

From the Bishop's Desk

Date: October 13, 2013

Offensive ads on Metro: Not letting hate speech to unchallenged

Dear friends,

By now you have all heard at least a little about the controversy over the placing of offensive anti-Muslim ads in several Metro stations. I have found lots of information (all of it to be read critically, of course) just by typing "WMATA anti-Muslim ads" into my browser.

In short, a woman associated with an organization called The American Freedom Defense Initiative is sponsoring ads that suggest Muslims who are opposed to Israeli policies in Palestine are dangerous "savages." The ads are crude and inflammatory. They are offensive to Muslims, of course, but also to anybody who believes that civil discourse and common decency are civic virtues we all ought to emulate.

At the request of people in the ELCA churchwide offices, I signed on to a letter asking the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) board not to profit from the placing of these ads.* Instead the goal should be to use any income the ads generate to fund public conversations that build tolerance and understanding. For many good free-speech reasons, no one wants to ask Metro simply not to accept the ads. But given the rise in violence against Muslims and Sikhs and others, no one wants public hate speech to go unchallenged.

The group that produced the letter I signed is called Shoulder-to-Shoulder. They have a good website** and I encourage you to check and see what they are doing to promote understanding of Muslims in American life. Since lots of people in Washington have Muslim co-workers and neighbors and friends, this work will certainly become even more important in the future.

Finally, I also encourage you to write a personal letter to Metro. I believe that all the public letters and press releases we are being asked to sign about this issue will carry less weight than a flood of letters from real Metro riders. Send a paper letter or an email to say that you don't support hateful language on Metro and that you object to the transit authority using hateful ads to make a profit.

The great issues of our time are not going to be resolved with ugliness and provocation and hatred. I hope you will join me in saying so.

- There is a comment form you can use on the Metro Web site.***

- Or write to Catherine Hudgins, Chairwoman, Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, 600 5th St., NW, Washington, DC 20001.

The irony is not lost on me that the Metro offices are really right across the street from our new synod office. Whether we want to be or not, we all live and work in the middle of the serious questions of contemporary history. We do not claim as Christian people that we have all the answers for which the world is seeking. But we can claim with integrity that we have God's authority for standing on the side of respect and compassion for all of God's people. The great issues of our time are not going to be resolved with ugliness and provocation and hatred. I hope you will join me in saying so.

God bless you and your ministry,

Dick

The Rev. Richard H. Graham
Bishop
Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod
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* Text of the petition letter can be found at

www.change.org/petitions/washington-metropolitan-area-transit-authority-refuse-to-profit-from-hateful-ads.

** Learn more about Shoulder-to-Shoulder at

<http://shouldertoshouldercampaign.org/>.

*** Jump to the comment form:

www.wmata.com/about_metro/contact_us/ridercomment.cfm.

Editor's note: Also learn of action on this matter taken by the synod's District of Columbia Conference in a recent "[Forum](#)" blog post (10/11/12).

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This From the Bishop's Desk note is sent from Bishop Graham to rostered leaders of the Metro D.C. Synod.