

How Faith-Based Leaders Contribute to Depolarization and Civil Civic Discourse

Fall 2023 Study Results



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was funded by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) and conducted in cooperation with The Carter Center. It explores the work of faith-based groups and leaders (FBG&Ls) in reducing political polarization and promoting civil civic discourse in the United States. The study included interviews with 17 faith-based leaders (FBLs) and nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives actively engaged in depolarization and democracy strengthening. All interviewees were involved in local groups and included staff from The Carter Center as well as FBLs in Florida, Georgia, Arizona, and Northern Ireland. All interviewees were involved in local, cross-partisan, and grassroots groups that promote peaceful political engagement around elections. The groups were initiated by The Carter Center.

Interviewee activities generally fall into the following categories: dialogue and relationship building; education and awareness building; resource provision and support; and institutional and policy engagement. Although initiatives vary, they share common features including a rootedness in community, a commitment to airing diverse opinions¹, a focus on learning and sharing what is learned, and a preference for in-person gatherings.

Through their efforts, FBG&Ls foster dialogue, promote understanding, and address some of the most challenging issues society faces today. While it is too early to fully gauge the impact of FBG&Ls' depolarization work, early results are promising. For example, a National Day of Prayer was held on Nov. 5, 2023. Participants came together to pray for peaceful elections, and turnout was significant. FBG&Ls have also lent support to "[Candidate Principles](#)," including agreements to accept election results and other democratic norms. FBLs have contributed to the growing awareness of polarization-related dangers and have, in many instances, helped shift dialogues in their communities.

The findings emphasize that FBG&Ls occupy a unique and significant position for promoting depolarization. Their mission, connections, and ability to raise issues within their communities are unparalleled. At the same time, the study underscores the need for support — particularly for clergy — in the form of resources and skills-building. The study also notes internal divisions within some faith groups and suggests a need to focus on conflict resolution activities both *within* and *across* faith communities.

Study findings offer useful guidance about how FBLs can productively engage in challenging conversations about polarization. Recommended techniques include storytelling, a focus on common values, leveraging faith traditions, and disentangling politics from partisanship. Interviewees emphasized the importance of developing sensitivities around word choice and the need to create opportunities for one-on-one interactions. Building relationships and trust — critical components for depolarization efforts — require time, commitment, and open and honest dialogue.

Leadership buy-in and support were crucial for growing FBG&L engagement in depolarization work. Such support increases visibility and legitimizes the work, making it easier for clergy — and congregants — to engage. Study findings also reflect the need for more diverse and inclusive FBG&L participation. Interviewees noted the importance of reaching underrepresented groups and encouraged FBG&Ls to

¹ Even when led by a single faith or denomination, depolarization initiatives usually included a diversity of viewpoints.

develop greater self-awareness of word choices that may make some potential participants feel unwelcomed.

The study offers actionable insights for philanthropic leaders, NGOs, and FBG&Ls. Ideas for funders include financing publicity, investing in security measures to protect leaders who may come under attack because of the positions they embrace, sabbaticals, thorough skills-building trips, and new, on-the-ground initiatives that promote in-person dialogue. For NGOs, recommendations include facilitating connections within and across faith communities, providing resources and trainings, and sharing success stories. Suggestions for faith-based leaders underscore the urgency of the moment, the importance of self-care, and the power of personal experiences, and offer valuable insights into the “how” of connecting individuals and groups with opposing political views. If enacted, these recommendations promise to strengthen the role of faith-based groups and leaders in fostering unity and understanding across the political landscape.

ACRONYMS

ADRN	Arizona Democracy Resilience Network
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DRN	Democracy Resilience Network
FBG	Faith-Based Group
FBL	Faith-Based Leader
FBG&Ls	Faith-Based Groups and Leaders
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
PACE	Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement

BACKGROUND

The purpose of this project was twofold. Through interviews, we sought to deepen our understanding of how faith-based leaders (FBLs)² respond to the challenge of increasing polarization. We also attempted to identify important new insights to guide future programming and policy development in the faith-based and pro-democracy sectors.

During October 2023, the study team interviewed 13 FBLs and nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives working to reduce bipolarization and strengthen civic discourse. The research team used semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. These interviews were supplemented with two focus groups, one with two left-of-center faith-based leaders and one with two right-of-center faith-based leaders. There were a total of 17 study participants. Additionally, two brief case studies of successful interfaith dialogue initiatives were developed. All interview protocols are presented in [Appendix E](#).

This study was funded by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE) and carried out in cooperation with The Carter Center.

INTERVIEWEES AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Interviewees represented a diverse set of faith-based leaders, including men and women; various racial and ethnic groups (White, Black, Latinx); multiple geographic locations (Atlanta, Phoenix, St. Petersburg, Tucson, and Tallahassee); and a mix of religious orientations (Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Evangelical, Jewish, Lutheran, and Methodist). Leadership roles were also varied and included lay leader, parish priest, lead pastor, senior warden, board chair, regional director of a faith-based group, FBG CEO, FBG advisor, Bible study leader, adjunct professor, and political consultant. Political leanings included left-of-center, center, and right-of-center. All interviewees were identified by The Carter Center through their involvement with local Democracy Resilience Networks, an initiative supported by the Center. For a full list of interviewees and their titles, see [Appendix A](#).

Interviewees are all involved in initiatives that address polarization and uncivil civic engagement at many levels. Some operate from within a single congregation; others are engaged in a network of congregations (both intrafaith and interfaith). Still others work for or with national sectarian organizations. Several interviewees were involved in organizing and promoting a National Day of Prayer on Nov. 5, 2023, an event held exactly one year prior to the 2024 U.S. presidential election. See [Appendix D](#) for additional details about this event.

In general, interviewee activities can be classified as follows:

Dialogue and relationship building. Illustrative activities under this heading include:

- Organizing informal gatherings of community members to talk about bipolarization.
- Nurturing relationships between Black and Anglo pastors.
- Holding retreats that bring together people from different Christian communities.
- Introducing evangelical pastors to imams and rabbis.
- Hosting FBLs in Belfast to learn from the Irish peace process.

² "Faith-based leaders" include both ordained clergy and non-pulpit leaders who are influential within their respective faith communities.

- Building networks of pastors interested in fighting extremism in their churches and communities.
- Recruiting new FBGs and leaders to join a local DRN.

Education and raising awareness. Some of these activities focus on FBL skills development, while others are lay-oriented. Several address both populations. Examples of education and awareness activities include:

- Teaching congregants (and pastors) about civics and how faith influences postures on politics and government.
- Giving presentations on issues related to social and racial justice in host churches.
- Offering courses that address misinformation and extremism.
- Visiting Evangelical college campuses to raise awareness and understanding of the dangers of polarization.
- Enhancing skills of pastors and church leaders who are working to bridge divides.
- Training individuals to speak about polarization from their faith perspective in the “public square.”
- Preaching in churches (either as local or visiting clergy).
- Working within the Catholic community to reduce vitriol and build “a better kind of politics.”

Resource provision and support. Examples of activities in this category include:

- Providing resources to FBG&Ls (e.g., dialogue materials, prayers, videos, and action ideas).
- Creating content that influencers can use (e.g., tweets) to mitigate violence in real time.

Institutionally oriented policy engagement.

- Creating institutional diversity within the Republican National Committee.
- Participating in roundtables with civic leaders.
- Advocating for policy change related to democratic values on Capitol Hill (e.g., voter access).
- Addressing polarization in educational spaces (e.g., affirming student pronouns).

It is too soon to say how effective their efforts have been in bridging divides and strengthening civic discourse. At this stage, most outcomes are more process- than product-related (e.g., the number of connections made, partnerships built), and some are anecdotal. Nevertheless, early results are promising:

- Churches in Arizona and Georgia participated in a National Prayer Day on Nov. 5, 2023.
- Since 2020, the Carter Center’s DRN movement has grown to over 1,000 network members. In Arizona, 70 of the 300 DRN members are faith leaders.
- A “Faith Forward Committee” has been established in Georgia. It is composed of several different entities and religious groups that have agreed there is an “issue” and have come together to address it. They have formulated an outline and an action plan.
- In Georgia, more clergy are talking about polarization in their congregations.
- The Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta has launched a program designed to help people with different viewpoints hold difficult conversations respectfully. Church officials reported seeing

more congregants lead with a Catholic agenda, as opposed to a Republican or Democratic agenda.

- Faith-based leaders in Arizona report they are having more robust conversations across the political divide because of their ability to use the interfaith network that has been created to talk with one another. Additionally, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese has become very active in the DRN's work, writing about it in her newsletters and encouraging all the churches in her diocese to pay attention to what the network is doing.
- Clergy and laypersons who attended the American Values Coalition's Pastor Conference in Amarillo, Texas, said they felt more prepared to deal with misinformation and extremism.
- Congregants at a nondenominational Bible church in North Phoenix are reshaping their disagreements and approaching each other with curiosity instead of suspicion.
- In Georgia, DRN leaders, including an FBL contingent, were instrumental in mitigating violence at a Second Amendment rights protest outside a voting precinct.

"If our democracy is in danger, then so is everything else that goes with it, including freedom of religion."

