

# Safety Net *Toolkit*



**SAFETY**  
NET

INTRODUCTION	3
SCENARIOS	4
<hr/>	
<b>01 Peace in My Congregation</b>	4
Breaking Down the Problem	4
What to Do	5
Proclaiming Peace	5
Constructive Conversations	5
Constructive Collaboration	6
Healthy Media Habits	6
Digging Deeper	8
<hr/>	
<b>02 Peace in My City</b>	9
Breaking Down the Problem	9
What to Do	9
Five Vital Signs of Peace	10
Resilience Teams	10
Digging Deeper	11
<hr/>	
<b>03 Peace Against Hate</b>	12
Breaking Down the Problem	12
What to Do	12
Preventing Hate	12
Responding to Hate	13
In your congregation	13
In your community	14
Nationwide	14
Digging Deeper	14
<hr/>	
<b>04 Peace Against Radicalization</b>	15
Breaking Down the Problem & Responses	15
What to Do	17
Early Intervention and Offramping	17
Early Intervention Checklist	19
Digging Deeper	21

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# INTRODUCTION

Peacemaking addresses the question of “What is the role of the congregation in the world?” Peacemaking is not just an activity for the congregation; it addresses our identity and role in the world.

Peacemaking calls us to speak into division in our congregations, our cities, and our country. It calls us to build belonging, connection, and trust as building blocks of peace and resilience to division. The need is great. Political division doubled between 1994 and 2014<sup>1</sup>, and reached a record high in 2022.<sup>2</sup> This division doesn’t just reduce our quality of life; it also makes violence more likely.<sup>3</sup>

Congregational leaders can provide an example of the characteristics of a peacemaker and a model of the work of reconciliation. Peacemaking is more than peacekeeping; it requires the hard work of digging into difficult conversations to get at the underlying issues in our community and in our hearts. This toolkit can help you start.

## About Us

This toolkit is rooted in a collective 100 years of peacemaking. It is taken from the Peacemaker’s Toolkit, created by the Multi-Faith Neighbors Network (MFNN), Search for Common Ground, and the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab at American University (PERIL). MFNN, based in Keller, Texas, connects Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clergy around the country and the world to jointly build unity and solidarity amongst all people of faith. Search for Common Ground is the world’s oldest and largest peacemaking organization. Founded in 1982, Search for Common Ground has worked in over 40 countries, including the United States, to build trust between unlikely allies and promote healthy and just societies. PERIL hosts a group of premier experts leading the way to test and share proven, community-led solutions to prevent polarization and extremism.

This toolkit is born not only out of the evidence and experiences of these three organizations, but also the voices of one pilot county: Tarrant County, Texas. Like many counties across the country, Tarrant County is full of people with the warmth, hospitality, and tenacity that make it a beloved home for many. Tarrant County is also one of many American counties grappling with growing divisions in its local government, schools, congregations, and sometimes even within families. We began working in Tarrant County to understand the unique local dynamics driving this division and to develop a model for other communities nationwide to replicate evidence-based best practices, thereby pushing back against these trends within their congregations and cities. In Tarrant County, we conducted clergy-led listening sessions with more than five dozen residents

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/17/which-party-is-more-to-blame-for-political-polarization-it-depends-on-the-measure/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/17/how-democrats-and-republicans-see-each-other>

<sup>3</sup> Kleinfeld, 2017

to understand: What is dividing the community? What is uniting the community, often despite these divisions? How do local and national history impact the ways that division manifests today? Which leaders and institutions could interrupt these trends, and how? We then collaborated with local leaders, including congregational leaders, superintendents, chambers of commerce, and school board members, to take action based on the listening session findings and our understanding of effective strategies to counter polarization. This toolkit is the culmination of this pilot work. What is needed and what works will be unique in each congregation, city, state, and town, but the principles of peacemaking remain the same. We hope the lessons in these pages inspire your actions.

## About You

This toolkit is for clergy, lay leaders, and other people of faith seeking to build peace and renewed strength in their congregations, neighborhoods, and cities. It is for those leaders who feel embattled by growing divisions and who seek a better way forward toward a beloved community. We hope that this toolkit shows you that you are not alone in seeking common ground for your community. We hope that this toolkit will give you evidence-based tools and approaches to undertake proactive peacemaking to bolster your community’s resilience to division, beyond the cycle of crisis and response.

As leaders trained and practiced in congregational leadership care, you already have many of the skills you need to build peace. As a peacemaker, you can draw on congregational leadership care principles such as:

- Active, empathetic listening
- Mediation and problem-solving without stigmatization
- Spiritual care
- Deep scriptural knowledge
- Commitment to being in a long-term relationship with your parishioners. This is long-term work, and frankly, multi-generational. Congregational leaders make long-term investments in their communities that sew the seeds of enduring peace.

## How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is structured with **Scenarios** that explain the what and how of peacemaking. These scenarios depict common dilemmas and what congregational leaders can do to respond. These are fictional stories rooted in real experiences found in our research and experiences.

With this foundation, we will focus on the origins of the division facing our country today and ways to proactively build peace through belonging and resilience, spot destructive dynamics early, and know when and how to step in.

# SCENARIOS

## 01 Peace in My Congregation

*The town of Americana was known for its close-knit community. Jordan, the long-time senior clergy-member at a popular congregation, took great pride in their role in building this cohesive, beloved community. But Jordan was growing increasingly concerned about the division they saw swirling around the country and creeping ever closer toward their congregation. Study groups were starting to derail into political arguments, and group leaders were worried that members would stop coming. With each new issue that became swept up in the national “culture war,” Jordan feared that they were ever closer to a tipping point when the congregation would be impacted. Jordan couldn’t ignore the impact of sensationalized news, biased reporting, and the spread of misinformation on social media platforms. As people became entrenched in echo chambers, consuming content that reinforced their existing beliefs, their perspectives grew more polarized. Disagreements were fueled by cherry-picked information and sensational headlines, deepening the chasm between opposing sides.*

