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The Pro-Democracy Faith Movement

Prominent Religious Leaders Reflect On the Meaning of Democracy

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Introduction and summary

This report was developed through a project with Auburn Seminary, which for more than 200 years has equipped leaders of faith and moral courage who are on the front lines fighting for the health and wholeness of U.S. society.

The past year has been an incredible test for American democracy. The coronavirus crisis not only crippled America's public health and economy, but it also necessitated new ways of voting in a presidential election. This incited new tactics for voter suppression that compounded long-standing efforts to hobble the voting power of communities of color. The electoral process was further compromised by a campaign of unfounded accusations of voter fraud. Then, following the election in November, the former president and certain factions of his allies attempted to overturn the results. Former President Trump was impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives for his role in inciting the deadly January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.¹ And although right-wing Christian nationalism was on full display from the insurrectionists, months before the seditious storming of the Capitol, faith movements across the ideological spectrum had already mobilized to uphold democratic norms, playing a critical role in securing America's democracy.

Many religious Americans knew going into the 2020 election that the survival of America's democracy hinged on adherence to democratic norms. These faith-based activists and advocates prepared for worst-case scenarios with large-scale organizing to resist disinformation, get out the vote, push back against voter intimidation, and protect the results of the election. Yet the stories of their activism and how their faiths motivated them often go untold. The role that American religious communities played in supporting this pro-democracy movement and moment has been underexamined—an oversight this report hopes to correct.

In summer 2020, the Center for American Progress interviewed 28 pro-democracy religious leaders of diverse faith backgrounds, some individually and some in groups, in an attempt to better understand the motivations of religious Americans who are driven to protect and uphold American democracy. The leaders were asked about the

values underpinning their work for an inclusive democracy where everyone has a vote and a voice. Considering these conversations as a whole, the authors discerned five value-based themes crucial to this work:

1. Building an inclusive democratic movement for a more inclusive democracy
2. Centering the experience of Black Americans
3. Grounding democracy in a shared sense of community
4. Being political but nonpartisan
5. Meeting the urgency of the moment

This report explores each of these themes. While the importance of defending democracy was clear to both the authors and many of the interviewees, it is important to note explicitly that the interviews took place months before the deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Yet they read now as prophetic, foreshadowing what was to come.

It is also important to note that although these faith leaders largely align with progressive positions on matters of public policy, many oppose categorizing their traditions, their communities, and even themselves along a left vs. right political spectrum. They even differed in their perspectives about American democracy. However, what they all shared in common was a religiously or spiritually driven motivation to see a nation and world in which all people are treated equally, including with regard to their political representation. The intent undergirding this report is to discern this shared narrative for the diverse people of faith who rallied around building an inclusive democracy—and to articulate a way forward for the various traditions who employ their faith as a source of resilience, hope, and systemic transformation.

The pro-democracy faith movement

During the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath, a number of different pro-democracy faith-based organizations, coalitions, and individuals provided leadership. The major areas of work in which these groups engaged were:

- Voter registration and get out the vote (GOTV) efforts
- Combating voter suppression
- Countering disinformation about the election
- Poll monitoring, including to deter violence
- Advocacy for pro-democracy legislation
- Preventing mass violence related to democratic processes
- Voting and democracy education aimed at faith communities
- Working to ensure elected officials accepted the results and peacefully transferred power to the winner of the 2020 presidential election

Not every faith group engaged in all of these efforts, but the faith community as a whole was active in many areas of protecting and expanding access to democracy.

