

SWEAR THAT OATH

Civic Scripture from Dec. 9, 2023

Delivered by Kwame Gyamfi

Vincent Harding was a historian and a scholar of American religion and society. As a social activist, Harding was perhaps best known for his work with and writings about Martin Luther King Jr., whom he knew personally. In Cincinnati, Ohio, on his 21st birthday, Harding spoke on a panel on national and racial healing. Here is what he said.

I am a citizen of a country that does not yet exist.

That's who I see you all as being. Especially you younger folks – but not confined to you younger folks. We are citizens of a country that we still have to create.

A just country.

A compassionate country.

A forgiving country.

A multiracial, multi-religious country.

A joyful country that cares about its children and about its elders.

That cares about itself and about the world. That cares about what the Earth needs as well as what individual people need.

I am, you are, a citizen of a country that does not yet exist. And that badly needs to exist. That's connected, you see, to Langston Hughes, the poet: *America, you've never been America to me!*, he said. And we can always stop there, and complain, and complain, and complain: You've never been America to me!

But remember, Langston did not stop there. America, he said, *You've never been America to me, but I swear this oath: You will be.*

I want you – those of you who are not afraid to swear oaths – to swear that oath. For yourself, for your children, and for your old uncle here. You will be America. You will be what you could be. You will be what you should be.

And you will say: I am going to give my life working for that.

Thank you.

