

The Church's Response to Hate-Group Violence

By Joseph E. Agne

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"On May 7, our church was vandalized to the tune of \$3000 worth of damages.... The people that did it called the church back and told us native Americans: 'Go back where you belong or we'll kill you.' The absurdity of that statement speaks for the mentality with which we're dealing."

Timothy Byington, Native American Network, Tulsa, Oklahoma

A United Methodist strategy to combat organized hate, counteract its violence, and convert its perpetrators was forged last summer at the initiative of the [General Board of Global Ministries](#) (GBGM).

After preparatory meetings with rural chaplains--many of whom encounter hate groups in their areas--the GBGM sponsored a special consultation in St. Louis last July. The St. Louis meeting included both specialists who study organized hate groups and grassroots church leaders who work in areas where such groups are found.

The 88 participants, who came from 21 annual conferences, focused on creative responses that congregations, annual conferences, and the general church might employ in countering a climate of hate. They identified contextual Bible study as a primary strategy. Every small-group report stressed the role of Scripture in equipping Christians to reject hate and the violence it spawns while working for the redemption of those trapped in it.

There are antigovernment militias in 31 states! That was the news that shocked so many after the explosion that destroyed the A. P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City last April. In the aftermath of the bombing, people throughout the United States wanted to know exactly what had happened, why, and who was responsible. Now, a year later, with a suspect being held, the nation's interest has waned considerably.

The situation that led to the Oklahoma City bombing needs much more than fleeting attention. Each day, a new community in an urban, suburban, or rural area faces hate violence. People of good will wonder what to do. Should they ignore it, minimize its importance, or mobilize for action? Communities that have successfully countered hate violence say that concerted community action is essential.

The General Board of Global Ministries has begun a program to help congregations respond effectively to groups that preach or commit hate-related violence. There are 10 essential responses that people of faith can make before and after hate crimes happen.

"You have to understand that these groups are really revolutionary....They are literally talking about overthrow. They are talking about new governments. They are talking about recreating a republic in which there's White male dominance."

Mac Charles Jones, Pastor, St. Steven's Baptist Church, Kansas City, Missouri

Before Violence Breaks Out

- 1.** Become well informed. Learn all you can about hate-group activity in the nation, your community, and neighboring areas. Form a group to do research. Keep track of reports made by victims. Clip articles from newspapers. Monitor radio and TV newscasts, and learn how to monitor hate-group communications on the Internet. Contact the GBGM for churches near you that have confronted hate violence.
- 2.** Keep the whole picture in view. Reacting against the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, the Ku Klux Klan resurfaced and new hate groups formed: the Aryan Nation, the Posse Comitatus, the "Christian" Identity Church, the White Aryan Resistance, the neo-Nazis, the racist "skinheads." They use slick magazines, song lyrics, computer networks, cable TV, radio talk shows, comic books, and other media to carry their message of hate. They field political candidates and boast of leaders at the highest levels of churches, corporations, and institutions. The biggest mistake is to underestimate the breadth, depth, and strength of the hate-violence movement, its apologists, and its silent partners. No longer do they all wear sheets.
- 3.** Work with those targeted for recruitment. Reach out to those who are most vulnerable to being recruited by hate groups. There are sociological, psychological, political, cultural, and economic indicators that attract hate-group recruiters. Many of the potential recruits are alienated from the church but would respond to the efforts of pastors and congregations that express love and concern for them. This outreach is particularly needed in youth ministry.
- 4.** Develop youth leadership. At one time, there were as many antiauthority "peace

skinheads" as there were "racist skinheads" in the United States. The number of young "racist skinheads" has grown because adult hate-group leaders have mentored them and provided resources, developing a new generation of leadership. Lacking such attention, the "peace skins" have become nearly extinct. Churches must undertake their own leadership-development programs with youth to counter these trends. Within congregations are many youths who, if encouraged and trained, would lead or take part in efforts to counter hate violence.