The Faithful Democracy coalition, for example, has provided long-standing engagement for faith communities working on pro-democracy reforms. The coalition, part of the Washington Interfaith Staff Community (WISC), started more than two decades ago as Religious Leaders for Campaign Finance Reform and was critical to the passage of the McCain-Feingold Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, a bill aimed at limiting the role of special interests in influencing elections.² The coalition now includes more than 70 faith-based organizations from across the country and made several constructive interventions during the 2020 election cycle, including through its multifaith Sacred Season of Voting action campaign.³ The campaign equipped faith groups with “strategic GOTV messaging, resources, and social media for their members.”⁴

A coalition made up of national faith leaders and organizations working in the pro-democracy space, co-convened by Auburn Seminary, shared information and resources to protect the election. Faith in Public Life and Bend the Arc organized a

network of faith groups supporting the Count Every Vote campaign, a nonpartisan effort dedicated to defending the integrity of the 2020 election.⁵ In addition, Faith Leaders United to Support Free and Fair Elections, a new ideologically diverse coalition, issued a statement before the election committing to accept the results and calling for a peaceful transfer of power.⁶

Long before the 2020 election and democracy crisis, voting rights and election protection have been priorities of historically Black denominations. Lawyers and Collars (organized by the Skinner Leadership Institute and *Sojourners*), Turnout Sunday, and other groups organized during the 2020 election cycle primarily to engage Black congregations in elections-related activities. Faith in Action (formerly PICO National Network) and the Poor People's Campaign, organized nationally and through their local chapters, were also active in supporting democracy, as were the advocacy arms of the mainline Protestant denominations and groups. The United Church of Christ organized an Our Faith, Our Vote campaign to help its members register to vote, vote early, find polling locations, learn about the issues, and engage in organizing work to help protect the results of the election.⁷ And the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church, the Disciples Center for Public Witness, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Office of Public Witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) all engaged their own communities separately and through the Faithful Democracy coalition in election and democracy efforts.

Likewise, there is a strong Catholic voice for supporting democracy. NETWORK Lobby, the Franciscan Action Network, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy Justice Team, the Catholic program of Faith in Public Life, and Pax Christi USA are a few examples. In the midst of the post-election chaos, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops acknowledged Joe Biden as the president-elect, providing an important validator for more conservative-leaning audiences that the election had been free and fair.⁸ Other predominantly Christian groups involved in supporting a free and fair 2020 election include the National Council of Churches, Mormon Women for Ethical Government, and the Friends Committee on National Legislation. Among other actions, each of these groups led their faith communities in signing petitions, issuing strong statements, or holding public events calling on elected officials to count every ballot.

There was a noticeable uptick in pro-democracy activism in religious-minority communities in 2020. The Unitarian Universalist Association; the Sikh Coalition; the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; Bend the Arc; the National Council of Jewish Women; and the Muslim groups Emgage, MPower Change, and the Poligon Education Fund were among many noteworthy religious-minority groups that organized pro-democracy efforts in 2020.

In addition to the national and regional efforts described above, faith groups were organizing at a local level. Groups such as The New Georgia Project, for example, accomplished many of their nonpartisan GOTV efforts through multifaith organizing.⁹ In the Milwaukee metropolitan area, a group of ministers and congregations organized a Souls to the Polls campaign with the goal of turning out 100,000 voters.¹⁰

The pro-democracy views of these religious groups resonated with people in the pews. According to a pre-election survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute, 81 percent of all religiously affiliated Americans said that “it is somewhat important” or “very important . . . for religious leaders to speak out about a peaceful transition of power regardless of who wins the election.”¹¹

The religious right's anti-democratic turn

Not all of America's religious leaders were supportive of the pro-democracy movement during the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath. Some of President Trump's evangelical advisers supported his attempt to subvert the will of the American people through unsubstantiated claims that the 2020 election was fraudulent.¹² Franklin Graham, head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, tweeted as late as December 19, 2020, "Since the 2016 election, [President Trump] has been falsely accused, maligned, and attacked. He told us his campaign was spied on. He was right. He told us there was no collusion. He was proven right. When he says this election was rigged or stolen, I tend to believe him."¹³ Graham continued to support former President Trump even following Trump's incitement of insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.¹⁴ These supporters' sentiments were amplified in the far-right media ecosystem that spread anti-democracy misinformation during and after the 2020 election.

