

### *On Islamophobia*

Statement from the Faith and Order Commission of  
The Rhode Island State Council of Churches  
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Recent events in both Paris France and in San Bernadino California have given rise to a wave not only of deep sadness, fear and anger but also of racism and xenophobia. Fear and anger are not only natural, but, when rightly tempered ensure our safety and spur us to action for the good. However, these emotions when unrestrained and agitated by the inflammatory rhetoric of some politicians, pundits and religious leaders, leads to hatred and violence. Christians, especially in this season of Advent when we both remember the birth of Jesus and wait expectantly for his return are called to discipline these natural emotions and reactions with the high calling of our faith.

The story of Jesus's birth as recorded in both Luke and Matthew both urge the faithful to disallow unrestrained fear and anger to compel them. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary announcing to her the risky task of nurturing God's own son, his first words are, 'Do not fear.' In the gospels, when the disciples are paralyzed by fear in the midst of a storm at sea, or when a parent is wracked by the sudden death of a beloved child, Jesus would echo the angels command to his earthly parents, 'do not be afraid.'

It is a courageous thing to propose faithfulness to the God who is mercy and love in the midst of chaos and loss. We believe as Christians that Jesus's words were not inspired by naiveté but by an audacious fidelity to the mission of God, as he repeatedly announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, a reign of justice and of peace. Jesus proclaimed hope to his people, dispossessed and oppressed by the violent occupation of Rome. This was not hope birthed by violence or force, but hope created in communities of hospitality and service. But the rhetoric that we have recently heard not only from certain political leaders but also from prominent national leaders of the Christian Faith simply does not harmonize with the repeated Gospel refrain that the model of our behavior is the merciful love of God not the tantalizing satisfaction of vengeance born from fear. Such language only foment a dangerous atmosphere in our nation for good and faithful Muslims. Furthermore it fails to live up to the dreams and aspirations of our fore bearers such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all, freedom of religious expression and hope for masses huddled and yearning to be free. Finally such bigoted and biased rhetoric fails to live up to the clear calling of the Christian Faith that was exemplified in the life of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians clearly stated the mission of those who consider themselves Christ-followers when he penned these words; 'So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ... We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.' Paul's understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus and its influence on the lives of Christians is in full display in these verses. All humanity separated from God through sin and injustice is reconciled (made friendly again) to God through

Christ. Distant and even broken relationships are healed and made whole. Paul clearly insists that Jesus's mission lives on in the lives of all those who call themselves his followers. It was the practice of hospitality, welcome and reconciliation that was the unique mark of this early version of the church, a community of people from various ethnic groups and social standings made one in baptism and enacting their newfound unity by gathering at communion table together.

Following Jesus's own urging in Matthew chapter 7 to beware false prophets we as Christians proclaim with hearts broken by tragedy, but made courageous by Paul's command to speak the truth in love, that political and Christian leaders who demonize our Muslim sisters and brothers and engage in racist, violent and Islamophobic rhetoric to be false prophets. We too feel fear and deep sadness but pray earnestly that God would lead us to respond as ambassadors of reconciliation, creating loving, supporting friendship with all those in our communities, both locally and nationally who because of ethnic heritage or religious faith are so commonly named a threat.

As Christians we remember that not only did the story of Jesus begin with and continue with the oft repeated command to have faith and not to fear, but it also closed with the same command. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew the crucified and risen Jesus appears to the women who had gone to the now empty tomb and says to them, 'Do not be afraid.' Because it is the life of the resurrected Christ that shapes our identity and our action we humbly urge fellow Christians not to fall back into fear, but instead to respond with the faith, risky and courageous of the one whose birth we celebrate this season. Finally we pray that as a Christian community we would speak and act in solidarity with our Muslim brothers and sisters, inspired by the great themes of this Advent Season, Hope, Love, Joy and Peace.