Faith-based campaign advocates for open, fair Internet rules

by [Brian Pellot](#) in the [September 30, 2015](#) issue

Interfaith leaders have long rallied for racial and economic justice. Now the Faithful Internet campaign is calling on America's religious communities to fight just as hard for net neutrality.

"None of our social justice work would be possible without net neutrality—the principle that keeps the Internet an open and free space for all of us," said Valarie Kaur, an American Sikh lawyer and media and strategy fellow at Stanford's Center for Internet and Society.

Kaur watched that principle come under threat last year when the Federal Communications Commission considered a proposal that would have allowed Internet service providers to speed up access to those websites willing or able to pay a premium while slowing down the rest.

Millions of Americans filed public comments against the proposal, and in February the FCC adopted Open Internet rules to protect net neutrality. Those came into effect on June 12.

Corporate critics are appealing to Congress and courts to kill the new rules.

Cheryl Leanza, Faithful Internet co-founder, who serves as policy adviser to the United Church of Christ's Media Justice Ministry, said net neutrality is just as important for everyday worship as it is for interfaith activism. Last year the UCC launched Extravagance, an online community designed to engage UCC members who live far from brick-and-mortar churches.

"For a community that would like to worship together online in real time, equal and fair access to high-speed Internet connections is essential," Leanza said.

Without net neutrality, Leanza and others fear that faith groups' online sermons and calls for vigils, marches, and protests will take longer to load while the latest seasons of popular TV shows pop up at record speeds in adjacent browser tabs.

The Faithful Internet campaign is attracting supporters from across America's diverse faith and belief spectrum. Coalition partners include Linda Sarsour, a Muslim activist; Otis Moss III, senior pastor of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ; Sister Simone Campbell, Nuns on the Bus organizer; and Greg Epstein, Harvard University humanist chaplain.

Epstein said the Faithful Internet campaign resonates particularly well with digital natives.

"With the spread of the open Internet, people are growing up virtually in an area of extraordinary diversity, and it's making them better-informed, caring and compassionate citizens of the world," he said. "It would be the greatest tragedy if we allowed the greatest tool in the history of human knowledge to be handed over to some sort of elite."

Net neutrality also allows encounters among people of different faiths, according to supporters.

"We need conversations in cyberspace that dismantle our silos," said Jacqueline Lewis, senior minister of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. "I converse with a young Muslim lawyer who lives in Pakistan. Seeing the world through his eyes changes my point of view."

Speaking on the Faithful Internet webinar launch last November, Kaur recalled how important a free and open Internet was to her faith community and interfaith allies in 2012 when a gunman fatally shot six people and wounded four more at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

"The only way we kept that story alive was through the Internet," Kaur said. "Sikh advocates and our allies . . . posted op-eds, used social media, and launched petitions online that finally persuaded President Obama one year later to make a historic policy change to track hate crimes against Sikhs, Hindus, and other religious minorities. For a small, marginalized faith community like my own, none of this would have been possible without the solidarity that we all built together online."

This summer, Faithful Internet enlisted more than 300 faith leaders and organizations to distribute a new promotional video emphasizing the ongoing need for net neutrality advocacy in the face of corporate calls to scrap the FCC's Open Internet rules.

The video highlights how activists have used the Internet to build social movements and promote racial equality and justice after fatal shootings in Ferguson, Missouri, and Charleston, South Carolina.

In one scene, Trinity UCC pastor Moss writes, "The Internet is increasingly critical to our sharing Christ's message, and empowering people to create a just, loving society." —Religion News Service

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