

TRAGIC BEYOND BELIEF: Monday, November 6, 2017

The massacre at The First Baptist Church in the small town of Sutherland Springs, Texas leaves us stunned and speechless at the suffering that community must endure. Our hearts are broken again with grief as we attempt to absorb the impact and reality of such horrific violence. While such acts of violence always offends us, that these murders happened in a congregational Sanctuary appalls us all the more.

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County joins with all people of good will in offering our prayers and love to the community of Sutherland Springs, Texas. We also call upon our membership Congregations and the entire community to stand with the families of those victimized and killed. We need to offer public prayer as we continue to commit ourselves to forming and building a non-violent culture based on compassion and understanding.

Once again this unspeakable act of senseless violence calls us to work for the cause of what is right, just and good. Now is the time to speak out once more for sane gun laws as we confront the growing culture of violence that infects our society.

Over a thousand people in the United States have died from gun violence since the massacre of over five hundred people in Las Vegas on October 2, 2017. Since then our governmental leaders have done little or nothing to address the issue. A small but powerful lobbying group continues to hold the Nation hostage to its demands that no restrictions be placed on their interpretation of the Second Amendment. While the majority of people in the Nation support gun control laws, our representatives in government remain either mute or ineffective. We underscore that the right to live overrides the right to bear arms. Even if the Founders of our Nation imagined an armed citizenry for the sport of it, which we are convinced they did not, the power and availability of modern weapons demands constructive and protective legislation.

More than anything else, The Interfaith Council of Contra County bonds with the nation's Interfaith Community and all responsible citizens in confronting the culture of violence that is enabled in so many ways from entertainment to governmental policies. We pledge to continue to do our part by promoting peace, understanding and good will within our communities.

But for now, in this heartbreaking moment, we stand in solidarity and compassion for all those who are the victims of violence, terrorism and hate every day across our country.

Sincerely,

Governing Board of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County

Standing Together In a Time of Anti-Semitism: September 29, 2017

As the anti-Semitic graffiti attack on Temple Sinai in Oakland, CA is being investigated as a hate crime, we pause to stand in solidarity with the Congregation of Temple Sinai and the entire Jewish Community. The September 21, 2017 attack on the eve of the Jewish New Year Holiday reveals how necessary it is for the Interreligious Community and all people of good will to witness together in the cause of justice. An attack on any community is an attack of all of us. It is especially upsetting that the vandalism took place on the International Day of Peace.

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa Council wishes to thank Temple Sinai for all its work in the pursuit of peace and justice. The Temple Sinai Congregation is a beacon of light and hope for so many suffering people. This sad occasion reminds us of the good work and dedication the Congregation of Temple Sinai is doing for the people of Oakland and the citizens of the World. They deserve better than this. We pledge to support our friends at Temple Sinai as we enter into a New Year of hope in the pursuit of justice.

This isn't an isolated incident here in the East Bay. Windows were smashed at Temple Israel of Alameda on the night of August 17th. A Jewish couple in Rossmoor found someone had drawn a swastika outside their front door on February 25th, and a youth dug a swastika in the ground cover near the Community Center of Danville on February 4th. J Weekly: The Jewish News of Northern California notes that there was a spike of Anti-Semitic activities on school campuses this year, including drawn swastikas on campuses, a swastika keyed into a student's car, text messages, social media posts and other threats against Jewish students (J Weekly, May 4, 2017).

In no uncertain terms the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County condemns these anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish acts. We renew our commitment to work with our Jewish sisters and brothers for the betterment of our Nation and World.

We once again caution against a growing culture of intolerance and bigotry that has infected our political culture. Religious, political, governmental and cultural leaders must be agents and good models of social civility upholding the dignity and rights of all peoples to live in peace. We must reexamine our hearts, language and behavior as religious persons insuring that in the name of God we cause no harm to others.

