



Pastoral Letter on the Disparate Impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Color

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We write to you today as leaders of the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, because we feel compelled to respond to the disparities in our society that have been laid bare by the COVID-19 Pandemic in our nation. While this medical and economic emergency is having a severe impact on everyone in America, this impact pales when compared to what is being experienced by our African American communities and other communities of color. We feel compelled to raise our voices concerning these outsized disparities because we are followers of Jesus who left us with the commandment to love one another. We cannot claim to love one another without raising our voices in the face of this injustice.

This pandemic has once again demonstrated that there is no equality in America. There are significant disparities between the health of black people and others in our nation. In normal times, most of us can simply ignore this situation. This pandemic is shining a bright light on the fact that African Americans are dying of coronavirus infection at much higher rates than are other Americans. While we know intuitively that this is true throughout the country, it is impossible to cite specific data, because most localities are not categorizing COVID-19 victims by race. In Connecticut, we can find coronavirus deaths by county and age. In Massachusetts, COVID-19 deaths are tracked by age and gender. In Rhode Island, one can find the coronavirus death count by age, by hospital, by nursing home facility, and by gender. None of these states is tracking deaths by race or ethnicity, nor are most other states or the Federal government.

When this disparity is discussed in the news, underlying health conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and asthma, in addition to living conditions and poverty, are cited as the causes. And while this is undoubtedly true, it fails to get at the root cause that has created these underlying conditions.

The root cause of each of these conditions is racism. Structural racism, the systemic reality of life in America for communities of color, has birthed the conditions that have created, and continue to create, disparate impacts on the health, housing and economic circumstances of people of color in our society. This structural racism is built into government policies at the federal, state, and local levels; into our American systems of justice and health care; and into our economy through banking, lending, hiring, promotion, and many other practices.

As examples, Federal, state, and local laws created crowded inner cities where black people were forced, by practices such as redlining, to live. Businesses including grocery stores left those inner cities, leaving few employers and little nutritious food. It is well known that many African Americans are obese, but it is not the obesity that results from too much food. Rather it is obesity that comes from cheap, non-nutritious, calorie-laden food that can be found in the food deserts of America's inner cities. And it is obesity that leads to underlying health conditions like diabetes and hypertension - and greater vulnerability to COVID-19.



While structural, systemic racism underlies many of the causes of health disparities for black people in this country, a general distrust of medical institutions contributes to a disparate impact for not only black people but other communities of color as well. African Americans can remember the unethical experimentation done on black men in Tuskegee by the medical community. History aside, many black people have experienced dismissive treatment when they arrive at a hospital emergency room. The maternal death rate of black women who arrive in the nation's hospitals is 2 to 6 times higher than that of white women. Distrust of the medical community by black and brown people is a reasonable reaction.

In addition, the animosity of this administration's interaction with immigrant populations creates distrust for those groups as well. Many undocumented people shy away from seeking help at hospitals, for fear that their immigrant status will lead to deportation and separation from their families. ICE detention centers have created a fertile breeding ground for the virus to spread in an environment where social distancing is impossible. Likewise, conditions in our nation's prisons and jails also make social distancing impossible, and a criminal justice system that has spent the last 40 years targeting black and brown people contributes to the racial disparities of COVID-19 as well.

While black and brown people are being blamed for bringing the virus on themselves, Asian people have been stigmatized by our national leadership for allegedly bringing the virus on all the rest of us. Referring to the coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese virus" has served to inject racism into the public discussion about the cause of the pandemic, and motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans all over the country.

It is disproportionately black and brown workers who have been deemed "essential." This requires many to continue to ride crowded public transportation to get to work to serve the needs of a nation sheltering in place. These essential workers, along with unhoused people, are the ones who most need to be tested if we hope to stem the tide of this virus in this country. Yet the people who are tested immediately upon any sign that they may have been exposed to the virus are the well-to-do and celebrities who have been afforded the privilege of working from home.

The inequities in the way this pandemic has been handled in America go on and on. Because we understand God's love to extend to all people, we feel it is our duty as followers of the God of love to highlight the ways in which our society fails to be loving. Because we seek to make God's love and justice real, we suggest these action steps:

- We call for the governments, local, state and federal, to provide adequate testing for all service workers who must continue working, for all unhoused people, and for all prisoners whether in ICE detention centers or state or federal prisons.
- We call for a release from detention centers and prisons all people who test negative and who pose no threat to society, to allow them to follow orders to shelter-in-place.
- We call for collecting statistics not only on age and gender but also race and ethnicity of people who are suffering from or dying of COVID-19. These statistics must be collected in every state, but especially here in our southern New England states of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts.



Southern New England Conference

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Living the Love & Justice of Jesus

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- We call for free care in hospitals for COVID-19 victims, such that people will not need to fear bankruptcy as a result of seeking medical help.
- We call for reparations for the descendants of slavery in the form of structural interventions in America's inner cities, so that the underlying injustices that this pandemic has illuminated may be addressed and ameliorated.
- To quote theologian Dr. Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., we call "for treating the people's needs as holy."

As the Southern New England Conference of the United Church of Christ, we are called to make our region a more just and loving place. As a microbe illuminates and exposes the destructive racial inequities among us, may we all be inspired to move toward this call.

The Rev. Ms. Marilyn Kendrix, Bridge Conference Minister

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