

## **ACTS OF VIOLENCE, INTOLERANCE & HATRED**

### **PURPOSE**

We write this letter to the churches and people of Vermont to help inform our common response to acts and words of hatred, violence, intolerance and cruelty. When we confront such disruptions, our faith offers us guidance. It offers us insight into the roots of such disruption. Furthermore, it sets us a standard of conduct that demands that we refrain from such destructive behavior and that we urge others to do so as well. We offer these insights to all those who seek a better world that we might together understand the reality with which we are dealing and the ideal to which we are striving.

---

### **THE HUMAN CONDITION**

We turn to the Bible for an understanding of the human condition. All persons are children of God and each person and group of persons has a mission to manifest God's glory in unique ways. All persons, in both their diversity and their likeness, are graced by God to contribute to the common good and to God's purposes for us.

God wills that we all live out our callings freely. We are responsible beings, called to work together in peace and justice, creating a world in which we are free from attack and degradation.

Yet human life is broken. Our individual and corporate lives are damaged, misdirected and destructive. This is inevitable when we do not seek and rely upon the grace of God. When we rely only on our own devices, we are fearful. We come to look upon others, especially those different from us in some way, with fear, distrust, animosity and hatred. We try to live our lives without reliance upon the love of God. We try to make do in the world without God. This is at the heart of what Christians call sin. We cannot escape this condition by ourselves.

---

### **HEALING THE BROKENNESS**

The Gospel of Jesus Christ provides an alternative to violence, hatred, discrimination and exploitation. That Gospel calls us to live out the Great Commandments: to love God with all our hearts, minds and strength and to love others as we love ourselves. We recognize that this is also an important part of the traditions of other faiths. We believe that it ought to be the guiding principle for our collective life together as well as our individual lives.

How we live this principle is critically important, especially when we deal with issues of importance on which we differ. For instance, we may well come to alternative assessments of moral imperatives in

*We are a diverse network of Christians in Vermont working together to serve the common good through public worship and prayer; acts of mercy and care; and loving prophetic witness for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.*

particular human situations. Yet, especially in such situations, it is God's will that we live together in unity and peace (Ephesians 4:1-3). We confess that we may well make divergent mistakes. We may construe events differently. We may evaluate our responsibilities differently. Yet we unite in our commitment to seek true unity of spirit and reconciliation—even with those with whom we disagree strongly. As Christians we believe we have this unity and reconciliation in Jesus Christ, whose Body we both are and seek to be. It is to his guidance and love we seek to submit, and in his resurrection we place our hope for a new life that overcomes the sin of the world.

We face a challenge! God has given us great diversity in creation and God has given us each freedom. Therefore God has called us to work through the diversity and multiplicity of life and human understanding to apprehend a way to the ultimate unity of all things (Romans 11). We confess that the whole truth is always greater than our own understanding. By engaging with those who differ with us, our own inadequacies are challenged and so are theirs; only by engaging with those who differ from us can we learn from their insights and share ours with them. Then we may together sense the greater truth of God.

Unity of people in obedience to God, therefore, requires us to lay aside pride, status, and contempt of others who differ from us in thought and understanding. When we place the love Of God first, we forbear condemning others that we might learn truth from each other-- even truth we are loath to hear.

---

## **TOLERANCE AND RELATIVISM**

True tolerance has to do with the way we disagree, not with the content of our disagreement. Yet tolerance has come to mean in popular understanding that content "makes no difference"- you have your point of view, I have mine, and we "live and let live." This is not tolerance but moral relativism. It arises from our fear of conflict and intellectual laziness. What we seek is rather rigorous understanding of one another's positions and real reconciliation and love.

For this reason we choose to speak of "forbearance" rather than "tolerance." Forbearance as ethical practice enables people of differing views to enter into one another's perspectives even when they disagree. Thereby people are able to learn new truths by discovering in apparent disagreement something new that points towards a fuller truth. Even when we do this and discover that disagreement is real, we maintain a relationship of love and respect. Both moral relativism and moral absolutism avoid this difficult work of engagement with the multiplicity of human experiences of truth—and the even more difficult work of maintaining relationships in the face of real disagreement.

We affirm what the Apostle Paul teaches about love in I Corinthians 13 as a model for practicing forbearance without moral relativism. Truth without love breeds absolutism. But love will always seek the truth, not to judge and condemn others, but to draw people together in love as they seek to know our loving God in whom truth and love are one.

*We are a diverse network of Christians in Vermont working together to serve the common good through public worship and prayer; acts of mercy and care; and loving prophetic witness for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.*

Love is both the means and the end of our lives; to contend for truth in an unloving way is to do unutterable violence to truth itself. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... Those who say 'I love God' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars (I John 4:16 and 20).

