

Opinion

Unite to fight rising hate crimes: How Miami can help

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Across our great nation, we are witnessing a disturbing and tragic rise in hate crimes targeting religious and minority groups. These heinous acts not only threaten the safety and well-being of individuals but also undermine the core values of diversity that the United States of America holds dear.

In October 2018, a quiet morning service at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was shattered by gunfire when a man killed 11 people and wounded half a dozen others.

This was just a few years after the Emanuel African Methodist Episco-

pal (AME) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, was struck by hate-fueled terror when a man walked into the congregation during Bible study. When the parishioners closed their eyes, he shot and killed nine people while shouting racial epithets and saying, "... I'll give you something to pray about."

Both killers had a history of espousing white supremacy and racist views. They were prosecuted by the U.S. Department of Justice and convicted.

Tragically, the horrific violence continues. Last August, an individual targeted a historically Black university and then went to a Dollar General Store and killed three

people of color in Jacksonville.

Hate crimes represent vicious attacks on the fabric of our diverse communities. Similarly, crimes upon our protected places of worship strike at our nation's foundation.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Freedom of religion is a fundamental right, regardless of an individual's faith. America was founded as a refuge for people who were fleeing religious persecution. Throughout our country, you may find a Christian seated beside a Muslim, Buddhist, Jew or atheist.

No one should live in fear because of their religious beliefs. We all have the right to live safely and with dignity.

We must, however, be honest with ourselves about the dangers that persist, and remain vigilant and united against them. The synagogue in Pittsburgh is not just a place of worship. It symbolizes the culture and the history of the Jewish people. Just the same, the AME Church goes back to the time of slavery and reconstruction.

The shootings represented a deadly venom spit across the very soul of a people, culture and their vibrant history.

The Justice Department was founded in 1870 to protect the rights of newly freed Black Americans, who faced daily terror and violence from white supremacists. That work continues today. Investi-

gating and prosecuting hate crimes remains a top priority for the U.S. Attorney's Office and the FBI.

Here in the Southern District of Florida, we have prosecuted threats against synagogues, churches and mosques alike, as well as hate crimes that target our residents.

Building trust between law enforcement and the communities we serve is paramount in the fight against hate crimes and threats to our religious freedoms. To this end, in January, the U.S. Attorney's Office, FBI, the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service (CRS) and local partners held a Protecting Places of Worship Forum attended by nearly 200 religious leaders.

This past fall, the U.S. Attorney's Office and FBI provided a day-long hate crimes training session to over 200 law enforcement officers, which included presentations by Judy and

Dennis Shepard, co-founders of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). Additionally, the U.S. Attorney's Office and FBI work with local partners to establish hate crimes task forces and a working group of Black faith leaders; collaborate with LGBTQ+ task forces, and meet with Jewish, Arab, Muslim and other community stakeholders.

But we cannot do our work effectively without your help. You are the eyes, ears and conscience of the community. If you see something, say something. If you know something, share it. Report hate crimes to your local police department and by calling the FBI at 1-800-CALL-FBI.

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