

## **Congregations Building Bridges: Renewing Civic Engagement as Our Common Purpose**

A panel featuring Rev. Traci Blackmon (Executive Minister of Justice & Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ), Prof. David Campbell (Packey J. Dee Professor of American Democracy at the University of Notre Dame), Sister Simone Campbell (Former Executive Director Network Lobby for Social Catholic Justice), Rabbi Rolando Matalon (Senior Rabbi at B'nai Jeshurun), Iman Eldin Susa (St. Louis Islamic Center NUR)

Moderated by Rev. Serene Jones, President of the Historic Union Theological Seminary

Introduction by Prof. Marie Griffith, Washington University in St. Louis

Virtual Event via Zoom

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**Griffith:** Greetings and welcome to all of you who are joining us on this webinar for tonight's event: Congregations Building Bridges; Renewing Civic Engagement As Our Common Purpose. My name is Marie Griffith and I'm the Director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St Louis. We are sponsoring tonight's event in close collaboration with two other organizations: the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; and Union Theological Seminary. Our conversation is inspired by the Academy's commissioned report: Our Common Purpose Reinventing Democracy for the 21st Century.

I'd like to just start by saying a few words about this report which is the basis for tonight's conversation. In early 2016, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences recognized that this country is in a crucial moment: on the one hand, Americans trust in our government and in each other is at historic lows. We all know that, on the other hand, there is evidence of a democratic revitalization in communities across the country and so the academy convened a group of scholars and a variety of other professional experts called the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. This commission launched in spring 2018, with the purpose of improving our understanding of democratic engagement in the United States and to make recommendations to help empower voters, increase political and civic participation, and revitalize our civic culture. The commission co-chairs are Eric Liu, President of Citizen University; Stephen Heintz, President and CEO of Rockefeller Brothers Fund; and Danielle Allen, Director of the Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University.

I was one of the commission members and we were a truly cross-partisan and diverse group. It included 35 leaders from academia, civil society, politics, and business from across the ideological spectrum. And we did what commissions like these frequently do: we talked to thought leaders, surveyed existing research, and looked at the many reform efforts happening around the country. But we also held nearly 50 listening sessions where we heard from hundreds of Americans across the nation. We heard from first years at the Naval Academy, refugees in Minnesota and Massachusetts, and moms in Kentucky. We also held two listening sessions hosted by Union Theological Seminary where we heard from faith leaders and students in all these conversations. We heard from conservatives, liberals, independents and non-voters from a diverse range of racial ethnic and religious communities; ages and backgrounds and you won't be surprised to hear that Americans from all walks of life told us they think our system is broken but we also heard that people want to fix it. We heard a real fear that our divisions in this country

have grown so deep that nothing can unite us anymore and we heard a shared love of country and a shared hope for what our nation has the potential to become, even if it has never quite lived up to that potential.

Over the course of our two years together, the commission put aside our own political differences to reach agreement around a set of important issues that affect all Americans. The commission's final report, *Our Common Purpose*, offers 31 bold recommendations to reinvent American democracy for the 21st century. The recommendations address political institutions, civic culture and civil society and seek to create a virtuous cycle between them. So, examples of these recommendations include political action and reforms like enlarging the House of Representatives; instituting supreme court term limits; and moving election day to Veterans Day. Other recommendations call for engagement in communities throughout the country about how to retell American history, not as a simplistic story of heroes and villains, but as a history of tremendous complexity that includes violence, structural inequality, and ongoing injustices so visible today. Many of these recommendations center around creating a culture of shared commitment to one another and to our democracy, like the recommendation to cultivate a civic faith in our country. Some require action at the federal level, but many could be enacted at the state or local level and only one requires a constitutional amendment. So, all of these, we believe, are feasible and achievable. You can read the full report online or request a hard copy from the website and those links are going to come to you here in just a moment in the chat.

So, our report and recommendations are committed to the idea that improvement of our civil society, civic culture, and our political institutions really must go hand in hand. All of these are necessary, and none on their own is sufficient. We see efforts across this country to sustain civic resilience and that's really why we believe a reinvention of our constitutional democracy remains entirely within reach. Now germane to tonight's discussion, a healthy civil society, and civic culture are vital to a healthy democracy. Religious institutions have the potential to play a central role in this conversation. And so that's really why we are here tonight: to talk to congregations and religious institutions; and how religious communities can participate in this process of reinventing American democracy.

So, with that in mind, I'd like to go ahead and very briefly introduce tonight's distinguished panelists who are here for this discussion. You will find links to longer bios and identifying information in the chat box as we move along.

The Reverend Traci Blackmon is the executive Minister of Justice and Witness Ministries in the United Church of Christ. She was initially ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and served in various ministry capacities there before becoming ordained in the United Church of Christ where she was installed as the first woman and 18th Pastor of Christ the King United Church of Christ in Fluorescent, Missouri. She is also a registered nurse with more than 25 years of Health Care experience.

David Campbell is the JD Professor of American Democracy at The University of Notre Dame and the Chairperson of the Political Science Department there. He is widely known for his research focusing on civic and political engagement, with a particular focus on religion and secularism, and young people. He is the author of numerous scholarly articles and books, most

recently, *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American politics* with Jeff Lehmann and John Green. And he too was a member of the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship that authored *Our Common Purpose*.