*Jordan knew that other congregations around the country were dealing with political and social divisions seeping into congregations. They had heard stories from some of their other cleric friends whose congregations had lost dozens, sometimes hundreds, of members. They informed Jordan that a few members had begun to stir up conflict in the congregation, constantly advocating for their clergy to address their preferred social/political issues from the pulpit. Eventually, some members left to join other congregations whose clergy advocated for their preferred politics. Other members stopped attending altogether.*

*Jordan didn’t want their congregation to suffer the same fate. They wanted to protect their congregation, build its resilience to divisions stirred up by social media, TV news, politicians, and others. But what could be done to push back against this overwhelming tide?*

### Breaking Down the Problem

- **Affective polarization** is more than disagreement; it’s a dislike and distrust of the other side. Polarization doesn’t just lead to conflict in the here and now. It also guarantees that conflict will get worse over time. As groups grow farther apart, disagreements tend to become more hostile and “winner-takes-all,” a dire, zero-sum mindset.
- **Partisan sorting** refers to the degree to which individuals live, work, and socialize with others who share similar political views. It also reinforces affective polarization; meaningful and regular encounters with difference impact our resilience to stereotypes and distrust of other groups. In the U.S. today, a large proportion of voters live with virtually no exposure to voters from the other party where they live.<sup>4</sup> Among various religious groups this can manifest differently, but in churches, for instance, this can be evidenced in “church shopping”, which 52% of American adults said they had in a 2022 poll. Of those, about 1 in 4 said that they had left or considered leaving their church

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01066-z>

because of political differences.<sup>5</sup> For Jordan, this data confirms what their clergy friends worried about: people leaving the congregation because of polarization.

- The outrage economy describes the incentives for our politics and media to invoke fear and hostility. Companies and individuals intentionally play on our emotions to get us to log on and stay on their platforms, apps, and online forums. This tactic is particularly popular for politicians and media to compete with one another in a crowded field. For Jordan, this helps to explain the intensifying outrage in national and online spaces, a sense that the tide is growing against them and other leaders like Jordan.

### What to Do

Break the polarization cycle by proactively building resilience in your congregation. Peacemakers draw from the wisdom of authentic faith in the face of outrage and fear. The most important lesson is this: start now. Peacemakers sow the seeds of peace that they can then reap in a crisis.

**Peacemaking starts with belonging.** Belonging is the sense of feeling emotionally connected, included, valued, and satisfied in our relationships. When we belong, we feel that we can show up as our authentic selves and honestly express how we feel. Belonging is positively associated with the fundamentals of strong societies, like stronger trust in our neighbors and local government, civic engagement, and openness to meeting and living in community with different kinds of people.<sup>6</sup> Belonging is a fundamental building block of resilience to polarization.

### Proclaiming Peace

Consider the fact that we all have a responsibility to advocate for peace on. As a congregational leader, you already have a wealth of scriptural and theological knowledge to support you on this journey.

### Constructive Conversations

Peacemaking is born out of connection. When people feel heard, especially by someone with whom they disagree, it reduces their animosity toward that person and the other side.<sup>7</sup> Regular and meaningful interactions with people who are different from us also mitigate that sense of animosity, or affective polarization.<sup>8</sup> Constructive conversations across differences can be a great place to start.

#### How to participate in constructive conversations:

- Practice active listening. Listen to understand, not to respond. Rephrase what the other person has said, and ask them if you’ve understood them correctly.

<sup>5</sup> Politics and Religion , Volume 16 , Issue 1 , March 2023 , pp. 73 - 89 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048322000384>

<sup>6</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f1da1ea15cd5bef32169f/t/641b16f74a75495c305d2625/1679496953766/The+Belonging+Barometer.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Stanford study

<sup>8</sup> Social contact theory

- Disagree with ideas, not experiences. While I might not agree with your perspective on an issue, I can't tell you that you didn't experience something in a particular way.
- Use "I" statements; avoid speaking for anyone but yourself. It's easy to derail a conversation by making people feel unfairly grouped or categorized. Avoid generalizing about broad swaths of people. Speak from your perspective - having a space for neighbors to talk honestly about their ideas and experiences, without the talking heads and politicians, is what makes constructive conversations unique and valuable.
- Be curious about the perceptions, emotions, and identities behind what is said. Difficult conversations are rarely just about the facts of a matter. They all rest upon three underlying conversations: What happened? What are the underlying emotions? What does this disagreement mean about me and the other person?<sup>9</sup> An argument with your spouse is rarely just about the dishes. It's about our different understandings of who was supposed to do the dishes, how I feel overburdened and you feel attacked, and how I worry that you think I'm a pushover and you fear that I think you're a lazy person. When we're aware of those three underlying conversations, we can share more effectively and with less defensiveness, and we invite others to do the same. We walk away with a better understanding of the topic, ourselves, and one another.
- Focus on empathy, not just civility. We should treat one another with respect and decorum, but we fall short when an emphasis on civility comes at the expense of honesty and growth. Recognize that others' feelings run just as deep as our own.
- Consider the range of contributions to the topic at hand, including from your side. When we focus on blaming others, we miss an opportunity for accountability. Acknowledging shared responsibility can be vulnerable, but it ultimately creates a space for joint problem-solving, rather than finger-pointing and defensiveness. This is not about blaming the victim. Instead, by understanding how my side contributes to the problem, I'm better able to understand my power and leverage to create change for the better.
- Check in with yourself during the conversation. When we get emotionally heated, our fight-or-flight responses hijack our brains and decrease the power of the logical parts of the brain. If you find yourself becoming tense, then take a break. Come back when you're calmer.

#### *How to host constructive conversations:*

- Establish the purpose. Clearly explain that you are all here to hear and learn from one another, not to debate. You can also acknowledge the limitations - this conversation won't immediately resolve the topic at hand. Still, it opens the door to future solutions once we're better able to genuinely understand where the other side is coming from. It is best to jointly agree on the purpose ahead of time with other congregation leaders, like congregation elders or study group leaders. This helps to diffuse and multiply ownership of the initiative, so that it's not all resting on your shoulders.
- Establish the expectations. Invite your congregation members to affirm these expectations for ourselves and one another; don't impose them upon them. These shared agreements set the stage for a productive dialogue, and they also justify

managing people who become aggressive or otherwise act in bad faith during the conversation.

