

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused sickness and death around the world and – along with the recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery – re-exposed the wounds of racism. Due to pre-existing disparities, the effects of the coronavirus have disproportionately affected African Americans and other minorities. Some people have even fueled racial tensions during the pandemic at a time when we should be promoting an understanding of our common humanity. The inherent dignity of each human person demands that we use our voices and collective power to act for justice.

As of June 7, over 1.9 million cases of COVID-19 and 110,425 deaths were reported in the United States alone. As with so many health crises, African Americans have suffered disproportionately. Thirty percent of COVID-19 patients have been African American even though they are only about 13% of the population. African Americans and other minorities such as Native Americans are more likely to live in communities with pollution and substandard housing, work in jobs where they are unable to work from home and therefore are more likely to come in contact with the virus, and have pre-existing health conditions with less access to health care.

The pandemic has also prompted racist language and behavior against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). Politicians have referred to the coronavirus as the “Chinese” virus. One advocacy organization (STOP AAPI HATE) has received reports of over 1,500 racist acts since January. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) had to put language on its website explaining that being of Asian descent does not increase the chance of getting or spreading COVID-19.

Muslims, Jews, Christians, and other religious minorities around the world are also experiencing increased prejudice during the pandemic. Some groups are blaming Muslims for the creation and spreading of the coronavirus. One protest in Columbus, Ohio included an image of the Star of David and a rat and the words “The real plague.”

Thankfully, some action is being taken to address this racism. The U.S. Catholic bishops released a statement on May 5 condemning racism. Senators are demanding that the CDC and Department of Justice take further and immediate action to address the increase in racism. In a recent eloquent message, President George W. Bush offered wisdom to Americans, asking us to “remember that the suffering we experience as a nation does not fall evenly.”

We suggest four actions that everyone can take to address racism during this medical and economic crisis. First, we must not let fear overwhelm our ability to show empathy and simple kindness. Nor should we allow the voices that attempt to divide us succeed. We applaud Governor DeWine for his remarks showing that prejudice (e.g., anti-Semitism) is unacceptable. If you hear demeaning language, you can respond with courage and kindness and simply say, “I am not comfortable with that.”

Second, while the government has responded rapidly to offset the adverse economic effects of combating the pandemic, it is likely that more assistance will be necessary. The initial focus was on speedy assistance. We now ask legislators to seriously consider our society’s disparities in education, healthcare, and jobs and to address these in designing future policies and spending programs. Third, we ask our brothers and sisters to consider writing their legislators to encourage them to take into account how to assist those who bear a disproportionate burden of this national suffering.

Finally, as we are all in this together, we advocate care for each other as brothers and sisters, neighbors, and friends – in unity and without racial division. Unity comes through understanding, and understanding grows from relationship. So be proactive – get to know someone from a different race, religions, ethnicity, culture, etc. Invite your neighbor or co-worker to go for a walk, meet for coffee, or visit your local park (using proper social distancing) and get to know him or her. You can’t unlearn someone’s story, and knowing someone’s story can be the start of a beautiful relationship.