

# Practicing Democracy with Your Faith Community



All across the United States, faith communities dot the landscape. Houses of worship and temples of reverence proudly demonstrate that Americans have the freedom to practice any religion without persecution. Faith communities serve as pillars of light modeling civility and hospitality to the stranger; they boldly denounce injustice and offer programs to enhance the common good. Here are some ways your faith community can strengthen the bonds within our democracy.

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### Prayer Service for the Nation

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees religious freedom. Honor this freedom by regularly reaching out to other faith communities — local churches, mosques, temples, sanghas, spiritual centers, etc. Find out good occasions to visit a service or share a meal to learn more about another community's beliefs and practices. Before an election or for a national holiday, hold a Prayer Service for the Nation. Have a representative from each faith community offer a prayer, blessing, chant, or vow for leaders, issues and concerns, and local efforts. These kinds of activities counter fear and distrust as fruitful and hopeful relationships among faith communities develop.

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### Community Use of Faith Buildings

Faith communities often demonstrate the democratic virtues of cooperation and generosity. In *The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence*, Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty discusses two churches in Louisville who share a building, the Covenant Community Church and James Lees Presbyterian Church. When the cost of maintenance of the space became unmanageable, they knew they needed to find another way to survive. They agreed on a new vision, rebranding the building as a “Social Collaboratory” where “[a]nyone in the local community could use the space as long as they covenanted to be part of the collaborator board. During board meetings, members made decisions about how to use the space by consensus. Ultimately, sixteen religious, justice, and arts groups met in the building.” In a time when many smaller faith communities are shuttering or selling their buildings, such collaborations strongly dedicate a space to the practices of hospitality and connections.

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#### **Blood Drive, Eye Clinic, Lending Library**

As another way to share your building and embrace the virtues of service and mercy, partner with local businesses and neighbors to host drives for important causes. Invite mobile units such as blood drives, eye clinics, and lending libraries to connect with residents in your space. Write up your experiences in local newspapers to encourage other faith communities to host these events. These initiatives champion health care, wellness, and education; they demonstrate the kind of caring and consideration upon which a democracy thrives.

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#### **Sanctuary for Immigrants and Refugees**

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” reads the poem by Emma Lazarus inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. The practice of sanctuary — providing a haven to immigrants, refugees, homeless, or displaced people in a house of worship — supports this invitation. Religious groups have heeded the call to care for and welcome the stranger for thousands of years. Explore how your faith community might provide sanctuary. If your building is unused during the week, you might convert a classroom to a place for people to sleep. In daytime, you might create opportunities for people to connect with social workers, lawyers, and organizations who can offer advice, translation services, and other kinds of assistance. Some congregations have teams that accompany immigrants to their check-ins with ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), providing emotional support and, if necessary, alerting families and lawyers if someone is detained. No matter how a faith community decides to respond, the process of discussing how and why to provide sanctuary — and even the logistics of what changes you would need to make to your facility to accommodate strangers — enables a congregation to consider its obligations to civic engagement.

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#### **Visits to Courts, Prisons, and Detention Centers**

AAmerica’s democracy affirms the values of justice for all and the rule of law. Learn more about how this works in your community. Members of your group could attend courtroom proceedings. You could arrange to visit prisoners or to correspond regularly with them about how they are treated and their sense of how justice is being served. Also, check out how you can offer friendship, counseling services, or legal referrals to immigrants being held in detention centers. Such activities demonstrate compassion and mercy; they also encourage you to face the shadow side of American life.

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### Community Garden

Many faith communities stock food pantries, organize food drives, or host a weekly soup kitchen or special holiday meal. You could also turn some of your underused property into a garden and grow food. Congregations practicing community gardening report that people from the neighborhood get involved because they do not have space on their own properties to grow vegetables. This practice engages people who have a spiritual gift of caring for the earth. It strengthens their bodies and senses in the spiritual practice of tilling the soil and caring for plants while demonstrating what it means to work for the common good.

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### Blessing Box

Another practice involving food and the democratic virtue of generosity is the blessing box. A blessing box operates like a “Little Library” or mini-food pantry. Set up a cabinet in a visible, trafficked area of your neighborhood or next to your building. Then congregants and neighbors can put non-perishable food and personal care items in it, and those in need are invited to take from it. A blessing box can easily be managed by a religious group who could check on the stock and make sure it holds supplies on a regular basis.

