

Voter protection training begins as clergy, secular groups look toward election

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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Steve Bland Jr. is co-leader of a voter protection campaign in Michigan, as a poll chaplain. (Courtesy photo)

Faith leaders are making plans to provide a de-escalating presence at the polls months ahead of another deeply contested presidential election in an increasingly polarized country.

[Faiths United to Save Democracy](#), a nonpartisan multiracial group with roots in Black church voter mobilization efforts, is expanding its outreach so participants include clergy and lay people of a variety of religions as well as people with no faith

affiliation and members of secular organizations.

On Monday, Catholic nuns, rabbis, and community and labor leaders gathered online to hear a Bible-based introduction in the first of seven “poll chaplain/peacekeeper” virtual training sessions aimed at equipping volunteers to keep the environment calm at polling places, especially in battleground states.

Eilis McCulloh is a member of the grassroots mobilization team of [Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice](#), an organization that has partnered with the Faiths United to Save Democracy campaign in the past, but she was a first-time trainee and “loved that it was an interfaith mix” working toward a “common good” goal.

“We can’t do that in our silos,” said McCulloh, a member of the Sister of the Humility of Mary order. “We’re much more effective when we all come together to do that.”

More than 80 people attended the 90-minute online training, which included breakout groups with practice scenarios, ranging from someone holding a gun to a bystander shouting obscenities outside a polling place. Trainees were given tools to help build trust with people in line to vote, as well as a special phone number to call if they witness intimidating behavior.

The week prior, the coalition had hosted “an urgent call to prayer for our troubled and divided nation,” featuring Black church leaders and a diverse range of officials of national groups, after the first presidential debate and before the shootings at a rally at which former President Donald Trump was speaking.

The prayers and the strategizing continued with the Monday night training, said Barbara Williams-Skinner, the group’s coordinator.

“We opened emphasizing that we denounce all forms of political violence (political violence has no place in our democracy/nation) and lifting up our prayers for the full recovery and health of former President Trump and others who were injured,” she said in a Tuesday statement. “We affirmed that the reality of political violence makes the presence of Poll Chaplain in clergy collars, lay leaders, and peacemakers of all backgrounds even more critical during early voting and on election day.”

Jim Wallis, one of the core leaders of Faiths United to Save Democracy and the director of Georgetown University’s Center on Faith and Justice, said the training session attendees did not need convincing to participate in the peacekeeping efforts.

“People were really wanting to do this,” he said of the trainees, some who hailed from battleground states where they would be working, such as Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. “Their questions were not, ‘Should I do this?’ But ‘OK, how do I do this? When do I show up?’”

In interviews ahead of the training, clergy who had volunteered as poll chaplains in past elections described experiences that ranged from threatening to uncomfortable to welcoming during their shifts outside polling places.

Steve Bland Jr., one of the co-leaders of the voter protection campaign in Michigan, recalled a Black grandmother who was at first put off from voting because she spotted a White driver circling her neighborhood near the polling place, making her anxious about voting. A White clergywoman serving as a poll chaplain and visiting from another part of the state approached the car and “asked the guy who he was, what he was doing, etc., and the guy took off.”

Dontà McGilvery, one of the co-leaders for the voter protection campaign in Arizona, said he stepped in when April Hawkins, another clergy colleague and poll chaplain, was confronted by a voter who made assumptions based on her collar and the color of her skin, telling her, “You’re not a real Christian if you don’t align with the values of the Republican Party,” McGilvery recalled.

McGilvery, who said he considers who people vote for a “nonexistent” topic for poll chaplains, usually merely congratulates people for voting. But after a 10-minute back-and-forth with the voter, nearby representatives of civic organizations intervened to end the situation.

Bridget Moix, general secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, traveled from Washington, DC, to her home state of Ohio to serve as a poll chaplain. Wearing a “Love Thy Neighbor (No Exceptions)” button, she welcomed a young Black man. He entered the doors of a polling place with trepidation and left surprised at how easy it was. The man had feared the threatening presence of guns and was relieved to find none, Moix said.

Moix, who gave the closing prayer at Monday’s event, said the young man’s experience “spoke to me of the situation we’re in as a country, and also the importance of having just a friendly, calming presence at the polls—that people can feel safe going to the polls. And I hope he’ll be back again this election season.”

Other organizations are encouraging actions and making statements that support voter protection. For example, Interfaith America's and Project Democracy's "[Faith in Elections Playbook](#)" notes ways to support voters, including bringing food and water to people standing in line if local laws permit them.

Citing rising levels of political violence over recent election cycles, Faith in Public Life issued a June 24 open letter to "Those With the Power to Lead Us Toward Peace" that said, in part: "As leaders who are invested in interrupting violence and working toward a culture of peace, we urge you—and all people in positions of authority—to cease using your power to advance political violence and to instead leverage your influence toward love and liberation."

Although much of the focus for the poll chaplains and peacekeepers is on supporting voters, their work may not conclude on November 5, Williams-Skinner said, but rather could last "until somebody is inaugurated." Their tasks could include prayer vigils, nonviolent protests and post-election monitoring of vote counts.

"When you sign up for this, you realize that you're not signing up for just Election Day," said Arlene Holt Baker, the District of Columbia-based executive vice president emerita of the AFL-CIO, who joined the training on Monday and said she signed up for the FUSD's buddy system and is willing to go where she's needed along with another peacekeeper.

"You're signing up for Election Day and beyond." —Religion News Service