



JOINT STATEMENT FROM FAITH LEADERS REGARDING "FREEDOM MARCH"

On September 14th, Orlando, "The City Beautiful" will witness Lake Eola being used as a platform for religious stigma against LGBT+ people. Conversion therapy and "Ex-Gay" Ministry proponents will be coming in from all around the country to hold what they have labeled a "Freedom March." The issue is complex and hurtful already, but this event will also feature two young men, who are survivors of the Pulse tragedy, who now say they no longer identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community and have "changed" for religious reasons.

As faith leaders, we are grateful to live in a country where people have freedom of conscience and specifically religious conscience. We celebrate the rights of freedom of speech and assembly. That said the Freedom March sends a deadly message to LGBTQ+ youth and community in the name of religion. By promoting the harmful idea that being gay is somehow "broken" or unacceptable to God, this protest march reinforces fear-based stigma handed down for generations. We have seen this condemning message from the pulpit enforcing a harsh shame-based interpretation of what a biblically acceptable identity should be and public policy disenfranchising and erasing LGBTQ+ people, families, and relationships from full equality.

What happened at Pulse is a tragedy that forever changed Central Florida. The trauma inflicted and healing that continues has become part of the fabric of our beloved community. Our love and respect extend to every person touched by this act of hate and violence. With sincere respect and compassion for the two Pulse survivors speaking at the Freedom March, the Pulse tragedy didn't happen because of anyone simply enjoying the evening, being their authentic selves.

Pulse happened for many reasons including easy access to military-grade assault rifles, the murderer's state of mind, and because systemic bigotry against LGBTQ+ people taught the murderer that what he was going to do was ok. The answer to such a tragedy isn't to spiritually scapegoat being gay as part of the reason; it's to lovingly embrace one another to genuinely grow and heal as individuals and as a community. Being LGBTQ+ is not the villain here; the shooter was the villain. This blame shifting must end with the traumatized victims getting the help they need and love leading the way toward true freedom to celebrate and affirm LGBTQ+ people.

The misinformation that organizers of the "Freedom March" offer is harmful to the LGBTQ+ community and to all of us. Continued stigmatization is a never-ending and cruel roundabout with only one exit, embracing and understanding of the authentic and beautiful identities of LGBTQ+ people. We hope that supporters of the Freedom March will do as so many others have done before and walk away from religious-based fear and seek understanding. When the Freedom March organizers and participants want to understand how you can be a healthy, whole, and happy LGBTQ+ person of faith (or not), or an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, our doors are open. We are here to help.

We encourage Orlando and all of Central Florida to celebrate, affirm, embrace, and speak up for their LGBTQ+ friends, families, and neighbors. Let's not let toxic theology and fear-based stigma continue to



harm our community. Let us instead live out what we know to be true; the truth that love conquers hate.

Signed By:

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Clerk Liz Jenkins on behalf of The Quakers of Orlando

Jose Rodriguez, Orlando Faith Leader

Rev. Cynthia Alice Anderson (RCA), Senior Minister, Christ Church Unity Orlando

Dr. Steve Harper, retired seminary professor, and United Methodist elder

Reverend Bryan Fulwider, *Friends Talking Faith with The Three Wise Guys* radio show

Dr. Paul W. Chilcote, Retired United Methodist pastor & seminary professor

Tim Powers, United Methodist Pastor

Brian Johnson, United Methodist Pastor, Citrus Church

Jerry Jeffords, United Methodist Clergy Retired

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