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Toward the World We Long For: Churches and the Hope of Democratic Life

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Abstract

This article draws on 8 years of research involving over 50 church members, clergy, and lay leaders in the United States. The effort began by asking how churches engage in politics, broadly understood, and what might help churches better achieve their often-stated aims of improving conditions in the communities where they are located. Three primary outcomes emerged from the study. The first was a framework for understanding how churches engage in political work. The second was the finding that deliberative practices can enrich the ways churches engage in political work that simultaneously strengthens democracy and helps churches advance their efforts to improve their communities. Finally, the findings highlighted some of the resonances between democratic and religious life. Naming these resonances can help scholars better understand the challenges of democratic life and provide insights for practitioners working toward a healthier and safer world.

Toward the World We Long For: Churches and the Hope of Democratic Life

The work discussed in this article drew on 8 years of research with over 50 church members, clergy, and lay leaders in the United States. Specifically, I detail three primary outcomes that emerged from this study. First, I outline a framework for understanding how churches engage in political work. In part, this framework pushes back on the dominant narrative about the intersection of religion and politics in the United States which tends to focus on the role of the Christian right^[1] in electoral politics. I hope this framework provides scholars and practitioners a means of parsing the complex ways religion and politics intersect in this country. Second, I make the case that deliberative practices can enrich the ways religious organizations engage in political work that simultaneously strengthens democracy in general and helps churches advance their stated intentions of “improving things” in their communities. Finally, I highlight some of the resonances between democratic and religious life that arose during the 8 years of this research. I argue that recognizing these resonances helps scholars better understand the challenges of democratic life and offers insights for practitioners working toward a healthier and safer world.

Methodology

Since 2012, I have met regularly with a diverse group of religious leaders interested in the ways religious people and organizations can strengthen the ability of everyday people to improve conditions in the communities where they live.^[2] Many churches and faith-based organizations have a deep commitment to the well-being of the communities where they are located and wish for things to “be better” or to “help improve things.” Yet, despite their efforts, many church communities continue to struggle to make progress on pressing issues (Funciello, 1993; Horrell, 2019; Lichterman, 2005; Lupton, 2012; McKnight, 1989). My study used grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to develop a framework for better understanding the kinds of political and public work that churches and their members do to address the challenges of shared life together (Bonhoeffer, 2009) in a profoundly troubled world.

The research participants have been at various stages of initiatives designed to engage their organizations in deeper democratic and community work. The bulk of my research has centered on Christian churches and communities—the focus of this study.^[3] Participants have included those from the United Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, the

Presbyterian Church (USA), the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Baptist tradition, Disciples of Christ (Christian Church), the Anglican Church, and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as individuals involved in nondenominational, ecumenical, and emergent church contexts.

In addition to in-person meetings, in which participants discussed their efforts and reflected together on what they were learning, research participants shared their work regularly via video conference and communicated about their work via email and written reflections. I have also made site visits to churches and organizations in Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Arkansas, Washington, DC, and Colorado that are working at the intersection of politics and religion. In addition to transcripts of meetings and interviews, this work has yielded thousands of pages of research notes from interviews, discussions, and site visits. These transcripts and notes, in conversation with the literature on this topic, form the basis of the conclusions discussed here.

Churches and Politics

In recent years, both in popular media and casual conversation, the role that conservative Christianity plays in national politics has comprised a significant portion of the public discussion at the intersection of religion and politics (e.g., Haberman, 2018; Hartman, 2015; Keller, 2017). It is, of course, a worthy task to develop a better understanding of the relationship between national electoral politics and religious identification. However, the hyper-focus on the role the Christian right plays in shaping national politics is often at the expense of a better understanding of the myriad ways that religiously committed people and religious institutions take part in political life in the United States. When the public narrative focuses on national electoral politics and the role that conservative Christianity plays in it, that narrative not only speaks to what is happening, but also shapes what is possible. It can constrain the religious and public imagination regarding the diverse possibilities for the ways everyday people can contribute to a more vibrant and robust democracy at the intersection of religion and politics. In an effort to expand the narrative about religion and politics in the United States, this study outlines a framework intended to help readers better understand and conceptualize the range of ways that religiously committed people and institutions take part in political life.

Religious identity, institutions, and commitments have played a prominent role in the trajectory and character of U.S. democracy since its inception. In *Democracy in America* (1945/1835), Tocqueville reflected on religion “as a political institution which powerfully contributes to the maintenance of a democratic republic among the Americans.” He noted, “On my arrival in the U.S. the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things” (p. 319). Further, as Raboteau (2004) pointed out in *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, from early in the history of the United States, religious communities often provided a taste of democratic life and self-rule when this was not yet possible in other parts of life. AME pastor Rev. Dr. Robert Turner (2015) noted in a conversation on this topic, “You might be the janitor at the school, but at church you are a deacon. Black people could vote in church long before they could vote in public elections.”^[4] Likewise, prior to the 1960s in particular, but in some cases still today, women’s activities as citizens and leaders have often been more acceptable and gained more traction in the context of

church activities than in other realms of public life (Braude, 2007; Griffith, 1997; Higginbotham, 1994; Hill Lindley, 1996).