We see an example of the unity of truth and love in the way Jesus handled both the crowd and the woman whom they had caught in adultery and were going to stone to death (John 8:1-11). He refused to be caught up in the passion of the moment, to judge and to condemn. He held up a mirror to others by telling them that if they were sinless they could throw the first stone. Then, when they had drifted away, he did not condemn the woman-but he admonished her to sin no more.

---

## AN EXPERIENCE AND ITS PRINCIPLES

We have experienced what is it like to seek truth and reconciliation through continuing disagreements in our own lives together as churches. The significant achievements of ecumenical dialogue during the past half century have produced unprecedented peace-making and resolutions of differences that had led in the past to centuries of hatred, warfare and disunity among the various branches of Christianity. Although we have continued to differ on important matters, we are convinced that ecumenical dialogue moves us toward the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Our experience offers an example for the world of how we can live out the Great Commandments in our corporate as well as individual lives.

In particular, we try to follow these principles (which we have derived from our experience together as churches) and we urge individuals and other groups to follow them as well:

1. Practice patience in dialogue. Recognize that truth emerges slowly as trust grows between persons and groups.
2. Speak truthfully from the depths of your own experience and understanding. Reach deep within yourselves for what you hold to be truth and share it with clarity and openness. This way others will hear more than slogans or jargon. They will hear the depth of your experience of reality.
3. Develop and practice a readiness to listen. Forbear judging others while holding on to your own truth. Place a priority on listening until you hear the transcendent truth that transforms you as listeners and dialogue partners.
4. Practice attentiveness to the other. Focus on learning about the other person or other group. Come to know them from the inside out rather than on the basis of pre-judgments.

*We are a diverse network of Christians in Vermont working together to serve the common good through public worship and prayer; acts of mercy and care; and loving prophetic witness for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.*



PO Box 764  
Richmond VT  
05477

(802) 434-3397 - [info@vecncc.org](mailto:info@vecncc.org) - [www.vecncc.org](http://www.vecncc.org)

We recognize that it can be difficult to practice these skills when one is faced with hatred, contempt and disrespect, especially if they are accompanied by violence or threats of violence. Nevertheless, this is the standard to which we are called.

Following these practices we will see the fruits of the Spirit manifested amid our diversity. We will experience love, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). We will experience the absence of boastfulness, pride, rudeness, selfishness and anger. The practices we commend are themselves ways of showing love to others, a love that can calm moments of tension or fear.

---

## THE RESPONSE OF FAITH

We urge all Christians and persons of good will to respond to the perpetrators of acts of hatred, violence and intolerance in a manner like that of Christ. Offer no counter hatred, vengeance or retribution; offer instead love and an invitation to new life.

We recognize that some behaviors and actions and words cannot be countenanced in our society. We are called to stand firmly against actions of violence, cruelty and hatred, against those who violate the right order of God's world-even if this places us in jeopardy ourselves.

But, in opposition to these acts, we may not adopt the very hatred, vengeance and violence we are opposing. Such means violate the end we seek. We are called to model the power and truth of love for every one of God's children, no matter how heinous their crimes, while we condemn the deeds they have done.

We can aspire to follow such a difficult standard only with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. It is a standard which moves us toward a more just society in which restorative justice is encouraged and people are less likely to turn to violence and hatred. The standard embodies as means the very ends it seeks.

We are therefore called to work not only in reaction to deeds of violence and hatred. We are to challenge the systemic and institutional injustices that foster a climate of fear, poverty, degrading competition and selfishness. We are called to engage in the reform of our common life so that all may know the benefits of employment, adequate income, access to the necessities of life-and the space and time to grow as spiritual beings, children of God.

This calling may involve us in sacrificial opposition to forms of exploitation, discrimination, isolation, neglect and abuse, violence and organized forms of hatred. Such actions are gifts we make so that the Great Commandments may become a lived reality in our time and place.

*We are a diverse network of Christians in Vermont working together to serve the common good through public worship and prayer; acts of mercy and care; and loving prophetic witness for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.*



PO Box 764  
Richmond VT  
05477

(802) 434-3397 - [info@vecncc.org](mailto:info@vecncc.org) - [www.vecncc.org](http://www.vecncc.org)

Therefore we urge all persons of faith to support victims of hatred and violence by all reasonable material and personal means available. At the same time, we all shall seek in prayer the transformation of the victim, the perpetrator, and the culture-so that all might live in justice and peace. We urge you to seek public forums in which to witness to this faith and to practice love and seek justice. Finally, may we all together encourage others who are fearful or filled with hatred to come into the love of God, to cease their destructive acts and words, and to extend the helping hand of goodwill to all persons. (Back to top)

Prepared and published by the Faith and Order Committee.

Approved by the Trustees of the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society, June 2001

---

Prepared and published by the Faith and Order Committee.

Approved by the Trustees of the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society, June 2001.

*We are a diverse network of Christians in Vermont working together to serve the common good through public worship and prayer; acts of mercy and care; and loving prophetic witness for peace, justice and the integrity of creation.*