- Focus on common ground. Our polarized environment encourages us to see one another as the problem. Help your community to understand that they are working on a shared project of fellowship and spiritual growth. Find shared values and agreed-upon goals that further the cause of peace in your community. Work towards those goals together, rather than engaging in winner-takes-all debates. Even if you disagree strongly with one another, it can be helpful to act as if you were all on the same team. Frame your statements in terms of the shared values and the challenges you both face together.
- Talk in small groups. Meaningful, transformative conversations are rarely had in large groups. Try to organize into groups of 4-10 people.
- Plan for power differences. Many societal power differences influence how much and how honestly people speak up in difficult conversations. The more perspectives are heard, and heard equally, the more everyone in the conversation can benefit from a deeper understanding and connection with others. Here are some options to plan for power differences: 1) Ask people participating in the conversation to be mindful of how much they are speaking vs how much others are speaking (and, in so doing, remind them that the purpose of the conversation is to learn other perspectives, not to "win" the conversation). 2) Tell the group about how societal power differences often show up in conversations. 3) Use techniques like breaking into groups of 2-3 or using post-it notes to allow people to write out their thoughts before discussing as a group.

### *Constructive Collaboration*

Take action together. We deepen trust, solidarity, and belonging - building blocks of resilience to division - through constructive collaboration. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder and move forward to tackle our shared problems, flexing our muscles of unity before they're tested in a crisis. People can also lose interest at best, or become disillusioned at worst, when we just focus on talking without action. Joint action provides tangible results that keep peacemaking relevant in a busy world.

Constructive collaboration can also be a great place to start when faced with a fissure. It is not always best to attack a problem head-on. Sometimes, it is better to "step over" it by shifting focus onto action around our common ground, the things that matter. If you can redirect people's energy toward positive goals based on shared values, you may be able to wait out the latest controversy while building trust and open dialogue. For example, today there is a great deal of conflict over school curricula. And yet, most people agree: it is good to help children learn. You might direct your community's energies toward that goal while avoiding hot-button issues. Charitable works, such as school supply drives, tutoring, and homework help, can help people see that they share common ground. When you focus on fundamentals, you can begin to open space for difficult conversations and build trust.

### *Healthy Media Habits*

Teach your congregation about healthy media consumption. A lot of information online isn't always factual or fair, and the outrage economy intentionally directs us toward this kind of toxic media. Consider sharing healthy habits with your congregation.

<sup>9</sup> Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most

- Outsmart manipulative media. There is an industry whose job it is to say something so outrageous that you click on it and forward it. Learn the red flags of manipulative media. [Propaganda Critic](http://www.propagandacritic.com)<sup>10</sup> offers an excellent list of common forms of manipulative rhetoric.
- Learn how to spot inauthentic content. Teach your friends and family how to be a savvy consumer of news. Empathize with loved ones when discussing misinformation they have shared and point to credible sources. Don't publicly shame people for sharing misinformation.
- Seek out the good; don't just avoid the bad. Seek out content that is humanizing and thoughtfully provides different perspectives.
- When consuming media content, ask yourself:
  - *Is it true?* Do a quick Google search to see if other trusted media outlets are reporting the same thing.
  - *Is it honest?* Consider whether the content is misleading. Does the article try to paint one event as indicative of a broader trend, without evidence? Is it specific about what has happened? Is the headline misleading?
  - *Is it helpful?* What is this media intending me to do and feel, and is that a constructive part of our world? How does it make the other side look? Is it inflammatory? Does it encourage me to disregard, dismiss, hate, or fear another group?

### Digging Deeper

If you want to learn more about building belonging to protect your congregation from division, consider the following resources and organizations:

- For quick resources to share with your congregation, see these practice cards in this toolkit:
  - “Can we talk about tough topics?”
  - “Can we peacefully talk to one another?”
  - “Can we talk about news consumption?”
- For guidance on constructive conversations:
  - [Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most](https://www.stoneandheen.com/difficult-conversations)<sup>11</sup>
  - [Living Room Conversations](https://livingroomconversations.org/)<sup>12</sup>
  - [Braver Angels](https://braverangels.org/)<sup>13</sup>
- For balanced news coverage and media bias ratings:
  - AllSides
  - Tangle

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.propagandacritic.com>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.stoneandheen.com/difficult-conversations>

<sup>12</sup> <https://livingroomconversations.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://braverangels.org/>

## 02 Peace in My City

*As the upcoming election loomed, Jordan's heart weighed heavily with concern. The scars from the previous divisive election period were still visible, not only within their congregation but also beyond the congregation's walls, affecting the entire community. During the last election cycle, the divisions were felt in schools, workplaces, and social events. Local projects and charitable initiatives lost momentum as people hesitated to collaborate with those who held opposing views. Instead of coming together to address common challenges, they were consumed by animosity and suspicion. The divisive climate didn't spare the schools either. Teachers struggled to maintain a neutral environment, and students absorbed the contentious atmosphere, sometimes mirroring the hostility they observed in adults. The community's social fabric, once tightly woven, seemed to fray.*

*Jordan felt compelled to act proactively to prevent the same divisions from taking hold again. They believed that the core teachings of their faith emphasized love, compassion, and unity. The divisions plaguing their community were antithetical to these principles, and they felt a responsibility to help interrupt the pathway to polarization.*

### Breaking Down the Problem

Like in the “Peace in My Congregation” scenario, Jordan is navigating growing polarization in their congregation. In this scenario, Jordan is concerned with how polarization in the broader environment affects the congregation. Some of the key factors at play:

