

A Pastoral Letter to the People of Montana from Religious Leaders

Dear Fellow Montanans,

Montana has a long history of openness and tolerance to a variety of religious beliefs and practices. America is now home to a religious diversity that was unknown to the framers of the Constitution. But just as the First Amendment protected Baptists in Rhode Island and Catholics in Maryland, Quakers in Pennsylvania and Congregationalists in Massachusetts, it still protects practitioners of all faiths today, including minority religions and unpopular traditions. Based on our own faith traditions, and based on our commitments to the laws of this country, we urge our fellow citizens to practice religious tolerance and civility towards all.

In the early 1600's when Europeans of different faiths first came to North America they desired freedom of religion and soon found that freedom meant granting it to others as well. The framers of our government saw the wisdom in that and established a constitution and society that guaranteed both the separation of church and state and a society marked by pluralism of belief and practice.

The United States became a beacon for people seeking freedom, and over the decades waves of different immigrants have continued to come - each making wonderful contributions to the fabric of our shared life. Today in the United States we have people from over 200 different nations, many of whom still speak their native language and practice the faith of their heritage . while at the same time learning to speak English and blend into the rich mix of peoples that makes us unique among nations.

This proud history is something to celebrate, but it is also something we could lose if the current extreme expressions of religious intolerance, hatred, and civil discord continue to dominate the media and the relationships of people with strangers and even neighbors. It is with this concern foremost in our minds that the following leaders of Montana Christian organizations call out to the citizens of the State of Montana to overcome the political and social and religious divisions they encounter and instead work for the unity that was modeled for us by the man we know as Jesus.

The measure of a society's character is not taken when life is easy. How a society treats its minorities and strangers, especially when the economy is tough, and the country is at war, is a better measure of a society's moral health. Montana has a long history of tolerance and openness. We call on our fellow citizens, whatever their own faith commitments, to respect the civil and religious rights of all our neighbors.

Sincerely,

The Rt. Rev. C. Franklin Brookhart,
Bishop, Diocese of Montana, Episcopal Church in the USA

The Rev. Jessica Crist
Bishop, Montana Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Rev. Dr. Ruth Fletcher
Regional Minister, Christian Church Disciples of Christ in Montana Synod

The Rev. Randy Hyvonen
Conference Minister, Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dan Krebill,
President, Montana Association of Churches

The Rev. Elaine Stanovsky,
Bishop of the Denver Area, United Methodist Church