

# Religion News Service/ Interfaith America Religion Journalism Fellowship Program





Interfaith America and Religion News Service are excited to invest in a new generation of storytellers exploring religious diversity and interfaith cooperation.

Religion in America is a wonderfully complex and constantly evolving landscape, and through this fellowship we bring new perspectives into the stories that connect us.

We are proud of the stories our RNS/IA Religion Journalism Fellows are writing, and we hope you will love them too.

## Eboo Patel

*Founder and President, Interfaith America*



One of the slogans you will see on t-shirts and coffee mugs at the annual RNA conference is “Religion is always in the room.” That truth — that religion is almost always part of the story, even if it’s not the story — goes to the heart of the value of the Interfaith America/RNS Fellowship.

The goal of the fellowship program is not only, or even primarily, to create the religion journalists of the next generation. Rather, our hope in training young journalists to ask questions about faith is that they will look for the impact of religion whatever the story is or whatever their beat. We believe that basic journalistic literacy about faith will allow them to report their stories more deeply and tell them more accurately.

Of course, we can’t teach religious literacy in the few months we spend with the four fellows each session. We can, however, instill a curiosity about a subject’s faith, what it means to them and how it influences their decisions. We can help young reporters to be comfortable asking questions about religious beliefs and about including what sources say about their faith when they talk about it unprompted.

Understanding religion will only become more important as this country becomes more religiously diverse. Reporting accurately and without bias about the faith and values of different groups will become more necessary as our democracy becomes more pluralistic and more religious viewpoints fill the rooms where we find ourselves reporting

## Paul O'Donnell

*Editor in Chief, Religion News Service*



The 2021-22 RNS/IA Religion Journalism Fellows at the 72nd Annual Religion News Association Conference in March 2022. Fellows got the opportunity to network with senior religion journalists, publishers, editors, and reporters from across the country.

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## About the Program

Religion News Service and Interfaith America partnered to launch the RNS/IA Religion Journalism Fellowship program in 2021. The program aims to develop future religion news journalists by allowing promising young reporters to write on topics of faith in American culture and politics while interacting with veteran religion journalists.

The inaugural 2021-2022 program launched in September 2021 with a cohort of four fellows and returned with four new fellows for a second year in September 2022. The fellows receive \$4000 stipends for seven months to uplift stories from diverse faith communities. They also network with renowned religion reporters and editors to deepen their understanding of

religious expression in individual lives and civic life and to develop skills specific to covering religion, belief, faith, and spirituality. The fellows are mentored by RNS Editor-in-Chief Paul O'Donnell, RNS Managing Editor Roxanne Stone, Interfaith America Managing Editor Monique Parsons as well as several senior journalists from RNS. In addition, they meet virtually with journalists from national and major regional news outlets, including the Washington Post, the New York Times, and CNN.

The fellows' work is co-published on the RNS and Interfaith America Magazine websites and carried by RNS' partner, the Associated Press and other RNS subscribers.



### About Interfaith America

Interfaith America is a national nonprofit that equips the next generation of citizens and professionals with the knowledge and skills needed for leadership in a religiously diverse world. Partnering with civic groups, higher education institutions, public health and business, IA is dedicated to making interfaith cooperation the norm and building Interfaith America in the 21st century.



### About Religion News Service

Religion News Service (RNS) is an independent, nonprofit and award-winning source of global news on religion, spirituality, culture and ethics, reported by a staff of professional journalists. Founded in 1934, RNS seeks to inform readers with objective reporting and insightful commentary and is relied upon by secular and faith-based news organizations in a number of countries.



# Meet The Fellows

## 2021-22 RNS/IA Religion Journalism Fellows



### **Diana Kruzman**

Diana Kruzman is a freelance reporter whose work focuses on the intersection of the environment, religion and urbanism. She is particularly interested in how climate change

impacts religious communities around the world as well as the role of religion in secular institutions. She has written for Undark, Earther, The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, Vice and the GroundTruth Project.

### **Tasmiha Khan**

Tasmiha Khan is a freelance writer from the Midwest. She champions marginalized communities, particularly the Muslim American population, including women and children. Her work has appeared in National Geographic, The New York Times, Forbes, The Daily Beast, Vox, and VICE, among others. Khan has been featured in The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Hartford Courant, Southtown Star, and ABC News. Khan has also been named a 2020-2021 Higher Media Education Fellow among other awards.



### **Sara Badilini**

Sara Badilini is an Italian journalist based in New York who covers religion, climate change and human rights. Previously, she worked as a local reporter and a freelancer. She has

a master's degree in international law from the University of Trento and a master's degree from Columbia Journalism School.