— **Don Henninger**, Episcopal community leader and state co-lead, Arizona Democracy Resilience Network

STUDY FINDINGS

1. **Faith-based groups and leaders (FBG&Ls) are uniquely positioned to engage in depolarization work, but many are hesitant to do so.** FBG&Ls have the mission, the right connections, and an outreach orientation. They understand the issue and are deeply concerned about bipolarization. For many, it is a daily struggle. They see the division and the unrest in their communities. Some report a sense of helplessness. There is also fear and anxiety on the part of pastors. Doing this work comes with a lot of personal risk. Interviewees speak of lost relationships, of hate mail and Twitter attacks, of being forced to leave their congregations, and of congregants refusing to shake hands with some family members. Burnout is also common among clergy, and they reportedly have high rates of depression, drug and alcohol use, and suicide.

"Even if it means folks in your congregation are going to be upset or frustrated or lobby for your removal, you're not called by them. You're called by God. You have a divine responsibility and calling to do this work." — **Rev. Brian Tillman**, United Methodist clergy

- **Significance:** FBG&Ls are natural advocates for reducing polarization because they witness it firsthand in their respective communities and recognize the importance of democracy for religious freedom. Clergy members view themselves as having a "divine responsibility" to do depolarization work. As trusted messengers, they are well positioned to reframe issues in ways that are acceptable to their faith community.
- **Implications:** There is a need for programs to equip FBG&Ls with the necessary skills, support, and resources to address polarization effectively. As Tom Crick of The Carter Center notes, "showing them there IS a path forward, that they CAN build bridges between their polarized parishioners, is powerful." Institutional buy-in from leadership would go far to soothe fears and anxiety on the clergy's part, leading to more active and sustained engagement (see finding No. 3 below).

“People of goodwill—even though they may not always agree politically –need to be leading this.” — Rev. Gary Mason, Methodist pastor from Belfast, Northern Ireland

2. **Faith communities themselves are often divided; focusing on these chasms first is a good practice.**

Religions are not monolithic, and even intrafaith groups do not always fully agree on opinions and values. Peg Harmon noted theological divides within her own Catholic church, saying, “It can be challenging even within a faith community to bring people together around the traditions and tenets of their faith.” Kurt Kelley, co-lead of the Florida Sunshine Network, similarly pointed out that “even within churches, people are politically divided.” And, where political agendas align, social agendas often do not. In fact, most of the divides clergy are currently working to bridge are around social issues (e.g., LGBTQ rights, racial equality, immigration, housing, homelessness, reproductive issues, health care).

- **Significance:** Despite the assumption that faith communities are politically and philosophically aligned, deep divisions exist within individual denominations and congregations. The “depolarization muscle” can be built up in intrafaith settings. The ability to bridge divides *within* a faith tradition is linked to bridging divides in the political sphere.
- **Implications:** FBG&Ls doing this work need to expect and be comfortable with conflict. Depolarization is not about getting everyone to agree. Instead, it’s about getting everyone to get along. Initiatives should prepare FBG&Ls to facilitate internal dialogue and conflict resolution within their own faith communities.

“Expect conflict. Expect to disagree.... We've tried to normalize disagreement and, instead of elevating unity around unity of conviction, we've elevated unity around a unity of posture towards each other. So, while your convictions may be different than mine, the reason that we're together — and one of the binding factors for us — is we're going to approach each other with curiosity instead of suspicion, love instead of hate. We're going to approach each other as friends instead of enemies.” — Caleb Campbell, Evangelical pastor

3. **These are difficult conversations to have with ways TO connect as well as ways NOT to connect.**

“Everybody who can't talk to their grandfather at the dinner table knows that we are polarized.” Interviewees are experts at having these uncomfortable conversations and have learned how to approach them. Their insights into effective communication strategies are outlined below.

- **Significance:** Specific language choices can either unite or divide people. Establishing a moral framework can provide legitimacy and a familiar entry point for faith leaders to address polarization. Storytelling is also highly effective. Stories can help soften people, appealing to their humanity and making them more approachable.
- **Implications:** Initiatives should focus on neutralizing polarizing language and using terminology that emphasizes common values and goals. Training in effective communication and conflict resolution techniques could help people better navigate these conversations. Encouraging faith leaders to use their religious traditions and texts to guide conversations and actions can be a powerful tool as well.

“We're not trying to change people's minds. We're not talking about political or cultural issues. We're talking about the higher-level values of ‘Love thy neighbor,’ ‘We are all God's children,’ and ‘Blessed are

the peacemakers.’ That’s an easier thing for a larger group to get into — the moral framework.” — Tom Crick, The Carter Center

Ways to connect:

- Pivot from arguing about the “facts” to **telling stories** and encouraging **experiences**.³ When opposing sides cannot agree on the facts, dialogue can end before it has even begun. Sharing **personal anecdotes** (e.g., family stories of division) is also effective,⁴ especially if they’re funny. **Humor** is a great way to disarm and defuse tensions.
- Find **common ground**. This can be around basic core values (e.g., nonviolent elections), shared interests (e.g., hobbies), or shared aspirations (e.g., a safe neighborhood). Focusing on things parties CAN agree on brings them together and provides a bridge to more challenging conversations.
- Anchor messaging in **faith traditions** (e.g., the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, the New Testament parables, and the Torah).⁵ This legitimizes the conversation, making it easier for people of faith to engage. This practice also makes it clear to others that the clergy’s messaging is driven by their faith rather than their personal opinions.⁶ Interviewees stressed that while it is good to use authoritative voices (e.g., the pope and the archbishop of Canterbury), it is also important to have people who can paraphrase the words of these authorities using “local lingo.”
- Use the phrase **“Help me understand.”** This is an approach two interviewees use to challenge viewpoints on sensitive issues in a nonconfrontational way. It is similar to the **“humble subversion”** tactic another interviewee uses to lead people to rethink their political commitments based on what they actually value (e.g., safety, freedom).

³ A Catholic community leader uses “listening sessions” to allow the poor, the marginalized, and the vulnerable to tell their stories. For more on the power of personal experiences, see [recommendations for FBG&Ls](#).

⁴ Rev. Brian Tillman, for example, has a brother with very different political views, but they are family and love each other. He says this storyline really resonates with people.

⁵ The teaching most often referred to by the interviewees was “Love your neighbor as your friend.” Others include: “All ground is equal at the foot of the cross,” the Good Samaritan parable and Imago Dei (we’re all made in God’s image). Others point to Scripture that supports social and civic engagement around care for the poor, the widow, the immigrant, the orphan, and advocating for the rights of the prisoner.

⁶ For example, one interviewee preached at a college town church after the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol attack and her response was well-received in large part because she says she used language from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. She said almost nothing about the actual events or personalities involved; but leaned on tradition and called on everyone to respond.

Practicing “Humble Subversion”

When Caleb Campbell, an Evangelical pastor, meets someone who has a “harmful belief structure,” he approaches them strategically. He uses the “**shibboleth principle**” first to connect with them. Shibboleth, he explains, is a code word from the Old Testament that signifies you are on their “team” and affirm their values. For example, he might say something like “I love my country,” “I think patriotism is a really good thing,” or “I believe our government should have healthy security around our borders.” Then, he introduces a humbly different thought, something like, “The teachings of Jesus say we should care for our immigrant neighbors. I wonder how we hold those two things in tension. What do you think?” These questions help reshape their imagination so they can approach the political other “as a friend and not as an animal.”

- Draw a distinction between **politics and partisanship**. Clergy should give themselves permission to talk about democracy, politics, and government without being partisan.
- Bring people together **face to face**. Many interviewees stressed the importance of giving people, especially those who don’t usually interact, a chance to meet and talk in person. This helps people on opposite sides of an issue to **humanize each other**. Outreach to clergy should also be personal, i.e., peer to peer. Members of the clergy are buried in invitations. Many will only respond when there is a direct connection to the sender.
- Find ways to incorporate **hospitality** and food. This creates a community feeling where people can share visions and break bread together despite their differences.

“There’s something different about face-to-face and in-person interactions that are better at building bridges, building friendships, building understanding, than what we can do with our weekly newsletter.”
— **Napp Nazworth**, Evangelical community leader

Ways not to connect:

- Avoid polarizing language (e.g., you’re left; I’m right; you’re wrong). It can alienate people and escalate tensions. Be aware of trigger words. If you use them, be prepared for the fallout.⁷
- Keep personalities out of conversations. Don’t mention controversial figures or leaders who, inevitably, will derail and dominate the conversation.
- Try not to generalize about opposing parties or views and call out generalizations. Part of this is also knowing how to spot and deal with misinformation. Rather than make assumptions, ask people what they mean.
- Instead of ignoring critics or engaging with them online or in a public forum, try having one-on-one conversations with them. One-on-one conversations are almost always more effective.
- Never take a side. Even if the conversation is with someone with opposing beliefs, act as a neutral party.

⁷ Two interviewees mentioned that “social justice” is triggering for political conservatives. They also noted that “social justice” is a 100-year-old phrase that originates in the Christian tradition.

- Don't enter into difficult conversations unprepared. Know conflict-resolution techniques (e.g., active listening, getting comfortable with silence, and suspending judgment). Build self-awareness and a capacity to engage.
4. [Building relationships and trust is critical for progress on charged issues](#). Many interviewees stressed the importance of personal relationships. But how do you create relationships between people with different experiences or political beliefs? By creating connections around shared values and by finding commonalities.

“We are more similar than we are different. And so a lot of what we focus on is [finding] the similarities. It makes it a little easier to talk about where we differ if we've already agreed on a bunch of the places where we're similar.” — **Kat Doyle**, Catholic community leader

A few interviewees stressed that people across the divide are more alike than they think. The key is to find each other's **humanity**. This takes **compassion** and **empathy** to understand what is going on in other people's lives. It also takes **humility** and a willingness to be **vulnerable**. Building relationships takes a lot of **time**.⁸ It also takes **proximity**. The more opportunities — especially informal opportunities (e.g., over coffee) — that people have to engage with those with different views, the better.

