



July 15, 2009

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of thousands of clergy members, pastors, and African American community leaders within the African American Ministers In Action (AAMIA) network of People For the American Way, I write in strong support of the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 (S. 909). Accordingly, I strongly support the amendment by Senators Leahy, Collins, Kennedy, and Snowe to add S. 909 to the FY10 Defense Authorization bill (S. 1391), and I support their effort free of weakening amendments.

As people of color, we are well aware of the hideous nature of race-based violence, and understand the importance of legislation that protects Americans who are victims of hate crimes. We also are not blind to the fact that violent hate crimes are motivated not just by racism. Knowing this, as clergy members and pastors who affirm the humanity of every person, we fully understand and embrace the call to advocate for an inclusive federal law that will extend protection to victims of hate crimes based on disability, sexual orientation, gender, or gender identity. The Leahy/Collins/Kennedy/Snowe amendment will make equal protection under the law for victims of hate crimes a reality and not just an American dream.

Unfortunately, propaganda and lies have prevented the protections that the Leahy/Collins/Kennedy/Snowe amendment proposes from becoming law. One such falsehood is that this amendment will eliminate churches' first amendment rights; that this amendment will "muzzle our pulpits" or dictate what we as clergy or religious communities can or cannot say. This is not true. In fact, the Leahy/Collins/Kennedy/Snowe amendment protects freedom of speech and freedom of religion. It only punishes violent acts like assault and murder, not religious beliefs. It makes clear that it cannot be used to prohibit any "constitutionally protected speech" or "expressive conduct."

The AAMIA network is passionate about protecting the civil rights of all Americans, especially those that protect people who are discriminated against because of who they are. Victims of violent hate crimes often come to our churches in search of a safe haven from enduring assaults, and they are in need of federal protections. Thus from our houses of worship to your house of policy, we trust that we can count on your support for the protection of American citizens from violent hate crimes. AAMIA strongly supports S. 909, and its addition to the FY10 Defense Authorization bill (S. 1391) as the Leahy/Collins/Kennedy/Snowe amendment – without weakening amendments.

Sincerely,

Rev. Timothy McDonald
Founder and Chair, African American Ministers In Action