



A Statement on Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; A Response by the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.—John 13:34 (NRSV)

In June 2020 we issued “A Pastoral Call to Dismantle Racism & End Violence Against People of Color.” This statement: recognized the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on people of color; recognized that white Americans benefit from the structures and privilege that were built primarily by white persons and that as people of faith we have a responsibility to work for dismantling structural racism; condemned the unprovoked and unwarranted violence committed against people of color; and called for restraint on the part of our nation’s law enforcement personnel in light of incidents involving people of color.

We did not, however, specifically address the escalation of hate crimes against our Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) neighbors since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Toxic rhetoric placing blame for the virus on China and scapegoating Asian people has accelerated violent incidents toward this population. We also did not specify actions by the Council to address the ongoing challenge of dealing with hate and hate crimes.

We acknowledge that “Asian Americans have long been left out of the conversation around racism in America.” In this recent PBS interview Dr. Kim Tran, consultant on diversity, inclusion, and equity, suggested that these crimes are often a surprise because the conversation has long focused primarily on crimes against African Americans.¹

We have only recently begun to recognize the dramatic increase in crimes against AAPI populations as reporting on them has begun to increase. A recent analysis from the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University San Bernardino revealed that while hate crimes had decreased overall by 7 percent in 2020, crimes targeting AAPI populations rose by nearly 150 percent.² A national report from Stop AAPI Hate looked at nearly 3,800 incidents reported to them from March 19, 2020 to February 28, 2021, noting that while these incidents represent only a fraction of actual incidents, they show just how vulnerable Asian Americans are to discrimination. The report notes that: crimes include verbal and physical assaults, civil rights violations, and online harassment; women are 2.3 times more likely to report these crimes; attacks do not discriminate based on country of origin, though those of Chinese origins are targeted most often; and these attacks have happened in every state and District of Columbia.³

We believe that this recent escalation of hate directed at AAPI populations merits specific attention. We reiterate our condemnation of unprovoked and unwarranted violence committed against people of color; this includes violence against any non-white populations—in addition to African Americans. This time of pandemic must not serve as an opportunity to promote misguided responses of violence and unrest—in this case, placing blame on specific populations for the spread of COVID-19. However, we deplore any misguided rhetoric or attacks that place blame on specific populations for circumstances beyond their—or our—control.

As we noted in our previous statement:

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/asian-american-community-battles-surge-in-hate-crimes-stirred-from-covid-19>

² <https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/FACT%20SHEET-%20Anti-Asian%20Hate%202020%203.2.21.pdf>

³ <https://securerusercontent.com/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>

As we represent traditions that seek to live as the body of Christ, we hold fast to the words of scripture, to the callings of prophets who warned against injustice and arrogance and who called on God's mercy and compassion. We strive to live by Jesus' teaching and example, repenting of violence in our hearts and actions and learning to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We also denounced the actions of those who would use scripture as a weapon or wedge to divide people but must add a denunciation of the use of opportunism and rhetoric used to target any vulnerable populations.

We acknowledge, yet again, that white Americans benefit from the structures and privilege that were built primarily by white persons who in some cases even denied the humanity of people of color. We continue to acknowledge that turning a blind eye or ignoring the failures of this system signals complicity, and we urge participation in dismantling this system of structural racism that, in the long run, hurts everyone.

However, we confess that our calls for change and response ring hollow without action. Therefore, the Pennsylvania Council of Churches is undertaking a series of conversations in 2021, beginning with an April 19 forum aimed at highlighting intersectional realities highlighted by the COVID-19 crisis. This forum will include representatives from all affected communities, including the AAPI community in Pennsylvania. The Council commits to seeking wide representation and participation from all its constituencies, urging not just participation in programs but formal statements/acknowledgments and actions to work for an end to hate crimes against vulnerable populations.

Finally, we challenge all in leadership at every level of government to call for and work for positive change that ensures all people have equal access to everything necessary to grow and thrive. We urge swift and fair responses to incidents of violence against our most vulnerable neighbors. And we urge all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, political affiliation, sexual orientation or identity, or socio-economic status, to stand together in solidarity and love, calling for a commitment to understanding and peace that will help to safeguard justice for all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Larry D. Pickens". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Rev. Dr. Larry D. Pickens
Executive Director

March 22, 2021