Beyond worship services, churches also provide a space for those struggling to make sense of who they are called to be, individually and collectively. Churches can be places where beliefs are affirmed and strengthened, as well as a context in which dearly held convictions and practices are challenged and undone. In the case of the Black church, there is a long history of providing both respite and a safe space for those who have faced painful discrimination and abuse in a White supremacist culture (Raboteau, 2001). For the poor and the hungry, a church often offers a hot meal or a place to lay one's head for the night (Adkins et al., 2011; Wolfer & Sherr, 2003). People attend church to socialize and seek fellowship, as well as to learn, grow, and serve. It is where many celebrate sacraments and commemorate birth, marriage, and death. Churches have also been central to many political movements in the United States, notably temperance and prohibition (Coker, 2007; Morone, 2003; Quinn, 2002), the civil rights movement (Findlay, 1993; McDaniel, 2008), opposition to abortion (Von Hagel & Mansbach, 2016), and issues related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identity (Hartman, 2015; White, 2015). Despite a decline in church attendance in recent decades (Olson, 2008; Pew, 2015, 2019b;), the church still plays an important role in American life. Lichterman and Potts (2009) pointed out in the introduction to *The Civic Life of American Religion*, "Religious congregations and associations might be the most widespread and egalitarian sites of civic engagement in the U.S. Almost half of Americans' association memberships are church related. Half of Americans' volunteering take place in a religious context" (p. 4).

Often, a distinction is drawn between churches' religious and political activities. The tax code, of course, affirms this distinction, limiting the ways that churches engage in political activities in order to maintain their tax-exempt status (Internal Revenue Service, 2007). Sometimes, it is possible and productive to delineate religious identity, belief, and practices on one hand, and political identity, belief, and practices on the other. Yet, in many ways, the political and the religious are inextricable. Democratic theorists have highlighted the ways that political life stretches beyond formal or institutional politics with terms like *everyday politics* (Boyte, 2005) and *organic politics* (Mathews, 2014). Similarly, Bayat's (2012) *Life as Politics* offered important insights into an understanding of politics that takes seriously the way everyday actions by citizens meaningfully shape possibilities for shared existence.

Understood this way, citizens take part in political life not only when they vote, protest, or campaign, but also when they give money to people in need, care for children, discuss the value of human life at a bible study, post on social media, or respond to a complicated interpersonal situation at work. Politics is not simply who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell, 1936); it is about how we live together among each other, day in and day out. Citizens, churches, and communities are simultaneously and continuously co-creating political and religious belief, identity, and practices in everyday life.

The ways religious and political beliefs, identities, and practices cannot be fully separated are underlined by the popular refrain that emerged from second-wave feminist movements: "The personal is political." There is no known originator of the phrase, but Hanisch's 1970 essay, "The Personal is Political," was one of the earlier written engagements with the phrase, and it has been further developed in more recent feminist theory and theology (Cornwall Collective, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991). Initially, the phrase referred to the ways that certain actions often rendered personal (e.g., cleaning the house, taking care of children) had implications that necessarily

reached beyond individuals' lives and structured possibilities for shared existence. This refrain resonates today as many struggle to make sense of the implications our everyday actions and decisions have—not only for our own communities and neighbors, but also for people across the country and world whose lives are bound up with our own through systems of cultural, governance, and commerce. Given this, the work here treats the political work of churches broadly, beyond engagement in electoral politics, and includes the ways those within churches engage with each other, develop policies, and interact with the broader community.

Churches' Approaches to Public and Political Engagement

One of the central findings of this study was that the political and public work that churches engage in falls into four categories, each of which has its own strengths and challenges. The following section includes descriptions and a comparative analysis of these four approaches: social service provision, political mobilization, community organizing, and deliberative practices. Of course, it is possible to parse church political engagement in different ways (e.g., Beyerlein & Chaves, 2003, p. 235), and the approaches are not mutually exclusive. This is one framework that offers some helpful insights for both researchers and practitioners who are interested in how churches can be a part of building civic capacity, while acknowledging that this does not exhaust all productive frameworks for understanding churches' political engagement.

Social Services Provision

With few exceptions, churches provide some sort of service to communities where they are located, and many serve in other communities as well (Wuthnow, 2014). This can take a programmatic form such as job training, afterschool programs, support groups, or counseling. Yet, service also involves material help such as cash assistance or free food (Poppendieck, 1999). Typically, the stated intentions of such social services include a commitment to helping people become more self-sufficient (Corbett & Fikkert, 2014; Ellerman, 2006; Poppendieck, 1999).

