

# CONNECTIONS

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## **COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement**

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The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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# Faith and Democracy

By Elizabeth Gish and Ekaterina Lukianova



**M**any churches and other religious organizations are engaged in efforts to improve their communities and help people face challenges such as homelessness, hunger, or addiction. Yet, even though significant resources are put into these efforts, they find that service-oriented initiatives don't address the underlying problems communities face. Often volunteers get a sense of accomplishment, and there are individual success stories of people who overcome major challenges. But the fundamental problems remain.

For several years, a group of religious leaders have been meeting in research exchanges at the Kettering Foundation to talk about how

they might try something new. Both lay leaders and religious professionals from a range of contexts have been meeting regularly, in person and online, to support one another in improving community capacity building, both within their religious communities and in the geographic areas where they are located. Some churches have experimented with integrating democratic practices into the life of their religious communities and inviting others to take part. They have found that this often helped to get at some of the underlying issues that make addressing community problems difficult. This article discusses a few of these efforts and highlights some of the ways these initiatives have been helpful.

Lutheran minister Leah Schade found that, in many churches, congregants and pastors did not feel comfortable talking about the complicated issues at the intersection of religion and politics because they did not want to risk upsetting others or alienating congregants. It was one thing to staff a food pantry or volunteer to clean up a local park, but when it came to discussing and moving forward on deeper problems of hunger or the environment, they were at an impasse.

Schade developed a way to approach these problems called the sermon-dialogue-sermon method in which the pastor preaches sermons that prepare the congregation for an upcoming deliberation on a topic

that might otherwise be controversial or feel risky. After these preparatory sermons, members of the congregation take part in the deliberation. Churches have used National Issues Forums issue guides such as *Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?* and *Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?* Churches have also used issue guides such as *The Church's Role in a Divided Society* developed by a group of religious leaders who have created materials specifically for religious contexts.

As Schade explains in her book, *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, she has found that this approach allows those in congregations to find “shared values and, as a result, [look] for common direction, or at least next steps [that] the group might take together.” We know that houses of worship are one of the institutions that citizens still feel a part of, where they have strong ties, and where many people still have high levels of trust. Using deliberation in the context of religious communities can help create spaces where these already strong relationships can be used to dig more deeply into the challenges of shared life. Schade teaches this sermon-dialogue-sermon method to students at Lexington Theological Seminary,



**We know that houses of worship are one of the institutions that citizens still feel a part of, where they have strong ties, and where many people still have high levels of trust.**

where she is a professor. Seminary students from around the country have used this method in their communities to begin the process of getting at the “problem behind the problem” so that they can work together with others to find common ground on which to act.

Another effort at using deliberation to strengthen community capacity has been led by Leslie King, a Presbyterian pastor from Waco, Texas, whose congregation has been holding regular forums in conjunction with the Hidden Common Ground initiative, a joint effort that includes *USA TODAY*, Public Agenda, and the Kettering Foundation. For the church’s June 2020 forum, King thought that her congregation would want to discuss issues related to COVID-19. Several others who have participated in Kettering’s faith-based organizations research exchanges also shared that their congregations were looking for resources about how to talk and act together in the context of a “new normal.” Some congregations were specifically interested in deliberations about how and when to reopen their churches, while others were interested in hosting broader deliberations about how to move forward together as a larger community.

Collaborators across five states worked quickly to develop a resource for a June forum. Through conver-

sations in their communities, they gathered concerns that people had about COVID-19 and the challenges the pandemic had brought to community-building and local problem-solving efforts. Over a series of Zoom calls and online collaborative writing efforts, the group developed an issue guide, *Living Together through Covid and Beyond*. Those who joined the forum said that they appreciated a framework in which to discuss ways to move forward and some of the trade-offs that came with the various approaches. Others in the network are considering ways to adapt the guide to their own contexts. Several of those involved in creating the guide have noted that this issue is often framed in dualistic terms—open things up or keep things closed—and it can be difficult to engage in productive conversation about the topic and to discern what course of action may be best to take. The group hopes that the guide will provide a more nuanced framework in which to discuss what’s happening around us and to identify some concrete steps for action even if we don’t all agree on everything.

