November 1, 2018

Peace and grace to you.

My name is Rev. Alice Fleming Townley. I am the United Methodist pastor at The Presbyterian Church of Okemos and I speak tonight on behalf of the Interfaith Clergy Association of Greater Lansing. We gather to support our Jewish brothers and sisters. We surround you with our prayers and our love this night. For each of us here, there are many more who would like to be here, their compassion radiates as well.

We join you in grieving for the 11 congregants who were killed on Saturday morning in the Tree of Life Synagogue. We remember also those who were injured—including the police officers. We extend our sympathy to family, friends, congregants, and rabbis who mourn their loved ones.

We are shaken by yet another mass shooting in a house of worship. The gunman targeted members of the Tree of Life Synagogue because they were Jewish. Anti-Semitism has been used to justify atrocities and genocide for centuries. Such religious hatred is evil. Let we as the interfaith community recommit to examining our own narratives and find opportunities to speak to the roots of anti-Semitism. The Torah calls us to love God and love our neighbor as our self. May our preaching, our teaching, and our relationships seek to deepen understanding and expand mutual support.

The Tree of Life Congregation was also targeted because they have supported refugee resettlement through the Hebrew Immigrant Aide Society, known now as HIAS. Since it began in 1881 HIAS has assisted millions of people displaced by religious or political conflicts to rebuild their lives. At first their clients were Jews fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe — but then the agency expanded and has resettled many from countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Iraq. "We used to welcome refugees because they were Jewish," said Mark Hetfield, the President of Hias. "Today HIAS welcomes refugees because we are Jewish."[i] Numbers of worldwide refugees is at a historic high, and at the same time the United States is allowing in a historic low. The increasing disregard and dehumanization of refugees is tragic. The Torah teaches us to 'welcome the stranger." May we as faith communities use our voices and our actions and our power in advocating for refugees.

Senator John Lewis says that one of his formative memories is of an afternoon when he was 4 years old. He and about 15 cousins were playing in the dirt yard outside his aunt Seneva's home. Suddenly the sky began to cloud, and the wind began to blow, lightning flashed, and he was terrified because he had seen what such storms could do. Aunt Seneva gathered all the

children inside her small wood frame house. The wind was howling, and the house was shaking. They were scared.

And then it got worse. The house began to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath them began to bend. And then, a corner of the room started lifting off its foundations with them inside it.

John Lewis says, "That's when Aunt Seneva said, 'Line up and hold hands." And they did as they were told. Then Aunt Seneva had them walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house they walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then they walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of their small bodies. Senator Lewis says that memory is guiding for him. Often there have been storms in his life, many of them during the Civil Rights movement.[ii]

These are stormy times for us. We are like the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart. Rabbi Amy Bigman, you have been like Aunt Sevena for us, calling us to come together. You gathered and directed the clergy association for many years. When you hear of a new pastor arriving in town, you often invite that colleague to lunch and into our group. You and Rabbi Michael Zimmerman and Rabbi Becca Walker are active leaders in our Interfaith Clergy Association. Over the years, we have studied, shared, played, and cried together. Indeed, the storms have blown. We have held hands and walked together towards the area being buffeted. Westboro Baptist Church came, and we partied for peace and swept away the hate. When the Islamic Center was targeted, we wrote a declaration of support and showed up in prayer. When anti-refugee rhetoric started getting louder, we formed the All Faith Alliance for Refugees. When a white supremist came to the University last winter, we gathered with school and city officials and students, and we celebrated diversity. We have come tonight to weep, to pray, to hold hands, and to express our care for you, our Jewish brother and sisters.

We'll gather again for our annual Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, 7:00 p.m., on November 19 at University United Methodist Church. We'll give thanks for God's sustaining presence and the gifts of each one. And, we'll linger over tea and cookies, as we do, so that we can ever renew and expand supportive relationships.

When the storms come again, we will shake. And when they get stronger, we will feel small and wonder what we can do, and yet we will already

know. This week, before we had worked out the details, calls from the community began, "Where and when will the clergy association be doing something?" The community has come to trust. We will come together the best we can, clasping hands and moving towards the corner of our community that most needs it. Gathering, and holding, and adding the weight of our support, this is our pattern. This is what we have done, what we do tonight, and what we will do as the Interfaith Community. We will show love and be love. We will show strength and be strength. We will show peace and be peace. That is who we are as people of faith.

I introduce to you now my friends and colleagues, Imam Sohail Chaudhry and Rev. Dr. Rob Carlson who have put together a Resolution of Support from our Clergy Association. This was based on the one our Association gave to Imam Chaudhry at the Islamic Center and to which he keeps in his office where he can see it regularly.

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[i] Miriam Jordan, "HIAS, the Jewish Agency Criticized by the Shooting Suspect, Has a History of Aiding Refugees," *New York Times,* October 28, 2018.

[ii] John Lewis, prologue, *Walking with the Wind: a Memoir of the Movement*.