

June 3, 2020

Dear Fellow Leaders, Members and Friends of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA):

African American Mennonite Association (AAMA) is deeply concerned about the rising number of incidents of racial injustice committed against people of color. Recently, 3 of 4 violent incidents in 30 days tragically ended in death. The divisiveness in this nation over politics, economics, race, healthcare, fair policing, the judicial system, etc., has reached epidemic proportions. AAMA is calling for MC USA to speak in the strength of its peace witness to the dominant culture in this society to address, interrupt and correct those disparities afflicting people of color.

The sad, atrocious act of violence that crushed the life out of George Floyd on that Minneapolis street as he cried out in agony for his mother shows racism has moved from using a white hood and noose to using a uniform and knee. Ahmaud Arbery's death in Georgia shows people of color are regarded as suspect and subject to unwarranted questioning; our presence is too often profiled as a threat to be met with deadly force. Breonna Taylor's death in Kentucky shows that even a female first responder and essential worker is not safe in her own home. Christian Cooper in New York, threatened by a white female who filed a completely false report, with police against him came close to precipitating a perilous situation; she enjoyed the privilege of going freely about her day without any summons while Mr. Cooper was glad to simply see another day. No other country has stigmatized a people simply because of the darker color of their skin as we have seen practiced in this country. AAMA asks MC USA to mourn and lament these senseless acts of violence, to walk alongside the suffering and oppressed, enter into their stories, and let compassion become action that calls for just and prudent steps toward healing, hope and reconciliation in our communities in crisis.

Our churches are more than micro communities of faith and fellowship drawing people out of the world; we are also churches placed in major communities in this world with a purpose to restore and promote the 'neighbor' that makes for 'neighborhood'. As a nonviolent peace church, nonviolence is our witness and peace our methodology. There is a dynamic pragmatism in our peace witness to be peacemakers above being merely peace lovers. Community has an intentional mutuality of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' that makes it necessary to call attention to these present and pressing concerns. What happens directly to one person of color affects all people of color indirectly and ultimately the world at large. Everyone needs to work toward a society where diversity triumphs over division, where the distinctiveness of a people is celebrated rather than discrimination against them tolerated.

Therefore, MC USA's practice of nonviolence must not be mistaken for a kind of 'noninvolvement,' nor must its precept of peace be one that favors tranquility over transforming society. To desire a return to 'normal' when social justice requires confronting those issues which fuel and fan the flames of injustice, prejudice, hatred, fear and violence ignited by racism disappoints the prophetic call to "Do justly, love

mercy, and walk humbly with God." There has to be a calm yet determined advocacy that alerts people to the injustice of racism while articulating the right things to do to help address, interrupt and correct conditions which created and sustain it.

AAMA understands that Church and State are separate in identity and mission yet the responsibility of the Church at large to be the conscience of the State leans upon us too. And in all good conscience we need the silent to be stirred up to speak up and the agitated to be shown a higher and better way to act in peace, as we all advocate for a just community. Racism is morally wrong and sinful because it presents a false superiority - inferiority paradigm which dares to say we do not all bear the image of our Creator, that not all people have intrinsic value or are worthy of dignity. It dares to rewrite Scripture to say, 'God so loved the world, except for the people of color'. Racism and injustice cripple the soul of the offended and oppressed, corrupts the soul of the privileged oppressors, and its bias also undermines good and equal government for all.

The resources of Grace and Truth in MC USA are crucial in this desperate hour. The Grace to say, 'We will not fight war; we will not hate or entertain malice of heart,' while speaking Truth to power that 'We are our brother's and sister's keepers. These blatant acts of racism are unacceptable, deadly and must be stopped.'

Our communities in crisis are suffering under the disparities in healthcare, testing and treatment during this COVID-19 pandemic, the loss of income and livelihood, racial profiling and the rising number of violent, racially motivated incidents perpetrated upon them. The literal words of Matthew 9:36 ring out, 'The people are harassed and thrown down.' These people are our neighbors. They are tired and hurting and dying.

There is a legitimate need for justice not vengeance, for restitution not retribution, for healing and hope to flow to all who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. AAMA urges MC USA to use its powers of Grace and Truth to speak to the dominant culture in this society that all may see 'swords transformed into plowshares and spears into tools for pruning. No more shall any nation ('ethnos') raise the sword against nation, and none shall study war anymore.' Selah.

Signed,

African American Mennonite Association Board