



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

**Hearing on
RESPONDING TO HATE: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ACTORS**

Tuesday, July 16, 2019

11:00 a.m.

**Rayburn House Office Building
Room 2200**

**Opening Statement of Representative Alcee Hastings
Chairman**

Last month marked the four-year anniversary of the horrific shooting that took nine lives at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Emanuel A.M.E. has played a key role in major periods of American history, including the antebellum South and the civil rights movement. Founded in 1816, the church has survived tragedies spanning from arson attempts to a devastating earthquake. Yet it was on June 17th during a Wednesday night Bible study that changed the church, and our nation, forever.

Three years ago, 49 people were killed in my home state of Florida at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, in what was at that time the worst mass shooting in the history of our nation. So many of us remain shaken by this horrific attack on the LGBTQ community and that such violence has continued targeting different communities and faiths.

Tragically in the last year, houses of worship in Pittsburgh, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and in the San Diego area – became the sights of even more attacks, driven by outright bigotry, hatred, and a lack of humanity. In the same vein, a failed attempt to enter and attack a historically black church led a perpetrator to shoot two African-American grocers at a nearby store in Kentucky. Sadly, only ten days following that attack, three black churches in Louisiana were lost to arson harkening back to times in our recent history where black churches were routinely targeted during our countries' civil rights struggle.

In these moments of tragedy, we have seen how religious leaders and civil society organizations such as interfaith institutions can play an integral part in preventing violence and healing their communities. We are honored to have Rabbi Myers with us here today from the Tree of Life Congregation a vibrant Reform Jewish Synagogue.

As a leader in his community, Rabbi Myers took an oath to act following the horror which took place in his sanctuary --- an oath to speak out not only for his own community, but also when others were targeted. A day after the Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand, Rabbi Myers' congregation raised \$45,000 to support the victims of the Christchurch attacks. When asked why, his congregation said the following: "We feel compelled to come to the aid of those communities, just as our Jewish community was so compassionately supported only a few short months ago by people around the world of many faiths."

When religious actors speak out to condemn violent acts, their words can carry a wide-ranging and powerful impact. Their actions are a testament to how interfaith partnerships can benefit us all.

The protection of our social institutions including places of worship from hate-motivated violence must be taken seriously. Violent attacks targeting minority, ethnic, and religious communities are spreading at a fast pace, and we all must take swift action to reverse these disturbing trends. No one should fear expressing their constitutional right to practice their faith in this country.

I have the honor of being Chairman of the Helsinki Commission, a U.S. government agency created to ensure countries throughout North America and Europe abide by the human rights and other commitments agreed to more than four decades ago enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act. While we have made significant strides with these bedrock principles, much work remains to be done.

At the Helsinki Commission, we express our resolve to protect human rights at home and advance societies that are safe, inclusive, and equitable. And we will continue to work with the international community to ensure governments, law enforcement, and all communities have the best resources available to prevent and respond to hate crimes that target our citizens no matter how they pray, look, love, or where they are from.

It is for this reason that I have supported greater cooperation between the U.S., European governments, and multilateral organizations including the European Union and the OSCE in developing joint initiatives to address prejudice and discrimination in our societies. I am currently working with Congressional appropriators and the State Department to see that initiatives our Commission advocated for over a decade ago such as the OSCE's Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Unit, are well-funded and able to address the concerns of all vulnerable communities from addressing anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim bigotry to racism and xenophobia.

One effort, now in its eighth year supported by the State Department and implemented by the German Marshall Fund called the Transatlantic Inclusion Leaders Network has brought together over 200 young elected and civil society leaders from diverse communities to build the foundations for a shared future whereby race, disability, gender,

orientation, religion, ethnicity, and other differences are valued. I am pleased that some of our alumni recently joined the European Parliament, sit in this very Congress, and occupy Ministerial and other leadership positions across the OSCE region.

While these young elected leaders who represent the future of our democracies are but one solution, I look forward to hearing additional thoughts on what we, Members of Congress, the OSCE, civil society, religious actors, and young people – our future – can do to effectively respond to attempts to erode peace and security in our societies.

Let us remain steadfast in ensuring and protecting the human rights of all in our country and across the globe. I welcome your testimony. Thank you.