

Anti-Asian Racial Violence in British Columbia and Across Canada

Called to Speak and Act against Racism

The Presbytery of Westminster recently adopted the following statement on Anti-Asian Racism in British Columbia and across Canada and agreed to circulate this statement to the congregations under our care and to share it more broadly with our national church.

In a recent statement from the Vancouver School of Theology we find these words.

"We are alarmed at anti-Asian violence in communities across Canada and the United States. Created in God's image and actively loved by God, we must respect, welcome, include and love all people without partiality. Racism has no place in our community, and we renounce and turn from it as followers of Jesus and as people who are called to love our neighbours and care for the common good. We know we are not immune to racism."

Living Faith, one of the Subordinate Standards of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, states, *"God's justice is seen when we deal fairly with each other and strive to change customs and practices that oppress and enslave others. Justice involves protecting the rights of others. It protests against everything that destroys human dignity."*

These faith-based statements are a call to Presbyterians and all Christians to speak and act against racism wherever it rears its head.

Here we draw the attention of Presbytery to the need for congregations to take action to combat the rising tide of anti-Asian racist hate crimes in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) and across Canada in 2020. (Note: *This paper was written prior to the recent wide attention being given to the issue of racism in many forms across Canada but we wish to maintain our focus on the specific Anti-Asian issue while referring presbyters to the Presbyterian Church in Canada's recent statement(s) on the Church and Anti-Racism. See, <https://presbyterian.ca/2020/06/02/pcc-anti-racism/>*)

In only the first four months of the year the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) reported 20 such hate crimes. On May 22, CBC news reported that the number of anti-Asian hate crimes in the GVRD had risen to 29. In all of 2019, there were 12. Many additional incidents go unreported, according to Carol Liao at the CBC.

This increase of racist incidents is part of a recent trend in Canada. Lee-Young reports that between April 23 and May 18, 2020, an online poll received reports of 128 anti-Asian racist attacks and micro-aggressions across Canada (87% in BC) including verbal harassment, physical attacks, and vandalism. As a result, long time Asian Canadians living in Vancouver "fear going out for dread of being attacked."

These attacks are motivated by the entirely erroneous belief that the COVID19 virus is carried by all Chinese or Asian people. A poll by the Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice found that 14% of respondents in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal either believed this (4%) or were uncertain it was not true (10%). Research has shown most COVID19 infection spread to Canada from the USA.

This “shadow pandemic of anti-Asian racism” is part of a long history of anti-Asian racism that has been endemic in Vancouver since the 19th Century. The “Chinese Head Tax” required Chinese immigrants to pay a huge entry fee when they arrived in Canada that was not applied to European immigrants. Chinese citizens (and all “non-whites”) were deprived of the right to vote in 1871 by an act of the BC legislature. In Vancouver, Nanaimo and Kamloops, Chinese residents were confined to ghettos on the outskirts of the towns. In West Vancouver, persons of Chinese and Asian ancestry were forbidden by legal covenant to own property in the British Properties neighbourhood. Even in death, Chinese burials were excluded from “white” cemetery areas. Racism against Chinese immigrants extended to other Asian minorities. At the onset of World War II, Japanese Canadians, two thirds of whom had been born in Canada, were forced into concentration camps in the Interior, and their property was seized, never to be returned.

Presbyterians themselves historically participated in the anti-Asian racism in Vancouver. For example, Vancouver’s Anti-Asian riots of 1907 were led by the Anti-Asiatic League, presided over by the Rev. John Fraser, minister of First Presbyterian (now United) Church.

Today, because of peoples’ fears about the COVID19 epidemic, “the toxic echoes from the past resonate through the racial slurs of the present,” according to Fiona Lam. “People persist in seeing themselves as superior, and others as inferior, based on skin colour and ancestry.” Personal responsibility for racist attitudes is deflected by finding scapegoats to blame.

This current trend to demonize Asian Canadians is especially unacceptable because, according to Wikipedia, there are almost as many Asian Canadians (43.9%) as European Canadians (48.6%) comprising the population of the GVRD. This is racism directed by one minority against another. Bowinn Ma, MLA for North Vancouver-Lonsdale, warns that if Vancouverites do not confront these racist acts, it will encourage others to embrace what may have been latent biases “as though they are *righteous*.”

Anne Kang, MLA for Burnaby-Deer Lake, and Minister of Citizen’s Services, said, “Hatred will thrive whenever we fail to denounce it... Government on our own will not be able to end racism but people standing up together will.” Apathy, and turning away, has never alleviated racism. “Purposeful and concerted actions of many people are necessary to change the trajectories of our histories,” says Liao, who adds that “the resurgent racism has made my belonging here feel conditional.”

John Horgan, Premier of British Columbia, stated recently that “hate has no place in British Columbia.” He observes correctly that “We are a strong and vibrant community because of

[our] diversity... I'm grateful to see citizens standing up to racism when they see it. We need to do that with increasing regularity."

The Community Engagement Committee of the Presbytery recommends that the Presbytery of Westminster stand up against resurgent Canadian racism on behalf of the 43.9% of Vancouver citizens who are Asian Canadians.

The Presbytery of Westminster condemns all racist attacks - verbal, physical, and acts of vandalism - against Asian-Canadians.

The Presbytery of Westminster requests that all member churches make this report known to their members by having it read out during services and/or including it in newsletters and other means of communication and encouraging all Presbyterians to stand against racism wherever and whenever they see it.

The Presbytery of Westminster will share this report, and its condemnation of anti-Asian racist acts, to all presbyteries within the denomination with the recommendation that they join in the stand against resurgent Canadian racism.

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