



M. Linda Jaramillo
Executive Minister

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110
Phone: 216.736.3700
Fax: 216.736.3703

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A Course toward Healing

M. Linda Jaramillo

It's that time of year again. Every year when September 11 rolls around, my sadness returns as I remember that awful morning when our televisions displayed images in New York that looked like a war movie made for the small screen. I can still hear the frantic reports coming across the radio waves --- planes were crashing into the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania. Each year, it is indeed a time of profound grief.

However, this ninth anniversary year brings an even deeper seeded sorrow. The racial and religious divide that we see on television screens and hear on the radio waves today should prompt us to mourn our loss of civility. What happened to the freedom of religion that our forbearers inscribed into the U.S. Constitution? Maybe the writers meant it for only Christians to have freedom of spiritual practice, but I do not think so. I certainly hope not because if that is true, none of the rights we so courageously claim are worth the paper they are written on.

Diverse religious expression is as important to our democracy as going to the polls is on Election Day. Religious leaders hold tight to the notion that we have the right to practice our faith without fear of retribution, maybe they just mean it for some, not all. The world is full of religious fanatics who truly believe that there is only one way to salvation, their way. Fanaticism is part of all our faith traditions be they Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. However, when this behavior becomes destructive as it did in Oklahoma City, Bagdad, Kabul, Pennsylvania, Washington DC, or New York City, we must collectively say no to hate and yes to hope.

As a Christian leader, I am offended when the Bible is being used as a tool for hatred. That is exactly the opposite of its intent. As followers of Jesus, we are compelled to boldly stand against powers that seek to destroy the lives and hopes of brothers and sisters, regardless of the ways in which they worship

God. We must think about how it would feel if we were banned from building a Christian Center in the midst of our community. How we would respond if there was to be a public burning of the Bible? As Christians, we must lift our voices in solidarity not in separation.

The tragedy of September 11, 2001 is imbedded in our memory. However, I am convinced that family members of those who died that day would not want their memories tarnished by the burning of the Qur'an on any day. That is precisely the plan for September 11 at Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida. It's called "Burn the Koran Day." Religious, political, and even military leaders from every corner of the world are saying no, this is dangerous and it is wrong.

Whether we expected this to happen or not, these expressions of fear and hatred have become part of our cultural tradition and we must change course now before it is too late. This year on September 11, let's set a new course together. Let's set a course toward healing and hope. We have the power, if we have the will.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 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.