



The River of Life Christian Church, Inc.

Official Statement from the Office of the Pastor and Executive Board of The River of Life Christian Church speaking out against violence in Charlottesville, Virginia

August 18, 2017

Monuments are erected to memorialize the life and work of a person or commemorate a horrific event. The Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson and King monuments esteem the work of men who've served this country on and off the battlefield. The September 11th memorial honors the lives of those who died on account of foreign terrorist attacks on American soil. These monuments capture a defining figure or moment in history and symbolize something far more than the bricks and mortar used to build them. They represent an ideal or a hope and they function to create space that allows for gathering around those ambitions. The General Robert E. Lee statue and any other statue erected in honor of the confederacy symbolize xenophobia, racism, state sanctioned violence and bigotry. Effigy like these represent a desire to hold firm to polarizing ideologies in an increasingly diverse population bent towards unity. White supremacists, neo-Nazi's and nationalists emboldened by fear and divisive rhetoric from President Trump stride towards breaking our bond of unity. The violence that erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia last week following the removal of the General's statue is a microcosm of the current state of American affairs. Racial tension that's existed in this country since its inception is again spilling into the streets. Even historic hamlets like Charlottesville are no longer safe from becoming boiling pots of violence. Indeed, last weekends events are a foreshadow of what's to come if we neglect to hold our president and his administration accountable, teach equality and equity and recall our human connectedness. Our collective moral conscious demands we do these things to ensure our union and future.

Let me be clear, America's moral crisis didn't begin when Mr. Trump took the presidential oath. Our moral dilemma was evident from the very founding of these United States. The forced removal of Native Americans from their ancestral lands and the buying and selling of African bodies as chattel in the south are embedded deep within the consciousness of this country and an expressed sense of white superiority. This false sense of self drove them to exact heinous crimes and deny privilege to other races. But, the idea of race is a concept used to identify human bodies. In her book entitled, *Whiteness and Morality: Pursuing Racial Justice through Reparations and Sovereignty*, Jennifer Harvey, associate professor of Religion at Drake University writes, "Race is produced at the intersections of social (legal, cultural, economic, political, etc.) processes, legacies of history and human activities. Race is a sociopolitical reality" (21). As a sociopolitical reality it has real meaning and impact in the world. It's influenced cultural beliefs we ascribe to one another. Historically, it's dictated who's had access to healthcare, education, homeownership and business loans. Institutionalized discrimination has



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helped limit the accessibility of resources to particular populations - more often than not persons of color. Needless to say, the codification of dominant beliefs sanctioned certain kinds of oppressive treatment of anyone other than white.

As living social documents of historical violence, the bodies of people of color, immigrants, muslims, jews and LGBTQ persons bear the consequences of state sanctioned codified hate. What erupted in Charlottesville, VA must be read within this larger historical narrative. The violent events didn't happen on their own but are the result of enduring ideologies that resulted in the formation and proliferation of discriminatory laws and domestic terrorist groups like the Klu Klux Klan. Attempting to take back their country, they marched boldly through the streets brandishing weaponry and physically attacking people. Regardless of how President Trump appropriates blame on both sides of the protesting lines, the fact is, the Charlottesville event signaled the present reality of terrorist groups existent within this country. It signaled their willingness to step out from under the sheets they once hid and spew hate because they have a president who does the same. Their actions are an extension of Mr. Trump's ideological stance. He's publicly mocked a differently abled journalist, objectified women and went so far as to dehumanize and ban muslims from entering the U.S. I believe, the divisiveness in his heart may be summed up in his campaign promise to build a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. However, building bridges not walls is what a true leader does. Reaching across the boarder, making our enemy our ally, allowing the stranger to feel at home - this is the real work of leaders. It's easy to further divisive agendas and bolster fear in the hearts of people but it takes strength and integrity to decry any system, people or group that stands for the marginalization of another. Mr. Tump represents the moral dilemma of America. His two-day delayed response didn't exhibit the kind of leadership this country needs at this or any time. Even more, his unwillingness to name those groups outright during his first speech and his double-downing during his third televised remarks is evident of his lack of a moral compass. But, restoring America's moral uprightness is what is necessary now.

Historically, in the time of moral crisis it's been religious voices that rose to correct the cultural ethos. I contend, religious leaders of all faiths must follow in the prophetic tradition of Abraham, Jesus, Mohammed and others. Religious leaders in every hamlet across America must use their power to reinscribe the importance of equality and equity. Americans need to be reminded that we're all created in the image and likeness of God. Clergy persons must invite the public to reconsider the collective good above ones own self-centeredness. Faith leaders like Mother Theresa of Calcutta, Mahatma Gandhi and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. helped us recall our common good by bridging the gap between what *is* and *ought* to be. This remains the work to which every person, irrespective of religious tradition, profession or vocation is invited. However, I call directly upon religious leaders because as Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, professor of Theological and Social Ethics at Church Divinity School of the Pacific writes in her book *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, "Religion provides a sense of hope that the powers of greed, exploitation, and brokenness are not the final word, and that the sacred Source of all is flowing through creation, is healing and liberating and



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ultimately will reign” (138). Then, religion and religious voices guide us to sense how the spirit is presently at work inspiring us towards good work for all of created order. Faith leaders point us in the direction of hope and that the systems of this world will be overturned. Our hope and what we strive towards must be the becoming of another kind of world. We must work to establish and live into that beloved community. This is our only hope.

Conversations about the present reality of racial tension need to be addressed with grace, wisdom and respect. Alongside religious leaders, community activists, teachers and parents must invest themselves in having these hard conversations with those they influence. They must inform their listeners of the historical narrative that violent events like that which occurred in Charlottesville are couched in. They must remind millennials of our moral responsibility to care for one another. Distinguishing right ethics from self-serving values will create an ethos of mutual respect. The task of re-interpreting and re-teaching our collective common good is daunting but necessary. For the sake of our common good we must listen intently to our moral compass. We must listen to why millennials seek escape from their present reality through opioids and underage alcoholism. We must have compassion for the widow and the orphan. We must seek the welfare of all American cities. For, in the peace of the city, town and suburb is where we will found our peace.

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