



Letter to the Governing Board and Ecumenical Officers of the NCC

May 27, 2022

Dear Friends,

It is difficult to imagine the intense pain an entire city was feeling after 10 people were tragically killed and three injured by a teenaged white supremacist gunman at the Tops Supermarket in Buffalo, New York. The sadness permeated the air when I arrived in Buffalo on May 16th, but hope in the form of “resource first responders” also showed up to help an already economically challenged neighborhood with food, counseling and prayer. Healing, however, is going to take time.

It is hard to sit on the sidelines and wait for the next crisis. We can use our anger wisely. Push for gun safety. Pressure the Senate to reinstate the Child Tax Credit. It helped lift thousands of children out of poverty. Call an elected official to do more than say “You’re in our thoughts and prayers.” Advocate for a fair and just response to these two new tragedies. If an 18-year-old is considered too immature to buy beer, could it be that they are too immature to buy an assault rifle? What was happening or not happening in the lives of the teenaged perpetrators that compelled them to shoot and kill others, whether it was a hate crime or anger out of control.

In the few days I was in Buffalo, I had the opportunity to worship with or meet pastors of several communion churches, Methodist, Baptist and Episcopal. I met with Mayor Byron Brown and City Council Member Ulysees O. Wingo, Sr. who represents the Masten District to hear how they will meet the challenge of healing and recovery. Mark Smith, the National Executive Director of Community Engagement of the Red Cross worshipped with us at Bethel AME Church where Rev. Paul Thomas is the pastor. He shared with me what they were doing to meet the needs of the community. Rev. Aundreia Alexander, Esq., NCC Associate General Secretary for Action and Advocacy, and I participated in a Circle of Healing with front line activities with Rev. Denise Walden and team from Voice Buffalo. Executive Director of the King Urban Life Center, Mrs. Surgourney Cook, gave a tour of their facility and shared about their community programs. I talked with Katherine Roberts, Executive Director of the Resource Council of Western New York, and visited their emergency food distribution site next door. It was encouraging to see residents of all ethnic groups and backgrounds bringing food along with Feed More WNY and Tops Supermarket.

I spoke during worship at Bethel AME Church and participated in a prayer vigil sponsored by St Phillip's Episcopal Church across the street from the now closed market with the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe, the Pastor; Rev. Steve Lane and Rev. Traci Blackmon, Executive Minister of Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ.

Sunday night ended with a free concert to raise funds for the impacted families at Greater Refuge Temple of Christ just a few blocks west of the Tops Supermarket, initiated by Pastor Mike McBride, Faith In Action, as well as offering comfort and encouragement to the grieving families. Headliners included Hezekiah Walker, Donnie McClurkin, BeBe Winans, Charles Jenkins, Israel Houghton and others. Rev. Blackmon and I prayed for the families during the service.

There were many emotional moments last week but two stand out for me. It was hugging and praying with two family members who lost loved ones in the massacre. It was also feeling their pain while they "...praised the Lord, anyhow!"

There are several things we can do. Here is a link with constituency resources you can share to assist persons impacted by events in Buffalo and now in Uvalde including mental health services and emergency funding: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/05/27/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administration-responds-to-immediate-needs-of-the-community-in-the-buffalo-and-uvalde-attacks/>

Also:

- **CHECK ON THE CHILDREN** - Some experts suggest that children often do not bring up tragic subjects like what happened in Buffalo and now at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas. You might consider gathering the family or loved ones and ask "What have you heard about what happened at the supermarket in Buffalo or the school in Texas." In this way, you can hear what they heard listening for any misinformation and gently make corrections.
- **CHECK ON YOURSELF** - We are all impacted by trauma close to home or far away. Some more deeply than others. Create space to honestly assess how you're feeling about what happened, acknowledging it and talk about it with a friend, a pastor or a professional. Watch how many hours you watch media reports on traumatic event. It is easy to absorb the pain into your own life.
- **CHECK ON THE STRONG AND THE VULNERABLE** - "Faith first responders" are always called upon to pray with and for those struggling with their own and community trauma. Be sure to keep your own Sabbath, as Bishop Darrin Moore suggested to me. Check on those most vulnerable, the elderly, the sick and the isolated. Telephone Care Calls works wonders for those with limited relational opportunities.

One of the goals of the visit to Buffalo was to engage in the ministry of presence, which is important. At the food distribution sites, prayer vigil, worship services and prayer tent, this presence was appreciated. The people knew that they were not alone in the midst of this tragic experience. Another goal was to meet with and identify resource organizations in the Buffalo community so that other people inside and outside of Buffalo can determine the types of support they could offer after the funerals are over. I believe we achieved those goals.

By the Grace of God,

Vashti Murphy McKenzie

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