In recent history, the religious right has seized ownership of the public faith narrative. Its language and visage are disproportionately of white supremacy and Christian nationalism, a reactionary movement rising out of the nation's growing racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, and religious diversity. This vision empowered many of the insurrectionists at the U.S. Capitol. The political activism of the religious right has played an outsized role in pushing the United States to an inflection point. As the nation experiences increasing diversity, these conservative, reactionary forces have marshaled a minority view of faith to fashion a narrow definition of America's national character and to limit the definition of who belongs—and who does not.¹⁵

In fact, one of the things that became clear on January 6, 2021, is that white supremacy has been and continues to be the biggest threat to America's democracy.¹⁶ White supremacy inspired, facilitated, and permitted the violent overrun of the U.S. Capitol for the first time in more than 200 years. And white supremacy has for years blended comfortably with Christian nationalism, in an effort to ascribe loftier ideals and values to hateful objectives.¹⁷

Fortunately, the majority of religious communities do not hold this narrow understanding of the way in which the values of their traditions ought to show up in the public square. On the contrary, central to their understanding of the world is the notion that each individual belongs to a human community and is therefore deserving of being cared for, respected, and heard. In political terms, that vision is only realized by an inclusive democracy, one in which every individual has equal voice and representation in their governance.

The values of the pro-democracy faith movement

The pro-democracy faith movement is broader than faith communities that can be categorized as religious progressives, but the authors' research found that those who mobilized for democracy in the context of the 2020 presidential election are largely politically progressive or moderate. This tracks with the political identities of people engaged in pro-democracy efforts overall. A January 2021 study indicated that while overwhelming majorities of registered Democrats (98 percent) and independents (73 percent) recognize the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election results, “nearly two in three (66 percent) Republicans say Biden’s election win was not legitimate.”¹⁸

Religious progressives are understudied, but moral psychology research indicates that they constitute a unique group. The Moral Foundations Theory developed by Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph¹⁹ identifies five foundations that constitute Americans' collective understanding of morality: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity. In a survey of more than 20,000 Americans, Haidt, Joseph, and Jesse Graham identified two highly distinct moral profiles among survey respondents: a) secular, progressive Americans who tended to prioritize care and fairness; and b) religious, conservative Americans who prioritized loyalty, authority, and purity. But the researchers also identified a cluster of Americans with a “moral profile” who did not fit either mold: people who prioritize all of the five foundations at high levels. People in this cluster self-identified as liberal or moderate, and they were also the most likely of any group studied to attend religious services.²⁰ This suggests that their religious and left-leaning political ideals are in alignment and that they prioritize values in common with both the secular left and the religious right. The results of this study suggest that the values of this group of religious Americans require further exploration.

In this report, the authors sought to better understand the values that inform faith-rooted work in support of a more inclusive democracy through a series of roundtable and one-on-one interviews with more than two dozen religious leaders and faith community and movement activists. The leaders selected represent diverse religions, races and ethnicities, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and geographic regions; some were activists, some were congregational leaders, and some were scholars. The inten-

tional diversity of this group was an effort to include the broad spectrum of motivations underlying faith-rooted pro-democracy work. Each of the leaders was asked a series of open-ended questions to reflect on the current moment in American history and what democracy means to them. Interviews were designed and coordinated by Auburn Seminary and the Center for American Progress and conducted by CAP's Sam Fulwood III. Recordings and notes are on file at CAP.²¹

The perspectives, language used to express ideas, and particular concerns of the faith leaders interviewed were as diverse as the faith leaders themselves. But considering the interviews collectively, the authors identified five values-based themes underlying their collective insights.

1. Building an inclusive, democratic movement for a more inclusive democracy

There looms an existential challenge to categorizing as one body those faith communities at the forefront of building a more inclusive American democracy. American religious communities are so diverse and express their public values in so many different ways that it would be nearly impossible to discern a singular motivation for faith movements working to build a more inclusive democracy. To some this appears to be their weakness, but that is an inaccurate view.