The service work that churches take part in is rarely framed in terms of building community or strengthening civic capacity. Success stories of individuals who have overcome challenges such as poverty, addiction, or abuse abound. Likewise, there are many examples of service activities that have transformed individuals and the churches that provide those services. However, it is difficult to find accounts of communities where the social services provided by churches have formed a foundation for citizens to change the circumstances that led to the problems in the first place (Corbett & Fikkert, 2014; Lupton, 2012; McKnight, 1989, 2000; Poppendieck, 1999). As Rev. Mike Mather noted when discussing his church's food pantry, "Year after year we were still handing out food yet people were still hungry. We felt so good about it that I broke my arm patting myself on the back. But nothing really was actually better" (M. Mather, personal communication, May 2016). In arguing against church social service provision as a mode of strengthening communities and building democratic capacity, John McKnight (1989), director of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, noted, "I have never seen service systems that brought people to well-being, delivered them to citizenship, or made them free" (p. 38).

According to De'Amon Harges, a full-time "roving listener" at a church that eschewed its social services efforts, "the church decided its call was to be good neighbors. And that we should listen

and see people as children of God” (King, 2015). This meant “retiring” the church’s social service programs and shifting to paying closer attention to hearing others, working in partnership and collaboration rather than through one-way service delivery, and letting go of the need for assurance about outcomes beforehand. I return to this theme later in the article, but this repeatedly came up in interviews and conversations: Close attention to improving metrics and outcomes did not bring about the deeper changes that communities wanted.

Even though there is little evidence that a social services approach transforms the ways that citizens and communities function, the strengths of this approach were made clear by the vast majority of research participants. One of the most obvious benefits of this approach is that it involves clear action that everyday people can take. This approach is often not taxing for volunteers and feels very rewarding, which means that significant numbers of people are able and willing to participate in such efforts. While there are Christian leaders and movements that suggest that living as a Christian should result in radical sacrifice (e.g., Claiborne, 2006), the reality is that most churches in the United States rely on those who have jobs, families, intensely busy schedules, and a disinclination toward more sacrificial modes of religiosity (Bowler, 2013). For many, service is an achievable and important way that people and churches put theo-political commitments into practice, and the services they provide meet urgent and real needs in communities.

At its best, service can be a steppingstone toward finding ways to imagine and bring into being the world as it should be. It is a way to get to know people who are different from oneself and to be helpful in a time of crisis. However, for churches wanting to address the fundamental and long-term challenges that communities face, important questions arise: How can service work be transformed such that it moves away from short-term, individualized crisis management toward collaborative problem solving and the expansion of democratic participation? How might a community transform so that formal social services provision is not so urgent because the community has found other ways for citizen and neighbors to support each other? How can social services be reframed as a community-building effort rather than as a self-sufficiency project? I return to these questions in the final section of the article which explores possibilities for promising paths forward.

Political Mobilization

A second way that churches take part in public life is through political mobilization around an issue, ideology, or set of candidates. Churches engaged in mobilization work are involved in campaigns, elections, policy, protest, and advocacy, and they mobilize with a clear end in mind such as making abortion illegal or helping to stop global climate disruption. The goal is to get as many people as possible to take action to promote a predetermined end. Mobilization has been used especially effectively in more conservative traditions, but it has also been utilized in a range of moderate and liberal contexts.^[5] This is the type of political engagement most often seen in the news and thought of when most individuals think about churches’ involvement in politics.

At the heart of mobilization efforts is the idea that those who try to mobilize others have a clear sense of what needs to be done and that other people need to act in order to get it done. There are, of course, many contexts in which churches’ mobilization efforts aimed at getting other people to act in a particular way are helpful, necessary, and reflective of pressing and urgent needs among citizens, communities, the nation, and the world. Such work is grounded in

important theological and political traditions of prophetic action, calling for people to act on pressing moral issues (McDaniel, 2008; Noll, 1990; Slessarev-Jamir, 2011; Wuthnow & Evans, 2002).

There is, however, the risk that mobilization becomes the primary locus of church political activity and is not preceded by deliberative practices that encourage mobilization to reflect the reasoned and prayerful convictions of church members and communities. It is easier to demand that others act in a particular way in relation to a public issue than to find ways to work with others through shared action to discover common ground across difference. It takes less time and energy to insist on a particular moral viewpoint and attendant set of actions than to negotiate questions of values with others and jointly determine action. When mobilization is not woven into other forms of public engagement, it risks trading immediate and easily observable political gains for the long-term benefits that come when faithful and diverse citizens struggle together to make sense of and act on complex theological and public problems.

Another challenge that the mobilization model faces is that social service efforts, community organizing frameworks, or deliberative norms are sometimes used as tools for political mobilization. Providing social services as a way to mobilize citizens around a particular issue or agenda has notably different theological and political resonances than undertaking such work as a way to serve those whom Jesus called “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). Likewise, training in deliberative norms (Shields, 2007, p. 97) in order to encourage people to reach a particular foregone conclusion weakens the individual and collective learning that can emerge from these efforts. Churches and leaders interested in strengthening communities’ abilities to address their challenges should proceed with caution when using service, deliberative practices, or community organizing frameworks as strategies to encourage action toward already-determined ends which does not engage people themselves in assessing what makes sense. Such efforts can produce narrow, short-term gains but ultimately undermine trust and hamper the development of citizens’ and churches’ authentic engagement and collaboration.