As we seek God's mercy and forgiveness, we call upon the Interreligious Community to stand in solidarity against all forms of religious, political and cultural intolerance. We join with the Interreligious Communities in the Bay Area in standing with Temple Sinai, Temple Israel and all who suffer the injustice of intolerance as together we pledge anew to bring peace, justice, civility and hope to our broken World and its suffering peoples.

After the graffiti attack Temple Sinai posted:

"While this is surely upsetting, this will not define our experience of coming together as a community today. Our strength and resilience will sound through our voices in song and prayer."

We join the Congregation of Temple Sinai in not allowing the madness and hatred around us to become the World within us. We join Temple Sinai in "writing over" the graffiti of hate with the words and actions of love and hope. We join with all peoples of good will in offering our love, our support, our solidarity.

Sincerely in these Days of Awe,

Governing Board of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County

VIOLENCE IS NOT THE ANSWER: August 31, 2017

“Our democracy has no room for inciting violence or endangering the public, no matter the ideology of those who commit such acts. The violent actions of people calling themselves antifa in Berkeley this weekend deserve unequivocal condemnation, and the perpetrators should be arrested and prosecuted. In California, as across all of our great nation, we have deep reverence for the Constitutional right to peaceful dissent and free speech. Non-violence is fundamental to that right. Let us use this sad event to reaffirm that we must never fight hate with hate, and to remember the values of peace, openness and justice that represent the best of America.”

– Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi

How we speak about an issue is as important as the issue itself. The recent protest in San Francisco and Berkeley is really a tale of two cities.

Governmental leaders and the civic community took control of the situation in San Francisco preventing violence and the potential loss of life. Rather than encourage confrontation, San Francisco leaders and activists encouraged counter marchers and gatherings based on values that truly make peace possible in times of conflict and dispute. What was ultimately effective was the commitment to non-violent witness. But, in all fairness, how protesters might behave in any given circumstance is never certain. The confrontations and violence in Berkeley might present a more accurate picture of what we are facing today in our nation, if not our world.

We must be clear that similarity of cause is not agreement in ideology, philosophy, purpose, or tactic. Attacks on the KKK and white supremacist groups do not imply any alliance with those who seek the full human rights of all people. The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County condemns the use of violence in the pursuit of justice. Peaceful protest is always desired. In this context of racial injustice, non-violent witness is always encouraged. Violent efforts to intimidate should be anathema. In light of these alarming developments, we offer some reflections for your consideration and dialogue.

Non-violent witness does not necessarily produce the outcomes people would like to see. We participate in non-violent protests and resistance because it is the ethical and moral way to respond to issues of injustice. At its best, such witness raises and challenges the consciousness of those with the power to bring about meaningful change.

Violence is embedded in our society. We have a long history, along with the rest of the world, of resolving issues and disputes through violence. We need only consider the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and the American Civil Rights Movements to mention only a few examples. Racism and discrimination against people of color underscores the violence that infects our society to this day. While we reject violent reactions to these injustices, we are not surprised by the violent reactions that occur when people feel no hope. Religious

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institutions and movements must provide moral leadership if alternatives to violence are to be found. We must confront our own tendency to legitimize violence, intolerance and racism.

The recent political atmosphere and rhetoric has emboldened public displays of racism, xenophobia and the glorification of force. The issues fueling violence in the streets are moral and ethical issues that should not be used for expedient political purposes. We reject any suggestion there is a moral equivalency between right-wing and left-wing political persuasions and white supremacy and anarchistic groups. Once again, the Interfaith Communities can do much to raise political rhetoric to the moral and ethical level. To this end we are inspired by the non-violent work of such people as Rev. Dr. William Barber of North Carolina and encourage all to engage his thought and non-violent action there in the Moral Mondays Movement which advocates for equal justice for all especially minority communities.

The trivialization of the art of compromise has led to a fostering of ideological absolutism and behavior. Civil society must engage in positive and constructive social discourse to address the issues and conflicts of the day. Once again, religious institutions can provide the space and example for people of good will of differing viewpoints and experiences to come together for the sake of the common good.

