



## THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Dear Friends & Colleagues of the New York Annual Conference,

*This one has taken a little while. Having a virus in the middle of the summer will do that to you; so will the virus that seems to have affected life all around us, . . .*

When the word began to emerge from the horrific events in Charlottesville, Virginia a few days ago one of my first reactions was a genuine one: *“What will I say this time that will be any different than what has been said over and over again these past several months?”* It has happened to us again — an intolerable, unacceptable, egregious act of racism, violence and injustice. This is an event that once again calls every leader to speak out against every white supremacist, neo-Nazi, and hate group that exists, calling for justice, civility, and a better way. Lives have been lost and others have been scarred for a lifetime.

It just isn't right.

As I laid in bed dealing with my own virus, I began to reflect on the virus that was being described on the television in front of me. It's an illness that has crippled and paralyzed us in so many ways. My first emotion was one of sadness. I began to think about innocent victims on site in Charlottesville and the chaos they were immersed in when a car plowed into the crowd. My sadness grew when I thought about family members of a young woman and two police officers who died. It grew even more when I thought about those who have seen this happen all too often in other settings and have been victimized by racism and alienation all their lives.

It just isn't right.

My sadness quickly turned to feelings of anger. I was angered at the hatred being thrown around in vulgar signs and inappropriate words. I grew angry when I saw people who somehow felt as if they had a right to do what they were doing and even more so when a former leader of the KKK stated that they were carrying out the mandate *“to take our country back.”* My anger boiled over when I began to think about what I would say if I were in that setting and how I would retaliate with rebuttals to such narrow thinking. I watched it all and kept thinking to myself one thing.

It just isn't right.

In the hours that followed, I found my anger being "ministered to" when I read a "tweet" from Barack Obama. In a very appropriate and well-timed moment, the former President quoted Nelson Mandela in his book, Long Walk to Freedom, *"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."* Mandela was right then and Obama was right in quoting it in the midst of this situation. And in that moment, I felt guilty for my own sense of hatred that had been stirred in the midst of this unfolding tragedy. Hatred.

It just isn't right.

Those emotions led me to a feeling of disappointment. Disappointment that we were having to experience yet another scene of pain, discord, and inappropriate behavior. Disappointment in leaders who could not appropriately or accurately name the wrongness of the action. Disappointment that, no matter the progress being made, we were once again forced to step back and start again from the beginning. Disappointment that racism continues to deeply affect people within our communities and churches in ways that are oppressive and sinful. And, if I'm honest, disappointment in myself.

I began to wonder, as I have before, things like: When were the times when I did not address a situation properly when I had the chance? When were the times when I looked the other way and did not deal with a matter at hand that needed a strong word of advocacy and justice? What were the occasions when I leaned inappropriately on my own white privileges and failed to see clearly the racism around me that needed a voice that declared the wrong and projected the right? You see, I was always taught to remember the old phrase that says, "when you point the finger at someone else, there are three fingers pointing right back at you." Jesus made a similar reference when he talked about our tendency to point out the speck in someone else's eye all the while ignoring the log in our own. For all of my disappointment over what was happening in Charlottesville, I couldn't help but be disappointed in myself as well.

As the statements addressing what happened in Virginia began to emerge, nothing seemed to satisfy me. I read one statement and thought, "That didn't go far enough." I read another and thought, "Yep, I read almost the exact thing the last time." Nothing seemed to reach me.

That is, until I read a response written by my friend, Julius Trimble, the bishop of the Indiana Annual Conference. In Bishop Trimble's statement, he made a reference to our baptismal and membership vows as United Methodists. That article led me to my hymnal. And my hymnal led me to the words that inspired and challenged me in the midst of this latest act of violence and hatred.

In each liturgy found in our hymnal, these words are repeated over and over again:

- Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

- Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?
- Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?
- Will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?
- Will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?

Read these vows again. Pay attention to the words underlined. These are the "strongest possible terms" anyone could use in addressing the injustices associated with the actions of white supremacy, neo-Nazism, and blatant racism. They just so happen to be the words associated with what we have been asked to do every day as United Methodist Christians. We renounce wickedness, reject evil, resist oppression! We accept God's power and confess our need for God's grace! We strive for faithfulness, long to represent Christ in the world, and pray for the courage to strengthen our witness! This is who we are called to be!

So, what is the appropriate response to the actions in Charlottesville? We shouldn't be afraid to point the finger at these actions and say, "It just isn't right!" But should also see the fingers pointed back at ourselves as well. Read those vows again. Repeat them. And ask yourself the question, "*How am I renouncing wickedness, rejecting evil, resisting injustice, confessing Jesus Christ, trusting God's grace, serving as Christ's representatives, and witnessing to it all in the way I live my life?*"

Don't wait for someone to write an article or make another statement about something that has happened in our midst. Go do something about it!

There's only one thing to say if anything less is done.

It just isn't right.

The Journey Continues, . . .

Peace & Joy,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas J. Bickerton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Thomas J. Bickerton  
Resident Bishop