

Helsinki Commission: Congressional Hearing Statement Reverend Aaron Jenkins July 2019

Good Morning. My name is Aaron Jenkins and I am honored to speak before you today for this important hearing entitled, "Responding to Hate: The Role of Religious Actors." I am an ordained Christian Minister and serve at New Solid Rock Church Ministries in Landover Hills, MD. I am the Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at The Expectations Project - an education focused, non profit organization that is dedicated to engaging faith actors to address issues of education inequities in public school education throughout the United States.

I want to thank the Commission Members, my co-panelists and those joining us in this chamber and electronically for today's critically important discussion. What brought me to this space was really work that began in my youth. As a high school junior (many years ago) I joined an interfaith dialogue program for African American and Jewish high school students that engaged participants in a three part program of: Cultural and popular education immersion, Experiential education and travel, and Public speaking and facilitation skill set training.

The overall goal? A trained group of youth leaders focused on working on the elimination of racism, anti-Semitism and all forms of prejudice and discrimination. It was a multilevel program that was initially founded by the late Congressman William Gray and George Ross - the program is called Operation Understanding. My participation in the Washington, DC version, Operation Understanding DC (OUDC) fundamental shifted my life to seek to understand before being understood and expanded my interest in the elimination of hate in its various forms.

I would later become a staff member for this organization, which allowed me to spend seven years educating and training young people to facilitate a similar shift in their lives and thinking. This position allowed the opportunity to come to Capitol Hill for a gathering of Jewish and African American Congressional members organized by you Congressman Hastings. That event, similar to this hearing, provided my students with a chance to address decisionmakers on lessons from this rich experience to address the issue of combating hate in systemic ways.

I have seen first hand the power of community engagement, dialogue and the impact of programming and the participation of faith actors to combat deeply entrenched societal ills. I believe that faith communities serve an important role not only in response to hate crimes but are positioned by responsibility to their traditions and placement in the community to be proactive instruments of action. I believe in the power of faith communities to impact hate in three ways:

1. The power of partnership: In Washington, DC, I am a part of a network of Christian clergy members called "Peace Walks DC". The group of clergy work in communities in Washington, DC that have been impacted by gun violence, underinvestment and other economic, political and social issues. Every Friday, members of this group walk in neighborhoods in either Ward 7 or Ward 8 to meet with community members and ask questions such as, "What do you need? What does your community need? and "How can we pray for you?" Participants include government agencies, an anchor faith actor institution from that community and volunteer congregations members from around Washington, DC. Training occurs for all participants. The host? The Peace Fellowship Church of Washington, DC, is based in Ward 7, one of the communities that receives outreach. To combat hate crimes, multi-level partnerships that are community focused must occur. Partners across religious, non profit/non governmental, governmental and trusted community voices, are critically important to addressing hate crimes wherever they occur.

2. The power of relationship: I believe that “The relational is transformational.” “When the horrific shooting occurred at the Tree of Life Synagogue, a service and rally were organized by a local Jewish Congregation, Adas Israel. The rapid, organized response of this gathering met a need of the community to show support and to heal. The synagogue was packed to capacity. Inside, the leadership of this tri-state area in Washington, DC, congregants from various faith traditions and visitors. Outside, hundreds more persons that could not enter. As I entered the building, I saw my colleague and friend, Imam Johari Abdul Malik. He was later asked to speak the outside crowd and started his remarks by saying “Peace” in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. How did he know to do that? This was not his first time speaking to an interfaith crowd. He drew from past experiences to connect. Any plan to address hate must engage faith actors within their faith traditions and across faith traditions in respectful and meaningful ways. We cannot wait until the next hate crime happens. These relationships should be cultivated and actively engaged for both reactive and proactive use.

3. The power of investment, training and resources: “We need things for the kids to do. We need a new basketball court. We need a new recreation center.” These are a few of the responses I received as I have worked with Peace Walks this year as a facilitator and community engagement participant. How did I know to ask these questions? Training. I both received training and am a volunteer trainer. To respond to hate crimes, faith leaders benefit from these three things: Training, Investment and Resources. Communities in need, that have experienced hate crimes and other atrocities, know what they need. We must trust them and listen to them. We know that there are many needs of communities where culprits of hate crimes come from, communities where hate crimes occur and communities where places of need in those community exist. If we are going to be proactive in the dual work of disarming those that mean to harm others and helping communities in need, we must go to them, we must listen to them and we must act in them wherever they exist. We must take time to listen to the needs shared and the needs observed and we must take action to provide what is needed.

I close with the words of someone whose name is often invoked when discussing issues of human rights, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. His last book was entitled, “Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?” This is a fitting question for our discussion today. May we move away from the chaos of hate to the necessity of community action. Thank you.