Despite some of its challenges, one of the strengths of the mobilization approach is that the moral or theological decisions are already made. An example is a church’s position on global climate disruption: It is a problem, and others need to take swift action to reduce carbon dioxide emissions through highly restrictive legislation and sacrificial personal action. The questions at stake in mobilization efforts are typically questions of strategy rather than values: How do we get where we know we need to go? In a time when citizens are often beleaguered by the intensive pace of life in today’s global economy (Cain Miller, 2015; Schulte, 2014), clear steps, such as writing a letter to one’s congressperson about an issue or showing up to protest, are often more manageable than the difficult and time-consuming work of coming to public judgement on complicated and dynamic problems, often referred to as *wicked problems* (Carcasson, 2013; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Yankelovich, 1991, 2014).^[6]

In assessing how churches can strengthen citizens’ abilities to act together to build stronger, healthier, and more democratic communities, many churches are finding that it is important to take the long view of such work. Whereas meeting immediate goals for mobilizing church members and citizens around a particular issue often makes sense, it is important to ensure that this not only meets short-term goals, but also considers the skills, habits, and relationships that the mobilization fosters in the medium and long term. With particular attention to the work of strengthening deliberative capacity and problem-solving abilities, mobilization often makes the most sense when it grows out of other forms of political and religious engagement that take

seriously the complexity of the problems that diverse communities face, engaging a wide range of citizens in the process of arriving at mobilization goals and strategies. For churches interested in strengthening citizens' and communities' abilities to have a say in their lives and futures, they might consider how mobilization can be a part of their public engagement practices such that it increases citizen agency and collaboration.

Community Organizing

Community organizing is distinguished from political mobilization both in terms of scale and emphasis. Unlike mobilization, community organizing, at its best, does not begin with a fixed end in mind. Rather, community organizing in churches focuses on working *with* a community to take on and successfully address pressing issues (Bretherton, 2015; Defilippis et al., 2010; Jacobsen, 2001; Posadas, 2008; Warren & Wood, 2001; Wood, 2003). While churches involved in community organizing often have a sense of what the community might want or need, there is, at least in principle and often in practice, a commitment to fostering the community's ability to reflect on, articulate, and carry out efforts they have identified themselves. The questions at stake in community organizing require negotiating issues, strategies, and values before determining desired outcomes.

Regarding scale, the community organizing approach often has a more local focus.^[7] While there are nationwide networks of community organizations and issues that transcend local communities,^[8] community organizing typically focuses on local and regional issues that citizens would recognize as issues germane to their own community. Examples include improving community-police relationships, the prevention of a local school closure, or coalition work that improves a neighborhood's ability to react to proposed construction that would physically divide the community.

A focus on relationships is a particular strength of the community organizing approach. Getting to know one's neighbors and community through one-on-ones and house meetings is an essential part of this model (Bretherton, 2015, pp. 122–123; Jacobsen, 2001, pp. 59–64). People build relationships by listening to others, hearing their concerns, and finding resonances across difference. The relational emphasis of community organizing can help churches and members connect with the wider community and each other. In this way, building relationships is essential to problem solving, expanding democratic participation, and having more of a say in a community's present and future. It is very difficult to address problems and increase civic capacity when an individual does not know their neighbors—literal and proverbial.

Another strength of the community organizing approach is that it often explicitly acknowledges social and power structures that shape life and possibilities for citizens and communities. In the faith-based community-organizing context, these discussions are enriched by tying this analysis to examples in scripture. Such examples help church and community members identify rhetorical common ground with religious narratives that complicate present-day differences and polarizations. The ability to connect current community challenges to what has gone before is helpful in opening up space for communities to see the broader contexts and environments into which they are woven. Additionally, connections to scripture and a long history of religious communities struggling together for change often serve an important inspirational function in the difficult and protracted work of change and growth.

Although there are many benefits to community organizing, the division between the organizers and the organized has the potential to undermine the democratic aims of the work. While organizing creates structures for everyday citizens to reflect and work together around shared challenges, there is oftentimes an underlying assumption that everyday people need specially trained people (“organizers”) to help them reflect critically on their own circumstances and make decisions about how to best act. For example, in *Resurrecting Democracy*, a study of community organizing as it related to religious commitment across both the U.S. and British contexts, Bretherton (2015) noted the importance of experts in the community organizing model to strengthen the “interpretive capacity” of citizens, noting that “people are not always aware of the issues that affect them or able to identify what their real interests are” (p. 113).

Community organizing conducted through churches is a part of the history of important and positive progress toward a world in which citizens have more say in their present and future. Yet, the rhetorical and often practical divisions between those who are trained, or sufficiently educated and aware, and those who are presumed to not yet know what they need or how to get it done raises questions about citizens’ abilities to know and understand themselves and their own communities. It also raises practical questions about how change can happen on a broad scale if churches and citizens need trained organizers to help them interpret appropriately “the issues that affect them” and their “real interests.” For churches and communities interested in increasing democratic capacity and problem-solving skills, it is important to consider what can be learned from community organizing models and successes, while at the same time recognizing the challenges of models in which outside organizers are framed as essential to communities and citizens doing the work of democracy. Churches might ask themselves how they can create space for relationships, learning, and collaboration, while decentering any one institution or individual role as necessary for success.

