

Community responds to attacks in Paris

By Nate Smelle

Following the recent attacks in Paris at the office of the French satirical weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo on Wednesday, Jan. 7 that left 12 dead, people around the world are struggling to make sense of this atrocity. Two days after the initial attack, the pair of Islamist gunmen identified as brothers, Saïd Kouachi and Chérif Kouachi were found hiding at a print shop in Dammartin-en-Goele with a single hostage. Without harming the hostage, authorities were able to storm the building just after 5 p.m. on Friday killing both gunmen. Close by at a Kosher grocery store in Paris's Porte de Vincennes another pair of terrorists Amedy Coulibaly and Hayat Boumeddiene who are suspected of killing a policewoman in the south of Paris on Thursday had also taken hostages in an attempt to help the Kouachi brothers escape. After killing four of the hostages Coulibaly was shot dead when authorities raided the building. His accomplice Boumeddiene still remains at large. As a Christian minister in Bancroft, Rev. Lynn Watson becomes distressed when others lump her in with extreme fundamentalist Christians. Watson said it is equally disturbing for her to see her Muslim brothers and sisters stereotyped as extremists. With more than 1.6 billion followers of Islam in the world only a very small fraction are extremists, likewise there are a small number of Christians propagating violence, terror and intolerance, she explained. "There are Muslims and there are Muslims just as there are Christians and there are Christians," said Watson. "I am not the kind of Christian who picketed the funeral of Matthew Shepard holding signs stating, 'God hates Gays!' Nor am I the kind of Christian who would call for the burning of the Qur'an or the bombing of an abortion clinic. I belong to a Christian community that affirms the LGBTQ community, that supports the rights of a woman to choose, and I have shared worship with Jewish and Muslim individuals at Eid Al-Ada." Admitting to being offended by a couple of the satirical cartoons featuring images of the Prophet Mohammed, she has seen published in the Charlie Hebdo, Watson does not view religion as sacrosanct and beyond critique. Watson pointed to a number of individuals throughout history who inspired others to exercise their right to freely express themselves for the betterment of society. In spite of their heroic and historic status these days, during their time many of them were considered outrageous criminals in certain less humane circles of society. "Our world has become a more just and compassionate world because of religious people who have followed the teachings of their religions," said Watson. "Men like Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama have changed the world for the better because they were and are men of faith. But we have a long way to go, and how do we get there?" Watson believes that the key to ending such senseless hate and violence resides in our ability as humans to learn how to better understand one another. For this to happen, she said people need to put a stop to discrimination and educate themselves about other religions and cultures. "If we can learn as much as we can about other faith traditions and cultures we are less likely to call them names. If we give ourselves fully to compassionate speaking and acting we will become uncomfortable with the pain and suffering of even our own enemies. Jesus said that we should 'love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.' (Matthew 5:44 NRSV), and the Apostle Paul said, 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.' (Romans 12:17-18 NRSV). As a person of faith I strive to make this my credo and my way of life." Bancroft Councillor Bill Kilpatrick expressed his condolences to the families of those killed in the attack on Paris; calling the shootings "a despicable act of cowardice perpetrated by extremists." "The response from the West needs to be one that begins to eliminate the conditions—mainly war, hunger and despair—that give rise to this extremist mentality." He believes that an appropriate response needs to look at non-violently extinguishing the root causes of terrorism, rather than just fuelling the fires of hatred by aggressively seeking revenge. "I believe that we must resist the urge to act out of our pain and anguish," said Kilpatrick. "Instead we must decide on a reaction that increases compassion if we are to eliminate the anger and hatred that is hallmark of extremism. I recognize this is easy for me to say as I sit in the comfort of my own home having lost no one in the attack, but as I see it more extreme actions will only lead to more extreme reactions." With discussions of a US-inspired Patriot Act being imposed in France and throughout parts of Europe Kilpatrick said authorities need to be careful not to trample the very rights and freedoms the journalists, cartoonists and security officers at Charlie Hebdo defended through their work. In May of 2013 humanist and human rights activist the late Dagmar Gontard shed light on the dangers of suppressing freedom of speech and freedom of expression. She believed these freedoms to be an integral part of existence, not to be neglected or ever given away. When such important rights and freedoms are taken away in the name of global security, Gontard said people need to question and challenge the powers that be or these essential liberties could be lost forever. "Breaking the law is a crime, but wait a minute," said Gontard, "isn't the history of mankind built on breaking laws? What about Rosa Parks, the black woman who refused to give up her seat on a bus in Alabama in 1955? Hers was clearly an act of non-compliance with the existing legal bond. What about Nelson Mandela? Didn't his non-compliance with the legal order lead to

the abolition of apartheid?? On this night Gontard chose to end her presentation with British-born engineer, humanist and human rights activist, Roy W. Brown's closing remarks from his address to the Human Rights Council at the United Nations in New York in March of 2012. As if speaking to the UN's Human Rights Council herself, Gontard read Brown's words slowly and deliberately to the assembly of curious minds at the Club 580 in Bancroft. ?Mr. President, it is people that have human rights, not beliefs. Protesting against human rights abuse and pointing it out is not a crime it's a duty. And it's the duty of every member of this Council to uphold the right to freedom of expression, not to condemn it.? Standing strong in the face of terror the surviving staff of Charlie Hebdo gathered on Friday, Jan. 9 to begin working on the next issue of the magazine.