



Receiving Unity, Giving Witness

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?
Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?*

Habakkuk 1:2 NRSV

Our hearts are broken, and we grieve as one with the families of the victims in Parkland, Florida. As the school day was drawing to a close on Ash Wednesday 2018, a lone student turned the freshman halls of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School into a killing field. At this time, seventeen students and faculty are dead, and others struggle to live at the hospital. Like the mother with ashes on her forehead comforting her child, while crying and waiting news of her older child, Florida and the nation have shed many tears. Like parents at the vigil who rage for political action to curtail gun violence, Floridians and Americans are demanding protection for our children. Like the teachers across the country who the day after led their students in safety drills, we too know that something more than hiding safely is required.

The shock of this violence on Ash Wednesday cuts to the core of the church. As the first day of the penitential season of Lent, Christians receive the imposition of ashes on their foreheads with the reminder: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." This ritual initiates Christians in an intentional period of reflection and action toward deepening our trust in God and expanding our compassion for humanity and creation. Using Ash Wednesday as a day of massacre is a thorough rejection of what the church understands as growth in maturity and faith.

The motives of the murderer are still unknown. What we do know is that a student turned violently on his peers with impunity. He used a weapon designed for war, which was readily available to him along with an overabundance of ammunition. Our society has forgone all restraint on such weapons. In the last decade, weapons manufacturers have seen their sales increase two and half times to over \$51 billion annually. Like the opioid epidemic in which tens of thousands are dying too, our society seems helpless in restraining our despairing appetite for self-destruction. Our children are killing one another and themselves. Too many are throwing themselves under the wheel of violence. And so we call out, "O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?" This much is clear: the marketplace has shown no capacity for healing the despair in our youth. It seems intent only on profit-making.

As we comfort our children and hold them tight, telling them we love them and will keep them safe, we also have the responsibility to engage and lead in dialogue and action about what truly keeps us safe. It's worth recalling that the word "safety" shares the same root meaning as healing. The fear and despair that now occupies our schools points to a deeper need for healing of the acrimonious debate that divides our nation – that turns our people against one another.

As we move forward from the unnecessary death and injury of this Ash Wednesday, we urge Christians and all people of goodwill to commit to a new level of dialogue that sees national healing as the outcome. Dialogue is the path that leads toward purposeful action and away from violence. Those who gave their lives deserve nothing less from us. May God hear our prayer!

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Rev. Dr. Raymond Johnson
President, Florida Council of Churches
Florida Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Rev. James Golden, Esq.
Secretary, Florida Council of Churches
Mt. Zion AME Church, Port of Tampa

Bishop Ken Carter
Florida Conference,
The United Methodist Church

Graham Hart
General Presbyter
Peace River Presbytery

Rev. Dr. Betsy Goehrig
Regional Minister
Florida Disciples Regional Church

Rev. Dr. Paul Luthman
Coordinating Presbyter
Presbytery of Florida

Rev. Dr. John Vertigan
Conference Minister
Florida Conference
United Church of Christ

Daniel S Williams
Executive Presbyter / Stated Clerk
Central Florida Presbytery

Patrice Hatley
Coach and Coordinator
Presbytery of Tampa Bay
Presbyterian Church (USA)

Rev. Dr. W. Harvey Jenkins, Jr.
FCC Representative, Presbytery of Florida
Presbyterian Church (USA)

Bishop Teresa Jefferson-Snorton
Florida Region
The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church

Beverly G. Ward
Florida Council of Churches Representative
Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the Religious
Society of Friends (Quakers)

The Rt. Rev. Dabney T. Smith
Bishop
The Episcopal Diocese of Southwest Florida

Dr. James T. Morris,
Senior Pastor
Carter Tabernacle C.M.E. Church,
Orlando, FL

Bishop Adam J. Richardson
Eleventh Episcopal District
African Methodist Episcopal Church

Rev. Joyce Lieberman
Executive & Stated Clerk
Synod of South Atlantic

The Rev. Willie Israel
Pastor
Rolling Hills Moravian Church

Rev. Pedro M. Suarez
Bishop
Florida-Bahamas Synod, ELCA