William Sloane Coffin, 1924-2006, was chaplain at Yale University and Senior Minister at Riverside Church in New York. He was a founding member of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. He was active in civil disobedient protest against what he saw as unjust social policies and unjust war.

http://voiceseducation.org/content/truth-william-sloane-coffin

Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If your heart’s full of hope, you can be persistent when you can’t be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. So while I’m not optimistic, I’m always very hopeful.

It is terribly important to realize that the leap of faith is not so much a leap of thought as of action. For while in many matters it is first we must see then we will act; in matters of faith it is first we must do then we will know, first we will be and then we will see. One must, in short, dare to act wholeheartedly without absolute certainty.

Modern American Patriot: William Sloane Coffin (interview)

Well, first of all, I’m more hopeful than optimistic. Hope being a state of mind independent of the state of the nation. The opposite of hope is not pessimism, but despair. And if we can keep despair at bay and just keep the faith, despite the evidence, knowing that in only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. But, in a way, over the long run, there is room for a certain amount of optimism.

I was thinking the other day that the whole course of American history has been to make the Constitution more consonant with the Declaration of Independence: All people are created equal, in value, that is. The Constitution has 26 amendments. Two of them deal with prohibition. One of them deals with the judiciary, that’s 1795. Three of them deal with the presidency. All the others, all 20, whether it’s granting freedom to slaves, votes to women, eliminating the poll tax, instituting the income tax, lowering the voting age, allowing residents of D.C. to vote for the president, every one of them mandates an extension of democracy.

The whole course of American history can be seen as a whole journey of very difficult social struggles in order to make democracy more vibrant, more just, to make what’s legal more moral. And it is of some importance that often, when what now seems self-evident was initially ridiculed and resisted, church people were found where the fighting was fiercest, because they understood that the mandates for justice are really at the heart of the gospel.