Deliberative Practices

Fourth and finally, deliberation in some form is integral to the way churches engage in political and public life. While it can be woven into the other forms of political engagement outlined earlier, deliberation is distinct here for several reasons, namely because it is often unrecognized or unnamed as a political and religious practice in the context of church life. The literature on deliberation in churches is somewhat limited and rarely considers deliberation as, at once, a religious and political practice. Further, deliberation is distinct in that it provides a particularly promising and underutilized path toward the end of creating healthier, stronger, and more democratic communities. When coupled with other practices, it is well-positioned to strengthen community-building efforts.

Although not always self-named as public work, churches are a vital public space for people to share, process, and better understand the theological and public issues with which they grapple. Each week, thousands of bible studies groups, Sunday schools, and small groups meet in churches as citizens try to make sense of their world and how they should respond its challenges. In the wake of tragedies, churches are often places where people gather to reflect and understand what has happened both in public and theological terms. Churches are locations for community conversations and forums on pressing issues, where members and people from the community come together to try to better understand each other, often weighing options and identifying

common ground from which to act (Coffin, 2005; Djupe & Calfano, 2012; Djupe & Olson, 2013; Neiheisel et al., 2009; Schade, 2018).

Theorists and practitioners understand deliberation in various ways (Carcasson & Sprain, 2016; Chambers, 2003; Ercan, 2014; Habermas, 1998; Heierbacher, 2007; London, n.d.a; McAfee, 2004; Yankelovich, 2001). For the purposes here, deliberation is distinct from dialogue and civil conversation in that it includes, but goes beyond, respectful listening and increased understanding.^[9] It also involves weighing trade-offs, making choices, and identifying common ground for action (Carcasson & Sprain, 2016; Chambers, 2003; Ercan, 2014; London, n.d.b). An example of the deliberative work in the context of churches can be seen in the efforts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), which engages in deliberations about gender-based violence and same-sex marriage (Djupe & Olson, 2013; Kaufman, 2016, 2019; Stumme, 2005). In both instances, the deliberations not only are intended to create space for sharing, understanding, and reflection, but also are explicit about the hard work involved in weighing competing values and identifying common ground for action (Kaufman, 2016; National Issues Forum, 2016; Sande, 2004).

Many churches also offer opportunities to learn and practice deliberative skills generally, independent of a focus on a particular issue. For instance, the Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, hosted a series of adult education classes on deliberative dialogue, in which the benefits were framed both in terms of the way it allows individuals to “enhance our democratic capacities” and the benefits to the community, where it can “serve as a vehicle to tackling some of our greatest challenges and determining a path forward” (Wake Forest Baptist Church, 2017). As another example of these efforts, the Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia, offered an adult education series titled “Faithful Discourse in an Age of Polarization: The Bible, Politics, and Rebuilding Community” (Second Presbyterian Church, 2016). Various speakers from the community discussed ways the church and its members might be better neighbors, with particular attention given to the role sacred scripture plays in guiding this process (Williamson, 2016).

Some churches use guides or frameworks for deliberation,^[10] but one of the strengths of deliberative habits and practices is that their success does not depend on professionals, experts, or guides. While experts play an important role in deliberative systems (Mansbridge et al., 2013, pp. 13–17), there is a shortage of public space in U.S. public life where everyday citizens are considered valuable and vital to naming, framing, and addressing public issues (Boyte, 2009; Friedman & Rinehart, 2017; Mathews, 2016). The 2006 *Citizens at the Center* report made note of this, pointing out the lack of “opportunities for ordinary citizens to come together, deliberate, and take action collectively to address public problems or issues that citizens themselves define as important and *in ways* that citizens themselves decide are appropriate and/or needed” (Gibson, 2006, p. 7). Deliberative spaces in churches provide a context in which many citizens are already gathering to discuss and negotiate what they hold valuable, where there are already pathways for action through the ministries in which churches and their members take part. As Lee and Mason-Imbody (2013) wrote,

Too often, deliberation is misunderstood as a specialized technique or method. By examining everyday speech acts, we can show that deliberation is a natural part of talk—a native plant, not some exotic flower. (p. 8)^[11]

In many conversations, church leaders or members have noted that this is “something we are already doing,” but identifying it as a meaningful political and religious practice opens up possibilities to be more intentional about the ways this can strengthen and catalyze the public work churches do. It helps expand the possibilities for what is “political” in a time when the public narrative often frames politics as a battle waged by elites and zealots, in which everyday people sit on the sidelines and hope to avoid stray bullets.

