

11/01/20

An open letter to the SVO, CAA, and SCCAOR Boards of Directors:

The recent incident of the racist image is neither an isolated event nor something that can be blamed on a single individual. The use of this racist image reflects our divided nation and the persistent denial of the needs, welfare, and security of communities of color, causing generations of harm and suffering. As a community, we have not fully faced that history nor engaged in a process of truth telling and reconciliation with the goal of healing from our racist past and racist present. This is the work that we must do now as we commit ourselves and this valley to an anti-racist future.

As faith leaders, we have been calling for this restorative justice for many years and with increasing urgency in 2020. In April, over 100 diverse faith congregations called on our public leaders to adopt a “moral response to covid-19” and implored our valley’s leadership to approach this crisis with equity and care for the most vulnerable among us.

We specifically called on people in power to:

- Push back against the scapegoating of racial and religious communities in this time of fear and insecurity;
- Prioritize human needs over corporate budgets and ensure that the economic impact of the pandemic was not unfairly borne by certain segments of society;
- Support those who are building below-market-rate housing in their neighborhoods;
- Accelerate the implementation of existing plans that will create high-density housing near transportation hubs;
- Build on the recent no-eviction resolution to offer long-lasting help for those without income security; and
- Extend further unemployment and family-leave benefits to guarantee that families can make it through this crisis.

In this moral response, we recognized that when this crisis has passed, we, the religious community, will be judged alongside all community leaders for the reach of our compassion and the impact of our response.

In June, we held a march that drew hundreds of faith and community leaders. We acknowledged the complicity of religious institutions in the destruction of indigenous communities and the persistence of systemic racism, and we vowed to be agents for equity and justice. We called for healing after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, and we demanded acknowledgment of the present and historical trauma inflicted on our own communities of color by the San Jose Police Department.

In October, we held a press conference calling for a peaceful transition following the

election, and we committed to organizing our community to stand up to voter suppression, post-election violence and to insist that every vote be counted.

Last week, on Tuesday, October 27, we joined with NAACP to express our collective disgust and hurt over the recent SVO mailers and web image and to call yet again for justice and re-imagining in the City of San Jose.

On Thursday, October 29, we joined with more than 100 community leaders to denounce the recent and past racist and divisive actions of the SVO, SCCAOR, and CAA, and we called for the resignations of all those responsible for these actions along with the immediate disbandment of the SVO Political Action Committee.

At a press conference last week, the SVO announced plans for a change in leadership and an internal investigation into their wrongdoings. This is not an adequate response to the depth of harm done.

Today we are requesting that changes within the SVO, SCCAOR, or CAA take place only in the context of a broadly shared understanding of the truth about what occurred, of how those responsible will be held accountable, and of what our community needs in order to reconcile and begin to heal. Rushing through an internal investigation or quickly naming new leaders will not resolve this issue. We cannot chart a new course of action without first understanding and reconciling with those most affected by what has occurred.

SVO, SCCAOR, and CAA executive leaders and board members must sit with communities of color and hear firsthand what decades of racist tropes, fear mongering, political dog whistling, repeated denials of justice, and white supremacy have done to our community. Only in this way can these institutions demonstrate a sincere willingness to learn and to change for the good of all.

Before these conversations take place, we urge the reading of these two highly regarded resources in the current work of anti-racism:

“The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America,” by Richard Rothstein and “How To Be an Antiracist,” by Dr. Ibram x. Kendi

In addition, a third book, “The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans,” by Stephen J. Pitti, offers crucial insights into the history of racism in our local community.

We faith leaders have direct experience in facilitating the discussion, self-examination, and learning that these books inspire. We are willing to offer our time and energy to work with SVO, SCCAOR, and CAA leaders as they engage in these first steps toward truth and reconciliation.

Let us be clear: this incident will not just blow over. However, if it becomes the impetus for real change, we can all help secure the future of our valley through leadership that is rooted in anti-racist understanding and committed to creating a society equitably accessible to all who live here.

At 6:00 p.m. on November 11, the American Leadership Forum, PACT, NAACP, and the City of San Jose are hosting Dr. Kendi in an online town hall meeting. We invite the leadership of the SVO, SCCAOR, and CAA to register and attend this event as our guests, and we ask that you encourage your membership to join us as well.

In Solidarity,

The Silicon Valley Faith Leaders

Rev. Ray F. Montgomery
People Acting in Community Together

Fr. Jon Pedigo, STL
Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County (for identification purposes only)

Rev. Dr. Bryan James Franzen
Westminster Presbyterian Church, San Jose

Rev. Dr. Dale G Tremper
Alum Rock United Methodist Church, San Jose

Rev. Geoff Browning
Presbytery of San Jose

Rev. Amy Beth Durward
Cambrian Park United Methodist Church

Rev. Erik Swanson
West Hope Presbyterian Church

Rabbi Lisa Levenberg
San Jose

Rabbi Melanie Aron
Congregation Shir Hadash

Rev. Steve Pinkston
Maranatha Christian Center - San Jose

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones
First Unitarian Church of San Jose

Rev. Sammie Evans
The Stone Church