“Show up with humility. We have to show up, as we say to little kids, with our listening ears on. We have to show up asking more questions than answers. That's where it starts. You have to be willing to listen and you have to then listen long enough to find some kernel of commonality that you can talk about before you get into the hard stuff. I think it's about authentic relationship-building. I think it's about listening skills.” — **Lynn Davis**, Jewish community leader.

- **Significance:** Building relationships and trust among diverse stakeholders is essential for overcoming political polarization. The clergy-congregation relationship is especially important. If it is strong, congregants will listen.
- **Implications:** Initiatives should prioritize activities that encourage face-to-face interactions and create spaces for informal personal connections. FBG&Ls must model civility, understanding, and a deep-seated, long-term commitment to working together for the common good.

“Intentionally create spaces to show our nakedness and our honesty and our core and who we are. We have to play golf together or play cards together or get a drink or have a meal.” — **Rev. J.C. Pritchett**, Baptist pastor

⁸ The “Pastor Partnership” in Tucson exemplifies long-term relationship-building. This group of Anglo and African American pastors from both sides of the aisle has been meeting once a month for lunch for 13 years, and they usually talk about politics and other hot topics (e.g., race). David Drumm says they have been able to hold difficult conversations (e.g., after George Floyd's murder, reactions to Black Lives Matter, and riots in Ferguson, Missouri) because of the relationships they have built over the years.

Modeling Pastoral Care & Activism

Rev. Brian Tillman spoke of being “amazed at the things” that he could say from the pulpit at a white, affluent church in the richest city in Georgia. Tillman, who is Black, has talked about race, sexuality, politics, suicide – all sensitive topics in his very conservative area. Tillman attributed this ability to his longevity (15 years) and the relationship he has with his congregation, the care he showed congregants in their vulnerable moments, and his openness to criticism. When congregants came to complain about his sermons on Monday mornings, he “always – ALWAYS – made time for those conversations.” Those smaller conversations in his office are where “the magic happened.” People didn’t necessarily change their minds, but they were willing to come back the next Sunday.

5. [Buy-In from church leadership is critical](#). Unfortunately, for many FBLs interested in doing depolarization work, there is little church support behind them. The personal cost of “going it alone” feels too high for some clergy. FBLs need authoritative voices in their respective religious communities (e.g., bishops) to encourage the difficult work of depolarization and provide the needed “cover” for initiating difficult conversations. Leadership is also critical in times of trouble when clergy must turn to higher-ups for support and advice.
 - **Significance:** Encouraging buy-in from top-level church leaders can help reduce fear and anxiety among clergy members while legitimizing their work.
 - **Implications:** National faith networks are hierarchical but accessible. FBG&Ls should try to attract the attention of and support from national or institutional leadership. Having even one high-ranking church leader as an ally can be enough to move the needle.⁹

“Support from leadership shows it’s not just a special interest and creates a united call from clergy.” —
Rev. Anne Ellsworth, Episcopal priest

6. [There is a need for greater diversity and more inclusive participation among faith-based groups doing depolarization work, along with enhanced self-awareness and blind spot recognition](#). This study is not exhaustive. It included a sampling of initiatives connected to The Carter Center in a limited number of states. That said, it is worth noting that the initiatives explored in this study were almost all Christian-led. Only one study participant (of 17) was Jewish and only three were people of color.¹⁰ Five interviewees were women. Other religions (e.g., Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism), while present in some initiatives (e.g., Arizona’s DRN), are clearly underrepresented. However, as one interviewee suggested, some faith groups may not be very interested in public engagement.¹¹ And while there was support among interviewed clergy in all three states for LGBTQ rights/issues, the extent to which LGBTQ people are represented in these initiatives could not be assessed.

⁹ The bishop of the Episcopal Diocese in Arizona, for example, has been critical to the successful organization of the Arizona Democracy Resilience Network (ADRN). She was the one to learn of the Carter Center’s initiative and reached out to the rector (at Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church in Phoenix) who initiated the call to action. She also has been supporting and promoting the ADRN’s work through her newsletters, encouraging all the churches in her diocese to pay attention to what they are doing. Both Catholic bishops in the state have also endorsed this work, which will help build more momentum for a statewide effort.

¹⁰ Two interviewees and one focus group participant were African American. One focus group participant was Hispanic/Latino and identified as white.

¹¹ One interviewee characterized Muslim and LDS communities in Tucson as more inwardly focused. A second noted that some religious leaders, particularly imams, were hesitant to do anything seen as “political.”

“You cannot exclude anyone for any given reason. ...You have to bring everyone to the table.” — **Jim Gaffey**, Catholic lay leader.

Although a good number of study participants were right-leaning, reaching the far right has been more challenging. There is interest in depolarization activities from clergy serving these communities, in particular among Evangelical leaders who struggle with how to message authentically without alienating their followers. To reach these groups, interviewees rely on one-on-one outreach by other people on the right, building “chains of relationships,” as Tom Crick calls them. Conservatives have the credibility and the tools to reach other conservatives. Additional strategies identified for reaching conservatives include convening small groups of Evangelical pastors and leaders to talk about depolarization and the tools they can use to combat it; organizing Evangelical-only subgroups within organizations or initiatives; and attending and recruiting at national Evangelical conferences (e.g., the American Values Coalition).

This study also identified a possible need for more self-awareness and blind spot recognition on the part of some of those doing this work from the left. Four interviewees cautioned their left-leaning peers to “approach this work with caution and a lot of listening and respect”; to “sort their rhetoric” so they don’t give the right more ammunition; to “make sure their actions reflect their nonpartisan values”; and “to make sure they’re not doing any harm.”

- **Significance:** Engaging a wider range of people, including those from different faiths, denominations, races, ethnicities, and political backgrounds, is needed to address bipolarization effectively and reach more people.
- **Implications:** Initiatives should work on reaching out to underrepresented groups and facilitating conversations across diverse perspectives. Creating a more welcoming environment and using language that connects rather than divides is vital, as is encouraging individuals to identify their own biases and preconceptions. This can lead to more empathetic and open conversations.

“The group that is pushing the depolarization work is still politically polarized. I would ask, are you really bipartisan or bipartisan in name only?” — **David Drum**, Evangelical pastor

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **For philanthropic leaders** interested in promoting depolarization or democracy strengthening programs in collaboration with the faith-based sector, interviewees recommended paying for publicity and security;¹² sabbaticals (to combat burnout) and skills-building trips to Belfast (where significant clergy engagement in depolarization work has occurred); making funding for work on depolarization more flexible for grantees; becoming involved in longer-term efforts (as opposed to one-off grants); and providing financial incentives for communities to start collaborating across divides. Interviewees also offered ideas for follow-up studies on faith-based leader contributions to depolarization.

Other suggestions that emerge from interviews and focus groups include:

¹² Some churches have opted not to host events in public spaces (e.g., a park or at the capitol) because they cannot make it safe for participants. Security concerns kept at least one pastor from asking the church she serves to host events.

- Focus on finding and funding what works. Two interviewees stressed the importance of identifying concrete examples of what’s working. And, as Caleb Campbell, an Evangelical Christian who wants to build bridges, notes, “Once you find these outliers, fund them. The only way to reach [Evangelicals] is through trusted messengers.”
- Amplify the fact that funders are looking for partners in this “faith-based, pro-democracy” space. Many FBG&Ls doing this work don’t know where to turn for financial support.
- Grantees know their communities and trust them to know what they need to do. Make funds as open-ended as possible because the work is going to look different in every community.
- Make sure to fund work at the ground-level. One interviewee suggested offering microgrants for initiatives that bring diverse community members together (e.g., interracial, interfaith, and intercultural) to tackle a single issue. Once they work together, they will find other issues to work on and resources to work with. They just need the financial support and financial incentive to start collaborating.

“Political polarization is so entrenched in the DNA of specifically Evangelical Americans that this thing will not be solved with a two-year national movement. This thing will only get fixed with 100,000 dinner table conversations over the next decade.... Conferences are wonderful. But this thing is about the table,” Caleb Campbell, Evangelical pastor.

2. [For NGOs](#) such as The Carter Center that implement democracy-strengthening programs with clergy participation, recommendations from interviewees underscore the need for support programs, resources, and skills-building initiatives that equip FBG&Ls to address polarization more effectively. Among the recommendations offered to NGOs were the following:

- *Serve as relationship brokers.* Organizations doing the same work need help finding each other. Well-known and respected NGOs have the power to bring authoritative voices and sources together and lend credibility to FBG&Ls’ efforts.
- *Make sure to “twin.”* Several interviewees suggested getting left- and right-leaning groups to roll out initiatives together. Bipartisanship in this space is key to wider acceptance. Build more alliances with key actors in the public space on both sides. Also look to partner with positive deviants (outliers who are unusually successful), especially the “rare birds” who are trusted Evangelicals.
- *Offer trainings.* Many FBG&L don’t know how to have these uncomfortable conversations. NGOs can help by training them in civil dialogue (specifically on how to draw a distinction between politics and partisanship), red and blue dialogue (especially word choice), and by providing toolkits with tips on how to listen to people. Other FBG&Ls need resources at the “street level,” playbooks that cater to specific faith traditions so clergy and laypersons have faith-based entry points. Incorporating “othering rhetoric” into trainings is another suggestion. One interviewee recommended making these resources available through an open source “resource hub” so others could use, adapt, and add to them.
- *Strengthen support systems* for leaders so they don’t feel isolated. One interviewee cites monthly Zoom calls as an effective vehicle for providing needed support.
- *Create accessible on-ramps* to foster clergy engagement. Clergy have busy schedules. Several interviewees mentioned time and human resource constraints. NGOs can support FBG&Ls by performing secretarial functions (e.g., organizing and drafting), serving as facilitators, generating action ideas, developing media/marketing strategies, and providing resources (e.g., dialogue materials, prayers, and videos). Recruiting more laypeople could also ensure the

burden doesn't fall entirely on a cleric. Moving involvement from faith leaders to faith followers was a recurring suggestion.