At their best, deliberative practices increase the democratic character of other approaches to political engagement by bringing to the fore the importance of ongoing learning with others, naming issues in terms that make sense to everyday people and framing challenges so that there are viable options that can be considered and acted on.^[12] Everyday people must be able to do these things in order to support the transformations that many churches, citizens, and communities long for. Such efforts are best understood as not only political but also religious practices for churches that are seeking to transform themselves and to be a part of transforming the communities and world into which they are woven (Schade, 2018).

Throughout this study, participants highlighted the extent to which they found resonances between deliberative practices and the practices of their faith communities (Dedrick, 2016). In both cases, there is an emphasis on slowing down and decentering the self. There is a shared sense that “we” do not have all the answers ourselves, and however encoded some answers are (in scripture or law), they remain incomplete. There is an acknowledgment that whatever we are doing has to relate to something that we already have: What we are doing cannot be completely disconnected from what has gone before. Finally, there is a sense that our work and efforts are proximate or open-ended. There is always already^[13] uncertainty, and the story is neither closed nor ever fully known. In considering the resonances between religious life and deliberative democratic efforts, there is a sense that humanity cannot thrive or be complete without community. Recognizing the ways such undertakings are mutually reinforcing can serve as helpful reminders about how our political and religious longings spring from similar places as we struggle to live well with and among each other. The following section highlights some of the insights that emerged from the efforts of the research participants as they sought to integrate more deliberative practices into their churches, communities, and ministries.

Steps in the Right Direction

There is no formula that churches can use to strengthen citizens’ abilities to act together to build stronger, healthier, and more democratic communities. It is imperative that communities, religious or secular, experiment with what works in their context and understand that failing and learning from failures are important parts of the process. That said, over the course of this study, some helpful insights emerged that offer good starting points for churches interested in strengthening citizens’ and communities’ abilities to act together toward the world they long for. While this study focused on churches, I suspect that these insights could help other religious groups as they seek new ways to engage with the communities where they are located.

Stop Creating “Good Programs”

In “The Organization-First approach,” Creighton and Harwood (2008) argued that the internal needs and logic of an organization often inadvertently become the focus of an organization’s

actions, at the expense of its mission or stated purpose. They found that many organizations take a project-development and implementation approach to their work: assessment of needs, education, planning, and then collaboration (in that order). In short, the “good programs” that organizations develop too often meet the needs of the organization but not the needs of the community (see also McKnight, 2000).

As many churches and ecclesial structures struggle to survive, they turn more and more inward—some might say they are circling the wagons. In a conversation about the ways churches might transition to more collaborative approaches to building community and civic capacity, the Rev. Dr. Dana Horrell, a United Methodist minister and nonprofit director, reflected that “denominations are talking more to themselves than they ever have” (Horrell, 2015). This fear and inward focus has led organizations to view collaboration and deliberation as an unpredictable risk. There are concerns that collaboration and deliberation can “go awry,” that people may not be happy, and that the organization will be blamed (Creighton & Harwood, 2008). Collaborative and deliberative efforts do not have predictable outcomes, cannot be easily controlled, and cannot be planned out in a way churches are apt to want to do.

The organization-first approach is familiar to many who struggle to try new and innovative ways to solve problems and address pressing moral and theological issues in communities. In churches, perhaps more so than secular organizations, there is a sense that the stakes are very high. In many churches, both leaders and members share a sense that the costs of failure are not only “the doors shutting” but also more serious eternal consequences. One result of this concern is often resistance to experimentation or risk-taking (Hearst, 2016; Kercheville, 2016).

This nexus of practical and theological concerns often moves churches toward predictable programs that produce results—food given out, warm places of rest provided, laws passed—that feel as though they are not likely to threaten the organization itself. Yet, replication of “best practices” and “good programs” often leaves out the creative learning that comes from everyday people working together to talk about, make sense of, and act together on their shared challenges (Frederickson, 2003). “Good programs” do not leave room for productive failure or struggle, which often stifles the learning and change that are essential for citizens to collaboratively address problems. In conversations among clergy about these challenges, many also noted that “good programs” can crowd out space for congregations, members, and the community to experience and connect both with God and with each other. It is clear that some churches get so invested in a safe “good programs” model that they lose sight of the risky and radical work of the church that has strong historical and theological roots in Christian tradition and scripture.

One way churches have found to counter this tendency toward an inward focus is through deliberative practices—through formal forums, bible studies, and informal gatherings—within the context of church life and also with other citizens and institutions. This requires considering others’ views, turning away from the self/institution and what is known, negotiating values, and weighing possible options for action (Hammond & Morrill, 2016; Horrell, 2019, pp.149–154; Schade, 2018; Turner, 2015). It is difficult for churches to give up the predictability of “good programs.” Yet, many are surprised to find how much energy is freed up by deemphasizing programs and instead putting that time and energy directly toward relational, democratic work with everyday people, unconstrained by the sometimes oppressive predictability that can come with even the best programmatic work.