- Many Americans are experiencing *threats to belonging in a changing world*. For some, there is a sense that traditional ways of life are rapidly shifting, which can instill fears about losing their place in society (unbelonging).<sup>14</sup> When people feel powerless and left out, they are more susceptible to “us vs them” polarization.
- Declining trust turns up the stakes of disagreements; it makes us feel like the other side isn't just wrong, they can't be trusted. Less than one in four Americans believes that the federal government, American corporations, and national media are honest. One in three Americans believes that their local government is honest. Nearly three-quarters believe that trust in our fellow Americans has gotten worse in the last 20 years.<sup>15</sup>

### What to Do

Broader societal divisions are seeping into congregations, especially during tense national and local “flashpoints” like the election period. Congregational leaders can take proactive action toward peace both in the congregation and in their cities, working in partnership with other leaders, like faith leaders, city officials, school superintendents, mental health professionals, and others. Here are some steps that congregational leaders can take to build peace in their cities.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Healy : “To ‘unbelong’ is to have what was thought to be certain or taken for granted removed, disconnecting us from others...In such cases, membership belonging has been revoked, removed or challenged in some way...unbelonging becomes positioned as a place of exile and danger, of homelessness and rootlessness for those who once belonged, but are now abandoned as outsiders.” One in three Texans is concerned about being left behind in a rapidly changing Texas, according to a 2021 study by More in Common. In Tarrant County, our research found particular concern about changes and divisions brought by outside influences, like “outsiders” moving in.

<sup>15</sup> More in Common, “Two Stories of Distrust”, [https://www.moreincommon.com/media/yfcbfmmmp/mic\\_two-stories-of-distrust.pdf](https://www.moreincommon.com/media/yfcbfmmmp/mic_two-stories-of-distrust.pdf).

## Five Vital Signs of Peace

Peacemaking is most effective when it is responsive to the local context. Just as a doctor checks a patient's blood pressure, temperature, and weight to assess their overall health, you can evaluate the vital signs of peace in your city. These vital signs provide lenses to look through to determine the level of peace in the community. Each lens provides a different view, offering clarity that facilitates discussions on the behavior and attitude changes that can make a difference.

1. **Safety:** How safe do people feel in the community? What makes people feel safe? How common is violence? How common are non-violent hate crimes (e.g., using slurs or hate symbols in graffiti and posters)?
2. **Agency:** Do people believe that they can create change in the community?
3. **Solidarity:** How much do people trust each other to have each other's backs, especially across age, politics, race, class, and neighborhood?
4. **Trust in Leaders:** How much do people trust their leaders to do the right thing?
5. **Resources:** Do money (like consumer spending or grants) and other resources (like volunteer time) flow toward division or toward peacemaking?

Check these vital signs to diagnose the health of peace in your city. Different groups will have different experiences with each vital sign, so it's important to consult as broad a group as possible. Bring in perspectives from other faiths, races, neighborhoods, ages, politics, classes, and sectors (government, faith, business, education, local media, non-profit, etc.). Consider ways to make sure that people feel comfortable being honest (like using anonymous surveys, talking to people one-on-one, or hosting constructive conversations).

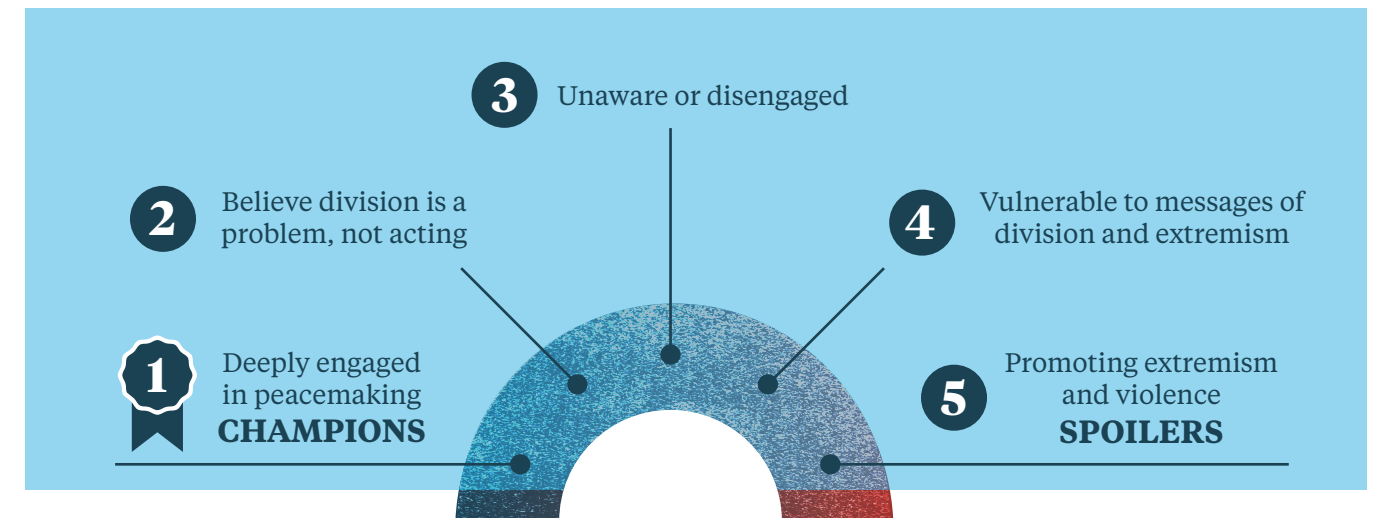
## Resilience Teams

Peacemakers need allies. Working together multiplies your impact across your community and offers solidarity with other leaders as you undertake this hard work. Resilience teams can be one way to build out your bench of peacemakers.

1. Recruit leaders from across your city, no more than about a dozen. Incorporate a diversity of perspectives, like in the vital sign diagnosis. Consider individuals with influence, ideally from diverse groups of people. Consider leaders who fall in the "1" range of "champions" (people actively working to build peace) and the "2" range of "passive supporters" (people who see a need for peacemaking but are not currently acting). By working with both 1s and 2s, you're both deepening and expanding your base of peacemakers. See the following page for more information about the 1-5 Spectrum and this movement-building approach to peacemaking.
2. Diagnose the health of peace in your city. Here are a few ways to approach that assessment:
  - a. Five Vital Signs of Peace
  - b. Envisioning peace. What does peace mean in our community? What would it look like if our city's vital signs were all healthy? How would leaders and residents feel and act?