The pro-democracy faith movement's strength stems from the diversity within its ranks. There exists wisdom that offers insights for the nation as a whole. Unlike the religious right—which is overwhelmingly white, patriarchal, and feeds from a narrow stream of conservative Christian ideology—faith movements striving to build a more inclusive democracy are in fact a reflection of the democracy they envision. They consist of a broad and expansive blend of diverse perspectives that embrace differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and faith traditions, and they are united by the notion that each person, and the fullness of each of their experiences, deserves a voice and a vote.

It is out of their unique—but shared—experiences in working, learning, and organizing together that these faith movements are able to move democratic values from theory into practice. As a result, they truly understand what it means to engage with all people and for all people, what it means to cherish every individual, and what it means to uphold the rights of every individual. In other words, they practice what they preach, and that practice further enriches their preaching.

As Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, explained:

The whole reason we do all this work in an interfaith setting is to hold each other accountable. It's not about imposing one religious tradition on the polity, it's rather to refract all of our faith traditions through a lens of shared values and shared concerns ... that bring us together to say, "OK, what do we demand of America because of our faith traditions?"

By striving for democracy in a way that is democratic in and of itself, one ensures that one's values and objectives are constantly held in check.

Like democracy itself, knitting together various views and vantages is hard work. Some faith communities employ different language, describing the work as acts of “revolutionary love,”²² of “repairing the world,”²³ or of upholding human dignity. Still other faith communities are concerned with a ministry of compassionate care alongside their quest for personal and inward enlightenment. Yet the central values of each of these is the same.

Being able to get it right within a multifaith movement in support of democracy strengthens the ability to do that for America as a whole. Some of the faith leaders interviewed—namely, Muslim and Sikh leaders—spoke to an experience of struggle for inclusion even within these movements striving for a more inclusive democracy.

Muslim activist Hazel Gómez noted the challenges inherent in engaging in community organizing and power-building among Muslim communities, when Muslims are demonized in the public square as being dangerous. As much as being in coalition is a challenge and requires educating coalition partners, those challenges are only a reflection of the far more daunting challenges of addressing systemic racism and Islamophobia in American democracy. Striving to build a pro-democracy coalition that is inclusive, multiracial, and multifaith has been in and of itself a democratic exercise. Faith groups that organized and advocated for a more inclusive democracy and fair election in 2020 have been challenged and stretched to expand their own sense of unity under the tent of the pro-democracy movement.

2. Centering the experiences of Black Americans

As challenging as it may be to achieve, the recognition that equity is critical to democracy necessitates achieving equity within faith movements and rooting out notions of

the supremacy of any one group over another. As such, faith movements working in support of an inclusive democracy engage in a constant reflexive practice to strive to resist oppression wherever possible. Yet as several faith leaders noted, it is challenging for those who sit comfortably within an experience of supremacy to offer insights on how to achieve equity. That is why dismantling systems of oppression is absolutely paramount in the work of faith movements in support of democracy. The movement itself must not just represent the diversity of the American democracy; in order to shape American democracy, it must also center this diversity as a key facet of its identity and allow diverse perspectives to shape the direction of the movement.

Black Americans, who have long struggled for any semblance of equity in America's democratic society, can offer particular insights into the pro-democracy faith movement. As the Rev. Traci Blackmon of the United Church of Christ explained:

The framing of democracy for this nation was not conceived in anything other than whiteness. No matter what we've made out of it, the framing, the intention of it was not conceived even with the notion of equitable humanity outside of whiteness. I certainly see quite a bit ... the words "America" and "white supremacy" and "democracy" all being used as if those words are interchangeably resonant for all.

The result, according to the Rev. Otis Moss III is that, "When we sing democracy and speak of it, we're talking two different things and we're unable to have a real conversation because white supremacy infects democracy, and those who sit comfortably in it are unable to hear the key changes that Black people make." Moreover, he added, "Black conceptions of democracy are radically different from those that have participated and are privileged in the democracy."

What these quotes highlight is that for some in the pro-democracy faith movement, particularly some white Americans, the end goal is the preservation of American democracy as the founding fathers intended. For others, including many Black Americans, the end goal is altogether different because American democracy was conceived when slavery abounded and Blacks were regarded as chattel. By centering the experiences of those whose voices are underrepresented in U.S. democracy, especially Black Americans, American democracy has an opportunity to fulfill its potential to be far more inclusive and democratic than the founding fathers could ever have imagined.

