

In the Aftermath of the Mass Shooting in Orlando...

A prayer from Dr. Jeffrey Haggray, Executive Director of the American Baptist Home Mission Societies:

We send our collective prayers to God as fellow citizens and a faith community on behalf of the victims of the mass shooting in Orlando, FL, and their families. We pray also for the people of Orlando, law enforcement and all first responders.

God of grace and mercy, hear our prayers on behalf of all who suffer violence, anguish, pain and grief. We pray for comfort, grace, and healing in the wake of these unspeakable horrors, in God's Holy Name.

Amen.

Dr. Susan Gillies, Interim General Secretary of American Baptist Churches USA, said,

"It's hard at a time like this to say "Love conquers all." For in our day, it just doesn't seem to be true. But perhaps it doesn't seem true because the power of love hasn't really been unleashed lately. I'm talking about the power of love inside me...and you. We've settled for a comfortable faith and when we do that, we are unable to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Lord, forgive us. Thank you for those stepping forward to help and heal. May we, like they, become love."

Virginia Holmstrom, Executive Director of American Baptist Women's Ministries, said,

"I grieve for mothers and fathers and families and friends of those loved ones who were killed and injured in Orlando by a gunman armed with hatred. I grieve at the easy access of assault weapons in our nation. I grieve at judgmental conclusions that will yield to Islamophobia and homophobia. This day tests the faith of God's people. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, 'Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.' This is the day to disarm the perpetual cycles of violence with the light and love of Christ. Let it begin with you and me."

Rev. Dr. Nick Carter, Interim President, American Baptist Seminary of the West, said,

God have mercy.

As people of faith we cannot remain silent in the face of the heart-wrenching tragedy in Orlando, Florida. It was a despicable act of hate and we need to confront it on that ground.

The overlay of Isis and terrorism is a deception – a fig leaf. Such a reference was a sad attempt by a sick man to cover his personal hate in something larger. But Isis is just a metaphor of hate. It was telling that the former president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, when pressed yesterday on the shooter's Afghani heritage said: "Listen, this man was born, raised, and educated in the United States. It was your culture that shaped him, not Afghanistan. Whatever he was, he learned it in America."

He's right. We want desperately to look elsewhere for someone or something to blame. Millions will once again be spent to try to connect this "terrorist" to a wider international conspiracy, but it will be a wasted effort. Hate is the issue. As the cartoon character Pogo once said: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Our country has many enemies, but none threatens the soul of this nation more than the enemy of hatred that has taken up permanent residence here. It is the dominant theme in our social and political culture. Vitriol, venom, belittlement and bile spew out in demonic quantity.

That's why we as people of faith have such an urgent responsibility to speak and act. We have a higher calling. We profess to have a different narrative about our neighbors and the dispossessed. If so, then it's time for us to be heard.

Hatred is not new to America. Indeed, the scars of hate cannot be hidden. They mark the most shameful chapters in our history and they are legion. One cannot tell the story of minorities here without an agonizing recitation of prejudice, lies, exclusion, hurt and violence. It was only through a long struggle for the soul of our country, more often than not led by prophetic members of the faith community, that justice and some degree of reconciliation was won for these minorities. It wasn't easy and some of the greatest struggles were within the religious community itself, but if there is any claim to moral character and Christian honor it was earned by those courageous few who dared to cast out the demons of hate.

Today the LBGTQ community is heir to America's awful heritage of hate. And it is incumbent upon the religious community to name and exorcise this demon too.

When Jesus cast out the Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5) he began by naming the demon in order to gain power over it. So must we. Then when Jesus healed the demoniac he made it clear that it wasn't an act of sympathy; he said it was an act of mercy. So must we proclaim the message of mercy in the face of the demons of hate. God's covenant with us is based on mercy, or loving-kindness. Mercy repairs the breach. It is salvific – it makes whole.

This is our calling. Kyrie Eleison