- c. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) Analysis. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses that will help you get toward that vision. Which leaders, traditions, and local institutions (like sports teams, congregations, civic associations, schools, etc.) are uniting people? What are the weaknesses driving people apart? How can you leverage your strengths (opportunities) and what might be barriers to success (threats)?

3. Make a plan based on your diagnosis. Like a doctor prescribing blood pressure medication, think about actions to improve your community's vital signs. Some ideas can be found in this toolkit.
  - a. Define who you want to engage in your plan, as specifically as possible. Consider where they might sit on the 1-5 Spectrum and how you might influence them to move along the spectrum.
4. Repeat. Peacemaking is a long-term endeavor. Decide how often you should meet and where. Clarify team roles, like meeting leader, notetaker, and leaders for each part of your action plan. At your team meetings, assess the peace in your city, evaluate the effectiveness of your action plans, and develop new plans that incorporate your findings and reflections.



## Digging Deeper

- To learn more about the state of belonging in the U.S.: [The Belonging Barometer](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f1da1ea15cd5bef32169f/t/641b16f74a75495c305d2625/1679496953766/The+Belonging+Barometer.pdf)<sup>16</sup>
- To learn more about what works to address polarization and support democracy: [Stanford University, Megastudy identifying effective interventions to strengthen Americans' democratic attitudes](https://www.strengtheningdemocracychallenge.org/paper)<sup>17</sup>
- To learn more about the Vital Signs of Peace: [Peace Impact Framework](https://cnxus.org/peace-impact-framework/)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f7f1da1ea15cd5bef32169f/t/641b16f74a75495c305d2625/1679496953766/The+Belonging+Barometer.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.strengtheningdemocracychallenge.org/paper>

<sup>18</sup> <https://cnxus.org/peace-impact-framework/>

## 03 Peace Against Hate

*Jordan knew that polarization and us vs. them narratives were taking hold around the country, but they didn't see how it could happen in their community, where they sought to foster a sense of fellowship in their congregation and beyond. That's why they were so surprised and distraught to learn that several local residents had woken up with flyers, adorned with white supremacist symbols and hateful messages, in their driveways.*

*The message was clear: the people behind the flyers were trying to stoke old fears and hatreds of different races and religions. Jordan knew in their heart that this was not an isolated act committed by a few misguided local teens. They knew that they had to take action to stand in solidarity with those who were targeted by the hateful messages and demonstrate that this was not what their town should stand for.*

### Breaking Down the Problem

- *Extremism* is any set of beliefs that divides people into an “in-group” and “out-group,” claims that these groups are in irresolvable conflict, and says the only solution is for one group to dominate, expel, or exterminate the other.
- *Moral disengagement* is a consequence of polarization and a symptom of extremism. It consists of deciding that others are not worthy of moral consideration, whether because they hold a different identity or disagree on politics.
- *Hate* is an extreme way of classifying something or someone that elicits strong emotions like disgust and anger. Hate amplifies aggressive behavior toward out-groups while reducing personal responsibility for such behavior. Recent research shows that hate can become “hardwired” into our brain’s pathways.<sup>19</sup> The more we hate, the harder it is to learn peace, and the more easily we are manipulated by demagogues and purveyors of hatred and division.
- *Perennial hatreds* include supremacist ideologies that have endured the test of time and continue to have negative impacts today. These hatreds share essential commonalities: identification and the dehumanization of an out-group; positioning the designated out-group as an existential threat; and seeking to exclude via social shunning and/or physical violence.

### What to Do

When a crisis or hateful incident occurs, our response means the difference between a stronger community and a weaker one. The guidance below will help you respond to an incident.

### Preventing Hate

1. *Focus on the long game of peacemaking.* Unfortunately, we don't often see the decisive, “Hollywood”-style resolutions we'd like, where the bad guys are defeated and driven away permanently. Then the community can return to its previous

sense of peace and safety. Hateful speech is protected under the 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which gives people the right to say even deeply immoral and harmful things. That means that facing it and opposing it must be a matter of ongoing work by people of goodwill. Working for peace is a lifetime effort. To begin this work, you and your community will need to understand the state of peace in your community and have a basic understanding of how people are drawn to hate groups and how to recognize a hate group.

2. *Assemble a team before an incident.* You don't want to exchange business cards at the site of the earthquake. Your response will be more effective if you already know who to call and if you already trust each other. Consider how to identify and convene peacemakers across the community.
3. *Decide where to draw the line of acceptable behavior, ideally before an incident.* Some lines are easy to draw. Few would tolerate calls for violence against people in their community. And most people recoil at openly racist statements. However, other boundaries are more difficult. Some might be passed off as jokes, harmless and outlandish conspiracy theories, or immature behavior by kids. These “gray area” cases are difficult to judge. That's why you must plan ahead for them. Take time to reflect, pray, and try to answer these questions: Do these ideas encourage seeing a whole group as inferior? What kind of language will prevent my entire community from participating in the life of our congregation? What topics will drive people apart if we allow them to become the subject of ongoing debate? Where do these ideas logically lead? What is the point of no return? What are the consequences of diverting attention away from our mission?

### Responding to Hate

*In your congregation:*

- **Move fast, but not too fast.** Address the matter as soon as possible, without appearing panicked or moved by external pressure. A delayed response or a lack of response will be seen by many as apathy or, worse, quiet endorsement of the incident. However, a too-quick reaction may drive tensions higher by increasing your congregation's sense of urgency. For most incidents, the following Sunday will be soon enough. However, for national or local tragedies, you may want to speak out immediately.
- **Identify the value** that was violated by the incident. Align yourself against that violation in the clearest terms possible. Be specific. Lead with your religious convictions and show your congregants the proactive steps that will help them live their lives as your faith would call them to live.
- **Form a team** to respond. Ensure there are clear channels for reporting incidents like these. Input from your peers will aid you in moments of indecision and also help to avoid mistakes.
- **Come back** more resilient than ever. If you have put good systems for reporting and responding in place before an incident, then you will see a congregation that is stronger and more vibrant by overcoming hate and division. Do not get discouraged when these problems don't go away overnight. There are deeply entrenched problems in our nation which make this work difficult—but also necessary. By working steadily, you will gradually move away from the threat of negative conflict and toward peace.