"These militias now act as a vehicle for a variety of political agendas and ideologies....We see everyone from neo-Nazis to tax protesters and antiabortion activists. Their numbers have grown exponentially. There is also...a new generation of leadership forming in the hate group movement, the so-called 'skinheads.'"

Jonathan Mozzochi, Executive Director, Coalition for Human Dignity

5. Don't wait for hate groups to show up. Hate groups capitalize on the negative emotions and racism already present in communities. Ask your annual conference to train teams of people who could help a local community or congregation strategize against hate violence and celebrate diversity in ways that give expression to the wholeness of the human family.

6. Develop strong interfaith networks. Most communities have found that the best leadership reflects an area's religious diversity. A strong interfaith presence can act as a deterrent to hate violence. Hate groups seek to exploit diversity as an evil and to pit religious groups against one another. Instead, all faiths working together exert a moral force that most hate groups fear.

"We must take the strongest possible stand against the racist and fascist behavior and methodology that's being generated at this time."

Frank Dorsey, Pastor, Asbury United Methodist Church, Prairieville, Kansas

When Violence Happens...

7. Provide immediate pastoral care. Victims of hate violence may become isolated and lonely. Visit them, as a pastor or layperson, to say "our church cares" and to offer assistance. Pray with the victims and let them know that your congregation will

keep them in prayer. Find out what support they feel would be most helpful. Then organize volunteers to provide for their stated needs, always showing respect for their privacy and maintaining confidentiality. Invite the victims to worship, pray, and study with your congregation or help connect them to a congregation of their faith tradition.

8. Resist the impulse for denial. At first, many members of the congregation will want to explain hate violence away. "It's just outsiders," some will say, "not our people," or "A few youth got a little rowdy the other night," or "If you respond, you'll give those people the publicity they want." In truth, hate violence always reveals a division already present in the community. Many will refuse to recognize the role of White racism in making communities vulnerable to hate violence. Work creatively to confront this denial.

"The people in the church...need information that is specific and direct as well as scripturally based. Then, if they are... coupled with clergy who are willing to speak out, we'll have a strong partnership...that will do community building."

Delores Jackson, Southeast Jurisdiction of United Methodist Women, at the St. Louis Consultation

9. Treat hate violence as a sin. Hate violence is not just a sociological or psychological phenomenon. It is a violation of the rights that come from God in creation itself. It is a human attempt to deny that all of God's creation is good. It is nothing less than sin. Concern for the healing of hate violence comes from the heart of the Gospel and is inherent in the second great commandment Christ prioritized: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39).

10. Be prophetic. Speak out. Nothing is worse than silence. Let the community know that your congregation is unalterably opposed to hate violence. Study the Bible and find the particular passages and themes that give guidance. Much hate violence is perpetrated by persons who misuse Scripture in an attempt to justify wrongful actions. Let everyone in your congregation and the community know that you stand strongly in the prophetic tradition. It is important for laity and clergy to challenge and support each other. Take risks in the name of Christ.

Further Resources

Contact the office at the address below for access to a variety of print, video, and Internet resources; for assistance from GBGM consultants experienced in responding to hate violence; and for training of conference or district teams to assist in local situations, as needed.

Lois Dauway

General Board of Global Ministries
475 Riverside Drive, Room 1501
New York, New York 10115
ldauway@gbgm-umc.org

Many resources, such as the book [*When Hate Groups Come to Town: A Handbook of Effective Community Responses*](#), are available from the Center for Democratic Renewal, P.O. Box 50469, Atlanta, GA 30302-0469; phone 404-221-0025. The CDR documents hate-group activity and analyzes its impact on people's lives.

The Rev. Joseph E. Agne, a United Methodist pastor in the Northern Illinois Annual Conference who pastors Memorial United Methodist Church in White Plains, NY, was a consultant to the General Board of Global Ministries on ministry in the midst of hate and violence and coordinator of the National Interreligious Racial Justice Connection when he wrote this article.

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