



June 25, 2009

The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Chairman
Senate Judiciary Committee
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Leahy:

I write today as a concerned clergy member and as a member of African American Ministers in Action (AAMIA), a program of People For the American Way. I applaud your efforts to pass the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 (S. 909), and thank you for holding this hearing today. Passage of S. 909 is a critical priority for your Committee and the Congress, and it is one that the President should sign into law this session. I have attached materials for the record of your hearing that should also be of use as this debate moves forward.

This is of particular interest to all of us who are concerned about equality. Equality for all should mean equality for *all*. Laws should protect everyone against discrimination: black or white, straight or gay. None of our brothers and sisters should be forced to live in fear of retribution because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, or disability. But the reality is each year thousands of innocent Americans are victims of violent crimes merely because of who they are. In this regard, I feel the church must fill the role of speaking out for those that others have turned their backs on.

I am also concerned with the false claims being made by political opponents of the legislation that the bill would silence pastors. In fact, the hate crimes legislation honors the prophetic voice of church leaders to preach the gospel as their faith compels them. The First Amendment will always protect the right of every person to speak out against homosexuality if they wish. This legislation does nothing to change that. I draw your attention to the materials that I've submitted with this letter, particularly the myths and facts document from AAMIA.

Thank you again for your tireless efforts in support of the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 (S. 909). Please consider me a resource in the future.

Sincerely,

Rev. Byron Williams
Pastor, Resurrection Community Church
Oakland, CA

Rev. Byron Williams has been pastor of the Resurrection Community Church since 2002 and is an active member of the African American Ministers in Action. Additionally, Williams writes twice weekly syndicated social and political column for the Oakland Tribune, and is the host of radio-blog talk show entitled “*The Public Morality.*” In 2005, he was voted by CityFlight magazine as one of the “30 Most Influential African Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area.” Princeton professor Cornel West considers Byron’s work “groundbreaking and historic.” The Rev. Dr. J. Alfred Smith, Sr. of Allen Temple Baptist Church calls Byron “the Reinhold Niebuhr of his day.” Williams has spoken throughout the country, including presenting the 2006 keynote address at the University of California African American graduation ceremony. He has appeared on numerous television and radio news programs, including CNN, ABC Radio, Fox News, and National Public Radio. He is also a featured writer on The Huffington Post.