

## A Personal Pastoral Letter from Rev. Dave Long-Higgins

### **“By tree, or gun, or knee... “How Long?”**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Only two weeks ago in my pastoral letter entitled, “How Long?”, I wrote about the intersection of the virus of COVID 19 and the virus of racism, especially as it profoundly and persistently affects the African American community, especially the experience of African American males in our country. Here again is part of what I wrote:

#### **“How Long...will young African American men continue to be killed with little or slow accountability?”**

Of course, this is not a new question at all. It is as old as slavery. But the recent video showing the shooting death of Ahmaud Arbery by a white father and son this past February in Georgia raises the question again... **“How long?”** The challenge of COVID 19 is not only its immediate impact on every corner of the world but also how it can allow other viruses like racism to go unchecked, untalked about, and unnoticed, unless of course you happen to be a young African American male jogging near your home. The truth is that we live inside a multiplicity of systems that largely go unnoticed until someone we love is at risk.

The answer to the “How long?” question of re-entry for worship is not so very different from the “How long” question of racism’s persistent and pernicious presence. **It leads to another question, “If there was something that I knew I could say or do through love to interrupt the viral spread of COVID 19 or racism and its effects, would I do it?” I want my answer more and more to be authentically “yes” and I invite you to join with me in this commitment.**

In the time since I shared those thoughts, others have died including Breonna Taylor and most recently George Floyd who was murdered in Minneapolis by having the breath of life squeezed out of him by a policeman whose knee pressed on his neck, despite his multiple cries that he could not breathe. So, I must write again.

I write because I made a pledge to my friends who have been frisked for no reason, forced to the ground without cause, told late at night to leave the town they were in because it was not safe, told to pull over despite there being no reason except being perceived to be in “the wrong place”. I must write because my two-year-old grandnephew is African American. He melts my heart and is only now discovering the world into which he has been born. The truth is, of course, I am related to all these dear people and I love them deeply.

This love has been shaped for me by encounters with the life-giving love of Jesus Christ, who himself was lynched. It compels me first to notice, then to confess and then to act. I must notice again as a white, heterosexual, educated male, I live in a world of privilege. It is a system so pervasive that it would be easy not to notice. It would be easy to become so comfortable with my life that I go along as if nothing were really happening around me. But because of these ones I love so much and because of the call of Jesus Christ, I cannot. I must confess that I have been living with the advantages of systems so pervasive that they can easily be taken for granted as simply what is, rather than the intentional constructs of power which they are.

A pilgrimage last November with the United Church of Christ Council of Conference Ministers to the Equal Justice Initiative’s Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Incarceration and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama remembering the over 4,000 African Americans who have been lynched in our country powerfully re-awakened even more deeply this reality to me. In these places we visited, the dots of systemic dehumanization, discrimination and violence against African Americans were connected quite graphically and powerfully. **I was again reminded that lynching is not just about being hanged from a tree. It is any form of deadly violence which uses fear to paralyze or control. So, it seems to me that by tree, or gun, or knee, it still a lynching be.**

Most powerful to me, however, was the personal witness of my African American colleagues and siblings in faith regarding their lived experience and their call for we who are white and in places of privilege to use our position to make for change.

So, I write again. I am compelled by the love of God made known in Christ Jesus to say, “No!” No to this violence that persists and dehumanizes and kills. No to being numbed by the frequency with which this deadly violence happens. No to the subtle and unchecked silence which I too often have allowed myself to engage. To my dear African American siblings, I say to you, “I hear your cries and I stand with you. I trust your stories and will allow them to penetrate my soul again and again. I will act in my personal life and professional life to be a force for change. And when I fail, I commit to confessing and starting again and again and again for as long as it takes.”

To my white siblings, I urge you to join with me in this sacred calling to heal and foster the possibilities and promises of the Gospel for a world free of fear so that all may flourish. Let us notice and speak out together. Let us dare to stand alongside. Let us listen. And let us teach our children and each about the vision God intends for the world. Toward that end, I want to suggest two specific things: the first is personal and the second is public.

To white adults, let us speak intentionally and directly to our children about a different kind of world grounded in the love of Christ for all. Name the truth about the world and the call to be a force for good. Practice the art of daring interruption so that together we can be readied for those times when awkward racist comments arise in conversations with people we know and love. Just as African American parents must have “the talk” about safety with their children, let us also equally engage “the talk” about how to interrupt when racism rears its head. This kind of conversation from my own parents at an early age has shaped me ever since.

In the public arena, let us vote so that policies to reshape and heal the systems in which we live may have a greater chance of taking hold. In this season of COVID 19 it will mean paying attention to the actual logistics of voting. May we come to see this act of citizenship also as an act of living out our faith.

Additionally, I want you to be aware that this Sunday, May 31st, at 6 p.m., the UCC will be hosting a ZOOM conversation about “how Christians can be actively involved in dismantling racism.” This conversation panel will include Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, Rev. Julian DeShazier, Linda Sarsour, Rev. Naomi Washington Leapheart and Rev. Dr. Velda Love. The public can attend by registering on the event's information page at: [https://www.ucc.org/the\\_cross\\_and\\_the\\_lynching\\_tree](https://www.ucc.org/the_cross_and_the_lynching_tree).

Of course, these are just starting points. But may they be the beginning of a larger work to which God is calling us as agents of healing, reconciliation, and change. I pledge my energy to this work and hope that you will join in it or continue in it for as long as it takes. In all of this, may God’s Pentecost power be poured over us for the fashioning of the beloved community which is God’s vision for our life as a human family.

Blessings and Godspeed!

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