Build in What is Already There

In discussing the problems associated with creating “good programs,” several ministers and community members cautioned against “throwing the baby out with the bathwater” (e.g., Horrell, 2015; Kaufman, 2016; Turner, 2015). While some churches have undertaken major changes and eliminated, for instance, all social service programs (King, 2015; Mather, 2016), for others it is important to create space for new ways of doing things without insisting on rushed change. Given the significant number of people already doing service, mobilization, community organizing, and programmatic work in churches, it often makes practical sense to build on the places where deliberative and democratic work is already happening within these contexts—sometimes just here or there, sometimes in the cracks and fissures, sometimes quietly and humbly in ways that are hard to discern.

Another way to build on strengths is to recognize the extent to which churches remain one of the institutions where citizens feel they belong, where they have strong ties, and where many people (about 35%) still have high levels of trust (Saad, 2012, 2015, 2018). In light of today’s historically low levels of trust and confidence in most institutions (Gallup, 2020; Pew, 2019a), churches provide a context in which people talk face to face, struggle with moral issues and values, and act together on those values. Communities, churches, and ecumenical and denominational organizations that want to build on these enduring connections and relationships can ask themselves:

- How can deliberation be named and/or introduced in the work we are already doing?
- How can we reframe our current work in a way that foregrounds community building and civic capacity?
- Where does “what is already happening” overlap with community-building and deliberative practices? How can we strengthen that work?
- How can the activities we are already engaged in—service, mobilization, deliberation, community organizing, spiritual reflection, and guidance—do more to reinforce the church as both a node in the community network and as a civic “gym” of sorts where people learn and strengthen democratic skills and habits?^[14]

Deemphasize Outcomes

Many churches have found that by focusing too closely on short-term observable outcomes, they lose sight of the longer term yet vitally important goals of their public work such as effectively solving problems and expanding democratic participation. One of the key findings of this study was that in order to make space for long-term improvements, the focus on measurable, observable outcomes, which have often come to define “effective programs” or “a successful ministry,” must be reduced. Too often, evaluations track and attempt to improve what can be easily measured (Muller, 2018). Yet, the ability to learn from failure, to take risks, to frame issues effectively, to listen and understand others, and to act on problems together is difficult to measure, particularly for organizations with limited or absent resources for in-depth evaluation (Dubnick & Frederickson, 2011, pp. 31–33; Muller, 2018). For instance, it is very difficult to measure the process of finding common ground when grappling with practical implications of bible verses in the regular Wednesday night bible study, or to measure the expansion of public space that a church creates when it helps organize a forum on pressing social issues in the

community. It is, of course, easy to measure how many meals are provided at a soup kitchen or to assess if a controversial law was blocked, but these measures do not speak to citizens' civic abilities or churches' progress in building community and civic capacity.

Some churches have found it helpful to frame the decreased emphasis on outcomes theologically, in terms of "trusting God." While this is understood in a wide range of ways across traditions, churches and community members have benefited from making the connection between the unknowability of the infinite and future, and the ability to let go of expectations about what the best or right outcomes should be. Perhaps counterintuitively, this letting go has helped churches move toward the sort of world they long for (often framed theologically as "the Kingdom of God"). This has strong theological roots in the Christian tradition and is also affirmed in the literature on what makes communities work well (Mathews, 2002). It seems that a less outcome-focused approach to the work of community building and democratic engagement allows churches to better enact their good intentions.

In conversations among lay and ordained church leaders, many have also found that the metaphor of an "ecology of democracy" is helpful in thinking about the risks and benefits of letting go of outcomes. Just as ecosystems change organically and develop in ways that experts cannot design or foresee, democratic ecosystems need the flexibility to change and grow organically without overly prescriptive control. Does this mean that the system cannot be supported and nurtured? No. Rather, it implies a trust in the organic logic of the ecosystem as a whole—that is, citizens coming together and learning through experience. AME Pastor Rev. Dr. Stanley Hearst pointed out that some religious institutions would rather die than change, and he emphasized that deliberative, democratic work that happens in, and grows out of, religious organizations will not "be for everyone." However, for those who already want to do this work or who are looking for a better approach than the one they have that is not working, it is important to continue disrupting and complicating expectations about what will "make things better."

Conclusion

Many citizens seem concerned with the state of the world and do not know what to do. The United States has faced repeated, horrific murders of African Americans; protests related to race and policing; an ongoing and serious pandemic; contentious and uniquely uncivil election cycles; harassment and targeted violence against religious, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities; targeted killings of police in several cities; mass shootings; extraordinary polarization; and increasing reports of terror attacks, refugee crises, and civil war abroad. Social media and public conversation often center on a sense of speechlessness and helplessness. Many turn to their churches for solace, for answers, and for hope that they might find a way forward that honors their religious commitments as well as their community, families, and the broader world.

In 1992, Vaclav Havel, political dissident and president of both the former Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, gave an address at Wroclaw University in which he spoke of the dissidents who,

despite the risks involved and the uncertainty of any real changes resulting, repeated over and over again that the emperor was wearing no clothes. This Sisyphean, almost quixotic stance originated mainly in the moral or existential field, in a heightened feeling of personal

responsibility for the world. That is, the political activity of the dissidents had, far more obviously than it might have in conditions of freedom, a spiritual or moral dimension. Their way of thinking and behaving, their values, the claims they made, their style of work, their standards of success and failure ... can rightly appear inappropriate, alien, impractical, and idealistic when transferred to real politics in democratic conditions.

