

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Seeking understanding when hate turns to violence



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Last Sunday, following the terrible event in Pittsburgh, I attended, along with over 400 others, the presentation at the Catholic Information Center on the "Hidden Holocaust." French priest and author Father Patrick Desbois gave a chilling talk about the more than 2,300 graves that his team has identified and the more than 2 million Jews that were killed — not in the death camps, but by the bullets of German troops as they went through Eastern Europe killing and burying in unmarked graves Jews from the villages they encountered.

It was hard to listen while also trying to process the deadliest attack on Jews in U.S. history at the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue. Why would someone who probably never knew a Jew be so obsessed with killing as many as he could? I thought back also to the white supremacists in Charlottesville. Why were they chanting, "Jews will not replace us?"

I really don't have a good answer to these questions. I can only acknowledge the fact that when prejudice turns to hate for any group, it soon becomes anti-Semitic. We live in an environment where Muslims are often considered terrorists; where African-Americans are disparaged and often deprived of voting; needy refugees are described as an invasion force; and women are demeaned and not taken seriously when they experience abuse. When such is the case, violence is too often the result, and anti-Semitic violence is usually next.

The Anti-Defamation League reported that in 2017, anti-Semitic incidents increased by 57 percent over the previous year. The rabbi from Tree of Life Synagogue pleads, "Stop the words of hate." Yes, we know hate often turns to violence.

A post from the Faith Matters Network said, "Many of us are horrified but not surprised. The past week has seen white nationalism taken to its desired ends: the elimination of otherness by any means necessary."

It is a basic problem of identity. Rather than being challenged to understand new ideas and be exposed to differing worldviews, we often listen and watch those outlets that reinforce our current beliefs and perception. We live in an echo chamber.

At stake is our own identity. We tend to reinforce our identity by affiliation with those who are similar to us. We live in neighborhoods that bring together people of similar social and economic (and even racial) status. We join organizations and religious institutions where similarity is more obvious than diversity.

It is natural to bond together with the "like-minded." It says to us, usually in a subconscious way, that we are normal, we are like those around us. It reinforces our identity.

But identity also tends to exclude. If there is an "us," then there must be a "them." If we bond with those like us, we see threats from those not like us. Our challenge is not to deny our identity, but to affirm it by continually expanding our world through interacting with those who are different.

But what can we do to change the atmosphere of hate? What can we do to identify those whose hate drives them to violent acts of killing? It often seems that we can do so little in the face of these overwhelming problems. Irish statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke warns, "Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who does nothing because he can only do a little."

Am I discouraged in the interfaith work in which we are engaged? No, I am only inspired to do more. I am inspired by the vigils that are being held and the

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words of support coming from all over the country and in our own community. The vast majority of our population wants none of this hate. We can vote, and we can seek to make friends with those who might be different.

MESSAGES OF SOLIDARITY

Our interfaith efforts in West Michigan now involve Affinity Groups that bring together persons from various faith communities around common interests, such as cooking together, reading books or scripture together, knitting together, or watching cinema and discussing. Partnerships among the different religious communities have been formed. One such partnership includes the Jewish Temple Emanuel as well as the At-Tawheed Mosque and two Christian churches. It has led to Jewish, Christian and Muslim clergy traveling together to Israel and Jerusalem.

Westminster Presbyterian Church is one such partner and issued the following message to the area Jewish communities:

"Words are not adequate to express our horror at the shooting today in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. We call on all members of our community to resist such hate and violence in whatever form it may be found. We express our concern for the members of the congregations and the larger Jewish community of Grand Rapids — and we express our support. We treasure our interfaith partnerships and the relationships that have been formed over these years of working and worshiping together in our community. We mourn with those whose friends and families have been affected. We commit to stand with you as you may find necessary. From within our faith community, we hold you in the light of God's love."

Trinity Lutheran Church, the other Christian partner sent this:

"My sisters and brothers, My heart breaks for you and the communities you serve after the tragic massacre today at Tree of Life Synagogue. The people of Trinity Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, will pray for the Jewish community in its deep grief as we gather in worship tomorrow. We will join you in mourning, and we will gather with repentant hearts as we pray for the healing of our nation and world in a time of such hate-filled violence. May we know the promise of true shalom in our journeys of faith and hope."

The Muslim partner congregation with Temple Emanuel is the At-Tawheed Mosque, which issued the following:

"Masjid At-Tawheed mourns the loss of our brothers and sisters of faith at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. That a house of worship would be the place of such violence is horrifying; that believers could be murdered for their faith is the very antithesis of the religious freedom upon which our religion and this nation were founded. Our deepest sympathies extend to the entire Jewish community, and we hold the 11 people murdered yesterday, and their loved ones, in our hearts and prayers."

We must continue to work together with respect for all faith groups. We will come together across these identity lines to learn, serve, develop new friendships and support one another.

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