Joint Statement of Civil Rights and Clergy Leaders Concerning Mistrial of Former Officer Michael Slager

[December 5, 2016] Today, Judge Clifton Newman declared a mistrial in the murder case of former North Charleston police officer Michael Slager who fatally shot Walter Scott, an unarmed Black man, during a routine traffic stop. The North Charleston Branch of the NAACP, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., the ACLU of South Carolina, the Charleston Area Justice Ministry, and the Community Resource Center released the following statement:

After four weeks of trial and four days of deliberation, the jury in the Michael Slager trial was unable to unanimously decide whether Slager should be convicted or acquitted of murder and voluntary manslaughter charges for the shooting death of Walter Scott as he ran away. It is our sincere hope that the prosecutor will retry the case, and that the jury will be more diverse and representative of the Charleston County population.

In the meantime, as representatives of the national and local civil rights and clergy communities, we remain resolute in our efforts to change policing practices in North Charleston and beyond to eliminate police bias and the excessive use of force. Testimony presented during former officer Slager’s trial has confirmed claims made by residents that systemic problems exist within the North Charleston Police Department (NCPD) that must be addressed. For example, witnesses testified that officers were encouraged to use traffic and pedestrian stops as a crime fighting tactic, a practice that residents have described as a quota system that unfairly targets Black residents. Additionally, testimony by NCPD Chief Driggers and others raised questions about whether former officer Slager’s use of a Taser 14 times over his career was excessive, and to what extent other police officers have similarly used force at high rates.

These are questions that we believe should be explored and answered by an independent evaluator. That is why we have asked the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) to open a civil rights investigation of the NCPD to determine if it has engaged in a pattern or practice of unlawful policing. And, we urge North Charleston city officials to join us in this effort. In so doing, they would follow the lead of elected officials in Ferguson, MO, and Baltimore, MD who responded effectively
to the call of residents to end biased policing and excessive use of force.

Additionally, we urge city officials and the Community Oriented Policing Services Office of the DOJ to expeditiously complete their assessment of NCPD policing practices, which began seven months ago. North Charleston city officials will not build trust between community members and police until there are thorough investigations of policing practices that have led to distrust between the North Charleston community and its police force. It is incumbent upon city leaders to demand these federal investigations as necessary steps toward building confidence in and improving policing by NCPD.

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.

The ACLU was founded to ensure the promise of the Bill of Rights and to expand its reach to people historically denied its protections. With more than 500,000 members, nearly 200 staff attorneys, thousands of volunteer attorneys, and offices throughout the nation, including South Carolina, the ACLU of today continues to fight government abuse and to vigorously defend individual freedoms including speech and religion, a woman’s right to choose, the right to due process, citizens’ rights to privacy and much more. The ACLU stands up for these rights even when the cause is unpopular, and sometimes when nobody else will. While not always in agreement with us on every issue, Americans have come to count on the ACLU for its unyielding dedication to principle.