Sister Simone Campbell, no relation to David Campbell, is a Sister of Social Service and is the former executive director of the network lobby for Catholic Social Justice and the leader of Nuns on the Bus. In these capacities, she worked for more than 16 years to shape public policy to benefit those who are too often left out of the U.S. economy. Her two books, *A Nun on the Bus* and *Hunger for Hope*, highlight the intersection of faith and her policy work. She is an attorney, noted speaker, and poet with extensive public policy experience.

Jose Rolando Matalon is the Senior Rabbi of Beni Jeshurun synagogue in New York, which is a vibrant, diverse community of 1800 households. He was born in Argentina and was educated in Buenos Aires, Montréal, Jerusalem and New York. He was ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1986. Rabbi Matalon has received many awards and is deeply involved in the New York Jewish and Israeli communities. His visionary leadership has a profound impact on the revitalization of Jewish synagogue life in the U.S. and Israel.

Eldin Susa is the Head Imam of the Saint Louis Islamic Center, a position he has held since 2015. He completed extensive training in Islamic Studies in Visoko, Cairo and Sarajevo before serving as a professor of Arabic language and literature at the United World College in Mostar. Prior to his arrival in the United States, he also worked as an imam in Visegrad, Eastern Bosnia working with former refugee populations that returned to their pre-war homes. Along with Reverend Blackman, Imam Souza is widely recognized as a dynamic prophetic religious leader in St. Louis.

Finally, the convener of this discussion is Serene Jones, a renowned scholar and public intellectual who is the 16th president of the Historic Union Theological Seminary in the city of New York. The first woman to head that august institution, President Jones occupies the Johnston Family Chair for Religion and Democracy. She was past President of the American Academy of Religion and she came to Union after 17 years at Yale. She's the author of many books; most recently, her memoir *Call It Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World*. She is frequently sought by media to comment on major issues impacting society because of her deep grounding in theology, politics, women's studies, economics, race studies, history and ethics.

So, audience members, you may use the Q/A function to send us questions for the panelists throughout the discussion this evening and we will get to as many as we can toward the end of the event, about 45 or 50 minutes from now.

So, thank you to all of you panelists for being here, and special thanks to you Serene for leading today's discussion. First, I do want to note that you hosted the two listening sessions at Union which were very helpful to the work of the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship. So, before I turn off my camera and we moved to your panel, could you just say a few words about these sessions: what did you hear in those discussions about the connection between faith communities and democracy.

You're still muted. Please unmute. There we go.

**Jones:**

So, thank you for that, and I'm so very pleased about this of means discussion. Marie thank you for all the work you did to pull this together to the Danforth Center, to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for this commission and, especially, to our panelists for saying yes to this conversation. So yes, we did host two of the conversations at Union and just to sort of jump into the deep end of this conversation, I will throw out there just a few of the things that came to the fore very quickly in our conversation. First of all, what was interesting is we invited about 30 religious leaders from around New York City, a sort of random mix – as diverse as we could make it– across the political spectrum and across all religious differences and all different kinds of congregations and communities. And what was most striking is that, I would say, 95 percent of the people said yes within like two hours of the invitation going out which said to me how eager leaders of faith community are to be asked to be in conversation about the relationship between their faith communities and democracy; to be a part of this conversation. I've never had that quick of a response.

In the conversation itself it immediately became apparent that no matter where one found oneself, the political divides that mark our nation are felt internal to their own communities. Religious leaders are -- they were very honest about it but they're really struggling with this. And whether it's a divide between them and the religious community across the street or whether it's divides they feel in their own communities, they are troubled by it and they're affected by it on a daily basis, be it an impact that it will have on their ability to think about what they're supposed to say when they speak publicly and how it might divide their community should they take a certain position on a matter. All of this is also happening as all of these religious leaders are reckoning with this decline of the size of their communities so there's this sort of external pressure that if a group of congregation members get upset and decide to leave. That just adds to the decline and also has financial consequences for religious communities.

So, there was, I would say, to be honest, quite a bit of concern and at times it bordered on despair about how to be a religious leader and speak ethically and morally and spiritually with conviction in the midst of a climate where that becomes itself a hot button topic. But there was also a real eagerness to figure out how to use the resources of the traditions that people came from to help respond to this. Now I must say people were not shooting their hands into the air with suggestions of how one does this because there was a real feeling of the depth of the issue. So, there was a sense of being both sort of lost and at odds with what's happening and searching for a way to move forward. And yet there was a sincere eagerness to do it and a searching for some new and refreshing ways to address this divide. And I would say the last thing is a really deep shared connection that ran through every single person in the room that faith communities are essential to the effective working of democracy because it is oftentimes in faith communities that the deep stories and the spiritual and ethical commitments that undergird democracy are taught and learned and the place where people are formed to be citizens. So, there's an eagerness for the faith community to be engaged. So that was what came of our conversation and this was again before the past election and before the past year. So, it'll be interesting this evening in our

conversation to see if things are on the upswing or to see if things have just gotten more divided or what's happening on the ground.

So as my first question to the panel, I want to ask us to have an honest conversation about how we are experiencing this divide in the places where we are leading, how is it manifest concretely in the communities that you're connected with? And I'm just going to go around and ask all of us to have a chance to say something about that. And Reverend Blackmon you are right underneath me on the screen, I'm going to ask you to go first.