- *Add value.* FBG&Ls need to see how collaborating with an NGO will amplify their own impact.
- *Show sensitivity* to the needs of different faith groups (e.g., when scheduling meetings). Be open to and seek feedback to ensure broad coalitions of faith leaders.
- *Share success* stories so FBG&Ls can see what the work looks like in other communities/spaces and find inspiration and lessons learned. Publicizing progress helps keep people engaged.
- *Focus resources, time, and talent on what has been demonstrated to work* (e.g., evidence-based models of change and “preferred practices”) and where depolarization work is needed most (i.e., communities most susceptible to violence and underrepresented as well as frequently bypassed groups). As one interviewee noted, you must understand why some people are embracing their ideas and bad behaviors before you can find a better way forward. Be responsive to situations where polarization and violence are especially threatening. “Evil jumps in where goodness fears to tread.”
- *Make financial resources available to FBG&Ls who need them*, particularly for security purposes.¹³

“It's important for people who say that they're supportive of this work to understand the risk that people are taking. ... You have to create a space where they can afford to be brave. ... I look for partners who can afford to be good partners ... where a level of safety can be had.” — **Leo Smith**, political consultant.

3. For [faith-based leaders](#) in both right and left-of-center settings who wish to contribute to depolarization or democracy-strengthening efforts, interviewees offered many candid and compelling recommendations, ranging from “Get yourself a therapist” to “Adopt a classroom.” Here are some lessons they've learned:

- Recognize the “serious urgency of now.” The potential for violence is real. Don't underestimate the severity of the situation and what is at stake for our democracy.
- Don't go it alone. Make sure your leaders are behind you. Anchor yourself to a bigger network (e.g., Arizona Faith Network). Connections and support can come from there.

“I think it's helpful for pastors just to be in network with other pastors and to be in community with other pastors who are struggling with the same sort of issues.” — **Napp Nazworth**, Evangelical community leader

- Learn how to have uncomfortable conversations. For tips, see [Finding #3](#).
- Don't dismiss the importance of context. Know your parish/church/synagogue/temple/mosque and the people you serve.¹⁴ “Develop your soft landing spot for different audiences in different ways.”¹⁵

¹³ FBG&Ls are assumed to have sufficient resources available to them. In fact, many are under-resourced, especially where congregation membership has fallen.

¹⁴ A parish on campus, for example, may be more progressive than a church in the suburbs that skews white and wealthy.

¹⁵ One interviewee stressed the importance of using research to frame your approach. Research has shown, he said, that conservatives tend to think in a very concrete, sequential way. They want to see the practical basis of an idea. Liberals tend to be a bit more abstract, according to the interviewee.

- Teach and educate on what your faith tradition says, not on your personal opinions (set those aside). At the same time, don't allow yourself to be in an echo chamber. Challenge yourself to hear other viewpoints.
- Use stories and personal experiences. Don't just talk about things. Provide methods for people to see for themselves (e.g., historic sites where lynchings or race riots occurred, immigration court, or video tours of places of historical significance). Show them the faces and names, making them deal with the reality and their own uncomfortable feelings.

"It is really hard to take a political viewpoint when you know the person who is experiencing the issue and it's the opposite of what your party believes. But once you've heard the story and once you've gotten to know the person, it is really hard to then climb up on your partisan bandwagon and beat the drums."

— **Kat Doyle**, Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta

- Start local. Find other ways for congregants to practice their faith in the civic space (e.g., buying supplies and doing painting/maintenance projects in schools, supporting foster kids).
- Remember the goal is community, not justice.
- Hold space for criticism and complaints and always make time for smaller conversations. Having effective homilies/sermons starts with relationship-building, which takes time and trust. It takes being with people in their vulnerable moments and being open to pushback. And when people disagree with you, don't ignore them, talk to them. Three different faith leaders recommended this. You want to try to keep doors open. But if someone threatens you, including on social media, do not engage.

"The big change is not going to happen with what I say from the pulpit. It's going to happen in the smaller spaces, but I still have to say something that triggers somebody to want to come and address it with me on a personal level." — **Rev. Brian Tillman**, United Methodist clergy.

- Identify people (family, friends, clergy) you can safely have questioning conversations with, people who are good sounding boards when they don't agree with you.
- See to your own self-care. Make sure you take vacation time and mental health support when you need it. Observe the Sabbath. You need that time and space to be the most effective.

4. Interviewees also offered many suggestions for establishing and building a network that could be useful for NGOs and FBG&Ls alike. Those recommendations are included in [Appendix C](#).

"With understanding, with facts, and with participation, we have a more resilient, more peaceful, more verdant sort of society." — **Leo Smith**, political consultant

CONCLUSION

Faith-based groups and leaders are playing an important role in combating polarization in the U.S. FBLs lead by example, modeling civility, forming relationships with people of other faiths and political convictions, while working with diverse actors for the common good. The work these leaders are doing demonstrates courage, commitment, curiosity, and compassion—all vital for depolarization work.

This study highlights the unique and vital role FBG&Ls are playing in addressing political polarization. It offers their unique perspectives and provides the lessons they have learned through their efforts. It also identifies deep internal divisions within faith communities, suggesting that a strategic focus on fostering

unity within churches and faith groups would be a valuable starting point for broader depolarization efforts.¹⁶

“This person who's my neighbor is on the other side of this issue. They're just as valuable, as reasonable, and as loving as I am. In fact, they may be more so. And so I want to approach them with curiosity instead of suspicion. The space between us is an opportunity for me to grow. And if I can approach them in good faith, we actually may find a better way forward than this current polarized thing where I have to conquer you in order to get my way.” — Caleb Campbell, Evangelical pastor

APPENDIX A – STUDY PARTICIPANTS

INTERVIEWS

- **Kat Doyle**, Director of Justice and Peace Ministries, Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta
- **Jim Gaffey**, Catholic lay leader, Georgia
- **Rev. Brian Tillman**, Director, Inclusion and Advocacy and Co-Director, Connectional Ministries, North Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church
- **Rev. Anne K. Ellsworth**, Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church/Episcopal Diocese of Arizona
- **Napp Nazworth**, American Values Coalition
- **Lynn Davis**, Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council for Tucson and Southern Arizona
- **Marguerite "Peg" Harmon**, former CEO of Catholic Community Services
- **David Drum**, Evangelical pastor, J17ministries.org
- **Leo Smith**, U.S. Non-Violent Democracy Labs, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change
- **Caleb Campbell**, Lead Pastor, Desert Springs Bible Church
- **Rev. Gary Mason**, Rethinking Conflict
- **Don Henninger**, Co-lead, Arizona Democracy Resilience Network (ADRN)
- **Tom Crick**, The Carter Center

RIGHT-LEANING FOCUS GROUP

- **Lisa Lorenzo**, Co-lead, Florida Sunshine Network

¹⁶ One interviewee specifically mentioned the “bigger need” for an “all-of-society approach.” Most other interviewees, however, spoke of focusing depolarization efforts on personal connections in smaller spaces, e.g., over coffee, at the dinner table, or in the pastor’s office after service.

- **Kurt Kelly**, Co-lead, Florida Sunshine Network

LEFT-LEANING FOCUS GROUP

- **Angelo Martinez**, Manager of Faith Based Relations, Better Together, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change
- **Rev. J.C. Pritchett**, President/Executive Director, Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance

APPENDIX B – “IN THEIR OWN WORDS” — ADDITIONAL QUOTES FROM INTERVIEWEES ORGANIZED BY KEY FINDINGS

FINDING #1 - Faith-based groups and leaders (FBG&Ls) are uniquely positioned to engage in depolarization work, but many are hesitant to do so.

- “Evangelical conservative Christians really hold the moral responsibility of being the ones to bridge the divide. We have a calling. We have a commandment, and this is where we should lead well.”
- “In many instances, faith leaders have the mission to be transformational. They have this transcendent purpose. They have institutional and congregational community grounding, a moral and ethical commitment, [and] they are natural peacemakers in their communities.”
- “It is based on a notion of enlightened self-interest. ... Jews and other marginalized communities can only thrive in a healthy democracy and in a robust civic society.”
- “I know lots of people. And so, what I can do is facilitate gatherings with people on different sides of an idea.”
- “As an Evangelical, we want to practice kindness, compassion. We want to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. These are all core tenets of our faith tradition.”
- “For many, especially Evangelical pastors, one of the greatest tolls that we take is the loss of people that we care for.”
- “The personal cost is too high, particularly in the wake of the last eight years. Pastors are burned out and they’re tired, and all churches took financial hits during COVID, and then it got so polarized. People are barely coming back to church. So, I think every pastor is [anxious] unless they’re in a non-politically diverse context. I think it would help all pastors to be told this is OK and this is the community that will support you.”
- “A lot of my peers, they’re kinda keeping their head down because ... their leadership might actually not like what they have to say.”

FINDING #2: Faith communities are often divided; focusing on this chasm first is a good practice.

