Pledging Allegiance in a time of National Tragedy
by Tom Cramer, June 27, 2015

One of my memories from grade school was our weekly flag ceremonies on the black top. I remember standing there on misty Pt. Loma mornings as the flag was raised to the music of our National Anthem, played loudly over the principal's portable speaker system. They were solemn moments that calibrated our weeks and caused us to focus on ideals larger than ourselves.

We stood there, 6-12 year old kids, looking up on a flag that symbolized much of what we aspired to as a nation. And then, when the anthem ended, we stood at attention with our hands over our hearts, and pledged allegiance to the United States of America.

Those were poignant memories for me as a child growing up in the 60's, with my whole life in front of me and countless possibilities for what I could become. When I recited the words to the Pledge of Allegiance I thought they were true in the same way the creeds I recited in worship on Sunday were true: “…one Nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

I was too young then to know that our nation was engulfed in an epic battle over those very ideals, and had been so since its inception. I was also too young to realize that what was true for me as a white male growing up in affluent neighborhood of San Diego was not true for countless others in our society.

It wasn’t until I took a university-level course on race relations, taught by a world-famous sociologist, that I learned about institutionalized racism, and how people of color in America, not to mention women in America, had been systematically and consistently marginalized, if not blatantly mistreated, in many of our society’s institutions (industry, education, church, justice system, sports, you name it).

His lectures made me aware that there were forces at play much larger than my good intentions and idealism of the 1960’s, and caused me to acknowledge the contradictions that existed in our society. For example, in grade school I was taught that America was a melting pot, but even by the end of my six-grade year, Dr. Martin Luther King had been shot, and a disproportionate number of blacks and Hispanics had been sent overseas to fight in the Vietnam war while the teenagers in my neighborhood were being shipped off to Stanford and UCLA.

Through his teaching, and especially his stories, I began to see America like the towering sand walls of the Grand Canyon, with hundreds of layers of color, but instead of beautiful mix of colors on top, depending on where you looked, there was only white. I felt like my innocence had been taken from me, that my idealistic worldview had been shattered forever.

All these years later, I realize what a gift my professor had given me, not because of his award-winning research or publications, but because of the openness he engendered in
me to listen to the stories of others, to the stories of those who experience the world much differently than me.

I have been told that someone with my upbringing and skin color has no idea what it feels like to be treated with daily contempt or to be the target of racial hatred. While that may be true in some large measure, I have also been blessed to be a part of a larger spiritual family that prophetically calls me to listen to the stories of those who have been mistreated and to join in their cause for justice.

On June 23, people from many congregations in our presbytery and from other denominations gathered for a Prayer Service at the New Hope Presbyterian Church in Orange to grieve and cry and ask for God’s help in the wake of yet another racially-motivated attack of a white person against black people. (There have been six such incidents in the past seven years.)

During that service, I realized again how powerful and necessary it is for us to hear each other’s stories, to acknowledge each other’s pain, and to seek in whatever way we can to bear each other’s burdens. There is no other way we can begin to create a more just world until we first listen and acknowledge the realities of those who suffer injustice.

As one pastor asserted during the service, “The language of justice demands radical and structural change, and so therefore requires that we recover the biblical languages of truth telling, of rage, of lament and frustration, so that we can get to the final language—that of hope in God’s steadfast love.”

In the wake of the Charleston massacre, where nine African American brothers and sisters were brutally slaughtered in a prayer service, I’m grateful to be part of a presbytery where people can tell the truth about where they are, and sojourn there for a while, trusting that as we hear each other’s stories, we will learn more about how God can use us to heal each other and work with each other for “liberty and justice for all.”