### **Camille Daniels**

Camille Daniels is a recent graduate of Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse Public School of Communications where she was a graduate student studying

Magazine, Newspaper and Online Journalism. She is a proud native of South Jamaica, Queens, New York. Her interests range from arts & culture, education, and business. Camille finds topics like religion fascinating because whether one believes or not, it impacts culture at large and can make for great conversations.

# 2022-23 RNS/IA Religion Journalism Fellows



## Amethyst Holmes

Amethyst Holmes is a freelance journalist based in Washington, D.C. She has worked in nonprofit sports ministry in various communications and

marketing roles for nearly a decade. She was previously a general assignment reporter for AL.com/The Huntsville Times. She holds a B.A. in journalism from the University of Alabama and is currently pursuing a Master of Divinity degree at Howard University School of Divinity.



## Kyle Desrosiers

Kyle Desrosiers recently completed a year of study and research in politics, sociology, and Jewish study through a Till Bechtolsheimer Friends Scholarship in Tel Aviv. He was a

university scholars major at Baylor University, with concentrations in journalism, fine arts, and political science, before receiving his master's degree in Conflict Resolution and Mediation from Tel Aviv University. This fall, he will be working towards his Master of Divinity with a focus on Hebrew Bible at Boston College.



## Emily Neil

Emily Neil is a freelance journalist based in Philadelphia. Her work has been published by WHYY, Billy Penn, TheTrace, AL DÍA News, and elsewhere. Born and raised in Baltimore,

Maryland, Emily received her Master of Science degree in journalism from Columbia Journalism School in 2016. Her B.A., in Middle Eastern studies with a minor in Spanish and Latin American studies, is from Barnard College.



## Tori Luecking

Tori Luecking received her master's degree in journalism from New York University and was a production assistant for Soledad O'Brien Productions after graduation. Currently,

she is the assistant director of communications at the Gillen Brewer School and associate producer for the documentary @StickerMovie. Her work includes a mini documentary for the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting and pieces on the Hare Krishna movement and subcultures in New York City.



# 2021-22 RNS/IA Religion Journalism Fellowship Articles



Photo by Stephanie A. Terry/Wikipedia/Creative Commons

## How Ohio's Indigenous Sacred Sites Became a Religious Flashpoint

**By Diana Kruzman**

Published JANUARY 4, 2022

Chief Glenna Wallace spent the summer solstice this past June walking the narrow asphalt path that encircles Serpent Mound, a low, serpentine wall of earth built by her ancestors' hundreds or even thousands of years ago.

Wallace, who leads the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, was joined by Chief Ben Barnes of the Shawnee Tribe, and the two talked to crowds of visitors to the historic site about their tribes' connections to the mound and the 19th-century

policies that forced them out of the area.

"We presented programs to let people know that the tribes still exist, the people still exist," Wallace told Religion News Service in a recent phone call. "We are still alive, and we are still active. Those are still spiritual places for us."

As they spoke, the sounds of flute music and a "Native American style" drum demonstration filtered through the air from the nearby Soaring



Eagle Retreat, where people had gathered to commemorate the solstice with crystal workshops and a presentation by a local Bigfoot investigator and other speakers who suggested that aliens or giants had built the mound.

Southern Ohio is home to more than 70 earthworks constructed by the Indigenous Adena and Hopewell cultures. These structures are still important to their descendants — the Shawnee, Eastern Shawnee, Miami, and Delaware people who were pushed out of the area 200 years ago by white American settlers. Some of the structures were built as burial mounds, while others functioned as astronomical observatories or ritual or religious structures.

But the mounds have also taken on significance for other spiritual groups. Terri Rivera, who has been bringing people to celebrate equinoxes and solstices at Serpent Mound for a decade, believes the site should be open to anyone who sees it as a sacred place.

“To me, it’s a real healing spot,” Rivera said on a visit to the mound in November. “I think people were probably drawn here because of the energy fields.”

Theories about the mounds’ origins have also led to attacks from fringe evangelical Christians who see them as unholy. Tribal leaders have responded by educating locals about the mounds and working with groups such as Ohio History Connection, the nonprofit that manages Serpent Mound and other mounds throughout Ohio, to ensure they are respected.

“We believe that some of the activities that have occurred there in the past are in direct violation of our beliefs,” Wallace said. “And so, we’re asking that our practices not be violated.”

Their efforts are part of a larger battle for access to sacred sites, from mountains in Arizona to rivers in North Dakota, aimed at fending off

developers or government agencies to preserve the physical integrity directly linked to their spiritual value.

