

1 June 2020

To our colleagues in Salem Presbytery:

People of Faith have grieving hearts, overcome by the tremendous losses suffered by the pandemic....over 100,000 dead....40.2million lost jobs. People of Color are disproportionately represented in these high numbers, each representing a person with loved ones and personal responsibilities touching many others. The impact of Covid-19 pandemic is only deepening old, racial disparities in housing, education, access to medical care, and income that we have ignored far too long. These social conditions are representative of the societal structures created to insure white supremacy and privilege over the generations. This is the toxic reality of institutional racism that is baked into our cities, state, and nation. And then added to this unbearable sadness are three more horrific deaths of African Americans killed in recent weeks.

In Louisville, Kentucky Breonna Taylor was gunned down in her own home in a ‘no-knock’ swat team raid directed to the wrong apartment. Ahmaud Arbery was victimized in a modern-day vigilante lynching in Brunswick, Georgia. And George Floyd uttered his final words “I can’t breathe” suffocated under the knee of a police officer on a street corner of Minneapolis. These deaths are added to the long list throughout our history of violence against brown and black people living among us. The long 400-year history of violence against our fellow human beings has resulted in the intense fear and distrust that exists among us. Understandably, our Sisters and Brothers of Color are responding with deep anger, and we people of white privilege most often, remain silent and complacent. And now legitimate questions are emerging about whether extremist groups are instigating the violence in some of these demonstrations, adding damage by destroying businesses vital to the black community.

As followers of Jesus Christ seeking to be faithful to his command to love our neighbors (no exceptions) as we love ourselves, we must acknowledge our sinfulness and confront this racism and its resulting impact on our lives and those of our brothers and sisters. In our churches and throughout our communities, we must strive to transform the institutions and systems that shape our everyday living and work to dismantle racism. Those of us living lives of privilege and power because we are white must name and renounce the sinful reality of white supremacy. We must renew our commitment to interracial justice and plainly demonstrate that Black Lives Matter.

As Salem Presbytery adopted an overture in 2018 addressing Black Lives Matter, *Recommendation for Racial Justice: A Vision for Inter-racial Justice Ministry and Reconciliation*, we urge congregations to take actions dedicated to justice and racial reconciliation of all of God’s people, just as we are reconciled to God through our risen Lord. In the Season of Pentecost, let us rekindle the gift and power of the Holy Spirit to close the gaps that divide us individually and structurally. Let us pray for not just a new conviction but a lasting commitment to action to make black lives matter once and for all.

We urge you to take this letter to your Session and grapple with these issues identifying ways your congregation can take action. Enclosed is a reference list of resources your congregation may find helpful. The work of racial justice that we are called to as followers of Jesus Christ is ever more urgent. Please let any member of the Peace and Justice Task force know if we can help you in any way.

In Christ’s just love,

Ms. Betsy Harrington
Mr. Jack Harrington
Rev. Sam Stevenson
Rev. Frank Dew
Rev. Frank Covington

Ms. Carole Covington
Rev. Ray Mims
Rev. Debbie Layman
Rev. Stewart Ellis
Ms. Grace Winn Ellis
Rev. Kim Priddy
Mr. Richard Purcell
Rev. Jess Rigel
Rev. Kate Davelaar
Rev. Wes Pitts
Ms. Karen Worley
Ms. Laura Peck
Rev. Jon Gaska
Rev. R.C Griffin
Mr. Ron Richwine
Rev. Abby Catoe
Rev. Bryan McFarland
Ms. Jackie Roundtree
Ms. Margaret Arbuckle
Rev. Steve Scott
Rev. Stuart Taylor

From 2018 Resolution:

Furthermore, the Presbytery calls on congregations to take at least one new intentional step toward racial justice and reconciliation within the coming year, including:

d. Engaging in interracial justice ministry by working with community partners to identify and address at least one local issue affecting the quality of life in communities of color, such as equity in education, housing, economic opportunity, access to a clean and healthy environment, and others. Congregations may want to show their commitment to interracial justice by also placing a banner which states "Black Lives Matter" on individual church properties, inside their buildings, or in designated visible areas as deemed appropriate by their Sessions as a sign of public witness (Luke 4: 18-19; Psalm 9:9). Banners are encouraged to share lines of scripture such as, "You Shall Love your Neighbor as Yourself" (Mark 12:31) to ground the statement "Black Lives Matter" as primarily a theological position rather than a political one. Only by urgently taking actions for justice together will racial reconciliation be authentically possible.