Non-violence requires we “disarm” our thoughts, words and deeds. As such, hate speech, while it may fall under the category of “free” speech, is nonetheless an act of violence. Violence is not simply measured by the length of the stick but the attitudes in our hearts. We must realize violent words and attitudes can often lead to violent actions and responses.

These are complex times to say the least. The complexity of the issues requires thoughtful and sincere honesty on the part of all. We encourage our member congregations to foster study groups to educate themselves about the issues of the day as they prepare to respond with constructive actions. It will be important to hear the voices of all those who truly seek the well-being of all.

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County in no uncertain terms condemns the use of violence in any form for whatever cause. We rededicate ourselves to the pursuit of non-violent means as we continue to address the issues of racism, inequality, hunger, war, homelessness, and the rights of all peoples to live and migrate in peace and security. We thank all of those who have raised their voices on behalf of others through peaceful, non-violent means.

We remind you of our Defusing Hatred Program. We have already conducted this program for over seventeen different gatherings, teaching non-violent communication skills, understanding those of differing worldviews and how to interrupt harassment in the public square. We offer this program through our member congregations and we are more than willing to offer this program to other religious and secular groups throughout the East Bay. We are also dedicated to bringing together the disparate voices and perspectives of all people, including particularly those speaking out on the right and on the left, so that all can work to better understand what is behind the anger and frustration of each to the other, and learn how to engage in constructive dialogue together. Please contact us for more information or to schedule a program for your group at 925-933-6030.

The Governing Board of the Interfaith Council

HOUSING – A HUMAN RIGHT: June 2, 2017

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and of their family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond their control.”

Article 25

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County has long been involved in the issues of housing and homelessness in very practical ways. We are deeply grateful to all those who have made the Winter’s Nights Program a successful outreach to so many people seeking temporary shelter and permanent housing. We are grateful that in many sectors of our society the numbers of people victimized by homelessness is decreasing. Nonetheless, homelessness is not a statistical issue. It involves real people. Our response to the issues of homelessness is a response to real people who deserve shelter, security and a fighting chance to live with dignity and peace of mind. We stand with the Interfaith Community as together we affirm the human right to shelter and housing for each and every human person. Together we affirm the following principles and perspectives:

- 1) Housing is a human right and governments have a responsibility to foster and support the structures by which emergency shelter is provided and permanent housing that is affordable is made possible. In times such as these, when people are being priced out of their housing and displaced away from their communities, the need for more local housing at rates affordable for those of meager means becomes a moral and collective issue.
- 2) Housing is more than a “roof over someone’s head.” Adequate housing implies safety, security and conditions befitting human dignity and community.
- 3) Emergency relief from homelessness cannot be the only response to the human needs of those who find themselves in the streets. The reasons for the homelessness of each and every person involved must be identified and addressed in a humane manner.
- 4) The Interfaith Community must continuously address the issues of homelessness and its threats as the conscience of the greater community.
- 5) The Interfaith Community must involve all people of good will in addressing the issue of homelessness by supporting emergency and temporary relief as well as advocating for legislation and development to permanently solve the homeless issue in our communities. Homelessness calls for more than charity. It is a matter of justice.

Thank you for all your support and outreach. We are thankful for the work of the Multi-Faith ACTION Coalition, the Trinity Center and our many congregations whose work of advocacy and hands on service restores the dignity of so many. We are blessed to work with you as we continue to walk in the ways of compassion, understanding and solidarity.

SCIENCE NOT SILENCE: April 21, 2017

Hardly a day goes by when the people of the world are not more and more aware of the world. The issues of Immigration, War, Hunger and Terrorism remind us of the suffering of many and the anguish of not a few. As Earth Day approaches, we pause to ponder the spiritual and interfaith implications of this modern-day observance (April 22).