As the Rev. Blackmon put it:

Black people have always had to make a way out of whatever we were given, and that God-given resistance and magnetic pull towards liberation means that we made something out of this too. . . . In America, we are still often seen as specimens and it is because of the brilliance and ingenuity of our people that we have carved a place and we have redefined what was not intended for us.

Simran Jeet Singh, a senior fellow with the Sikh Coalition and visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary, said that he sees interest among others in the pro-democracy faith movement in being more inclusive: “I’m heartened. . . . We have seen increasing conversations around inclusion and making the tent bigger. And I think part of that’s strategic and part of that’s ethical. My sense is that it’s more ethical. People are coming out with the conviction that we cannot continue to live within a supremacist society, and we have to create equity.”

This tension within the pro-democracy faith movement may appear to indicate that the movement lacks a centralized call to action. In fact, however, this call for inclusive representation from the movement is a meta-practice of the call for inclusive representation in American government. In this nation, political commitment to a strong and inclusive democracy arises from the collective recognition that the United States’ diversity is a strength and otherness is merely the first step toward new relations of belonging.

3. Grounding democracy in a shared sense of community

Central to each of these articulations of democracy is an emphasis on collective care over individual achievement, a sense of humility that foregrounds the needs of the stranger and community growth over singular prosperity. “Faith is all about community,” said Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice. She felt that the “linchpin struggle” of American society is a drive to obtain wealth, leading to individualism and, ultimately, a “lack of seeing our shared responsibility,” which in turn breeds a vicious cycle of individualism that plays out in public policy and deepens wealth inequality. For her, faith leaders must rally their people around the “deeper story of people journeying together” because rampant individualism “hollows out democracy.”

Public theologian the Rev. Brian McLaren had a similar diagnosis of the challenge to American democracy, saying that, “There are theological roots of individualism” in our

society. According to McLaren, while one would expect Christians to be focused on community, “there is a turn that the Christian religion took . . . when it became really obsessed with individual salvation.” This obsession, he said, “with ‘my own individual salvation,’ in a way, makes ‘me break faith with my community.’ This seems to me an undemocratic impulse.”

The Rev. Marlin Lavanhar of All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, similarly observed competing impulses in American society, which he described as two opposing ideas about freedom in the American psyche. He felt there was an individualistic, “don’t tread on me” type of freedom but also a collective freedom where people strive to ensure that everyone’s “basic needs are met.” The latter allows individuals the “freedom to live out their own dreams.”

As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”²⁴

“Democracy is a religious value,” said the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. “It’s rooted in the inherent dignity and worth of all people. And . . . for me, it is political.” She went on to say that “justice work that’s actually transformative” cannot be accomplished if it is not “rooted in a deep spiritual foundation, of love, of compassion for all people, of dignity and the commitment to what’s possible in humanity.”

Many of the religious leaders interviewed for this report described their own sense of a moral imperative to cultivate core democratic ideals in their communities. The Rev. Moss felt that people are “wrestling with a spiritual language of restorative justice.” He said that faith communities should be “artistic” in their imagining of a more inclusive democracy. Moss said an example of this approach is “creating worlds that do not exist but operate as if they do.”

4. Being political but nonpartisan

By near-unanimous agreement, the faith leaders interviewed for this project said that despite their varied traditions and practices, they were united in their values. They expressed that having a set of unifying shared values was necessary to effectively engage public actions in support of democracy. Put simply, these public actions are about politics, not partisanship.

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, senior rabbi at Central Synagogue in New York, emphasized this distinction between political and partisan. She described that the work of maintaining people’s safety, “justice, fairness, basic freedoms for people, human beings—these are basic needs that have to get played out in the political realm, because that’s where these laws are made.” Politics is a necessity, she explained, quoting a Talmudic phrase:

“If you don’t have bread, or flour, you don’t have Torah,” meaning, you can’t actually be worried on this high spiritual plane when you have people whose basic needs are not being met. And that’s going to get played out in the political sphere. But partisanship is different, where you basically say ... you’re not willing to call out when [your side is] actually not acting in good faith.

