

The Urgency of Our Times

As theological educators related to the United Church of Christ, we are united in the declaration that we reject white supremacy as a profound moral evil. White supremacy is an offense to God who created all human beings in God's image.

As teachers of current and future clergy, we recognize the sacred responsibility we have to create space for holy listening, engagement, and instruction while also holding firmly to the fundamental dignity and equality of every human person. We call on our alumni/ae, faculty, staff and friends to stand with us in affirming, through our teaching, preaching, and public witness, a testimony to the beauty and intrinsic value of every person. We strongly reject the sinful advocacy for and ideology of white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia. These do violence to God's will for the whole human family, deny the ministry and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and threaten the common good.

The urgency of our times has us reflecting on the challenging words of Rev. Traci Blackmon, "Our nation is in a moral and political crisis." [1] As people of faith we humbly, and yet with conviction, offer the following statement:

As a denomination that embodies an ecumenical witness and interreligious engagement, the United Church of Christ joins the human freedom movement that has prophetically led the public witness in our nation's history against all forms of white supremacist domination. This movement has worked on many intersecting fronts through our nation's history – abolition, indigenous rights, women's rights, civil rights, LGBTQI rights, and now takes shape in the vision of Black Lives Matter. In our hearing, the call of Black Lives Matter is at once a confession of our nation's sin of racism -- still entrenched in vicious disparities in all our systems of economy, healthcare, education, and criminal justice -- and an affirmation of faith in what we see as the yet unrealized potential of this nation, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "to live out the true meaning of its creed." In the contemporary call of Black Lives Matter we hear lament and hope, and these truths summon and ground us anew to be about the work of freedom, represented by our liberating God.

Currently we name and decry efforts to demonize and criminalize Black Lives Matter as a part of the historic strategies of white supremacy, and we commit to listen to and engage with Black Lives Matter leaders who are prodding our nation's conscience to face the deadly forces of racism and white supremacy at work in our society, communities, churches, and lives. We commit to doing what we can to marshal the resources of our faith, religious institutions, and tradition to further their cause of racial justice through loving engagement. [2]

We commit to this work in solidarity with and on behalf of people of color, Jewish people, Muslim people, immigrant people, LGBTQI people and all who are made vulnerable by the rhetoric and actions within the current political climate. As people who follow Jesus, we join our bodies, voices, and spirits with those who demand justice for the oppressed and transformation for our society. As people who follow Jesus, we do this -- as many have before -- knowing the cost and trusting in God.

The United Church of Christ has been Just Peace Church for more than 30 years. [3] We recognize that the practice of confession, repentance and change, one of its peace and justice

practices, is especially relevant to this urgent call for the whole nation to confront and reject white supremacy.

As representatives of the institutions of theological education, we must acknowledge that we have corporately benefited from the economic, social, political and yes, religious advantages conferred by America's "Anglo-Saxon" myth of white superiority, as Dean Kelly Brown Douglas of Episcopal Divinity School at Union has pointed out. [4] We recognize that this is unearned privilege, bought through the exploitation of others, and work to do the necessary work of change to divest of these privileges in our institutional life and teaching.

We call on all institutions that have also benefited from white privilege, and they are the majority in this nation, but especially those who claim the name of Christian, to confess their own complicity in the national history of racism, repent of this, and make concrete change.

It is our conviction that this nation is worth saving and is imperiled by the vile actions of those who will deny others their right to be free citizens. Sound confessional examination of our nation's history is not only prophetic, it is patriotic. The public square in which we all find our identity and express our humanity is sacred and must be protected and must remain free of spectacles of violence, especially the violence of racism, xenophobia and bigotry.

What we saw on display in Charlottesville, VA on August 11 and 12, 2017 was a hatred unworthy of our nation and an assault on the sanctity of our common life. The challenge for theological educators who form citizens for the public and religious life is to persistently question how the idea of nation—which belongs to us all, can be used as a weapon to divide and fragment the people of God and our fellow citizens of goodwill. While our nation is by no means perfect, it is our conviction that it can be great power for good in the world. That also means that it can be a powerful force for inflicting harm and suffering. We choose to fight for the former.

As theological educators we know well the history of religion being brought to the service of evil. We are also well acquainted with the calls to leave the public life to the forces of politics and culture. It is this knowledge and these memories which, as with our ancestors, brings us into the public square to bear witness to the power of religion to make this a better nation in which all God's children might flourish. As did the abolitionists, the Civil Rights Movement, and the LGBTQ Movement or indeed any movement on behalf of those fragmented and displaced in the nation, before us we bring our religion to the public square not as power of coercion and death but, rather as a power of hope. Knowing the power of education to create new imaginations in which good is more powerful than evil and in which our society is broader and not smaller, we dedicate ourselves to the work of saving this nation in these dark hours. This is not a work we do alone but with all people of goodwill who believe this nation can have a place for us all.