**Blackmon:**

That's what happens when you have a last name that is a "B". It's an honor to be here with you it's so good to see you again Serena and everyone that's on the call together. I know some of you and I'm honored to meet others of you now. Well, I serve the United Church of Christ. We are known as a progressive denomination and so one might think that we would not be experiencing the same types of divisions that others are but we are. Anytime that politics becomes so infused in our witness of our faith we have people who are on various sides of various issues. What has changed most that is heart-wrenching to me is that we have lost in some cases the ability to communicate with one another beyond our differences. I think that, that has been escalated over the past several years by this tension, this growing intolerance in our country for diversity of thought, diversity of belief, diversity of expression. We've seen it tearing apart not just congregations but also tearing apart families. It is disheartening but I still hold hope that it offers an opportunity for faith leaders to model something that I believe is inherent in all of our sacred texts: the holiness and the divinity of the other; and that when we can come back to a place where we have civil conversation that is respectful of difference. Well perhaps, we do not start with difference and we start with the things we have in common then we model it for our larger congregation, so we're working at it. We just had a session devoted specifically to how to have courageous conversations. and we are going to roll that out for conversations between our rural communities of faith and our urban communities of faith our red communities of faith and our blue communities of faith. And we're hoping that by modeling this courageous conversation that does not lose sight of the divinity of everyone the divinity inherent in everyone that will be able to move back to a place, not of uniformity –that doesn't concern me as much, but of some unity around what matters most in this country and in our denomination.

**Jones:** Well, thank you. Right underneath you is Rabbi Matalon. Rowley, would you take a shot at this question?

**Matalon:** Thank you so much Serena. I'm pleased to be here with everyone on the panel. It is an honor to be here. My experience... you know, I am a leader congregation here on the upper West Side of Manhattan and I feel people are tired, that divisiveness has been so profound and they're always differences of opinion and divisions. I think the last few years have been particularly divisive and hard and the last election has left just people tired and, I think, afraid of getting into conversations and fights with... We have had divisions within the Jewish community about national issues in particular also about Israel. Now this latest round of violence between Israel and Palestine and Gaza and the profound hatred that has also surfaced, erupted, in some mixed towns, Arab-Jewish towns, has the Jewish community here and around the country. I think in a state of division also I mean there's some of us who lean this way, some others who lean that

way. So, I would say that the Jewish community is in a particularly difficult place. Our position in our congregation has been to lean in to this challenge and, as the Reverend Blackmon has just said, we have also created some opportunities for training, for practice. This trying to bridge the gaps is not something that comes naturally. I think either people are implanted or entrenched in their own position or they move away from the conversation. So, we've been trying to push people into the conversation, to lean in; and in order to do that we have to learn how to do it. It doesn't come naturally and so we've had to train and we did it over a number of issues which I would be happy to share a little later if we get into the conversation but I would like to allow some space for others to share.

**Jones:** Sister Simone, how are you – I know you're in California with your community now for the first time since the pandemic began but – how are you seeing this divide play itself out in the communities where you're working?

**Sister Campbell:** Well, thank you so much for this opportunity in this conversation. It just makes my heart happy to be able to engage across our various space in this critically important question and one of the things that I had noticed –I work more in politics, as a person of faith in the political world– but what I had noticed is that there is no agreement as to the mission of governance and there is a very large gap among our various constituencies in the U.S. as to what government should be about. And we did a series of rural roundtables around the country just to educate ourselves about what rural communities think. Reverend Blackmon mentioned the rural-urban divide and what we discovered is that in our small sample of 17 conversations in 16 different states, is rural communities felt dismissed by the urban reality. They felt demeaned and thought that it was local community who should take care of their people not knowing the urban reality of what challenges face us in the broad urban setting. But I think the critical piece is feeling demeaned and disregarded by the urban reality. Then I talked to my urban friends and they say “well, rural folks don't care about us, why should we care about them?” which goes back to the basic faith dimension that Reverend Blackmon was mentioning that I, as a Catholic Christian come at this with, is that we all have inherent dignity because we're created in the image and likeness of God. So, we need to see each other's dignity and respect that. So, I think one of the challenges that people of faith can bring to this is lifting up both dignity but as well as the needs and the goals of governance because if we could begin to agree on the goal then maybe we could find some bridging around some of the means to achieve it. But we've got a long way to go unless we're going to respect each other and that's the challenge that I see.

**Jones:** David Campbell, from where you sit, how do you see these deep divides manifesting themselves?

**Prof. Campbell:** Well, thank you and for that introduction actually because to put it that way, I think, presents me with both a challenge but it's in answering the challenge that I think I can hopefully, maybe, bring a bit of hope to this conversation. So, the challenge I have is I feel like I'm the ambassador here from political science, the discipline that studies religion and politics and how they fit together. As a card-carrying political scientist, I feel like I'm obligated to point out what we already know which is that America is a very polarized country. Now that word means different things to different people, but I think we can all sort of agree that, whatever it means, it has something to do with people not getting along with one another or not being able to