<sup>19</sup> (Danesi 2023)

## In your community

- **Move fast.** It is sometimes easier to determine if an incident in your wider community is significant enough to address. Once you've decided to respond, do so quickly and calmly. Follow the steps described above to address your congregation. You might also consider offering your presence as a mediator or calming influence during moments of local controversy and tension. If the disputing sides in an incident will allow it, try to facilitate dialogue. Offer your support and solidarity to the victim-survivors on behalf of your congregation.
- **Offer to lead relief** services in the community. This could be something as simple as publicly praying for victims. Or, it could be a public display of support that brings together different groups from your community in a spirit of peace and reconciliation. Always ask: What is the role that the congregation can take to make a difference, first in the short-term, and then in the long-term? Never speak without action.

## Nationwide

- **Practice discernment.** Many seeming national crises are actually *pseudo-events*. That is, they are amplified up to create division rather than reflecting an existing conflict. Prayer can be a helpful way to organize your thoughts and receive guidance when making this discernment. Also, ask yourself, "Are there real-life examples of this issue in my community? How many or how often? Does the media reporting far outweigh actual occurrences?"
- **Resist culture-war framing.** It is impossible to keep up with every trend or political controversy. Don't get trapped in the outrage cycle, and try to keep your community out of it, too.
- **Shift** your congregation's point of view to the long-term. Proactively set goals with your faith community that deal with issues of unity, inclusion, political polarization, and the difference between constructive disagreement and destructive conflict. Focus on shared interests, values, and goals, and work to separate people from problems. Help your community to understand that they are working on a shared project of fellowship and spiritual growth.

## Digging Deeper

- For quick guidance on hate and responses to incidents: "Can we talk about hate?" practice card in this toolkit
- To stay informed about trends in hate and extremism:
  - [Middlebury Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism](https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec)<sup>20</sup>
  - [Institute for Strategic Dialogue](https://www.isdglobal.org/)<sup>21</sup>
  - [Life After Hate](https://www.lifeafterhate.org/)<sup>22</sup>
  - [The McCain Institute](https://www.mccaininstitute.org/programs/democracy-programs/)<sup>23</sup>
  - [The Western States Center](https://www.westernstatescenter.org/)<sup>24</sup>

20 <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec>

21 <https://www.isdglobal.org/>

22 <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/>

23 <https://www.mccaininstitute.org/programs/democracy-programs/>

24 <https://www.westernstatescenter.org/>

## 04 Peace Against Radicalization

*Jordan sat in their study and listened attentively to the voice on the other end of the phone. The voice belonged to Mrs. Thompson, a devoted member of the congregation, who was worried about her college-age son, James. James had always had trouble in school, both socially and academically. He was on the right path after enrolling in a few courses at the local community college, but things seemed to be going south once again. Mrs. Thompson explained that James had been spending an excessive amount of time online, engrossed in video games and chatting with his gamer friends. Lately, she had noticed a disturbing change in his behavior.*

*During family dinners, James began expressing troubling opinions about women and minorities, parroting some of the toxic rhetoric he had encountered online. He said that his online friends had opened his eyes to the ways that these groups were baiting real men into violence. Worried for her son's well-being, Mrs. Thompson turned to Jordan for help, knowing that they had a deep understanding of their faith and a genuine love for the congregation.*

### Breaking Down the Problem & Responses

#### The New Media Landscape

Unfortunately, our modern media tends to worsen both the demand-side and supply-side aspects of the radicalization problem. Social media fuels envy and fear of losing status, while broadcast media sensationalizes the ordinary conflicts of life into dire struggles for life and death. Living in this onslaught of negative media is traumatizing, as we rocket from one panic to the next, unsure what fresh fear lies around the corner, waiting to snatch us. Meanwhile, there are all too many content creators, influencers, and political figures who are all too willing to stoke the fires of our fear and uncertainty for their cynical gain. Add to this the firehose of supply, a barrage of content directed at us through our computers, phones, and televisions, and we find ourselves in a dangerous place. In this environment, even healthy individuals can find themselves at growing risk for being manipulated. Intelligence, honesty, and morality are not always enough. It takes awareness of the problem, too.

Online radicalization, like the kind James appears to be engaged in, is most often targeted at young men. It takes their very real concerns about an uncertain future, and their questions about what it means to be a man, and misdirects them into fear and hostility. James appears to be scapegoating women, but he could just as easily be directing his anger toward racial and religious minorities or other marginalized groups. Remember, radicalization is less about the extremist ideology itself and more about the sense of power and control that the ideology promises to a vulnerable person.

*Jordan has been working with their youth director to address the risks posed by online media, including risks of radicalization. Jordan and the youth director know that the best way to stop young people from radicalizing online is to educate them before they encounter "supply-side" material. While James did not receive this protection, all the young people in Jordan's congregation who participate in the congregation's youth group do.*

It's essential to remind your community (and yourself!) that the internet is full of manipulative messages, intended to short-circuit our ability to make sound judgments. When we allow ourselves to be manipulated in this way, our freedom to make up our minds is taken away, and we can be made to act against our best interests—including the best interests of our souls. Unfortunately, being intelligent is no defense against manipulation. Intelligent people are manipulated by propaganda as easily as anyone else. Being well-intentioned is also no defense. Our best intentions can be twisted in the interest of a harmful ideology. The only defense against being manipulated is to recognize the dynamics of online propaganda.