Notes:

[1] Rev. Traci Blackmon, "The dying breaths of white supremacy: Witness to Charlottesville outlines the way forward for anti-racists," St. Louis-American http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/the-dying-breaths-of-white-supremacy-witness-to-charlottesville-outlines/article_b8bdf2c0-82b0-11e7-adfc-7f69a341ce12.html

[2] The Black Lives Matter Guiding Principles define "Loving Engagement" this way: "We are committed to embodying and practicing justice, liberation, and peace in our engagements with one another," <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>.

[3] [1] Just Peace is an emerging fourth paradigm beyond the divide between Just War and Pacifism. It has now been affirmed by the World Council of Churches, many other Protestant denominations and is under active consideration by the Catholic Church. In addition, Just Peace has been affirmed by Jewish and Muslim communities as well. See UCC Just Peace:

http://www.ucc.org/justice_just-peace

[4] Kelly Brown Douglas, "Charlottesville and the Truth about America," August 13, 2017, Black Theology Project. <https://btpbase.org/charlottesville-truth-america/>

Authors:

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, Professor of Theology and Former President , Chicago Theological Seminary

Deborah Krause, Academic Dean and Professor of New Testament, Eden Theological Seminary

Susan Abraham, Vice-President of Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty, Pacific School of Religion

Sharon Tan, Vice President of Academic Strategy and Dean, McVay Professor of Christian Ethics, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

Stephen G. Ray Jr., Neal A. And Ila F. Fisher Professor of Theology, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

Carolyn M. Call, Executive Director of Development and Communication, Lancaster Theological Seminary

MT Dávila, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Andover Newton Theological School

Susan Hayward, UCC minister and Ph.D. student in Theology and Religious Studies, Georgetown University

Signatories:

Donald C. Clark, Jr., Acting President and General Counsel, Chicago Theological Seminary

Ken Stone, Academic Dean and Professor of Bible, Culture and Hermeneutics, Chicago Theological Seminary

David Greenhaw, President, Eden Theological Seminary

David Vásquez-Levy, President, Pacific School of Religion

Kristen Leslie, Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care, Eden Theological Seminary

Christopher Grundy, Associate Professor of Preaching and Worship and Associate Dean of the Chapel, Eden Theological Seminary

Adam Ployd, Assistant Professor of Church History, Eden Theological Seminary

Laurel Taylor, Assistant Professor of Old Testament, Eden Theological Seminary

Carol Shanks, Associate Dean of Students and Director of Contextual Education, Eden Theological Seminary

Ben Sanders, Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics, Eden Theological Seminary

Damayanthi Niles, Professor of Constructive Theology, Eden Theological Seminary

J. Clinton McCann, Evangelical Professor of Biblical Interpretation, Eden Theological Seminary

Carol E. Lytch, President, Lancaster Theological Seminary

David M. Mellott, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Dean of Seminary, Professor of Theological Formation, Director of Ministerial Formation, Lancaster Theological Seminary

Myka Kennedy Stephens, Seminary Librarian, Assistant Professor of Theological Bibliography, Lancaster Theological Seminary

Lee Barrett, Mary B. and Henry P. Stager Chair in Theology, and Professor of Systematic Theology, Lancaster Theological Seminary

Anne T. Thayer, Professor of Church History, Lancaster Theological Seminary

Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament, Lancaster Theological Seminary

Julia M. O'Brien, Paul and Grace L. Stern Chair in Old Testament Studies
Professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Lancaster Theological Seminary

Yasmine Abou-El-Kheir - Director, Lapp Learning Commons at the Chicago Theological Seminary

Lew Zeidner, President, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

Geoffrey Black, Visiting Professor of Church Leadership and Ecumenical Studies, Eden Theological Seminary

Zachary Moon, Assistant Professor of Practical Theology, Chicago Theological Seminary

Emily Vogt, Assistant Dean for Academic Administration and Director of the PhD Program, Chicago Theological Seminary

Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, Associate Professor of Theological Field Education and New Testament, Chicago Theological Seminary

Justin Kim, Director of Online Learning, Chicago Theological Seminary

JoAnne Marie Terrell, Associate Professor of Theology, Ethics, and the Arts, Chicago Theological Seminary

Dow Edgerton, Professor of Ministry and former Academic Dean

Rachel S. Mikva, Rabbi Herman Schaalman Associate Professor in Jewish Studies

Martin B. Copenhaver, President, Andover Newton Theological School