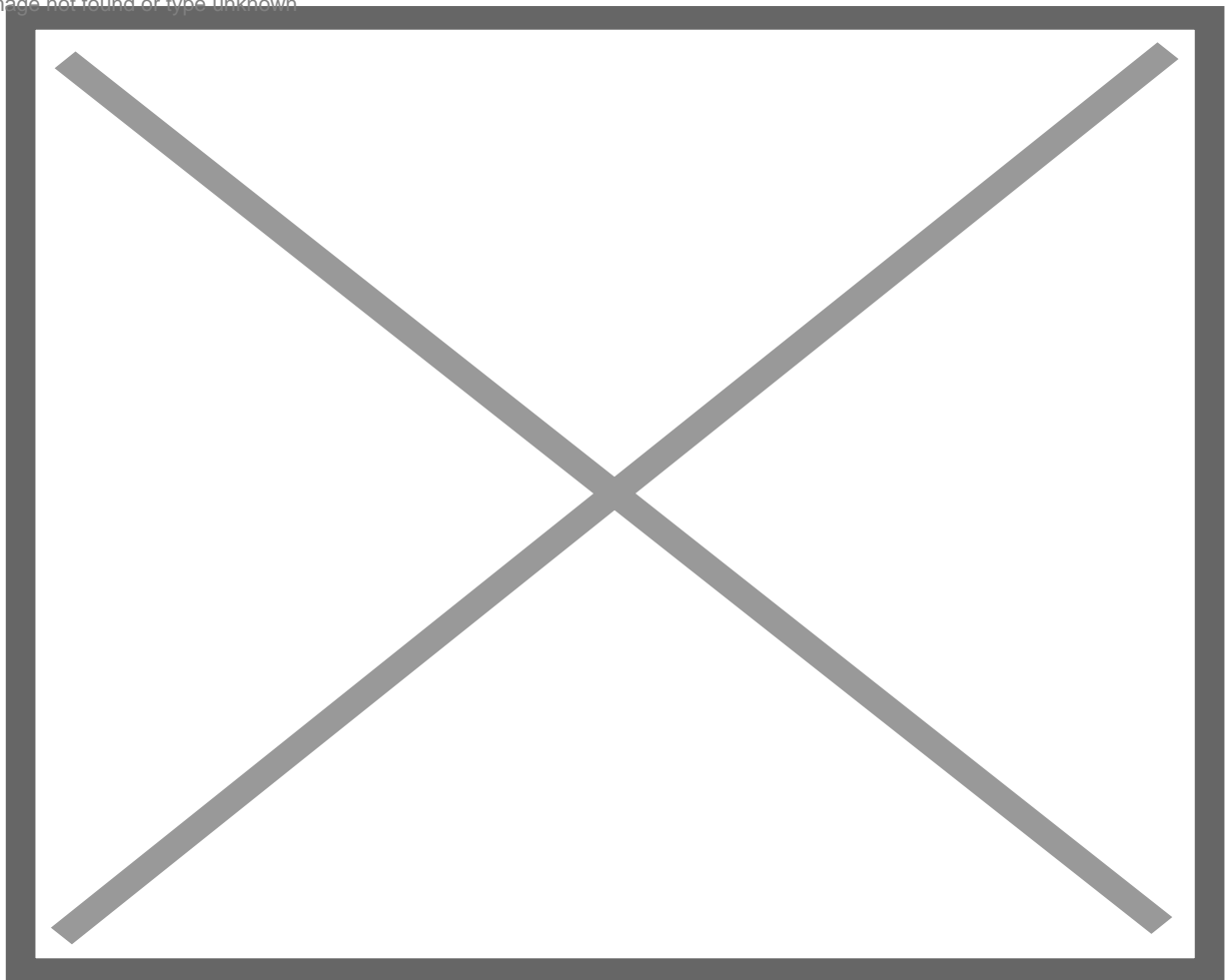
U.S. Senator Raphael Warnock Speaks to UVI Students About Democracy and Civic Engagement

Drawing from MLK's vision, Warnock urges the next generation to champion democracy and justice

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U.S. Senator Rafael Warnock By. UVI

“You all had the good sense to come to school on the beach,” U.S. Senator Rafael Warnock joked, as he began his presentation as the featured speaker at the University of the Virgin Islands’ special student convocation on Wednesday.

