

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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This Time, We Can Do More than Pray

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I was the only member of the Collegium of Officers of the United Church of Christ in the national denominational headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio, on September 11, 2001, when it became clear what was happening, I invited all the staff to gather in the Amistad Chapel, our space for worship in the building. Like many others, all we could do was express our sadness, our fear, and our confusion about what was happening and why.

The reality is that none of us ever controls our own fate but sometimes we try to and delude ourselves to the contrary. September 11th was a harsh reminder that much of life is out of our control and sometimes all we can do is pray, and that is what we did ten years ago when we gathered.

Being a denominational staff person means that many of us travel frequently. It was only a couple of weeks after September 11th that I had to get on a plane. I have never really liked to fly, but it came with the position so I found ways to manage my anxiety. But my first flight after September 11th was really hard.

I knew that those who died on September 11th got on those planes expecting an uneventful flight, just another business trip, or vacation, or visit with family... As I prepared for my first trip after 9/11, I understood in a visceral way that life as we knew it had changed. We would never again feel immune to the suicide bombings and terror attacks that we had watched on our TVs.

That first post 9/11 flight was hard, and yes, I was afraid. But I also experienced something other than fear. I experienced outrage. Outrage because back then and increasingly over the last ten years, I began to notice the stares at people who appear to be Muslim or of Middle Eastern descent. I don't personally know about religious persecution, but as a person of color, I know how it feels to have conclusions drawn about me with no information other than my skin color. I recently listened to an old podcast of *This American Life* where the painful story of a Muslim 4th grader was recounted and how her life changed after September 11th. It was the story of intolerance and hate being taught in our classrooms and innocent children becoming collateral damage of 9/11.

We all know better, but ten years after September 11th, the numbers of anti-Muslim hate speech and attacks have only increased.

On September 11, 2001, in the face of the attacks and the incredible loss of lives, all we could do was pray. As we approach the 10th Anniversary of September 11th, I hope we pray for all who feel the loss of precious family members and friends - but we can do more this time. We can speak up when we hear comments or witness acts of aggression or insult based on racial and/or religious differences. We can be proactive in teaching acceptance of all of God's children and refuse to act out of fear and ignorance. Fear cannot be the winner here. I hope that is how we honor those who died on September 11th.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,277 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.