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### Parish Health Advocacy

The ideal democracy would uphold the dignity of all and pursue the spiritual practices of compassion and kindness. Faith communities contribute to this ideal by caring for the sick. Officially, parish nursing has been a specialty in the nursing field since it started in Chicago in the 1980s, but faith community health programs in the U.S. have a long history dating back to official programs in the 1800s. Parish nursing is not intended to be a substitute for healthcare; rather it is a way to determine needs and refer people to help. Lay people may also serve as health care advocates, especially for singles and older people. An advocate keeps track of a patient’s complaints and symptoms, attends medical appointments, takes notes on health care providers’ recommendations, and helps with organizing a medication schedule. A faith community can also offer nutrition workshops, exercise classes, or CPR and first aid training.

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### Clean-up Day

Our surroundings mirror our attitudes towards ourselves, our communities, and our nation at large. It is important that we care for our streets, highways, fields, forests, rivers, lakes, and oceans. Organize a clean-up day; Earth Day on April 22 is one good time. Join the efforts of the United Way’s Day of Caring or Keep America Beautiful. These nonprofits work with local officials and community members to beautify our towns and cities. As a bonus, you will meet your neighbors and discover what is worth saving and protecting in your environment.

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**10****Faith Leader Neighborhood Walks**

Community building strengthens democracy. Citizens connect with others in places such as schools, gyms, and houses of worship. A lovely way to build relationships outside of institutions is to go on an evening or morning walk through the neighborhood. As faith leaders become familiar faces in the community, stopping to chat on the sidewalk or even knocking on doors to ask how people are doing, they become presences of hope and safety. In turn, they learn what issues people are dealing with and how community services might respond. These kinds of listening, strategizing, and initiating actions are the foundations of democracy.

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**11****Rituals of Acknowledgement and Commitment**

Rituals abound in a democracy: raising the flag, citizenship and swearing-in ceremonies, dispatching delegates to national gatherings, the opening of a legislative session. Faith communities can bring an additional layer of ritual to civic life. For example, after a devastating event (a terrorist or shooter attack, a climate disaster, the death of a revered leader), you could hold a service, using a call-and-response litany to acknowledge any fear, anger, and grief that has surfaced. In *The Ceremonial Circle*, Sedonia Cahill and Joshua Halpern describe a ritual conducted on a path where a woman had been raped. After reading poems and statements, participants passed around a rock shaped like a goddess, each one saying a prayer and making a commitment to end violence against women. The goddess was then buried along the path to reclaim it as sacred space. Similar rituals could be conducted at wildlife preserves, public parks, and other places needing protection and healing.

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**12****Marches and Demonstrations**

Faith communities talk about the importance of “walking your talk.” Joining marches and demonstrations is one way to do this, and the impact of your witness grows when groups walk together under a banner identifying their faith community. Have a poster-making party in your gathering place beforehand, involving children if possible. Opportunities to march and demonstrate may emerge organically, such as the Women’s March or the March for Your Lives. Other marches happen annually, such as those for Gay Pride and Thanksgiving; the organizers may even have designated a place in the march for religious groups.

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**13****Local Action Initiatives**

Historically, faith communities have been supportive of national and overseas projects, but sometimes local needs go unmet or unrecognized. Have clergy and lay leaders attend city council meetings and meet with government representatives to see what local issues need addressing. In *Where Justice Dwells: A Hands-On Guide to Doing Social Justice in Your Jewish Community*, Rabbi

Jill Jacobs suggests contacting faith-based organizations such as the Industrial Area Foundation, PICO National Network, Gamaliel, and Direct Action Research and Training. Denominational offices and websites will have more suggestions of organizations with local connections. Bring ideas back to your congregation and hold conversations on how to proceed. For example, you might host a forum about issues of concern (police activity, abandoned buildings, public services).

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### Models for Decision Making

Three core values of democracy are equality, justice for all, and popular sovereignty; decisions are to be made by the people and for the people. Faith communities offer a good place to learn and model this approach to decision-making. When clergy or other congregational leaders make decisions for the congregation with little or no input from the larger group, frustration and legalities can stymie growth and creativity.