The line drew laughs from the audience, as the lawmaker inhabited the role for which he was previously most widely known – senior pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, the famed spiritual home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Mr. Warnock invoked the late civil rights

leader in his address, noting that April 3 marked the 56th anniversary of Dr. King's last public address. He would be assassinated fewer than 24 hours later.

"We never know when we might be summoned," Mr. Warnock told the listening audience, referring to how the then Dr. King, a "young minister that no one really knew," was recruited into the civil rights movement at age 26. "Your job is to be prepared," Mr. Warnock told the students before him.

He continued to utilize the legacy of Dr. King to exhort the audience take up principled action and activism as their contribution to building the nation. He reminded that the motto of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was to "redeem the soul of America," and through that guiding principle came the integration of public accommodations, as well as the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

"They moved from an assumption and an understanding that while the work was political and social, it was also spiritual. In a real sense, they set out to save our democracy to help us to live up to the American ideal."

Continuing that work, Mr. Warnock says, requires the belief that "democracy is the political enactment of a spiritual idea." The fundamental notion that each citizen has value and a voice, and therefore a vote in a democracy "is under siege right now," he said. That is why it is necessary for the work of Dr. King and his fellow civil rights leaders to be continued by future generations.

That work, Mr. Warnock argued, can take multiple shapes and forms. Quoting Howard Thurman, Mr. Warnock advised students not to ask what society needs, but instead explore "what makes you come alive and go and do that". The world needs people who are pursuing their passion, he said. "There's nothing like a young mind that has come alive...nothing like something capturing your imagination and then going after it with head, heart and hands so that you might make a contribution." Dr. King, Sen. Warnock said, was committed to ensuring that "all of us could live up to our highest potential because in a very real sense, the whole democracy depended on it."

He reminded listeners that Dr. King met his fate in Memphis, Tennessee because he was there after two garbage collectors had gotten crushed after having been forced to ride in the back of the garbage truck. In 1968, poor black people were being "literally crushed in the back of their own truck," Senator Warnock declared. "And we live in a moment right now where poor people are being crushed" under "mean-spirited policies," he argued.

It was now the task of the current generation of students to commit to continuing the legacy of Dr. King, to continue the work that Senator Warnock is now doing. "I hate to lay that heavy burden on you," he told them. "But it's up to you. We need you in a moment like this."

He closed the perception gap some students may have felt between themselves and himself – a senior pastor and United States Senator – by recounting his academic journey as a student of Morehouse College. "My parents were short on money but they were long on love and long on faith," Mr. Warnock recounted, sharing a piece of Dr. King's wisdom they instilled in him. "Faith is taking the first step even when you can't see the whole stairwell." That sentiment underpinned his determination to attend Morehouse even when his family's financial resources didn't seem able to accommodate his collegiate ambitions. He told the story of how his father gave him a short sermon and a hug instead of money when his parents dropped him off at campus, and concluded by reminding the audience that despite entering on a "full faith scholarship," somehow he managed until four years later, he was being awarded with a cum laude degree.

He reminded listening students of their legacy of survival. “You are the descendants of slaves, folks who kept making a way out of no way,” and told them that the trajectory of the country now depended on how they worked to shape it. “Can we indeed be a nation that embraces all of its people? Is there room in the country for all of us...I submit to you that is up to you.”

As he continued his remarks, Mr. Warnock remarked on the changing face of the country’s leadership as a direct result of Dr. King’s fight to integrate the nation. He contrasted his election to office on January 5 with the insurrection at the Capitol on January 6. “To search for the soul of America is to decide which of those things that we’re going to be.” He said that the nation, “like all families” had a complicated history, one which Virgin Islanders understand intimately. “You’re part of the colonial history of this experiment in the new world,” Mr. Warnock noted, saying that the United States had to make a choice between succumbing to the forces behind the January 6 assault on democracy, or pushing for a strengthened institution which would mean giving territorial representatives such as Stacey Plaskett “what she ought to have – a vote in the United States Congress.”

In the choice between the America of January 5 and the one shown on January 6, “I choose January 5,” declared Mr. Warnock. His fervent hope is that the young citizens listening on Wednesday also make that same choice.