- “I think we all have the tendency to walk into a space, especially a small, homogeneous space like, oh, I’m with all Jewish professionals, I’m with all, you know, parents, schoolteachers, whatever our affinity group might be, and assume that we hold a lot of opinions and values in common, and that’s not always the case. And we’re not going to be able to create more diverse spaces, to create more places in which people with different values and viewpoints can gather — much less talk to one another — if we don’t walk into those spaces with that realization or with that awareness.”
- “There’s a big difference between agreeing and solving a problem or agreeing and changing a policy. ... Depolarization is not about everybody agreeing and wanting to accomplish the same thing. The goal is problem solving, [which] requires us to be able to come together for the good of all.”
- “Our job is to bring people together, not to change people’s minds.”
- “There’s a lot of folks who wish that their congregation would not just ignore all the political stuff because most do. Or, if the leadership of their congregation does address it, it’s usually ‘You should vote this way or vote that way.’ It’s not a depolarizing message. ... And a lot of folks know the world is a little bit more nuanced than that and [their ask] is ‘Could we get some help in navigating the conversation that I have to have with my adult child or with my coworker who has, take your pick, Trump stickers or Biden stickers on his desk? How do we have relationships with those people — because we have to and we don’t know how to do it?’”

Finding #3: These are difficult conversations to have with ways to connect as well as ways NOT to connect.

- “A lot of the work that we do is on storytelling and giving people the opportunity to tell their stories.”
- “Don't begin by asking about their politics. [Ask] “Tell us a bit about your life story. Where did you grow up? What shaped you? What do you enjoy? Tell me about your family. What vacation time do you like? What sports do you like?” You're initially trying to create commonality. ... You're trying to constantly build bridges through the use of wholesome, engaging language rather than language that separates. ... “What kind of community/country do you want for your kids/grandkids? What are your dreams for the U.S. in 30 or 40 years? And is it possible to share that dream together? What do you want for your kids? Your grandkids?”
- “In the Catholic faith, there are certain tenets about loving one another and respecting others. And oftentimes our current pope uses the example of the Good Samaritan as an example of how people come together across difference.”
- “Some of the things that specifically work that way is during election season, we do what we call faithful citizenship where we remind people that our faith calls us to be active in the public square. ... We encourage people to show up at their places of worship, at their parishes and show up with a Catholic mentality versus a partisan mentality.”
- “You can't preach good news to the poor without being political. You can't preach release of the captives without being political. You can't recover sight to the blind or let the oppressed go away free without being political. Those are political things. They're not partisan, but they are political, and we're called to do that by God. And so even if it means folks in your congregation are going to be upset or frustrated or lobby for your removal, you're not called by them. You're called by God. You have a divine responsibility and calling to do this work.”
- “I don't agree with him, but I can disagree with him in a kind way.”
- “Never mention leadership at the extremes. Never give them airtime. ... I refuse to allow myself to be drawn into those conversations.”
- “Instead of saying what we don't agree with, what do we agree with? We agree with being nonviolent, we agree with loving our neighbor, we agree with picking trash up off the ground. ... I'm looking for the place where we agree.”
- “We discovered that we all share some basic common values. Some of those are illustrated in our candidate principles. It's hard to argue with any of those principles, right? Those are just core values that have been part of our country since the beginning. If we can find common ground like that to stand on, then that makes a very powerful launching platform for anything we want to do. And I think that's where we've discovered the successes. ... All those kinds of values also relate to any kind of religion — Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, whatever. Those are core values. And so, when we come from a spot of core values, it's easy to build bridges that are connected to that.”
- “If I'm gonna preach a sermon and I'm gonna talk about a sensitive topic, I'll started off with ‘Help me understand’ ... Help me understand how Christians could support [a bill that prevents teenagers from receiving the gender-affirming care that might save their lives] without even a conversation. Help me understand that. I didn't point my finger at them. I didn't, you know, say anything really harsh, but I'm asking them to help me understand, which literally is an invitation. Come, help me understand that. Literally come talk to me. And after that service at a very conservative church, there were several people who engaged in some level of conversation with me in that space. ... I'm hopeful that I triggered something in them that can help them to see the other angle. You don't have to change your mind about the position, but how does it affect people that you know, who go to your church, who live in your community and in your neighborhood? It affects them directly. And that might be something that can shift in their thinking.”

FINDING #4: Building relationships and trust is critical for progress on charged issues.

- “Unity goes as far as humility takes it and no further. And so humility is going to be the limiting factor in how far we’re going to get. ... If you've got folks who are strongly identified right or left, with some humility, you can have a conversation.”
- “There's no question that when you build relationships with people who are on the other side of the political aisle, you're then equipped to be able to have political conversation in a nonpolarized manner.”
- “You can say tougher things to people that you know very well.”
- “Almost everything rolls back to the strength of the relationship, if there's a strong relationship where there's trust for one another. We can talk about almost anything, and whether the challenges of that conversation without that, it's very hard to talk about almost anything that's controversial without it blowing up. So, the depth and strength of the relationship and love for one another dictates how much progress we can make on politically charged or emotionally charged issues.”
- “Practice conflict resolution so you build self-awareness. How do you feel when you're uncomfortable? What does your body do? Where does your mind go? Do you attack, blame, and shame when someone says a certain statement, whether it's political or whatever and you feel attacked? Why do you feel attacked when that person has an issue with a politician?... How do we normally confront [conflict]? Do we walk away? Do we freeze? Are we combative with our words?... If we can develop communication through conflict to better navigate those conversations, to build the capacity to listen, to tell. And I feel like that brings again, that's a long-term process. A lot of people bow out after like a month. But if you can develop that ground, that fertile ground, you can move forward.”

FINDING #5: Buy-In from leadership is critical.

- “Make sure they're not isolated. ... If you and I are living in isolation, I mean, you end up depressed, you end up [thinking], ‘I don't do this; this is a waste of time.’...To know that there are people there when it goes wrong.”
- “By the time we got to September 2020, I was toast. It was too much, and my board was so great. They were like, listen, you're not gonna take any more bad-faith emails or phone calls, you gotta direct those all to us. And so ... I'd get an email I perceived was a bad-faith attack or something nasty and off it goes to the board, and then they would address it. And that allowed me time to heal and get back on my feet again.”
- “I previously served as an interim rector at a place in Apache Junction, Arizona. And there was violence towards the church. We were tagged with slurs on our sanctuary doors, on our social hall and on all of our signs. And the community of the Arizona Faith Network surrounded us, like the bat signal went out, and we were cared for. ... And I think that's why being connected to a larger organization is critical.”

FINDING #6: There is a need for more diverse and inclusive participation in faith-based groups doing depolarization work, paired with more self-awareness and blind spot recognition among their members.

- “If your entire life is within this right-wing news and information bubble, you just need to see an alternative, right? Someone like David French or someone like me, who's already a conservative, might have an easier “in” to these audiences than someone from the left. And because we're not there to turn people into Democrats or liberals or anything like that, they're less defensive.”
- “Whatever political team I prefer, my posture towards them is not full allegiance, but actually criticism. We believe that the Bible has a lot to say about speaking truth to power. And so, while I may prefer the red team or the blue team, my posture should be to speak truth to the leadership in the red team and the blue team, not to just advocate their behavior or make no apologies for their errant behavior, speak truth to power.”

FURTHER COMMENTS

- “All these different groups are all of a sudden seeing these problems and wanting to do something about it, and we’re just starting to try to connect with each other and find each other and find a way to work together.”
- “If they've never lived it, the only way for them to understand it is to hear it through somebody else's story or see it through somebody else's eyes.”
- “If you can take trips to places, like the Legacy Museum in Alabama, like if you can really sit there and experience real facts, things that impact your senses ... I think storytelling has a lot more impact now than stating facts, because we can argue every day, any day from any type of resource. I think experiencing life experiences and reinforcing that with stories personalizes it. They see the face of the person, you can't deny that. And so now you're struggling with that presence of someone's life experience, life story. ... I feel like it should be shifted because the facts are burning out, people are tired of it.”
- “Some of the criticisms I have about movements now is that the mantra is justice, justice, justice. I'm not saying I'm against justice. You can't have community without justice. But the goal has to be community. ... Keeping that goal of community is critical. Do not allow justice to be the ultimate goal, because if you do that, everything will burn in your pursuit of that.”
- “If they don't get to the race issue, if they don't get to the balanced aspects of capitalism, they won't be seen as having integrity as they try and support other organizations.”
- “Most of the people who will be willing to do this work tend to be center-left or left, but they also tend to be less urgent about the existential threat to human existence in a civil society. Whereas the people animating this violence from the right and even some of the far left ... those people are acting with a sense of extreme urgency. So, practitioners in this work need to match their urgency, and that is a rare thing to find.”
- “The number one thing is the realization that this could quickly switch to a violent situation. ... They have to come to realization that that there is an issue.”
- “Within conservative communities and conservative churches there, I think there's a lot of people who aren't in sort of a right wing bubble but they're beginning to have doubts about what's happening in their own communities. ... That's sort of like the low-hanging fruit. ... Those are the people who you try to reach first, because, you know, misinformation once it's stuck in your head, it's hard to get out.”
- “There are about a dozen organizations that are working against Christian nationalism as Christians, but they're not trusted by Evangelicals because they're progressive Christians. ... Here's a quintessential example: Bob Roberts out of Tarrant County, Texas. He runs the multifaith Leaders Network. He is a hardcore Southern Baptist, and he does a ton of work with Muslims and Jews. It's people like that you've got to find, people who can operate in the spaces where The Carter Center might be viewed with suspicion.”