Ustadh Ubaydullah Evans, scholar-in-residence of the American Learning Institute for Muslims, shared similar concerns about engaging one’s religious community through a partisan approach. He explained that, on the one hand, “The progressive winds that are now blowing in our country are very much consonant and consistent with our faith in terms of our endeavor to make new ways of seeing the world, to make the reimagining of possibilities, particularly for oppressed and marginalized communities, possible.” On the other hand, he explained, progressivism may be a defining characteristic for one’s political orientation that does not apply to one’s religious orientation: “We do practice a faith that places a strong value on historical precedent, on tradition, so there’s sometimes tensions and conflicts that arise as we attempt to proceed.”

Weighing in on the subject, Rabbi Pesner observed, “I believe we get stuck into a false dichotomy when it becomes about the religious left and the religious right. We are not the religious left. We are religions in America fighting for the values of our traditions and our country.” He added, quoting the Rev. Michael-Ray Mathews of Faith in Action, “‘We are not chaplains to the regime, we are prophets to the resistance.’ ... We don’t align ourselves with a political party ... it’s about these enduring religious values that call us to love, that call us to build a beloved community, and we won’t be branded as ‘the left.’”

If one’s approach to politics becomes rooted in divisiveness, argued the Rev. Ken Fong, a retired evangelical pastor and the host of a podcast called “Asian America,” then it will ultimately fail because it comes from a place of “weakness in love.” He said that faith-rooted pro-democracy work has to be defined by values such as “love of neighbor,” not by partisanship. He felt that the religious right’s full embrace of the right wing of the political spectrum was evident to his daughter’s generation, which could only find the value of love of neighbor “in the justice work of progressives.” He urged those

engaged in that justice work to remember that central value, cautioning, “if we start then being hateful and bitter in the name of” attempting to pursue love of neighbor, “the next generation is going to sniff it out again.”

The Rev. Billy Michael Honor, then-director of faith organizing for The New Georgia Project, felt that the solution to advancing a political agenda without divisiveness could be found in broad tent messaging and framing, which should not be designed as a communications strategy but instead as a community building strategy. According to Honor, it’s a necessary challenge:

We are oftentimes trying to make sure that we are tending to the beloved community, which is a broad community of folks. That does require for us to be a lot more conscious of the things we say and the way in which we are building community, rather than just coming up with the things that will be red meat, that will draw political sides.

Embracing nonpartisanship means actively creating space for others. The inclusion of others who are seen as different is so central a value that many people of faith are reluctant to project their own faith values into political discourse, lest they crowd out the voices of others from diverse religious and nonreligious backgrounds. The result of this consistent stepping up and stepping back—this notion that if each voice should indeed be heard and given equal space, then one must routinely quiet oneself, no matter how strong the desire to loudly proclaim one’s own righteous beliefs, so that others may also be heard—is itself an exercise in an inclusive democracy.

This tendency leads to a sense that some in the pro-democratic faith movement either retreat from public professions of faith or have done so in a manner that fails to connect the movement’s messaging with its mission. “We don’t have enough prophetic preachers in the public square,” said the Rev. Erica Williams of the Poor People’s Campaign, calling on all people of faith to take action. “There is a need for folks to get out of their homes, if they can, and get serious about this work of justice.”

The diversity within America’s faith communities is a reflection of the nation’s democratic traditions, where the prime ideal of the United States is a country where our many strands of humanity bond together to form a coherent and stronger whole. Rather than a fatal flaw, it is the diversity, the tirelessness, and the sense of community that makes the pro-democratic faith movement so important and vibrant. It is the model of what democracy should be.