In today's digital age, there is a wealth of worrying material available to download, consume, digest, and share. All someone must do is look, and they can find just about anything. Sharing extremist propaganda during face-to-face interactions or online may indicate that someone is being exposed to extremist ideologies. Depending on the substance of the content, things like pamphlets, videos, manifestos, and memes can all be associated with extremist groups and movements. Content can have blatant indicators like symbols (e.g., a swastika or flag associated with a group), hateful or inciting language, derogatory comments about a particular group of people, or be associated with an individual who has carried out a violent attack. In other cases, content can be less transparent, integrating conspiracy theories or using humor. At first glance, humorous content<sup>25</sup> such as memes and videos, can seem harmless because of the incorporated elements of jest or irony. However, it is usually at the expense of a targeted population, can involve the suggestion of violence while offering levels of plausible deniability. Sharing such content is a red flag of someone being exposed to extremist ideologies.

There are many different ways that a person with demand-side risks for radicalization might consume extremist content and proceed down a pathway to extremism. A few concepts would be especially relevant to James's situation:

## *Pills*

People going down the same path as James often use the language of being “redpilled,” or simply “pilled.” “Taking the red pill” is a popular culture reference from the 1999 blockbuster film, *The Matrix*. In the movie, taking the red pill, as opposed to the blue pill, opens one's eyes to the truth of society, instead of staying in a state of blissful ignorance. This concept has been adopted by many extremist groups and movements as a way of indoctrinating individuals into their conspiratorial philosophies. Individuals exposed to or consuming extremist rhetoric often mention having a political “awakening.” Being “redpilled” points to someone being pulled into the folds of misogynistic, racist, antisemitic, or conspiratorial ideologies. If someone earnestly describes themselves as becoming “redpilled,” it is a major indicator that something might be wrong.

<sup>25</sup> <https://gnet-research.org/2020/10/26/lol-extremism-humour-in-online-extremist-content>

## *Misogynistic Expressions*

In 2022, the [Secret Service noted](#)<sup>26</sup> that misogynistic extremism is a growing threat in the United States. Misogynistic or male supremacist attitudes toward women and girls present themselves in several ways. Including policing or controlling their behaviors, the idea that feminism has destroyed the fabric of modern society, and in more extreme cases, sexual nihilism, where sex is seen as unattainable, lacking value, with women and society being the cause. Sometimes behaviors such as interpersonal difficulties, harassment, or having a history of inappropriate conduct toward women are signs of misogynistic or male supremacist leanings. James's words suggest he has been “redpilled” toward this kind of extreme sexism.

## *Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles*

The online space tends to push us into “echo chambers.” Echo chambers are social spaces where disagreement and dissent are rare, or even forbidden. Echo chambers can occur online or off, such as in a chat where open discussion is shouted down or a congregation where congregants may not question their congregational leader's opinions. Echo chambers create dangerous conditions where the most extreme voices tend to dominate and moderating voices are eventually driven out. This can distort the judgment and values of people inside the echo chamber.

Similarly, “Filter Bubbles” are the result of our digital technology's tendency to filter disagreement and dissent into hostile opposition, through increasingly personalized online media habits. Our choices in social media connections, streaming audio and video selections, etc., produce a highly customized media diet. Social media algorithms and other design choices can produce a very limited range of perspectives for us to consume. However, this does not completely prevent us from encountering differing opinions. Instead, it leads us to view those differing opinions as “outside” our circle of trust, and thus more worthy of suspicion and even hostility.

## *Slippery Slope*

There is usually no one moment when someone becomes radicalized. Instead, it is a gradual process where, over time, seemingly innocent or harmless ideals become more extreme. While internally someone may have contradictory thoughts about their behaviors, [cognitive dissonance](#)<sup>27</sup> increases a person's justifications for their actions, creating a personally persuasive narrative, validating their opinions and deeds. This doubling-down effect, when paired with groupthink, provides a *slippery slope* toward radicalization. This step-by-step progression includes engagement with more extreme views, activities, and social groups. Through this process, individuals also become desensitized to emotions of guilt associated with hatred and even violence.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2022-03/NTAC%20Case%20Study%20-%20Hot%20Yoga%20Tallahassee.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24936719>

## *An Idealized Past*

People on a radicalization journey will often become nostalgic for a past that they never experienced, and indeed never existed. Sometimes this takes the form of belief in a time of perfect social harmony based on a lack of racial or religious diversity. Other times, this can refer to an idealized past when men ruled over women like dictators (some benevolent, some not). It can even take the form of outlandish pseudo-histories, such as the belief in the lost continent of Atlantis or alien kings from outer space. What all these beliefs share in common is the promise of power and safety, and the justification to do “whatever it takes” to get there. That can mean domestic abuse in the case of male supremacy, as James is espousing.

*When meeting with James and Mrs. Thompson, Jordan tries to ask questions and listen more than speak. But when they hear something that reminds them of the dynamics described above, they point it out. Jordan mentions that it is not unheard of for people to engage in that kind of behavior, but that it can be harmful. When possible, they bring up their religious convictions and teachings to shed light on the errors that can lead people to this behavior and points to the correct course of action instead. James does not leave this meeting “cured” of his morbid interest in misogyny. However, Mrs. Thompson is much better equipped to understand what is happening and to stand up to it. Jordan continues to check in from time to time and, if necessary, mediate between mother and son.*

## **What to Do**

### *Early Intervention and Offramping*

You may pursue the following steps to intervene with a person of concern, *so long as there is no possibility of violence*. If there is the slightest suggestion of possible violence, it has to be reported. There simply is no alternative. You must keep yourself and your community protected, physically and legally.

These approaches will likely work best at the early stages.

### *Pre-empt*

It’s best to educate your community about the risks of manipulation they will face in their day-to-day lives. Propaganda exists because it is effective, and no one is immune. Moral, intelligent, well-meaning people fall for false, harmful stories every day.

As soon as you become aware of a destructive political movement, conspiracy theory, or cultural trend, learn everything you can about it. Then, identify the most common arguments, narratives, and rhetoric used to spread it. With that in hand, speak to your community. Explain that there are bad actors at work who wish to manipulate them away from their morals, values, and beliefs. Explain that no one is immune to this manipulation, and that the only way to protect yourself is to know the ways that these false teachers manipulate others. Explain that, while it is easy to nod their heads and confirm this is happening outside of your community, it is quite possible that each of them in the congregation is also susceptible to this kind of experience. Finally, describe the most

common arguments, narratives, and rhetoric you identified previously. Explain why these tactics are manipulative, why they are false, and why they contradict the values of your community.

