

RISING TO THE CALL

After he learned of the birth of Jesus, King Herod ordered the execution of all males under the age of two in the areas around Bethlehem. Herod was filled with fear that one day this “new born king” would become powerful and overtake him as King of Judea. The cries of those children calling to their mothers ring out every year as the church remembers them on December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents.



This gospel story provides a poignant message for us today as we struggle to understand our current reality. It was all about power then and it still is. On May 25, the cry of George Floyd could be heard calling out to his mother, “Momma! Momma ... I’m through,” as he lay dying pinned down on a Minneapolis street by a police officer. Mr. Floyd is one of many Black Americans who have died because of racial injustice in this country. History repeats itself as fear and abuse of power continue to fuel heinous acts of violence.

Shortly after the tragic death of Mr. Floyd, Michelle Ann Williams, Dean of the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, and Jeffrey Sánchez, a former Massachusetts state representative and lecturer at Harvard Chan, wrote an op-ed for the *The Washington Post*, titled, “Racism is killing Black people. It is sickening them too.” The authors said, “Racism is a public health crisis.” They stated that police violence kills Black Americans at a rate of nearly three times that of white Americans and that social conditions are key drivers of the health inequities of Black Americans that are killing them, too.

Health experts have reported for years that social conditions directly impact one’s health status, but it has taken the current public health crisis to really get our attention. The mortality rate during the COVID-19 pandemic has been more than 2.4 times higher for Black Americans than for white Americans. And social conditions such as poverty, inadequate health care, unemployment, lack of education, unaffordable housing and food insecurity — which are all prevalent in much higher rates in communities of color — are putting people at greater risk for COVID.

From the very beginning, the Catholic health ministry was at the forefront of responding to the coronavirus: caring for patients and families; advocating for

needed medical supplies and funding; and providing pastoral and spiritual care resources to patients, families and frontline workers.

With the escalating spread of COVID-19, the Catholic Health Association refocused efforts on supporting member needs in addressing this public health crisis. Members were convened virtually and listening sessions held with key committees. CHA collaborated with partners including the American Hospital Association and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to strengthen our collective efforts.

In their good wisdom, the CHA board paused our strategic planning process in April as they recognized the impact COVID was having on health care throughout the country. It was important for the board to stay in dialogue in order to better read the signs of the times and prepare for what would be ours to do.

During the most recent CHA board meeting, there was passionate discussion about the current racial injustices and the impact on health disparities. This discussion resulted in a call to action and clear direction, and the CHA strategic planning process was able to be resumed. Strengthened in its resolve, CHA is impelled to lead the Catholic health ministry and give priority to addressing health disparities caused by the systemic and structural racism that permeates our country.

Let us never forget the cry of George Floyd and so many other victims of racial injustice. May their voices ring out as a clarion call to rise and work for the eradication of all forms of social injustice that impact the health of our communities.

“Day unto day conveys the message, and night unto night imparts the knowledge. No speech, no word, whose voice goes unheeded; their sound goes forth through all the earth, their message to the utmost bounds of the world.” (Psalm 19: 2-5)

The collective ministry is being called to rise in response to this need, and I am confident that this call will not go unheeded.

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