see the good in the other side even if they disagree politically. And all of that is true. We are definitely at a high point of polarization, at least, in the last 50 to 100 years. But there's actually another side to at least my work that cuts against that theme that we hear repeated endlessly that "Americans are hopelessly polarized". And that is specifically, believe it or not, on the topic of religion. A few years ago, Bob Putnam, he's another political scientist, and I wrote a book in which we went deep into trying to understand the role of religion in America's civic life and what we found was actually that when you get to the individual level, what actual Americans think about people of other faiths, there's a remarkable degree of acceptance across religious lines. It is not complete and there are certainly some religious groups that are not fully embraced by their friends and neighbors and I will acknowledge that. But for the most part most Americans actually are quite accepting of those who worship at a different altar than they do. They see this lived out in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces, in their families, and, increasingly, even in their marriages. So, when we look at what happens when people are exposed to those of other faiths, we see that they become more religiously tolerant and accepting – not just of the people in their network, you know, the people they actually know, but toward all faiths, believe it or not. If you become friends with a Mormon, you actually become more positive toward Muslims – just to give you an example of how this works. So, we have two things going on in the country, we've got this sharp political polarization but then we actually see evidence that, in their lived experiences, Americans have figured out a way to stitch together these sorts of inter-religious communities in a way that historically has not been the case. There was once a time when Americans were very separated religiously. That actually gives me hope that it is not the case that we are destined or doomed to be at each other's throats all the time, that actually there are some hints of positivity there. The very fact that this group represents the sheer diversity of American religion, I think, is a living example of exactly the sort of bridging at the individual level that many Americans experience, even if it's not reflected on social media or on cable news.

**Jones:** My guess is too that some of the hardest divides are not between religious communities but within religious communities. The Praise church across the street from the UCC church probably has a deeper conflict than one might have between those two communities than the mosque down the road. Imam Souza, talk to us about how it's being manifest in your community in St. Louis?

**Susa:** Yeah, and thank you for giving us a chance to express our thoughts on this, I would say, not so easy topic. Muslims, it is obvious they are affected by the political situations and the whole narrative created a really toxic, I would say, situation in which people, at least in my community, started to feel unsafe. It showed us how quickly a situation can really change, can deteriorate. I would say, in our situation, since we are coming from a war-torn country, it really reminded us how even religion can be abused by and used for political agenda. It really reminded us of the situation in Bosnia and in former Yugoslavia in the late 80s and 90s, when we witnessed abusing Christianity by Serbian Orthodox Church and using religion for Serbian national agenda which aimed at creating a greater Serbia at the expenses of the surrounding nations Bosnians, Croats, Albanians, and Montenegrins. Hopefully things and thankfully things are getting back to normal because of the narrative is no longer there. But what happened is that for the first time since we have a community here in United States, we had and we were forced as a community to hire security service because of the not so pleasant calls we received. That's from one side but also from the other side is what I must mention – and especially United Church

of Christ since the you are here and they are already mentioned– that from other side many people also reached out, sending letters of support to us, and even some of them asked if they needed to come and guard us while we pray. And I as I said, I must mention the United Church of Christ, who were very often the first one to reach out. So, although we were affected by this situation, I would say that not everything was so negative that we also saw a positive side. And we also saw how religion can have a positive role in reaching out to those who are affected by the whole political situation.

**Jones:** Thank you. I just want to stay on this topic for a minute more and then we're going to turn to the resources in our traditions which many of you have already spoken about, in terms of how we begin to step forward. But it's one thing to talk about how the political divides in the U.S. have impacted religious communities; it's a slightly different question to ask how faith itself has been a big force behind the divide. So, it is not as if it is a divide out there, impacting religious communities, but are in many ways driving it. I am going to stop calling on people in order –and hope you'll just chime in or I will start calling on people– but how do you think about that role? And David, maybe you could start us off because you study this. You see this positive thing in terms of a personal level and the inter-religious engagement opening people up, but it is also this like religion itself is that is in the driver's seat of the divide.

**Prof. Campbell:** It can be, although what can also happen and we should keep this in mind is often people will hold a political belief and then justify it using religious rhetoric. And that's a very different thing than having your political beliefs informed by your religion. That's just simply religion to reinforce a political belief or to selectively take from your religion in order to justify a policy position. And the reason I say that is I do fear that there are religious leaders in this country –I actually don't mean the people on this panel but we can probably think of who I do mean– who in spite of their being a religious leader, have put their politics first and that frankly has been toxic for all of religion and a dangerous thing. But again, there is hope here, and the hope I will go back to what individual Americans do, because when people are part of a congregation, whether it be a Christian, Muslim, Jewish, you name it, just simply being in a congregation and being involved in that life that gives them an opportunity to be civically engaged in a way that is increasingly rare in American society. For many people, their congregation is the only way that they're civically involved. What does that mean? Well, it means they have to learn how to get along with people, how to get stuff done, and that is critical to building a strong civic infrastructure. In fact, when you look at the data, many of Americans who are perhaps most on the extremes politically, they might claim to have a religious affiliation but they're often not actually involved in religious life. They are what sociologists would call culturally religious and that's important. Why is that? Well, it's because they don't actually have that experience of what it's like to be a part of a community within a congregation. So again, it is a myth that all congregations are these political echo chambers that just simply get people fueled up, fired up politically. Often, it is quite the opposite, actually, they have to learn how to stitch things together, even within a single faith tradition.

**Sister Campbell:** Can I jump in on that because I think that my tradition ...

**Jones:** I was going to you and because I knew you'd have something to say to that. – So yes, Sister Simone, jump in there.