Tips for Establishing and Growing Your Network

- Start with people you know. Leverage existing personal and professional networks first. Personal connections are the most promising.
- Seek out preestablished groups of congregations (e.g., the Arizona Faith Network; the Jewish Partnership for Democracy). They can help open doors and help you grow.
- Recruit at regional faith-based meetings and assemblies. Attending annual meetings is a great way to gain entry, meet people and start having these conversations.
- Try reaching out to church leadership. Clergy interested in this work will need their support. And where they lead, others will follow.
- Grow the network nationally. National faith networks are hierarchical but accessible. At the same time, build breadth into the group by bringing in more laypeople.
- Look for opportunities to cross-pollinate with other like-minded organizations. When addressing these groups, it's about sharing information. With left-leaning coalitions, you may have to explicitly state that your focus is democracy, not justice, and that your initiative is not a platform for their issues.
- Make your agenda transparent and try to anticipate standard critiques.
- Don't persuade too hard. If people don't want to join, that's okay.
- Look for and nurture the enthusiasm of co-participants. Even having just three to five people of different backgrounds who are enthusiastic about the project can be tremendously motivating.
- Establish a goal. There must be a focal point. "If you don't know where you're going, you'll never get there."
- If beginning at the congregation level, formulate a small committee who can focus on making sure everyone knows there's an issue (and a goal).
- Partner with local community-based organizations, fire departments and youth basketball programs. They're more flexible, on the ground and on the pulse. Give them the toolkits and deescalation content and let them distribute it organically. The goal is to create a "social nudge kind of movement."

APPENDIX D: TWO CASE STUDIES

The Arizona Faith Forward Initiative

Introduction. The Arizona Faith Forward Initiative is a component of the Arizona Democracy Resilience Network (ADRN), a cross-partisan effort to stave off political violence. The network, created with support from The Carter Center in 2021, seeks to mitigate election-related violence by helping citizens recognize that local, state, and national elections are “free, fair, and safe.” To achieve this outcome, the ADRN asks political candidates to endorse a set of principles (“The Statement of Candidate Principles”) that involves cooperating with election officials, avoiding the dissemination of falsehoods, and acknowledging the legitimacy of election outcomes once results have been certified. The statement also urges political parties and others to train poll-watchers and asks all citizens to respect voters’ lawful rights to register and vote without interference or intimidation. The ADRN actively promotes these principles.

This case study is based on an interview conducted via Zoom with Don Henninger, the Arizona right-of-center state co-lead. All quotes, unless noted otherwise, represent comments Henninger made during this interview.

“We built up a pretty robust network of probably close to 70 faith leaders that we have in our network right now, and they’ve been among our most active contingents. ... They show up more often than everybody else.”

The Strategy for Building a Network of Faith-Based Leaders to Support the ADRN. Henninger and his counterpart, Ron Barber (the left-of-center ADRN co-lead), built a coalition of FBLs through a combination of wholesale and retail approaches. The “wholesale” approach entailed recruiting networks of faith-based leaders rather than individual clergy. We discussed this strategy using the metaphor of a real estate magnate developing a shopping mall.

“Our lead tenant in the very beginning was the Arizona Faith Network, ... I sat down with their executive director, and she opened doors. [She gave us] probably 30 contacts ... and, in key cases, email introductions. Other lead tenants early on were the Pima Faith Council; the Episcopal bishop; and a woman with a broad set of connections into the Evangelical community. All these leads reached out to others within their respective networks. They were all people who represent others.”

This strategy has evolved. Henninger reports that they have switched to operating at the “retail level” by reaching out to individual churches.

“[The retail level is] probably where we are now because we’ve already reached out to the major tenants. And they’re promoting us. That’s how can we reach out to more individuals. After ‘lead tenants’ are recruited, you take it all the way down to individual churches.”

Key Events in the Arizona Faith Forward Initiative’s Development

- **Introductory webinar.** The Rev. Gary Mason, a depolarization and conflict management expert from Belfast, made a presentation that was attended by several Arizona faith leaders and heightened interest in depolarization work. Attendees also developed a greater sense of how their positions afforded them an excellent opportunity to engage in this space.

" [There was] more awareness among faith leaders of how they can talk about values around democracy and protecting democracy."

- *Development of a common faith statement.*

"As faith leaders from across Arizona with different religious and political backgrounds, we have come together to reaffirm our united support for peaceful, safe, fair, and secure elections. The sacred texts that we cherish affirm the inherent value of each human being and the need for us all to be peacemakers. With the November 2024 elections now only one year away, we desire to speak collectively about these vital issues." [Opening paragraph of the Arizona faith-based leader statement]

The statement continues with a list of principles that will contribute to "peaceful, safe, fair, and secure elections." In addition to the concepts enshrined in the Statement of Candidate Principles, the faith statement urges individuals to manage honest differences of opinion respectfully; to participate in elections as informed voters; to refrain from propagating misleading information about candidates or the electoral process; and to maintain a peaceful election atmosphere during the preelection, polling, counting, and post-election periods. In its concluding paragraphs, the statement affirms that the great majority of Americans support these principles, which will "not only strengthen our nation, [but] will improve our relationships with our families, friends, neighbors, and religious communities."

The statement encourages everyone to commit to values that are reflected in sacred traditions and texts. It is decidedly values-based and nonpartisan, while also introducing norms of acceptable conduct.

"[The statement] equipped [network members] to be able to talk about safe and secure elections and peaceful elections. I think these conversations happen on a daily basis in small ways throughout our network, ways that we really don't know or see. Sometimes they're individual conversations."

- *The Day of Prayer observance in Tucson and Phoenix.* The two events, designed to encourage adoption of the values outlined in the faith statement, were timed to take place approximately one year prior to the 2024 presidential election.

"[The event] will be in a church where advocacy has long been part of what they do. It's in their DNA. But I think you'll see representation from people of all walks of faith. That's what we're looking for. We've got a Catholic bishop, an Episcopal bishop. We've got a Mormon leader, a Muslim, a Jew — all walks of faith coming together, praying for common results and common values. What we're talking about crosses through all faith areas. I can't think of any faith out there that would be opposed to the values that we're endorsing. There will be prayer and singing. There will be [experiences that help] people go from their mind to their heart. People will leave with their heart full of confidence that elections can be peaceful and productive."

- *Follow-up activities.* Ideally, there will be five or six additional activities throughout the year (to keep up the momentum), including another Gary Mason webinar. These activities are intended to increase the number of people in the network and to sustain the momentum that has thus far been achieved.

"How do we get out and reach more people? There are a lot of folks within our market that we haven't yet touched. How can we really grow the network? I mean, we've got 70 faith leaders in the network right now. We should be able to [increase that number fivefold] and build a robust network. One way to do this (and I haven't really thought through this to a great extent yet) is [to recognize that] we don't need to have just faith leaders in our faith network. We could include just people of faith. And I'm hoping that faith leaders will be able to help us to do this. A small example of this idea might be in my own church, where the rector is giving me an opportunity to stand at the pulpit on a couple of Sundays and promote the work that we're doing. This has resulted in me finding six or seven members of our parish who are just people of faith [but who can contribute to this work]."

Successes and Challenges to Date

The most noteworthy success has been getting a broad spectrum of faith-based leaders to engage in this initiative.

"We've found that there's a willingness and maybe even an eagerness for faith leaders to become a part of what we're doing. I don't think that we've really reached out to any individual faith leaders who said, 'No, I don't think what you're doing is a good idea, and I don't want to be a part of it.'

"It's been very enlightening and encouraging to find so much willingness for faith leaders at the individual level to be involved.

"We've got both bishops and the Catholic diocese for both areas [Phoenix and Tucson] on board. We've got our Episcopal bishop on board. We've got major religious leaders who have signed onto what we're doing publicly and have endorsed it publicly.

"The willingness for people to actually stay active with what we're doing to volunteer to do things, to move us forward, one person at a time, and then come together as groups — I think that's been very powerful."

Challenges include navigating faith-based bureaucracies, holding in-person events, and reaching rural Arizonans.

"The challenge is sometimes getting caught in faith bureaucracies because they exist. ... Churches are, in their own right, very political ... once you get inside. You've got to navigate through things the right way and make sure that you're not alienating any people along the way, and that you're embracing everybody and trying to build a tent big enough for everybody to get under.

"It would be great to be able to do more in-person events. But when you're trying to build a statewide network, it's hard to do.

"How do you reach more people in rural Arizona? We need to build our overall network with more rural representation."

Lessons Learned

- There is genuine demand on the part of FBLs to engage in initiatives that address bipolarization.

"I discovered early on was there was a pretty large appetite for this issue among faith leaders, and it was easy to recruit them from all faiths."

- Be realistic in your outreach. Not every faith-based leader is reachable.

"One of our guiding principles is about accepting the results of an election. A MAGA Republican is probably not going to ... endorse our principles for fair and secure elections. ... We're not going to get the MAGA crowd. But can we get the moderate Republicans to come on board."

- It's important to create options so that faith-based leaders can determine for themselves what resonates and how they wish to engage.

"What followed [from our session with Gary Mason] was a grocery list of a dozen or so potential activities. One of them was a day of prayer. That resonated with folks."

- Early buy-in from leaders of faith-based networks is crucial. The initial key partner in this case was the executive director of the Arizona Faith Network.

"[The executive director] represents all faiths from across the state and has a pretty wide network. She loved the idea of a day of prayer. The idea mushroomed from there, and we're rocking and rolling ... right now in terms of getting a lot of people interested."

