In our interactions as Presbyterians with people of other religions and faith traditions, we seek respectful dialogical relationships and authentic witness. How do dialogue and witness help Presbyterians support those of other religious traditions who are targeted with hate speech and acts of violence?

ELONA SAYS: The PCUSA is witnessing real demographic and social change here in this country and in the world, accompanied by media and public narratives that message fear, hate speech and acts of violence.

During a Minnesota Education Equity Partnership conference, John A. Powell, director of Haas Institute for Fair and Inclusive Society, UC Berkeley, said “The opposite of racism is belonging.” It has deep implications for defining who the ‘we’ mirrors in a fear of the ‘other.’ This is especially dangerous if the church and other institutions retreat into its historic systems, firmly embedded with racism, without mutual efforts to create inclusive systems created for the emerging multiracial world.

If the PCUSA reaches out to engage in interfaith dialogue, it must transform disinformation into a message of racial equity. Dismantling systemic racism in the church requires courage to build inclusive policies, decolonize our practices, and invite those of other traditions to co-transform our structures so that together we can welcome belonging into the center of our relationships. I’ve addressed racism and reviewed policies in the church for over 40 years and will always stand in support of those targeted because they are the ‘other.’

We will experience the KinDom of heaven when we aim for equity, more than diversity. I believe that is possible if we can step into the ‘other’ reality of Matt 25. It challenges us to open up space and wrestle with our history, our purpose, and the source of our social capital as a white dominant Christian institution. An institution that has hoarded systems of privilege on this continent since the Doctrine of Discovery.

Unless we confess that we have misused the gifts God gave us, we will continue to break our relationship with others. We will perpetuate these fears by blaming victims of hate crimes for the injustice they suffer. When we focus on the poverty, citizenship status, language, or mistaken characteristics of another culture, we imply they aren’t good enough, and we fail to examine the root causes of these stereotypes that erase competency and substitute erroneous identities. Our purpose will be to seek out the source of the hate and work to dismantle it.

Dialogue is based on the art of listening and my hope is that the PCUSA will reimagine its role in interfaith dialogue as a supportive one. If we are serious about interrupting hate speech, we will listen for the other unique spiritual perspectives or cultural experiences that shaped and contributed to that narrative. We’ve been socialized to see our leadership role as more significant than creating safe spaces, but that is exactly what we are called to do. We are called to build integrity in our relationships by creating trust. Everyone in the interfaith dialogue belongs at the table, shaping important questions and response as the lead voice. A strong faith-based interaction relies on greater participation and recognition of diverse voices. If we don’t protect the contribution...
of their knowledge to sacred space and work, we remain complicit in the assimilation of other voices by the cultural definitions of who is important and what is normal.

GREGORY SAYS:
When you enter a courtroom, there are multiple places to sit. There’s the judge’s seat, the prosecutor’s table, the defense table, the jury box, and the witness stand. Following the laws of physics, you cannot occupy more than one place at a time to save your life. The witness stand is our proper place as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus has called us to be his witnesses to walk and to talk what we have seen and heard of God as revealed in his life, labor, and love. And what we see is a radical inclusivity and a willingness to cross all manner of barriers to connect with and have fellowship with people who do not share our racial, religious, socio-economic, or cultural background. We witness to the radically inclusive and expansive love of God when we step out of the narrow and constricting confines of parochialism and tribalism.

Dr. Martin Luther King reminds us:

“Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ Vanity asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’ And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is right.”

We dialogue with and defend people of other faith groups—as well as those who don’t claim any faith group—who are targeted with hate speech and violence because it is right.