**Sister Campbell:** Well, my tradition, I am a Catholic and right now we are in the headlines because some of our leadership are wanting to be extremely divisive –and I’m sure professor Campbell is well aware of the challenges faced by some of the leadership within the Catholic Church– wanting to politicize faith practice when it comes to the president and other politicians. I find it rather horrifying and so does Pope Francis, quite frankly. [He] has issued a few criticisms of their approach of wanting to criticize President Biden. And I think that the challenge is the mistake of spiritual leaders thinking that it is about enforcing political rules. It is spiritual leadership and it is missing the fact that spiritual leadership is much broader, much deeper than the political norm. But within my tradition, we have not done a good job of bringing our leadership to that deeper spiritual awareness and so I think we see a great division within the Catholic Church at this point. Massimo Faggioli, a theologian, recently wrote a book about the divide within the Catholic Church in the United States that is fairly unique. So, I am not sure we are exhibit “A” of coming together and finding out how to talk to each other. I have a hunch we are more to the barricades at times.

**Prof. Campbell:** It was not until I came to Notre Dame, where I teach, –I am not catholic myself– that I understood what it means to say “I’m more catholic than the pope”.

**Jones:** So, I thought that you also might make the point that many faith traditions being the relationship between religion and politics is very deep it's like to be a faith person is to take a very strong political stance on issues like poverty.

**Sister Campbell:** Well, can I just piggyback on that, Serene, because the founder of my religious community was the first woman in the Hungarian Parliament, when she was the head of our community, because faith called her to act for the needs of those most marginalized. And so, politics is in our bones. It's well connected and, in fact, in Pope Francis's most recent Encyclical Fratelli Tutti, he has a whole chapter on political love where he calls on those who exercise political engagement to come at it with a sense of love and respect and welcome. Now, would not that change our U.S. political reality?

**Blackmon:** I want to assimilate a couple of things, I want to state a couple of things that, I think are important, at least in my reflections they are important. I want to acknowledge that in the U.S. all faiths are not the same. And that much of the oppression that happens here happens because of Christianity and a part of the work that we have to do is owning that from the “establishment of our place” here it was a religious document that began this ethos of othering other people and the doctrine of discovery saying that if you did not believe this Christian way of thinking then you didn't have a soul. We saw what that did to the Native Americans, to the indigenous people of this land, and we've continued to carry that through in many ways. This is a Christian governed country and I think because of that those of us who profess Christianity have a larger task and more accountability and responsibility for the recklessness in the ways that we use religion here. –I am not countering the professor– I do not do that for a living so I'm not going to get into that. What I am going to say is that in our expression of Christianity, not all faiths have been so interwoven into the politics of this country, that it is hard to separate those things. And every time we have an uprising, every time we have to go and defend someone else's right for faith, my question is always from my point of view –even though I know the number of

people that attend communities of worship are going down, we've seen the new numbers— but most people are exposed to some form of religious indoctrination. Most people are connected whether they go themselves or someone in their family goes or they simply watched it on TV. They have some religious indoctrination and we cannot claim the good of our faith without being willing to examine the places that our faith has caused harm to lots of people and continues to do so; and is interwoven in our theological interpretations in our teachings in our scriptural readings. I'll stop there, but I think that that's a big part of what we have to wrestle with. These recent years have brought to the surface the ways that so many people operate out of religious sound bites that are embedded in religious ignorance of their own faith and of the faiths that they rail against and that is a part of the work of faith leaders that we shy away from.

**Matalon:** I would like to follow up on that. I fully agree that unless we acknowledge and face these destructive elements within our traditions. Our number one being this approach to faith which is about certainty we own the truth, we know the truth, we know what God wants. There is an arrogance in most religious traditions, together with of course many positive elements. At the foundation of many of our traditions, there is this element of arrogance that we know the truth, that faith is about certainty. There are exclusionary elements in our traditions, there's triumphalism in our traditions; and I think that unless we awaken a sense of humility and the willingness to look at those things and to confront those things. We all have violent texts, we all have exclusionary texts in our traditions that are sacred texts, that are part of our sacred canon and unless we confront them —I do not say we should eliminate them, I think we should keep them there in order to push back— but to identify them and to name them and to teach them in context and to push back so that we can then emphasize some of the positive or many of the positive elements in our traditions that are about the other, about the image of God in every creature, in every person and so on and so forth about solidarity, about empathy and those things but unless I think we confront and we are willing to look at those destructive elements in each of our traditions I do not think we will be able to move forward and to move into disagreements and arguments which are necessary for the search for truth. I mean, I think it is important that we disagree and that we argue, that we debate but we do so with 1) with curiosity and also with humility. I think that's what needs to be awakened but we have to confront these other elements.

**Jones:** Yes. I mean, it strikes me that that one of the gifts of religious community is the ability to start by being critical of teaching people how to be critical of their own traditions while still standing in them. Imam Susa, do you want to jump into this conversation?