- Recruit an experienced person (in this case, Rev. Gary Mason) who brings deep, global experience in conflict management to galvanize interfaith dialogue.

- Mitigate the real physical risks to those who engage in depolarization efforts.

"We're doing [the Day of Prayer] at a church that historically has dealt with risks ... the First Institutional Baptist Church downtown, which is the largest African American Church in the city. They've been through a lot of ... rough times. They know ... about security issues. So, the Day of Prayer [will be] there. I think we'll have security pretty well in in hand."

- Recognize and mitigate the professional risks to faith-based leaders who engage in depolarization work.

"I can speak to this from my own experience at the church. ... We have people on the far left and we have people in the far right in our congregation. Our rector has to worry about how he puts himself in the middle so that he doesn't do something to alienate

either side. This scenario plays out on almost every level. And that puts the faith leaders in a difficult position when they stand up to endorse things like [the Statement of Candidate Principles]. Are they going to alienate members of their own flock to some degree? That's a risk.

"[Mitigating this risk] is done on an individual basis. It's the words and the topics that people choose to preach on. It's the words they use in their conversations. It's about being careful not to take on partisan issues. I think you try to focus on what are the values of our democracy. But even that can be a little risky."

- Focus on values and helping the "other side" to see that values are shared.

"We're planning for our prayer vigil. And one of the planners who's helping us put this together said, 'I think it'd be very important for us to have some music. [We should sing] either "God Bless America" or "America the Beautiful," so that people realize that people on left side also are patriotic. It might be an important sign [for the right] that Democrats sing that song, too.'

"I'm reaching out to several Evangelical leaders and partnering with them on things that they're trying to get done. ... For example, there's a group of Evangelical pastors in Phoenix that probably will, in the next month or so, start putting together ... small groups of six or eight Evangelical pastors at a time. They're going to do some training, some information-sharing, and some brainstorming on how they can ... talk to their congregations about democracy and values. ... We're in the middle of that. ... And there [will be] a National Evangelical Conference in Phoenix in January that we're going to be a part of to deliver what we think are the values that we stand for and how they actually are common to what [Evangelicals] embrace.

"I take [all conversations] back to our values. Fair, safe, secure elections, peaceful environment, accepting results. And then [I move] to common values. You know, the faith values of loving your neighbor, having an open mind, listening – actively listening – to people.

"As we bring faith leaders together, we recruit them [by explaining] who we are and what we stand for. And they say, 'Yeah, we agree with that. We want to help you and be a part of that.' And then it just evolves, because our conversations are around those values.

"The values that we talk about are pretty nonpartisan values. They're core values. They're Christian values, Jewish values, and Hindu values. They're human values that people can certainly relate to. You take the political angles and partisan issues and leave them off to the side and just deal with values. There's a lot of common ground there."

The Georgia Faith Forward Democracy Initiative

Introduction. Faith Forward Democracy is a network of 90 faith leaders (both lay and clergy) from across the faith and political spectrum. It was launched as the faith pillar of the (Georgia) Democracy Resilience Network (DRN) and established with support from The Carter Center in 2021. While the initiative is primarily Georgia-based, it includes some senior advisors from elsewhere. This case study, however, focuses on Georgia and is based on an interview conducted via Zoom with Tom Crick, the Carter Center’s project advisor for the Conflict Resolution Program. All quotes, unless noted otherwise, represent comments Crick made during this interview.

The network describes itself on its website as follows:

"We are a multifaith, nonpartisan network of faith leaders who are united by our concern for our increasingly divided country and the impact those divisions have on our communities, families, and democracy. We believe that faith can ease divisions that plague our political processes and social fabric [and that] faith leaders have the power to bridge differences and inspire positive change. ... We share a common commitment to the highest values of peace and love as we strive to live these through our faith."

The network’s core values and principles include these statements on its website:

"To live well, we need to disagree well. To disagree well, we need to understand well. Faith can ease divisions that plague our political processes and social fabric. [Faith leaders] have the power to bridge differences and inspire positive change. Differences are human and real, but they are not transcendent. Faith leaders must create space for common ground and model the courageous leadership needed to guide people away from a zero-sum understanding."

Overall, the network’s strategic goal is to prevent violence by strengthening norms related to the peaceful resolution of conflicts. It works with both the left and the right, using an influence model.

"The overall DRN strategy involves civil society influencing politicians and leaders to behave better. We envisaged that there would be pillars, or different communities that we would work with. And at the very beginning, we convened a meeting of local Atlanta business and legal leaders. And the faith community also seemed a logical place to work."

The network’s current efforts reflect framing questions developed by the Rev. Gary Mason (the noted Northern Irish peacebuilder) and research sponsored by the PACE network. That body of work makes the case “for faith leaders to be proactive and take action.”

"One of the things about [this initiative] is we're absolutely not trying to change anybody's mind. We're not asking anyone to work on an interfaith basis or partner with [any designated group]. We just want faith leaders to work in their own community on these issues that we all agree are problematic."

Key Events (not in precise chronological order)

- Faith Forward Democracy was formed following several webinars presented by Gary Mason and several private dinners with faith leaders. There was little follow-up after the first dinner in 2022

and, unsurprisingly, little momentum was generated. However, a second dinner, held in August 2023, did include ample follow-up and succeeded in getting the ball rolling. The significant interest in Mason's initial webinar demonstrated a deep yearning to see greater faith leader engagement in depolarization work.

"We repeated the same sort of relational dinner model [in the summer of 2023]. We got people of different faiths and different political beliefs around the table, with a nice dinner and a safe space [The Carter Center]. But this time we did a bit more networking upfront and got a really interesting group of people. The group was larger and more diverse. We had very senior people: the executive pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church and the bishop from the Lutheran Church, for example. We also invited people who were lay leaders in their counties and their communities, both left and right. It turned out to be a really interesting mix. And this time we had follow-up.

"[The main initiative] didn't really kick off until we had the idea of working with Gary Mason. It occurred to us that a possible place to start a dialogue with faith leaders would be to put Gary in front of an audience with his message of deep concern for the trajectory of identity politics in the U.S. and what sharing the experiences from Northern Ireland about faith communities could mean, both positively and negatively. We arranged a webinar.

"The Carter Center actually publicized [the first webinar] within its own donor network ... and that's not very common. Our Development Office looked at this and said, 'This looks interesting. This is something our donor base would be interested in.' That was a real indicator that people in the faith community wanted to understand what they could do to get us out of this malaise.

"The message Gary had was, essentially, 'How can we use our places of faith for healing? How can we learn to disagree well? To disagree well, we need to understand well.' Those fundamental questions are sort of at the core of what we're trying to do with Faith Forward."

- Action-oriented follow-up occurred. During an August 2023 meeting of 30 leaders from a wide variety of faiths and positions, the idea of developing a day of prayer 12 months before the elections emerged. A sample prayer was created:

THE PRAYER. Loving and Gracious God, we give you thanks for this, our cherished nation that you have entrusted to our care for our children and generations to come. We live in a time of disharmony and are troubled by our growing divides. We pray for the unity and protection of our country in the year ahead. Remind us that no matter our beliefs or our views, we are all made in your image, even those with whom we disagree. Together, let each of us commit to seek harmony and reject division. Let us be inspired by the better angels of our natures. Help us as people of faith to remember our calling to peace and to find the wisdom to make our places of worship into places of healing. Let us reunite in a common commitment to our shared democratic norms and the rejection of violence. Give us the courage to help ourselves and others to the path of unity and love. Give us the strength to reach out and listen to those who may have different views so we may better understand their hopes and fears. Give us an open heart to find common ground and, where we cannot, to disagree peacefully and well. Give us the will and strength to do so. We pray for our leaders so they may guide us with love and wisdom for the betterment of all. These things we ask in the name of all that is holy and good.

"The steering group came up with a list of 12 or 15 things that people could do to address polarization in their space. Then we sent out a survey with ... those things and asked people to check the boxes of what they were interested in working on. One option was to form a cohort of leaders to go to Belfast and do some study. Another option [involved] developing prayer resources that can be used in in congregations. The two things that people were most interested in turned out to be the study tour to Belfast, and the day of prayer to be held 12 months before the election. [We also began to] create a toolkit of faith-based resources for dialogue.

"In Georgia, we can now talk about network building and about action."

- A draft description of the effort, in the form of a slide deck, was developed after wide consultation. The deck reflects Mason's work along with research from PACE and represents an effort to find common ground. Specifically, the deck conveys a desire to use faith settings as places to address individual and societal polarization.

"Faith communities can ease divisions. Faith leaders have the power to bridge differences and inspire. They can be transformational because they have a transcendent purpose, a congregational base, and a moral, ethical commitment." [website]

- The Day of Prayer was organized and celebrated.

"On the weekend of Nov. 3-5, 12 months before the 2024 presidential election, we ask faith leaders in Georgia to lead their congregations in reflection on what can be done to reduce the sense of division that is afflicting our country. By praying together, we can begin to help ourselves, our families and our communities reduce the temperature in our country and ensure a peaceful, democratic election process for all. "

- Day of Prayer follow-up was planned.

Strategy for Building the Network.

The strategy that the initiative has employed primarily rests on relational events and activity-focused follow-up.

"Another option [to grow the network] is in hierarchical churches. If they get on board, this can move like wildfire."

Successes and Challenges to Date

"I think the success is that we have collectively developed both a process and a product that appears to be of interest to a pretty wide group of people that I expect will expand. And what I mean by product is taking Gary's ideas and PACE's ideas and marrying them with tools for action. We've put them together in a way that's fairly substantive but accessible. We have no problem sending [the slide deck] left, right, and center. The [deck] is a calling card that establishes the framework. People look at it and say, 'Sounds good to me. We need that.' There are no trigger words.