However, as Sister Simone Campbell notes, unanimity is hard to come by—even among faith groups with shared ideals—if faith groups don’t see themselves as having a shared community with shared responsibility. If “we don’t all know the solidarity of being one” whole American community, she explained, those “communities who get left out, who get hurt,” will continue to be marginalized.

This is what it means to hold democracy as a core value. The pro-democratic faith movement can by definition never be static but must constantly strive to be better and make the world more inclusive. It must aim to improve and not return to a falsely idealized past. However individually expressed, the many people of faith in this movement share a deep concern for the world and for one another.

5. Meeting the urgency of the moment

The urgency of now—meeting the challenges of the current moment—is a call across faiths. The deeper that people of faith journey into their core beliefs, the more they find the urgency to speak up and take action. The conversations with pro-democracy faith leaders shared in this report occurred during a roiling set of national and international calamities. Shut in by the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans reflected inwardly, contemplating the fragility of life and the vagaries of mortality. Their view of the outside world, constrained by socially distanced online meetings and what transpired on television, offered a troubling panorama that caused consternation over the effects of white supremacy, economic inequality, police brutality, and political stalemate. Americans became sensitized to the extent that the nation’s democracy is threatened.

“We cannot continue to watch what is happening in the country and hide behind religion, as if it doesn’t mean anything,” the Rev. Traci Blackmon said. To be sure, the dangers to democracy are real. The events of January 6 were a clear indication that one cannot expect democracy to endure without hard work. It was also a clear indication that religion will be used to cloak acts of violence.²⁵ Therefore, it is crucial that people of faith play an even larger role in strengthening U.S. democracy.

Declared Rabbi Jonah Pesner: “We really do believe that if the faith community doesn’t organize and amplify its voice in the public square, somebody else will.”

The Rev. Fong called on faith leaders “to create a theological crisis that [is] greater than getting kicked out of your tribe” in order to reconcile the political challenges that Americans face. Fong said if people of faith truly believe that loving one’s neighbor is “a

way of expressing how much we love God” and then look at American democracy, one has to ask: “How are we doing with that?”

The Rev. Katharine Rhodes Henderson, president of Auburn Seminary, put it another way:

What I'm feeling is both the pain of the moment and the lament of the moment, but also the opportunity of the moment and the desire and hope that we don't go back to whatever people thought was a normal—that we move forward. I'm very much concerned about . . . the voice and visibility of moral leadership in an immoral time, and how we stimulate, support, and advance that, because I think there's such a deep spiritual hunger right now.

The Rev. angel Kyodo williams, a Sensei, or teacher in Japanese Zen tradition, also challenged Americans to take the opportunity of this moment to embark in a transformative process for the better. “Body memory is powerful,” she explained. “The impulse to go back to ‘the way things were’ is very, very strong.” She noted that the Black Lives Matter movement and the existential crisis of American democracy has opened a “window of awareness, of ‘joltedness,’” that we need to keep “open long enough for us to funnel in whatever changes have to be made” to build a real democracy moving forward.

As the Rev. Erica Williams of the Poor People’s Campaign said, “What we’re trying to get at is ‘How do we get to the heart of the system?’ How do we break down what is actually happening here in America?” According to Williams, changing the system “is an act of faith. Our movement is a national call for moral revival. We are trying to change the hearts and minds of this nation. . . . Every time someone says the system is broken, I say, it’s not broken, it’s doing exactly what it was created to do.” She said that the Poor People’s Campaign is trying to “organize this country in a way” that makes it possible “to build this world that we have never seen.”

“To be an organizer,” Hazel Gómez said, “you need to have an imagination, and as people of faith, our scripture not only teaches us lessons and stories, but it allows us to see.” She said each person of faith must ask: “How can I bring that scripture and that story to life, now, where I am?”

The work of faith-based organizing will continue to play a vital role in this effort of forging a more inclusive democracy. For many religious Americans, the role that faith plays in inspiring them to imagine and believe in a better future is key to a more democratic future.