**Susa:** Yes, definitely. I mean it is obvious that religion can be abused and religion can be used to turn people against each other and that's the unfortunate thing. But I also think that in order to prevent this, the most thing I am afraid of is the situation and the stage and situation in which those who are shy now and who are silent now will not be able to speak and will be afraid to speak the truth. So, in order to prevent the abuse of religion, I believe that all of us within our own communities —I as imam in Muslim community, the rabbi as leader in his community, the priest as leader in Christian community— should have a courage to speak the truth to our own communities, first, before we before we speak to anybody else. We just sometimes need a courage to teach the people, our congregants, what the true basic principles of our faiths and our religions are. I know that in Islam basic principles are equality of people is that justice is basic a principle, that the freedom of belief is also basic principle. So, we already have something to

teach people to. But the thing is that we very often do not want to recognize abuse of religion within our own communities. We don't want and maybe don't have the courage to name it and to point to it but we are just being asylum so that's – I would say – a problem. As long as those who are abusing religion are much more publicly present than those who are recognizing the abuse of religion, the abuse of religion will be spreading. So, I would say that as a conclusion to this, I would say that I as Muslims, and we as Muslims, should recognize injustice first in our own communities and the abuse of Islam and point to it, call it out, call those who do a terror in the name of Islam; the same as Jews should point to injustice being done in the name of Judaism before others took; the same as Christian leaders and clerics should recognize when Christianity is being used for justification of poor criminals or, as his case, as I said, in Serbian Orthodox Church or when it is being abused to justify behavior or certain political groups or individuals they need to recognize this and call it out. I would say that even ordinary priests, and they are probably the most important ones, they need to have a courage to speak the truth about the basic principles of their faith to their community. They need to have a truth, as a faith leader, to teach their congregants that God is the one who created man with the freedom and gave us freedom to create a just society with guidance and freedom to create a just society. This is not an easy thing to do but I believe as faith leaders we should know that our goal is not to please those who abuse religion even. Although there may be in some times and in some cases the majority but our goal is to please God. So sometimes we need – and I as a leader need – to go against probably sentiment of the congregation, of my congregation's congregants. If the truth is on the other side, I am supposed to say it. We are teachers and we are leaders; we just need to remind ourselves of that.

**Jones:** Thank you and it is so interesting, as we move into this next question, about what it is our religious traditions have to bring to the conversation about democracy. And how we begin to bridge these divides that bring into that conversation practices of self-criticism and of humility and of, sort of, starting with yourself and your own shortcomings. – It is a powerful place to start to teach practices. Where else in our society, do we have places that teach those kinds of practices? And the practices of courage – Imam as you've just also lifted up – the practices of the courage of truth-telling. I wonder if we could now shift to those practices and ask this question: what is it that faith communities can bring to what's happening in our nation that is distinctive to what faith communities can bring that's different from what could happen at a meeting of the city council or in a first-grade class or at the county fair? What is it we bring to this divide that is most powerful?

**Blackmon:** In terms of common practices, I would suggest that from the Christian faith, inherent in the Christian faith, is very much the practice of repentance confession and repentance which precede repair and healing; of this act of confession; of acknowledging that one is not always right, that one is not always innocent even. Within all of us we have this battle of good and evil. Sometimes we win it and sometimes we lose it and that our pathway to restoration – not just to God but to ourselves and to one another – is through this act of repentance. Repentance not being just saying “I'm sorry” but meaning to turn away from that thing and not do it again is very much – I do not think it's solely a Christian practice – but it's very much a part of Christianity. When we bring that, it is an act of humility to acknowledge that we may have harmed the other and to simply start by acknowledging that and then being heartily and godly sorry that we've done that,

with a commitment to not do that act again, is a practice that I think would do well for us to live beyond just our sanctuaries in our times of worship.

**Jones:** Imam you look like you were getting ready to jump in there too, so go ahead jump in.

**Susa:** I just wanted to say that religion is really great motivator. I believe – I know – that in Islam we have a teaching which if we emphasize it, they can be a great motivator for people to get engaged in their community, to get more engaged and to get closer to each other with the purpose of doing good. I'll just mention the Hadith the saying of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, in which he says “whosoever amongst you sees an evil let him change it with his hands and if he is not able then with his tongue to speak out against it. If he is not able then let him hate it in his heart but that is the weakest of faith”. I believe the same motivators we have, in another phrase, in another case we need to emphasize on these things.

**Jones:** Yes, the motivation to do the good and to serve the other.

**Matalon:** I want to jump in. You know, we begin in our tradition we begin our prayer services in the morning among the first things that we say is we make the following declaration: “I hereby take upon myself my creator's commandment love your neighbor as yourself”. Now that's a very tall order – I do not know that we can achieve that level but certainly the tradition teaches that every person is made in God's image and every person therefore has infinite dignity and value. So, we can be reminded if I can't, that if we can't love everybody as I love myself – and that's very a very hard reach – at least I can make the effort to respect the other. In spite of the fact that the other may have ideas that are difficult for me – challenging, that are unacceptable for me. I can despise the ideas but I cannot despise the person, I have to respect the person. So, I think the call is to meet the person, to respect the person, to meet the person, to know that there's somebody behind those ideas, there's somebody who has a life, who has loved ones, who has work just like I do and try to go towards that person and discover who that person is.