As we face a world that many perceive to be chaotic and perhaps irrecoverable, where our best hopes can seem silly and wildly unrealistic, it is helpful to remember concrete examples in recent memory, alongside the many examples we can draw from religious tradition, that even in the most difficult times, there is the possibility that things might be otherwise. Although not sufficient for bringing about the world we long for, it is essential that there are people who continue work that can seem, in our current day and age, Sisyphean.

There is indeed an important “spiritual and moral dimension” to this belief in the possibility of a different world. The work of relationships, change, and growth is slow and often mundane, and it requires people to take a long, impractical view of shared life together (Bonhoeffer, 2009) that is unreasonably undeterred by election cycles and current events. The work is certainly long and hard, but the hope is that efforts such as those described in this article will add to the possibility that things might be otherwise and encourage those who share similar commitments to continue, even when things seem inappropriate, alien, impractical, and idealistic.

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1. The *Christian right* is an imprecise term, and there is little consensus—either scholarly or popular—about what it means (e.g., see Diamond, 1995, pp. 5–11 and Shields, 2009, pp. 10–17). See Pharr (2001, p. 39) and Wilcox and Robinson (2011, p. 39) for examples of definitions. I use the term in this article to refer to an influential set of organizations and leaders and a significant part of the U.S. citizenry that desires and/or works toward close alignment between U.S. laws/policy and a conservative Christian worldview. For more on a conservative Christian worldview, see Martin (1996); Pharr (2001); Williams (2010); and Wald and Calhoun-Brown's (2007) *Religion and Politics*, especially but not limited to Chapter 8. [↑](#)

2. The Kettering Foundation has provided space and resources for those interested in this work to gather to share their experiences and insights several times a year since 2012. [↑](#)
3. Over the years, meetings have included religious leaders from a range of contexts, including Muslim, pagan, Jewish, Christian, ecumenical, and interfaith contexts. This study focused specifically on work in Christian contexts, although I look forward to additional research that attends to the particular contributions and challenges faced in other contexts. [↑](#)
4. Many attributions in this article are in the context of group conversations among participants in the Religious Organizations and Community Building research exchange that has met at The Kettering Foundation regularly since 2012. While ideas are, as often as possible, attributed to individuals, there are many instances of an insight coming about collectively, sometimes over the period of several days and multiple conversations. Thus, individual attributions should be understood in this collaborative context. [↑](#)
5. See especially “Mobilizing the Faithful” in Shields (2007, pp. 94–97); and “Mobilizing the Moral Majority” in Liebman and Wuthnow (1983, pp. 50–74). This type of mobilization is also discussed throughout Shields (2009). [↑](#)
6. See Bretherton’s (2015) helpful discussion of the importance of time and its relationship to democratic life: If we cannot “take the time to listen to and build relationships with each other, democratic politics cannot be sustained over time.... While democracy undoubtedly needs to be quickened on occasions by forms of agitation and democratic impatience with the status quo, it is for the most part a slow and time-consuming business of patient deliberation, relationship building, and arriving at rather than making decisions” (pp. 285–286). [↑](#)
7. See Defilippis et al. (2010) for a critique of this local focus. [↑](#)
8. For instance, PICO National Network (<https://www.piconetwork.org/about/history>), Gamaleil (<https://www.gamaliel.org>), and the Industrial Areas Foundation (<https://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/content/mission>). [↑](#)
9. I focus on deliberation because it is often preceded by or includes conversation, dialogue, and discussion, yet goes further in that it requires the weighing of values and options with a view toward action. This article focuses on strengthening citizens’ abilities to *act together* to build stronger, healthier, and more democratic communities; thus, I narrow my focus to deliberation because of its view toward action. [↑](#)
10. See for instance the materials provided by the National Issues Forums Institute (<https://www.nifi.org>) or Everyday Democracy (<https://www.everydaydemocracy.com>). [↑](#)
11. There is a significant literature that considers ideal conditions for deliberation (Bächtiger et al., 2010). Conditions conducive to the habit of deliberation with other citizens and institutions (to build stronger communities, conducive to the habit) These questions are important for considering what deliberation is and how it relates to democracy. For the purposes of this research, however, I assume that deliberation can, perhaps imperfectly, take place productively in a range of conditions that do not meet the ideals discussed throughout the literature. [↑](#)
12. Note that these practices are drawn from Chapter 10 of *The Ecology of Democracy*, “Democratic Practices” (Mathews, 2014, pp. 119–120). See also Mathews (2016). [↑](#)

13. See Ricoeur (2012, pp. 48, 57) for more on “already always” formulation. [↑](#)
14. For more on “civic muscle” that can be built in a “civic gym,” see Rourke (2020). [↑](#)

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