“I think about the distinction between hope and optimism,” said Ustadh Ubaydullah Evans. “I don’t have any optimism. A serious read of our history, and a serious assessment of our current reality, does not lend itself to optimism. But I am a faithful, hopeful person. We know that white supremacy is a disease that has infected the entire American body politic. Whether or not we as a society can marshal the collective spiritual resources necessary to overcome, to perhaps change, the momentum of this social malady, is yet to be seen. I don’t know about that, but I’m prayerful.”

Conclusion

Now, perhaps unlike any recent moment in U.S. history, faith communities must step up to play a more vital and visible role in advancing a competitive narrative to the Christian nationalism that was on full display during the Capitol insurrection. This counternarrative must be rooted in the ideals of shared values of pro-democracy faith communities. America's democratic future demands that faith communities show up in public spaces as viable and outspoken advocates of democratic norms, offering a just, moral, and inclusive narrative to support the nation's founding principles. The principles outlined in this report highlight the diversity of values that underpin the faith-based pro-democracy movement and underscore the truths and beliefs that unite people of different faith traditions as they embrace this difficult but necessary work.

Faith communities helped protect and secure democracy from the attempts of the former president and violent insurrectionists to overthrow the will of the people. This stress test for democracy did not come as a surprise to the faith leaders who have been engaged in pro-democracy efforts for many years. They know democracy is not a given. It is something secured and advanced and strengthened by every generation. If this was not obvious before, the past year brought it into focus for all Americans. Faith communities will continue to be active defenders of America's democracy in the years to come. No matter what comes next, they will keep the faith and call the nation to form a more perfect union.

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Appendix

The religious community leaders, organizers, and scholars interviewed for this project include:

The Rev. Jennifer Bailey, founder and executive director, Faith Matters Network

April Baskin, racial justice adviser, Jewish Social Justice Roundtable

The Rev. Traci Blackmon, associate general minister of justice and local church ministries, The United Church of Christ

Joanna Brooks, Ph.D., associate vice president of faculty advancement and professor of English and comparative literature, San Diego State University

Rabbi Sharon Brous, founder and senior rabbi, IKAR, Los Angeles, California

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, senior rabbi, Central Synagogue, New York, New York

Sister Simone Campbell, SSS, executive director, NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice

Ustadh Ubaydullah Evans, scholar-in-residence, American Learning Institute for Muslims

Bishop Yvette Flunder, D.Min., presiding bishop, The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries

The Rev. Ken Fong, D.Min., host and co-producer, “Asian America: The Ken Fong Podcast”

The Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, D.Min., president, Unitarian Universalist Association

Hazel Gómez, trainer and curriculum developer, Muslim Power Building Project, Faith in Action

The Rev. Billy Michael Honor, religion and racial justice fellow, The Aspen Institute's Inclusive America Project

The Rev. Katharine Rhodes Henderson, Ph.D., president, Auburn Seminary

Rabbi Jason Kimelman-Block, Washington director, Bend the Arc Jewish Action

Carol Lautier, Ph.D., associate director, Inclusive Democracy Project, Demos

The Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Ph.D., senior minister, All Souls Unitarian Church, Tulsa, Oklahoma

The Rev. Jacqui Lewis, Ph.D., senior minister, Middle Collegiate Church, New York, New York

The Rev. Brian McLaren, author, speaker, activist, and public theologian

The Rev. Alex Patchin McNeill, executive director, More Light Presbyterians

The Rev. Otis Moss III, D.Min., senior pastor, Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, Illinois

The Rev. Alba Onofrio, co-executive director, chief financial officer, and spiritual strategist, Soulforce

Eboo Patel, Ph.D., founder and president, Interfaith Youth Core

Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, director, Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

The Rev. Lawrence Richardson, lead minister, Linden Hills United Church of Christ, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Simran Jeet Singh, Ph.D. senior fellow, Sikh Coalition; visiting professor, Union Theological Seminary

The Rev. angel Kyodo williams Sensei, founder and senior fellow, Transformative Change

The Rev. Erica Williams, national social justice organizer, Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

Organizations are listed for identification purposes only. These religious leaders' participation does not in any way signify endorsement of the ideas in this publication.

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