Decades of science have shown that this is one of the most effective ways to protect people from manipulative propaganda, if you follow the formula described here. You may do this one-on-one, in small groups, or to an entire assembly. If you can identify at-risk individuals within your community and reach out to them quickly, you might save them a great deal of unhappiness and moral mistakes. If you can reach people before the peddlers of hate, conspiracy, and misinformation, you will prevent many people from falling prey to their deception.

## *Disengage*

Once someone has begun to consume “supply side” content, you must convince them to stop.

## *Redirect*

Disengagement leaves a vacuum in the life of the individual. If something positive does not fill that vacuum, they will likely slip back into Radicalization Career or pursue other unhealthy solutions to their needs. This means redirecting their energy in three key ways:

1. **Spiritually and psychologically.** Address the demand-side vulnerabilities. This will probably call for counseling of some sort. Extremism is a sickness of the soul, so your experience as a faith leader will help you here. Psychological counseling may also be necessary if the individual has significant experiences of trauma or other emotional vulnerabilities.
2. **Socially.** Involve them in better activities, ideally in-person activities with other people. Service activities create a sense of self-efficacy, healthy pride, and concern for others over self.
3. **Behaviorally.** Breaking the habits that expose them to supply-side material. Stop using the online channels, watching the television shows, and listening to the radio shows. People have a hunger for content just like they have a hunger for food. They will need new sources to get that intellectual and emotional nourishment.
4. **Support.** Check in and keep checking in. Keep asking questions. Continue to facilitate the previous three steps.

Note: People who have become involved in extremist scenes, conspiracy theory subcultures, or other destructive movements are generally more informed about *your* beliefs and expectations than you are of theirs. Be careful that you are not being told what you want to hear or being “yessed out the door.”

## *Early Intervention Checklist*

1. Does this individual have a personal support network? (e.g., family, friends) Is this support network virtual or “in real life?”
2. Is this network strong? What kind of support do they offer (e.g., emotional, moral, financial)?
3. Who in this network is concerned about the individual’s behavior?

4. Is this individual living through a period of transition or change?
5. Has this individual suffered a recent loss (e.g., loved one, job, divorce, etc)?
6. When did the concerning behavior begin? Was it sudden, or has it been building for some time?
7. Are there spaces that they regularly visit online to consume content related to this issue?
8. Are there broadcasters, influencers, or other people not personally known to this individual who supply most of the troubling content?
9. How often do they consume online or broadcast content?
10. Has this individual separated from their friend group?
11. Do they have online friendships with specific, like-minded individuals?
12. Are they meeting with like-minded individuals in person?
13. How frequently do they meet with these people?

Look at your answers for questions 1-5. Use the answers to get a sense of the individual's "demand-side" vulnerability. Are they socially isolated? If not, is their social circle a healthy one, or not? Are there acute stresses that might be causing this problem to surface? Adjust your approach based on the severity you see. If they are early in the process and their symptoms seem mild, focus on a preemptive message while encouraging disengagement and diversion. If they appear further along the pathway, work to understand the negative messages and attitudes that they've already absorbed, and focus on disengagement and diversion. Then, follow up.

Look at your answers to questions 5-10. Use these answers to get a sense of the individual's "Supply-Side Direction." What subcultures, political movements, or conspiracy theories are they consuming and associating with? Are these movements violent? What social needs are being met by associating with them or consuming their content? What are the spaces and places where this happens (e.g., a website, gaming chat, or physical location)? This will help you to create a disengagement and redirection strategy.

Look at your answers to questions 11-13. Use these answers to get a sense of how strong the individual's social connection is to others who share these concerning beliefs. If the social connection is strong, particularly if they are making contact offline, then the situation may have progressed beyond your ability to intervene. At that point, your responsibility shifts to keeping your community safe and free from toxic influence. You might insist that the individual not discuss this topic, or topics relating to it, in your congregation or at its events. In extreme cases, you might request that the individual refrain from attending events until they have disengaged. However, it may be worthwhile for you, as a community leader, to maintain contact and continue to encourage disengagement. Religious counseling against hate and the conspiracy mindset may help. You might even consider referring the individual to a reputable deradicalization group, such as Life After Hate.

We recommend that you look to others in your network for a second opinion. This need not be very formal. Meet and describe the situation to your peer. Walk them through your

assessment of the Early Intervention Checklist and ask for feedback. If you are tapped to help with peer review, consider questions that will shed more light on each Checklist item. Perhaps there is more personal background you could gather. Perhaps you have insight into the social context (e.g., family, political climate) surrounding the at-risk individual, which can add nuance to the assessment. If, by the end of your meeting, you determine that you need more information, make a plan to gather it all quickly and in the least intrusive manner possible. For example, you might reach out to the at-risk individual's teachers, coaches, or friends. However, if by the end of your meeting, you have not clarified or confirmed a course of action, reach out to another network ally for more input and peer review.

Again, *if there is the slightest possibility of violence or self-harm*, you must report it. There simply is no alternative. You must keep yourself and your community protected, both physically and legally.

### *Digging Deeper*

- For quick guidance on online dynamics:
  - "Can we talk about conspiracy theories?" practice card in this toolkit
  - "Can we talk about social media?" practice card in this toolkit
- For more guidance on how to support a young person in your life: [A Parent & Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization](#)<sup>28</sup>
- For support with counseling individuals of concern: [Life After Hate](#)<sup>29</sup> & the [Prevention Practitioners Network](#)<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.american.edu/centers/university-excellence/upload/splc\\_peril\\_covid\\_parents\\_guide\\_jan\\_2021\\_1-2.pdf](https://www.american.edu/centers/university-excellence/upload/splc_peril_covid_parents_guide_jan_2021_1-2.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.mccainstitute.org/programs/preventing-targeted-violence/prevention-practitioners-network/>