"[A challenge] is getting Evangelical and center-right engagement. We're still heavier on center and left-leaning denominations. We are currently reaching out to Baptist churches and have

successfully engaged with many conservative leaders who are experiencing the challenges of polarization within their congregations, also.

"For the people who have been engaging from the left, a requirement for their engagement is inclusivity. Finding that balance between an inclusivity that retains the space for people to work within their own networks and not having it seem like a big old interfaith kumbaya exercise is tricky.

"It is something of an heroic effort to try to write something that you think people from different faith and political traditions might agree with. Statements need to operate at a high level and not alienate groups you want to bring to the table.

"Each network will find different ways to interact locally. For example, the Georgia prayer doesn't focus on democratic norms, unlike the Arizona process, which is closely tied to democratic norms and the Candidate Principles for Trusted Elections. In Georgia, the starting point is a statement of faith rather than a statement of norms. But faith will only take you so far in the world of politics, and so we are helping faith leaders find collective and individual ways to have these difficult conversations as a means to bridge our growing divides."

Lessons Learned

- Build it and they will come. *"Almost every conversation we've had and every door we've pushed on, we've had that same response: 'What can we do?' Everybody recognizes that the country is in trouble. Everybody understands that there is just such a focus on the micro-partisan, day-to-day partisanship that we're losing the big picture, losing the plot, and losing what binds us."*
- It's important to mitigate the professional risks of those who choose to engage. Fostering strong connections to other faith leaders and creating safe spaces are important components of faith-based depolarization efforts.

"We're trying to build enough of a critical mass so that no one is out on a limb when they discuss issues of polarization. If you're joining a day of prayer 12 months before the election, hopefully nobody will criticize you for that. You're praying for our nation, together with others.

"We'll give you a place that you can feel comfortable and get peer advice."

- It's important to use the right language.

"It's about looking at yourself and, if you are on the left, for example, recognizing that every time you hear a term like 'Democratic Republic' used instead of 'Democracy,' you don't need to be triggered and it may not be a conservative plot to take over our government. Our own polarization can make us lose the ability to hear, listen, and imagine common understanding."

- It is important to find common ground. *"We're trying to establish common ground using high-level core principles that are applicable to all faith leaders, whether they be conservative or whether they be liberal, such as 'Love thy neighbor,' 'We're all God's children,' and 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' We recognize that we have a common problem, polarization, in our spaces and that this problem is extending to our country."*

- Recognize the importance of agency, choice, and authenticity. Personal ownership of activities sustains engagement.

"We are giving people a common framework and saying, 'You just keep doing your thing in your constituency. And hopefully, together we will reach enough people so that collectively, we can bring the temperature down.'

"We're not being overly prescriptive. The toolkit we've created allows people to choose what they want to do. The toolkit needs to be pretty broad and usable. It's sort of à la carte. That's the way we hope that it will take root. It will challenge people and have examples, such as 'We did this in our church'. Or, 'I've taken this course.' That helps people know that it's worth their time. And knowing this is important, because time is scarce.

"The approach of offering 15 activity options is probably too many, but at least this gives a lot of choice. This was a good way to begin, because it wasn't telling people, 'This is what we're going to do' or 'This is who we are.' This isn't The Carter Center saying, 'This is what's right.' It was absolutely offering choice. It says that 'we're challenging you. What are you good at? Where do you need new skills? What do you think might work in your space? Here's are some options for what you might do. So, grab a piece."

- The work of engaging faith leaders rests on relationship development and having something for people to do.
- Currently, elections are polarizing and zero-sum. We need to *"imagine a world where it would be okay for the Republicans to win or for the Democrats to win. That's just the natural political flow. We're a long way from that. Elections are seen by many as being some kind of an existential threat now, and we need to find ways to get away from this."*

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

FOR CASE STUDIES

- *Origin and purposes*: How did you establish your interfaith dialogue to combat polarization? When? Who were the key movers? Who participates now? What did you initially set out to accomplish? How, if at all, have your initial goals changed? [Note: we're not looking for names but positions and affiliations.]
- *Key activities*: What are some of the activities you've undertaken as part of this interfaith initiative? Who participated in these activities? If you've grown (in terms of participant numbers), what activities contributed to this growth?
- *Topical themes*: What were some of the topics you explored as part of your anti-polarization interfaith dialogues? How were these topics selected? How difficult or challenging were these conversations? How did you facilitate the dialogues to respectfully include all voices?
- *Successes*: Successes come in all sizes. What were some successes you experienced as part of your work to create interfaith dialogues that address (and mitigate) polarization?
- *Disappointments* (if any): Where did your results or the process fall short of your expectations? What did you do, if anything, to address this disappointment?
- *Lessons learned*: Based on your experience, what lessons did you learn about how to *promote* and *sustain* interfaith dialogue to address extreme polarization?

FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Introduction

Thank you for so generously sharing your time with me today. My name is X, and, helping me out today is Y. We are part of a team conducting a study funded by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE). The purpose of the study is to learn how faith-based leaders are responding to the challenge of increasing polarization and a decline in civil civic discourse. Study findings will be used by PACE to guide faith-based work centered on preserving our democratic values.

Do you have any questions for me? [pause] If not, let's begin. Our session is planned to last one hour. Occasionally, I might try to move the conversation to a new topic. I'm going to start the recording function of Zoom if that's all right with you. Do I have your permission?

1. I invite each person to share your name and describe the faith community you belong to and serve.
2. We live in a time of pernicious polarization. How does that play out within your religious community? What political views predominate in your community? How widely held are these views?
3. How consistent are these views within your faith tradition? In what ways, if any, are these views at odds with your faith tradition?
4. What have you done to address polarization within your religious community?
5. What constraints do you face when thinking about how to address polarization?
6. How might these constraints be overcome?

7. If you could do *anything* — operating with no constraints — what would you do to reduce polarization in your religious community?
8. What are the most important lessons you've learned from your work as a faith-based leader addressing polarization?
9. What can faith-based leaders do to reduce polarization that currently isn't being done? What would it take to move the needle in the direction of these suggestions?
10. What question should I have asked you about faith-based leaders and the challenges of polarization and uncivil civic discourse? How would you answer this question had I asked it?
11. The sponsor of this study, PACE, is a funding network. What advice would you offer funders interested in supporting faith-based leaders in depolarization work?

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Note: this is an interview *guide*. Please don't feel you are stuck following a script. If someone shares an insight that deserves follow-up questioning, jump right in. You may want to just focus on the conversation without taking notes since you can return to the recording later.

The probes are all follow-up questions. Only use them if the original response didn't cover the points listed as probes.

Introduction

Thank you for so generously sharing your time with me today. My name is X and I am part of a team conducting a study funded by Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE). The purpose of the study is to learn how faith-based leaders are responding to the challenge of increasing polarization and a decline in civil civic discourse. Study findings will be used by PACE to guide faith-based work around preserving our democratic values.

You have been recommended for this interview because you are a faith-based leader who is engaged in bridging divides in your community and strengthening civic discourse.

Do you have any questions for me? [pause] If not, let's begin. I'm going to start the recording function of Zoom if that's all right with you. Do I have your permission?

1. Could you kindly share a bit about your role and position as a faith-based leader?
 - a. Make sure you capture the interviewee's denominational affiliation and title/position.
 - b. Determine if the interviewee is working within a single congregation, a network of congregations, or a sectarian organization. Note that these options are not mutually exclusive.
 - c. Ask whatever follow-up questions you need to generate a good description of the interviewee's role and position.
2. What are some activities or initiatives you've been involved in as a faith-based leader who works to address polarization and uncivil civic engagement?
 - a. Be sure to get as many details as possible: who, what, where, and when.
 - b. Determine whether these activities occur within the context of the interviewee's home congregation or through some other entity.

3. How, if at all, are the activities you're involved in making a difference in bridging divides and strengthening civic discourse?
 - a. Who is being reached? What changes, if any, have you observed as a result of these activities?
 - b. What specific aspects of these activities seem to make the greatest difference?
 - c. What might you alter to *expand* the impact of these activities?

4. What are **three** suggestions you would offer a faith leader colleague — someone who holds a position like yours — if that person asked your advice about how to use his or her position to stem the rising tide of polarization and uncivil civic engagements?
 - a. Suggestions can be positive or negative. Probe for what to do as well as what to avoid doing.
 - b. Probe for the support that would be needed to implement each suggestion.
 - c. Probe for the reasoning behind these suggestions (without directly asking why questions).

5. Can you share a story about any threats or pushback you might have received while working to reduce polarization and uncivil civic discourse?
 - a. Who made the threats or gave the pushback?
 - b. How did you respond?
 - c. How effective was your response?
 - d. How did the situation make you feel?
 - e. Was there someone you turned to or could have turned to for advice?

6. [**Only ask if the interviewee holds a congregational pulpit**] Have you ever offered a sermon or homily about polarization or civil civic discourse?
 - a. What response did you get?
 - b. In what ways, if any, did that response surprise you? Delight you? Disappoint you?
 - c. As you reflect on that experience, how does it make you feel today?
 - d. What, if anything, do you feel you learned from that experience?

7. What question should I have asked you about faith-based leaders and the challenges of polarization and uncivil civic discourse? How would you answer this question had I asked it?

8. The sponsor of this study, PACE, is a funding network. What advice would you offer funders interested in supporting faith-based leaders in depolarization work?