Now we had –I'll briefly tell you– one of the most transformative experiences we had. We had a dozen members of our community –Jewish people who are mostly liberal and progressive on the upper west side of Manhattan. We met a group of corrections officers who are conservative in Michigan and we spent three days with them in their homes and their ideas could not be more polar opposite than our ideas politically, in many of our religious ideas also. Then they came here and they spent three days with us in our homes and so on; and we got to know each other personally. When we got to know each other personally, we could disagree and we could discuss. We also realized that we had made caricatures of each other and then you realize that you may not agree fully about this but you agree about this over here and that you don't completely disagree. You know that there's overlap. And as we met people personally, we became friends. It was one of the most powerful and transformative experience for all of those of us who participated in this and that, I think, was prompted by the teachings of our traditions that say meet the other as a person, don't just be deterred or put off by the idea. Meet the person and then discuss the idea and that was a powerful, a powerful experience.

**Sister Campbell:** Can I piggyback on that Rabbi because for me, meeting the other person is the story of the political and spiritual work that I do. In our tradition, in the Christian tradition –the

Christian scriptures –, there is this idea that we're all one body but we have a different part to play. As I have looked at what part I'm playing, in the what we call the Body of Christ, I realized I was stomach acid: I could be toxic in large quantities but my goal is to stir up energy but I need other people to pick up that energy and to know. It goes to what the Imam was saying: to know my limitation and my need for you that changes everything. When we were in West Virginia doing one of our Nuns on the Bus events –I am originally from California though I live in D.C.– and the guys from West Virginia were giving California a really bad time because they were hippies and not doing all that stuff. I said, “Wait, wait, wait. Be careful I'm a Californian” and we got talking about how they could be so easily dismissive of Californians. And the younger guys realized that they had never met a Californian and the older guys said, “Well you know when I was in Vietnam, I was in a platoon with a guy from California and we had to care for each other”. So, this idea that we are not in proximity, that we don't know each other helps me realize that our faith traditions can help us know that we share a mission, a charism, a connection. It is in that knowing each other then can we begin to make change. And maybe that's the most important thing faith can do.

**Susa:** I'll just add that there is probably a great verse from Quran which speaks about the purpose of creating man. And God, in this verse from Surah Al'Hujurat, says, “O mankind we have created you from a male and female and made you into races and tribes so that you may know one another –get to know one another”. “Mida-ara” or “لِتَعَارَفُوا” means to get to know one another. So basically, at least in Islam, one of the purposes for creation of man and making us into different races and tribes; different languages, creating different languages is so we can get to know one another. It's just great, it is really great. They are, I believe, to overcome division. I am speaking about this but, unfortunately, I must notice that this [division] is happening also in here in Saint Louis and it's happening. There are retreats in multiple or interfaith retreats –however you call them. But the thing is that what we are missing, what I personally think, is that we need the same things, the same projects, the same idea to push between our communities to get ordinary people, ordinary congregates, to know one another. Very often when it comes to our interfaith dialogue, it is held on this high level between clerics, between faith leaders, but I would say to certain degree it can become pointless if we do not bring this back to our communities and if we do not teach our communities or ordinary people what we have come to conclusion.

**Jones:** Just to sort of say something about this conversation, which is so powerful is that the notion of the fundamental dignity and equality of all people undergirds and is necessary for democracy. I mean it's a fundamental presupposition of democracy– and yet what I hear here is pointing out that just simply asserting the fundamental equality of all persons is not enough. It is actually what is happening in our culture is you might abstractly believe that [equality, democracy] but if you do not, if there is no care and connection that steps across the divides that are there, you can have this abstracted notion and still have a policy as a religious policy that constricts voting rights for instance so it's that combination of equality and care that creates different shifts in culture.

David, I know you haven't said anything yet in this part of the conversation, you want to jump in there?

**Prof. Campbell:** I would just observe that both in this section of the conversation but maybe over the entire session, we've seen the two faces of religion discussed. On the one hand, religion can be divisive and, on the other hand, religion can bring out the best in people and I guess the observation I would make is it underscores that the fact that there are those two sides of religion, how significant it is for religious congregations to be involved in America's civic life. The reason for that is there is no other form of organization that brings people together on a regular basis the way that religious congregations do. There's no other organization that does all the other things that religion does. It doesn't just bring people together, it gives them a symbolic system, it gives them rituals, it gives them meaning, it gives them texts to learn from. And that is why it is so important that faith leaders like those represented here are a part of this discussion about the crisis of democracy that we face. And I would hope that that message is not just limited to these faith leaders but beyond that. And I do fear that there are faith traditions where this is a lot harder to do. I mean what we've heard today is religious leaders who get it right and I just want to pick up on a point that the rabbi noted about the idea that if you're certain that your faith is the only way that can have destructive consequences. That is borne out in the data: people who believe that really are on the extremes. So, to the extent that people are learning in their own faiths not only about their own faith but to appreciate that there are other paths and that there are truths in other places that itself is an, I will say, a civic antidote, if you will, and I just hope that the message is spread far and wide on that point.

**Jones:** Marie, you're back with some questions for us from our audience!

**Griffith:** Hello, yes. This is a wonderful discussion I hate to break the flow. We have far too many questions that can be answered here but I thought a couple were particularly relevant. One came in a few days ago and said "are there ways" –and this speaks somewhat to David what you were saying and certainly to your expertise in other areas but I would love to hear from others too. "Are there ways for congregations, ecumenical or interfaith groups to reach out to those disconnected from or even hostile to religion? Can we provide opportunities for people to ask questions and share perspectives without being evangelized?"