The federal government is sometimes a partner, and sometimes not. In Ohio, the United States is working to have nine Ohio earthworks, including Serpent Mound, added to the UNESCO’s World Heritage list, a move that would provide added resources to safeguard the mounds.

Interest from practitioners of alternative faiths is also a mixed blessing. While New Agers often share a belief in Native American sites’ spiritual power, they have sometimes caused damage. In 2012, a group called Unite the Collective, whose members identified themselves as “Light Warriors,” buried hundreds of orgonites — balls of crystals and resin, often made in muffin tins — at Serpent Mound in an attempt to focus the earth’s vibrations.

A map of Serpent Mound from “Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley,” published by the Smithsonian Institution Press in 1848. Image courtesy of Wikipedia/Creative Commons

Sites like Serpent Mound have served as gathering places for New Age spiritual practitioners since the 1987 Harmonic Convergence when believers congregated on a day they believed was auspicious according to the Mayan calendar. The Newark Earthworks, about 40 minutes east of Columbus, has also drawn attention for supposedly being built along ley lines — invisible gridlines that channel “earth energies.”

In 2011, Serpent Mound was featured on an episode of the History Channel’s show “Ancient Aliens,” in which several people claimed the mound may have been used as a landing site by aliens. (Rivera’s husband, Tom Johnson, appeared as a guest on the show, saying he’d heard such stories.)

And the day before the winter solstice last

December, Dave Daubenmire, a conservative activist and leader of Pass the Salt Ministries in Hebron, Ohio, led a group to Serpent Mound to perform a prayer to cast out demons from the site. Daubenmire said in a Facebook video that he believed Ohio’s earthworks were built by Nephilim, a race of giants some say are the offspring of fallen angels and human women.

For many, these claims echo the racist “Moundbuilder myth,” which credits the mounds’ construction to an ancient white race — an idea used by 19th-century politicians to justify the expulsion of Native tribes from their lands.

Daubenmire’s group was met by protesters from the American Indian Movement of Ohio, though the organization is not sanctioned by the official American Indian Movement. (The group’s director, Philip Yenyo, presents himself as Native American but is of Hungarian and Spanish Mexican descent, according to AIM.)

Rivera criticized both Unite the Collective and Pass the Salt Ministries, maintaining that the mounds provide an opportunity for people with different beliefs to come together, provided they respect the site.

“One of our sayings for our events is: all nations, all races, all relationships,” said Rivera, who describes herself as having Native American ancestry but is not a member of a recognized tribe. “So, it’s time to just quit dividing. Just say, hey, let’s just all be friends.”

But Wallace said that belief in the mounds’ spiritual power can lead people to disrespect the mounds’ history and sacredness. She has seen people using drugs at Serpent Mound on the winter solstice and heard of people having sex there, believing it would boost their fertility. Even the drumming that took place at the last solstice event, though characterized by organizers as “ceremonial,” seemed disrespectful to Wallace

— more like a “rock concert” than an act of reverence.

Joe Laycock, an assistant professor of religious studies at Texas State University, said interest in Native American traditions goes back to the Spiritualist movement of the 1800s, when settlers’ guilt over the displacement and destruction of Indigenous communities may have driven them to obsession. It boomed in the 1960s, as alternative spiritual practitioners began integrating “pseudo-Native” folklore.

The New Age movement’s syncretism — what Laycock calls a “cultic milieu” of different spiritual beliefs and practices — is evident in the gathering Rivera is organizing in December. The event will feature a Peruvian healing ceremony, a presentation by a psychic medium and “animal communicator,” ceremonial drumming, lessons in “sacred geology” and traditional Māori dance, or haka.

Not everyone who attends these gatherings identifies as New Age — including Rivera, who said she’s broadly spiritual — but this kind of big-tent approach is a hallmark of the movement, Laycock said.

This year, after input from Wallace and Barnes, OHC began restricting groups from gathering directly at the mound, meaning Rivera’s Serpent Mound Star Knowledge Winter Solstice Peace Summit will take place six miles away from Serpent Mound.

No matter their beliefs, visitors to the mounds need to show respect for the sites’ spiritual nature, said John Low, director of the Newark Earthworks Center and an enrolled citizen of the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians. The mounds are no less sacred than a church or a mosque, Low said, though their sacredness is not bound by what is built on the land.

“The earth which they are built upon was sacred, is sacred, will always be sacred,” Low said.

