

# Clergy unite to urge: 'Thou shalt be civil' "Faith Statement on Public Discourse"

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It's gotten ugly out there in the public square—on television, at public meetings, on the Internet.

Whether it's health-care reform specifically or politics generally, it is common to see people demonizing each other, shouting each other down and gleefully circulating vicious e-mail messages distorting the other side.

So much so that Christian, Jewish and Muslim clergy in New Orleans recently found common ground about one, clear thing. They've decided to give their congregations a message: Get ahold of yourself!

"The whole atmosphere has been getting just nasty," said Robert Loewy, rabbi of Congregation Gates of Prayer. "We're not going to change the world, but we've decided we need to raise people's awareness—that this is just not right. It's wrong."

A standing group of about two dozen New Orleans-area clergy recently drafted and began circulating a "Faith Statement on Public Discourse." It urges members of their congregations and the public to show basic respect to those with whom they disagree.

Some of the two dozen or so priests, ministers, rabbis and an imam have agreed to raise the admonition from their pulpits—and some, like Loewy, already have.

At his congregation's Yom Kippur service earlier this fall, he pronounced himself "disgusted" with the "obnoxiously partisan" tone of the national debate over health-care reform.

The civility statement has begun circulating among regional Episcopal and United Church of Christ clergy. Copies are going to local, state and federal politicians urging

them, too, to keep a civil tongue.

The statement is founded on the shared Christian, Jewish and Islamic premise that “since we regard all human beings as God’s children . . . we regard an offense against our neighbor as an offense to God.”

“Violence begets violence,” the statement says, “in speech and in action.”

It calls on people to display respect for those with whom they disagree; to debate issues, not demonize opponents; to stop misrepresenting opponents’ views; and to stop circulating e-mail messages that “demonize or humiliate persons or groups.”

The initiative comes from an interfaith group that was born in 2008 after somebody burned “KKK” into the lawn of a black couple in a predominantly white neighborhood in suburban Metairie.

More than a year later, the group has taken stock of the general level of anger in the public arena.

A renewed effort was triggered when a relatively new member, Ginger Taylor, interim pastor of Good Shepherd United Church of Christ, came to a clergy meeting, having attended a raucous town hall meeting on health-care reform sponsored by Sen. Mary Landrieu (D., La.).

“To say they were a bunch of wing nuts would be absolutely inaccurate,” Taylor said. “They’re the people who go to church, who mow each others’ lawns when they’re sick, who bring a pot of soup over.” But that evening, she said, they were shouting at each other and so distorting each others’ ideas that the event amounted to “bumper sticker discourse.”

In that kind of climate, spectators’ passiveness can be seen as implicit consent, so the civility resolution was all the more necessary, some clergy said.

“Silence allows more and more incivility to develop. It allows people to develop a culture of incivility, and as clergy people we should make some kind of statement,” said Priscilla Maumus, an Episcopal deacon who drafted the one-page document.

“What we’re hoping is it’ll get conversations started. Not about what your opinion is, or what mine is, but that we both have an opinion, and if we disagree, we’ll be civil. Not because we’re polite, but because as people of faith, we’re called on to do that.”  
–Bruce Nolan, Religion News Service