A final example comes from Jacksonville, Florida. St. John’s Cathedral has been using issue guides for several years to deliberate about issues ranging from end-of-life care to immigration. One of the strengths



*St. John's Cathedral, Jacksonville, Florida*

of regularly using deliberation in a religious context is that not only does it strengthen the church's ability to be a node in a network of civic organizations seeking to strengthen a community's democratic capacity, but also it strengthens the "civic muscle" of the citizens who are taking part in the regular deliberations. It helps to normalize deliberative talk as an important political and religious practice, allowing citizen-congregants to think together about what they hold valuable and to weigh trade-offs together in a spirit of discernment.

St. John's recently had the opportunity to collaborate with others

in their neighborhood, known as the Cathedral District, to help with neighborhood development plans. The Cathedral District is a 36-block, 118-acre area in downtown Jacksonville. There are five historic churches in the neighborhood and many parking lots that are used by parishioners on Sundays.

Early in the process of assessing what to do about some of the challenges of the Cathedral District, a local nonprofit interested in neighborhood development and revitalization, Cathedral District Jax (CDJ), sought help in addressing what they thought was a clear problem: too much parking and not enough

development. Yet, CDJ was open to naming and framing exercises with residents and church members from the district, and, through this, discovered more to discuss. This is a pattern that many communities find: when people are given the opportunity to name and frame issues together, it often uncovers more to the story.

Led by a member of St. John's Cathedral, a small group of representatives from several of the historic churches, a resident of the neighborhood, and a person rehabilitating homes in the neighborhood met. After a lot of back and forth, many hours of brainstorming, and gathering concerns, the team developed an issue guide that would be used in deliberations about the future of the district. Residents of the local condominiums and members of the five churches—Historic Mt. Zion AME, First Methodist, First Presbyterian, Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, and St. John's Episcopal Cathedral—met for a series of forums to discuss the future of the Cathedral District.

The final report from the deliberations included the following: "Forum outcomes revealed significant interest in relationship building among District stakeholders through community festivals, tours, collaborative church events, and possibly

establishing a community association to complement CDJ, Inc. efforts."

It turns out the problem wasn't too much parking per se, but that people longed for more green space, more trees, and more relationships among the various stakeholders.

The CDJ board took the forum outcomes seriously. The first major initiative to come from the deliberations, Christmas in the Cathedral



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District, took place in 2019. There were lights, live music, a live nativity, a Bethlehem Marketplace, refreshments, shuttle transportation, and security. Several hundred volunteers and more than 1,000 visitors came to the district. There are ongoing efforts to plant trees, create a more walkable neighborhood, and develop more opportunities for the churches, church membership, and residents to work together to grow a more vibrant and connected community.

In each of these cases, deliberation has served several purposes. First,

it has helped religious communities to engage in meaningful conversations about some of the polarizing topics of our time. Very often, public discourse about political topics is either a debate between people who talk past each other or a discussion among people who all agree. Those who have taken part in the deliberations repeatedly say how important it is that they are able to authentically engage across differences with an eye toward finding common ground on which to act. In addition, while service is an important part of many religious communities, understanding deliberative habits as an equally important part of religious practice has helped these faith communities to make progress on the problems that they would like to “make better.” Along with the deliberations themselves, the naming and framing process has created space in neighborhoods and communities to engage together around the challenges they face. Many involved in the work have noted that this has helped expand on their service mindset and facilitated movement toward a more collaborative framework for addressing community issues. ■



**While service is an important part of many religious communities, understanding deliberative habits as an equally important part of religious practice has helped these faith communities to make progress on the problems that they would like to “make better.”**

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