I think that's partly the other way to think about that is some of our secular communities the ethical society which is very vibrant in St. Louis and New York, and other places and other groups like that – so maybe thinking about the seculars. Then I'll throw in the second question Serene and sort of let you decide where to take this. The other one is someone wrote in that Traci mentioned the declining rates of affiliation with religious institutions and this person asks: Would more engagement in democracy be a way to broaden the audience for faith leaders?

In other words, is it possible, despite our structures of church state separation in this country, for congregations to actually be more direct in thinking about democratic values? so I'll just leave those with you Serene and see where you want to take them.

**Jones:** Wow those are big questions so I throw them out to you all.

But it is interesting they are both connected in that they are both about the space that does not identify as explicitly religious and what is the relationship in terms of democracy and moving forward in positive ways between the religious and those who are quote not religious maybe people of conscience.

**Sister Campbell:** Can I jump in on that, Serene, because I realized when you started rephrasing it, I thought I had nothing to say but then I realized we do this. We have done this program *Nuns on The Bus*. We travel the country and we have this big bus and we have community events. And what we have realized in that process is the sisters who ride the bus, we pray together every morning and it solidifies our community for the engagement and openness and welcome of the day. Then whoever comes to our events is welcome. They belong to community and one of the great events at the end of any session, what we do is people get to sign the bus so that it's not just nuns on the bus but everyone is on the bus. But what we've come to realize is the hunger to belong, the hunger to not be judged, the hunger to be welcomed in. It is not so much as faith as it is that first step of human bonding, trusting that I am in a safe place and that while we may be diverse it is okay because you're not going to be stigmatized because of it. And so, regardless of where you are in sexual orientation, where you are in faith, where you are on any career or race or all those issues that become so divisive community becomes the antidote. And I think that is where the hunger is and my book, actually, *Hunger for Hope* is all about that effort to belong because hope is a communal virtue and unless we know we belong, we're going to lose [if] we don't have hope. So, I'd advise everybody to get on a bus, go around, and welcome everybody in. Maybe we could create a broader sense of belonging.

**Prof. Campbell:** Can I just quickly say on the growing secular population of the U.S., which is something I've been thinking a lot about because I've recently published a book on what we call the secular surge in America. [There are a lot of myths about the secular population in the United States – I won't go into all of those– but let me just dispel one of them which is that secular people are hostile to religion. We actually do not find that, we find -and this is goes back to something that Reverend Blackmon said earlier when she noted that virtually all Americans have some experience with religion- and that's true, that is absolutely true. Even the most secular American almost certainly has some sort of connection, whether through a family member or in their past. And so, what we actually find is that many secular people are very comfortable with the free exercise of religion and they are very comfortable with public expressions of religion. What they are uncomfortable with is what we might call the establishment of religion but they are not alone in that. There are lots of religious people who are uncomfortable with that too, so that tells me that there is the possibility for religious and secular people to come together. And it turns out that people who are highly secular – that they actually have a what we call a secular worldview– they're often quite civically engaged. So that is an opportunity to build a bridge, if you care to put politics aside and focus on classic community service-type project, because these are people who do actually roll up their sleeves and get stuff done.

**Blackmon:** I want to follow what Professor David has said with I think the thing that comes to my mind is we need to stop worrying about the gathering and focus on the scattering, right. The point was never for us to get in a building and create our own little commune, the point was to scatter and to be among. And the example of that in my recent life is I came to this level of platform because of the work that I attempted to do in the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown Jr. And the only reason that I ended up in that position was because I was a pastor whose church had started opening the doors for the community to use the building without being a member. It was one of the people who was in the church for a community funeral that was in no way related to us other than we opened the doors for this family who was at that funeral and

heard something in what I said that caused her to ask for my card on the way out. And she never came back to visit.

She never called until the day Michael Brown Jr. was killed. She lived in Canfield Green Apartments with her two small children. And when she came back from breakfast saw all of these police [she] could not get her car in. [She] walked in with her seven-year-old and four-year-old and saw Michael Brown's body in the street and her seven-year-old began to cry and she didn't have answers. She went in her house and found that card and called my cell phone and she told me the story that I just told you and said you haven't known it but since that day you've been my pastor”.

It is not about how many people come to our buildings, it is about the impact we have outside of the buildings and so to that questionnaire, I say yes. The evidence of our faith whatever that faith it grows by our ability to serve no matter what the connecting point in those matters are, the same connecting points that we have when we connect interfaith. We all have a moral responsibility and accountability to serve and to bring the best of humanity forward from ourselves and from others. If that's the only connection, if that's the only religion we have across this country it could change the world.

**Griffith:** Wow, what a powerful witness for us to have right now out here at the conclusion of this conversation, Traci, the witness of your community. Yeah, that is a beautiful place to end and, obviously, we could keep going. I hate to break this off because all of you have said such important things coming out of your own communities, your own expertise. And I appreciate it all so very much so thank you to you, Serene, and to all of our panelists for such thoughtful conversation. We might have to turn this into a series where we continue these kinds of conversations. I want to thank all of you in the audience for coming and being with us and asking such good questions. My apologies for not getting to everything. And please stay in touch. And we will absolutely do this again so thank you to the staff who helped put this event together from all three institutions and organizations. And everyone, have a good night and carry this with you as we go. Good night, thank you. Bye.

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