

Faith groups focused on multiracial, multifaith voter protection ahead of midterms

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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After voting in Harlem, Ayoka Foster Bell, left, talks with Liz Edman, an Episcopal priest and Election Day chaplain on November 3, 2020. (AP Photo/Jessie Wardarski)

Two years ago on Election Day, Lee May, pastor of Transforming Faith Church, a predominantly Black congregation in Stonecrest, Georgia, served as a poll chaplain, posted at a local voting site to promote calm at a time of intense political divisions. Most of the difficulties that day, he said, involved people who weren't sure they were at their correct polling place.

Things could be different this year, May said. To prepare, he and other clergy have added more de-escalation training to their preparations.

May got his training from Faiths United to Save Democracy, a multifaith and multiracial coalition that has enlisted more than 700 chaplains so far and is seeking to train more in the last week before Election Day.

“Because many states have changed the law to further empower partisan poll watchers,” said Adam Russell Taylor, president of Sojourners and a member of the coalition’s core team, “we’re anxious that that is going to create a lot more problems at polling sites and, potentially, further intimidate and deter voters, Black and brown voters in particular, from voting.”

Two years of disinformation and agitation over the 2020 election results have heightened fears of violence and mischief at voting sites this year. Poll watchers from both ends of the political spectrum have vowed to be out in force. [Several states](#), furthermore, have made it more difficult to vote by mail, created new voter ID requirements, and reduced registration options, raising the possibility of more disagreements and chaos on November 8.

The rising tension has prompted clergy groups to mobilize for the midterms with new approaches and broader coalitions. They are supplementing long-standing initiatives for voter registration, education, and mobilization with voter protection and expanding efforts such as Sojourners’ “Lawyers and Collars” program, which teamed poll chaplains with lawyers and advisers who could be called to answer questions and defuse tempers.

May, who once was the CEO of DeKalb County and now partners with Faith Works, another clergy coalition that mobilizes voters through his state’s churches, thinks the initiatives of religious leaders are contributing to the record turnouts for early voting. Data from the Georgia secretary of state show turnout as of Tuesday was already up 38 percent from the 2018 midterms.

This year, many clergy worked long before Election Day to make sure all voters have a voice. In Wisconsin, the Ari Douglas, pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Janesville, helped organize a candidate forum for city council and state senator candidates where they learned about the issues on the minds of low-income voters.

The nonpartisan Faith in Florida has also put together listening sessions to address concerns about the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*; Florida’s so-called Don’t Say Gay law, which limits teachers from talking about sexual orientation to

young students; and new “[election police](#)” who have charged formerly incarcerated people who had received voter registration cards.

“All of these things have brought people together in a way that has never happened before, because we see something wrong morally,” said Rhonda Thomas, executive director of Faith in Florida and a leader of New Generation Missionary Baptist Church, an independent congregation in Opa-locka.

Christian clergy who have long worked to get their congregants to polling places are also expanding their reach by including more non-Christian clergy in get-out-the-vote efforts.

Thomas said Black churches’ election-time tradition known as “Souls to the Polls” has expanded to include more than Black congregations. “People are really annoyed and tired and upset and they’re determined to vote. So now, our Souls to the Polls go beyond the Black church. We have mosques and synagogues that have joined us in getting out to vote.”

Rabbi Frank DeWoskin of Temple Beth Emet in Cooper City, Florida, is planning to participate in a Souls to the Polls event for Black and Jewish leaders at the African American Research Library, a polling site in Fort Lauderdale, on the Sunday before Election Day.

“When we see one faith group joining another faith group, I think that fires people up and that creates that level of excitement and energy to go vote,” said DeWoskin.

Faith in Florida also is working with some 800 congregations in more than 35 counties through phone banking as well as door knocking and canvassing within a 5-mile radius of their houses of worship.

Faiths United to Save Democracy is mobilizing with pastors as well as rabbis and imams in 10 states, from Arizona to Alabama and from Pennsylvania to Wisconsin.

In Ohio, Jewish and Christian leaders affiliated with Faith in Public Life planned to march to the secretary of state’s office in Columbus on Thursday for a prayer vigil “for peace at the polls and a multi-faith, multiracial democracy that works for all Ohioans.”

Taylor, of Sojourners, said his group is framing the mobilization efforts not only as a counter to new voter restrictions, but as good theology.

“Voting itself is kind of a sacred responsibility, and it is our way of honoring and protecting Imago Dei, the core belief that we’re made in the image and likeness of God,” said Taylor. “Sadly, tragically, voting rights has become metastasized into such a partisan issue and such a political issue. . . . But it’s also a moral issue, and any effort to try to deter or suppress someone’s ability to vote is also a kind of attack on Imago Dei itself.”

Douglas, who will be a first-time poll chaplain this year, echoes Taylor’s argument. “These people matter; their voices matter. They matter. If I can encourage one person to vote for the first time, I think that’s sacred work.”

Douglas, a local chairperson for the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, said part of ensuring fair elections is making poor and low-wage workers aware that their issues are at stake. The forums conducted on topics such as the needs of the unhoused, racism, policing, and the lack of health care were, Douglas said, “a means to encourage people who are impacted by those things, to understand that they are on the ballot in Wisconsin. We are encouraging people to vote because they are on the ballot.”

Between now and Election Day, the focus is less on theology and more on the pragmatic work of voting. Douglas has been “text banking” first-time voters and no-shows from previous years, encouraging them to go to the polls. And poll chaplains like Georgia’s Lee May are preparing with the aim of ensuring fair access to the ballot.

“We want to make sure that we are bringing peace to the polls,” May said. “We want to be proactive in ensuring that everyone who desires to vote can vote and can vote peaceably and that their vote can count.” —Religion News Service