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SOLIDARITY, COMMITMENT

Williams: Hatred and bigotry will not dissipate on their own. They require our conscious, critical response.

MICHAEL PAUL WILLIAMS

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People hold the names of those who were killed at two mosques in New Zealand during "Standing Together in Mourning and Solidarity" at the Islamic Center of Virginia on Sunday, March 17.

alexa welch edlund/times-dispatch

As people rallied outside the Islamic Center of Virginia in Bon Air on Sunday evening to mourn the New Zealand dead, they prayed for healing after an apparent act of white supremacist terrorism that seemed a world away.

By Monday, it became clear that the ugly ideas behind an attack that killed at least 50 people and wounded 50 more had roots closer to home.

According to a story in Tuesday's Richmond Times-Dispatch, the Colorado Springs branch of antifa alleged that Chesterfield County Police officer Daniel Morley is a member of Identity Evropa, has been a neo-Nazi since 2006, and has posted comments on such websites as Stormfront, a white nationalist and white supremacist organization.

The group also claimed that Morley, a school resource officer for L.C. Bird High School, was a pledge coordinator for Identity Evropa, also known as American Identity Movement.

On Monday afternoon, Chesterfield's police chief, Col. Jeffrey Katz, recommended the officer's firing. Morley has not been charged with a crime or accused of assaulting others. But the beliefs his bosses are investigating are troubling, especially for a person in a position of trust.

Two-thirds of Bird's enrollment are people of color, according to the most recent membership data from the Virginia Department of Education.

How are they — or for that matter, the county's minority, Jewish or Muslim residents — supposed to feel about their police?

Some would say the Chesterfield Police Department has some explaining to do if a white supremacist was indeed embedded in its ranks.

Others would argue that the institution of law enforcement is so inherently racist that its historic attraction for white supremacists makes perfect sense.

Frankly, our nation does not like to dwell on its legacy of white supremacy. But if the U.S. brand of racism has become a global export, as the manifesto of the New Zealand suspect suggests, we'd better start asking more questions.

"It goes to the 'why'?" said Imad Damaj, founder and president of the Virginia Muslim Coalition for Public Affairs. "In order for us to do something preventative, we have to understand the 'why.' Is it the online hate available nowadays? Is it the very polarized political tone we hear in the U.S. and Europe?"

Is it anxiety over diversity or media carelessness in its depiction of *the other*? "All these factors seem to be playing a role," Damaj said.

It seems that the more we come together in our glorious diversity, the more some people resist — sometimes violently.

"The world is intermingling in an unbelievable way, creating some anxieties in terms of people in general who've lived in homogeneous groups for generations," Damaj said. "And now with the internet, what's going on is people are feeling this anxiety of having very diverse groups, different cultures, different religions, kids being born and raised in the same place."

The upshot: "People are anxious about their so-called heritage and how to preserve it," he said.

Whatever the reason, this race- and, in the case of New Zealand, faith-directed hate has caught people at their most open and vulnerable — when they are engaged in prayer. Such horrors have unfolded at a Sikh temple in suburban Milwaukee, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., and Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, just to name several. Add Christchurch, New Zealand to that somber list.

And yet, Damaj says he's optimistic — a remarkable thing, in my view, given the trauma the Muslim community has just endured.

He's surprised and heartened by the Richmond community's support and spirit of inclusion after the mosque attacks in Christchurch, given our city's tortured and less than inclusive past. But this progress has not occurred by happenstance.

"A lot of these groups that came yesterday, they've been working together the last 10 or 15 years," Damaj said, crediting the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities with fostering that environment.

But VCIC's president and CEO says more work needs to be done.

"Gathering after a crisis is important to show support for and solidarity with communities that have been targeted. But that's not the real work of advancing inclusion and equity," said Jonathan Zur. "Instead, that commitment needs to be embedded into our day-to-day actions.

"For example, what if the white supremacists responsible for these horrific acts of hate instead had built deep, authentic relationships with people of different racial and religious backgrounds when they were growing up? How about if our neighborhoods and schools and houses of worship were places that facilitated interaction across lines of perceived difference?

"What if those who find a place in violent, hateful groups instead found similar belonging and purpose in more positive, affirming, inclusive outlets? In some ways, these are interpersonal questions about relationships, but they are also questions that interrogate the very structures around us. As long as we ignore those structural realities, I'm afraid that we will continue on this painful cycle."

Zur noted that the psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum describes racism as "smog" — something we don't consciously think about breathing even as the air around us is polluted.

Each of us needs to be more intentional, conscious and critical about the world around us "every single day if we are going to substantively address the tragic rise in bias, bigotry, and hate-motivated violence," he said.

Otherwise, we will remain lost and smothered in this killing smog.

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