The Scientific Community and other people of good will have decided to march for Science on Earth Day. In this day and age of “alternative facts” and questionable truths, it is important to claim the power of our intellect to guide us in the way of justice and intelligence. It is no longer tenable to put science and religion in opposition to each other. The pursuit of truth, based on facts, is one of the most powerful acts a human being can achieve. We cannot afford to reduce the quest for truth to an expedient self-serving world of “alternative facts”.

As we prepare for Earth Day, we might consider at least three contributions science and the pursuit of truth based on facts have given to the spiritual pursuit.

First, modern Science has moved the scientific inquiry from a mechanistic understanding of the world to a holistic appreciation. We do not live on the surface of a great machine. The World is alive and the Divine is sensed, celebrated and encountered in the matrix of it all. This invites us to a sense of wonder that expresses itself in gratitude.

Second, the scientific enterprise invites us to see and experience the world in evolutionary terms rather than static. Since humanity has evolved into conscious and conscientious creatures, we are now responsible for the world that created us. Our gratitude for life expresses itself in generosity to others.

Finally, because of scientific explorations and break throughs, we no longer think of the world as a collection of objects to be used, but subjects to meet and encounter. We are called by our very nature to live humbly on Earth, our common home. We are deeply moved by the wise and challenging words of Albert Einstein:

If we want to improve the world we cannot do it with scientific knowledge but with ideals. Confucius, Buddha, Jesus, Mohamed and Gandhi have done more for humanity than science has done. We must begin with the heart of humanity-with the conscience-and the values of conscience can only be manifested by selfless service to humankind. Religion and science go together. As I've said before, science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind. They are interdependent and have a common goal-the search for truth.

Interfaith Peace Project (Antioch)

Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County (Walnut Creek)

Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County Responds to the Recent Ban of Muslims

Sunday, January 29, 2017

“You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it’s like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.”

– Exodus 23:9

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County condemns the recent Executive actions of President Donald J. Trump against refugees and Muslims in particular. This kind of Executive Order is contrary to human decency, violating the human and moral rights of all people to seek safety and security. It also runs contrary to our Nation’s struggle to be a respected beacon of hope and a safe haven for people who are threatened by war, hunger or persecution. To single out Muslims is dangerous to the safety and well-being of all citizens.

The rhetoric of President Trump over the past year has endangered the lives of Muslims not only in the United States but across the world. Such rhetoric emboldens terrorist groups and individuals. Unscrupulous people will be tempted to engage in aggressive action or vandalism against innocent people and houses of worship because of their religious affiliation. Associating all of Islam with terrorism and then suspecting all Muslims because of their religion cannot be allowed to stand.

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County stands in solidarity with the Muslim Community throughout the world. We call upon the President to rescind his Executive Order against Refugees and Muslims and to ensure that such tactics will not be entertained in the future. We call upon Congress and the Courts to block any implementation of this dangerous Executive Order or any like it.

It is simply irresponsible and life threatening to single out a particular religion and people for such Executive action. The President’s Executive Order contravenes our most precious constitutional values of equal protection and due process, and ignores their cherished principles of anti-discriminatory development of remedies and evidence-based decision making. We are further concerned since most, if not all, of the would-be refugee entrants have already undergone two years or more of careful screening and comprehensive vetting under the well-established protocols of the last two administrations. Yet the Executive Order would allow individual agents at the port of entry to exercise their own discretion in selectively denying what has already been approved.

We are deeply concerned about those refugees who are fleeing dangerous situations to find a safe haven in America. President Trump’s plan does not respond to the severity of the global refugee problem and must not destroy the aspirations of so many who look to us for hope. We are appalled and saddened the President would act in such a manner as this, as it betrays even those with permanent residency rights in the U.S. and divides families around the world. Xenophobia and Islamophobia must not be the basis for legislation or Executive Orders. We call upon the Interfaith Community to stand in solidarity with one another and the Muslim Community as we honor the founding principles upon which this country has been built and seek peace through justice and the welcoming of strangers.

Signed,

The Governing Board of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County