Try a different approach. Quakers practice a way of conducting business meetings which focuses on deep listening and collaborating to find a solution with which all can agree. In *Listening to the Light: How to Bring Quaker Simplicity into Our Lives*, Jim Pym explains how to conduct a meeting in this manner:

- When an issue is introduced to the group, people are reminded to keep an open mind and a sense of prayer.
- Silence is honored along with the recognition that the group needs to trust that the Spirit is working in each issue brought up by a member.
- Deep listening is encouraged when someone speaks; all agree to speak only when prompted by the Spirit.
- After all voices are heard, the issue is summarized by the presiding clerk. If persons are still not in agreement, the decision will not be made in the meeting and patience is practiced until the next meeting. If the notes are agreed upon, then a decision is made.
- Even if the outcome isn't what every person wanted, trust builds during the process.

Another model for democratic decision-making aims for consensus. This practice also provides a way for all members' voices to be heard and honored. After listening to a variety of views, when it is time to vote, people are given the option of 4, 3, 2, or 1. Voting with a 4 means you are completely on board, no reservations; 3 means mostly on board, few reservations; 2 means on board, but with significant reservations; and 1 means not on board with the decision. No matter can move forward unless everyone is a 2, 3, or 4. The issue must continue to be discussed and everyone's concerns taken into account before a decision can move forward.

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## 15

### Listening to the Exploited and Persecuted

American history is peppered with tales of heroes and also stories of great trauma. To affirm the democratic values of justice and unity ("Out of many — one"), we need to hear the narratives of those who have been exploited or persecuted. Invite a Japanese American, an African American,

a First Nation representative, or a person who has been incarcerated to speak to your faith community. Host a special event or invite the speaker to give the khutbah, sermon, homily, or derasha on your holy day of the week. You can host a Q & A after the talk. In discussions, talk about how your faith community has stood with the marginalized — and even how it has participated in exploitation. Hosting the speaker for a meal welcomes them in a hospitable manner to further build a relationship. Another option is to screen a documentary movie that reveals America’s shadow side.

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### Care Packages

The United States has historically been a generous nation when it comes to helping other countries in times of disaster and distress. Many faith communities make care packages for soldiers overseas or send holiday presents for children in developing countries. Have a committee in your community identify groups that you could help closer to home, such as the medical staff on a floor of the local hospital, young parents, and nursing home residents. Reach out to those whose work often goes unnoticed, such as child services social workers or the grounds crews in local parks. During the hot summer months when fire danger is high, connect with your fire department to send supplies and goods to the firefighters on the front lines who might spend weeks away from their families. Your adoption of a group and your care packages says, “I see you. Your work is valuable in our nation.”

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### Foster Parenting

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Children’s Bureau reports that in 2016 there were 437,465 children in the foster care system. Almost half of these children are placed in nonrelative foster homes. Sadly, the numbers for adoption out of foster care are on the decline in the latest study by the Child Welfare Information Gateway. Faith communities, acting out of the charge to “care for the least of these,” can make a huge impact on these numbers. Foster care education groups can provide information on how to become foster and foster-to-adopt parents. They can also form support networks around foster parents. This kind of outreach encourages the democratic virtues of courage, purposefulness, sacrifice, and dignity. For more information please visit: [\*The National Foster Care & Adoption Directory\*](#).

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### Sermon Series, Study Groups, Book Clubs

From its earliest days, America’s democracy has been nurtured by an informed citizenry who pride themselves on their love of learning and cultivation of wisdom. You can continue this tradition in your community by sponsoring a sermon series, adult education study, or book club that focuses on America’s values and virtues and how they intersect with the values and virtues of your faith tradition. In governing, a separation of “church and state” is respected, but in practice, they share much in common.







## Additional Resources

1. For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview](http://spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview).
2. To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/practicing-democracy-project](http://spiritualityandpractice.com/practicing-democracy-project)
3. For more on **conversations**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/28/conversations](http://spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/28/conversations)
4. For more on **empathy**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/26/empathy](http://spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/26/empathy)
5. For more on **generosity**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/25/generosity](http://spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/25/generosity)
6. For more on **hospitality**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/15/hospitality](http://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/15/hospitality)
7. For suggestions on **book clubs**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub](http://spiritualityandpractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub)



**A collaboration between Spirituality & Practice and the Fetzer Institute, The Practicing Democracy Project** offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

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**For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](http://PracticingDemocracy.net).**

