

*Pastoral Letter from Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, General Secretary, ABCUSA
November 6, 2017*

Responding to Violence in Our Society – American Baptists Express Love and Not Fear

Dear American Baptist Family,

On Tuesday, October 31, my son and I were traveling home from the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board meetings in Manhattan. Driving south on the West Side Highway, and then turning west to enter New Jersey through the Lincoln Tunnel, I was unaware that just a short distance away a terrorist act of extreme violence was unfolding. Yesterday, while traveling home from a wonderful ABCOFLASH celebration of the executive ministry of Sam Chetti, along with the rest of the country, I was deeply saddened by the news of the horrific violence inflicted upon the members of the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas.

American Baptists categorically reject all forms of unnecessary and senseless violence, regardless of motivation. Throughout the country, I know our churches will mourn and pray for the church and the town they serve in solidarity with all who have experienced grievous loss. I ask for every church to dedicate a special time of prayer for First Baptist Church and Sutherland Springs when you gather for Bible study, service or worship this week.

In 1998, American Baptists stated:

The culture of violence is manifested both in the pervasiveness of overt acts of physical force and in the more subtle dynamics by which harm is persistently done to people. This culture of violence is reflected in such ways as: the glorified role of violence in historic frontier communities; violence in the family; violence of sexual abuse, incest and rape; violence in the workplace; violence in the schools; violence in the streets; violence in the criminal justice system; violence in the use of guns, knives, and other weapons of assault; violence in the military; violence in war; violence in the marketing of weapons; violence of industries that profit by harming others; violence in the media; violence in music; violence of hate crimes; violence of the systematic destruction of the earth; and the existence of nuclear weapons, wherein we have seized the divine prerogative to determine the destiny of humanity. **(AMERICAN BAPTIST POLICY STATEMENT ON VIOLENCE, June 1998)**

Accordingly, I ask our churches, pastors and members to re-commit to proactive Christian and biblical witness and ministry, including (as examples):

- 1) Let us gather together in love, and not fear. “Perfect love casts out all fear,” according to 1 John 4:18. Do not give in to reactionary fear that promotes unhealthy responses to violence. May we keep the doors of our sanctuaries and buildings open, not locked. Paul calls us to “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13) and not be fearful of strangers.

- 2) Work as peacemakers, because Jesus stated, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9). Let us serve as healing agents in our communities, since we are called to be “ambassadors of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:20).
- 3) Let us “bear one another’s burdens” (Galatians 6:2). Let us train our members to discern when people around us are troubled and may require professional assistance in order to prevent violence.
- 4) Regardless of political perspective, can’t we all agree that sensible measures can be taken to keep weapons from people who have mental illnesses or terrorist ties?
- 5) I would encourage pastors and church leaders to contact your Executive Minister if you are willing to either participate in a conversation about the church and violence, or if you would consider cooperating on a common anti-violence witness in your region.
- 6) Consider creating sensible and practical crisis management policies and procedures, in cooperation with your local police and insurance agencies, to prepare your church for possible future crises.

In closing, let us dedicate ourselves to the advice Paul gave to us in troubled times:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends,...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
(Romans 12:17-19; 21)

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lee B. Spitzer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
ABCUSA General Secretary