# In Catholic Italy, ‘De-Baptism’ is Gaining Popularity

By Sara Badilini

Published NOVEMBER 16, 2021



Photo by Josh Applegate/Unsplash/Creative Commons

*Like most of his fellow Italians, Mattia Nanetti, 25, from the northern city of Bologna, grew up with the teachings and sacraments of the Catholic Church in parochial school. Even his scouting group was Catholic.*

But in September 2019 he decided the time had come to leave the church behind. He filled out a form that he had found online, accompanying it with a long letter explaining his reasons, and sent everything to the parish in his hometown.

Two weeks later, a note was put next to his name in the parish baptism register, formalizing his abandonment of the Catholic Church, and Nanetti became one of an increasing, though hard to quantify, number of Italians who have been “de-baptized.”

Every year in Italy, more and more people choose to go through the simple process, which became available two decades ago at the behest of the Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics, abbreviated in Italian as UAAR.

A lack of data makes it difficult to establish how common the phenomenon is, but some dioceses are keeping track. The Diocese of Brescia, east of Milan, said in its diocesan newspaper in August that 75 people asked to be de-baptized in 2021, as opposed to 27 in 2020.

Combining this partial data with activity on a website UAAR recently launched where people can register their de-baptisms, Roberto Grendene, national secretary of the UAAR, said the organization estimates that more than 100,000 people have been de-baptized in Italy.

The church does quibble with the word “de-

baptism” — sbattezzo in Italian. Legally and theologically, experts say, this isn’t an accurate term.

The Rev. Daniele Mombelli, vice chancellor of the Diocese of Brescia and professor of religious sciences at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, said it’s not possible to “erase the baptism, because it’s a fact that historically happened, and was therefore registered.”

“What the procedure does is formalize the person’s abandonment of the church,” said Mombelli.

While agreeing that it is impossible to cancel a baptism, Italy’s Personal Data Protection Authority now states that everyone has the right to abandon the church.

The de-baptism is finalized once an applicant declares the intention to abandon the church and the decision is registered by the church authorities, normally the local bishop.

But according to canon law, anyone who goes through the procedure is committing the crime of apostasy, which, Mombelli said, comes with “severe consequences.”

An apostate immediately faces excommunication from the church, without need of a trial. This means that the person is excluded from the sacraments, may not become a godparent and will be deprived of a Catholic funeral.

“There’s a substantial difference between the sin of apostasy and the crime of apostasy,” Mombelli said. “An atheist commits the sin because it’s an internal decision, and they can be forgiven if they repent. An apostate, instead, manifests their will to formally abandon the church externally, so they face legal consequences for their decision.”

De-baptism is not exclusive to Italy, Grendene said, and the UAAR website includes a section monitoring how the procedure is being carried



out abroad, but only very few countries regulate it. In the rest of the world, humanist and atheist organizations, such as Humanists International, pay more attention to apostasy than governments do.

The reasons behind de-baptism vary from person to person. But many of the de-baptized described their choice as a matter of “coherence.”

Pietro Groppi, a 23-year-old from Piacenza who got de-baptized in May 2021, said that the first question he asked himself before sending his form was “Do I believe or not?” and the answer was simply, “No.”

But for many, abandoning the church is a statement against its positions on LGBTQ rights, euthanasia and abortion.

Nanetti said that being de-baptized helped him affirm his own identity as bisexual. “I had to get distance from some of the church’s positions on civil rights matters,” he said.

The church’s stance on sexuality helped pushed Groppi to seek out de-baptism as well, though he’s not affected personally. He finds the Vatican’s position on these matters “absurd,” and he’s unhappy with how the church meddles with Italian politics.

Francesco Faillace, 22, now going through the de-baptism procedure, said: “I’ve been an atheist since basically forever. For the church, being baptized means that you’re a Catholic, but that’s not the case. I’ve personally been baptized for cultural reasons more than religious, because that’s how it goes in Italy.”

Faillace believes that if all the people who don’t truly identify as Catholics were to be de-baptized, official percentages of Italian Catholics would be significantly lower.

The latest data seems to back him up. In 2020, sociologist Francesco Garelli conducted a large

study financed by the Italian Catholic Bishops Conference that concluded that 30% of the Italian population is atheist — around 18 million people.

The Rev. Alfredo Scaroni, pastor in a town of 9,000 in northern Italy, has noticed an increasing number of people distancing themselves from the church. If more than 15% of the population appear at Sunday Mass, he said, it is an achievement.

“The church is having a large conversation on atheism, and, from our side, we need to practice more acceptance and attention,” Scaroni said.

Grendene, of the UAAR, said many Italians are still unaware of de-baptism as an option. In the past, the association would organize “de-baptism days” to advertise it, he said, but it turns out that the church itself is de-baptism’s best promoter.

“Whenever the Vatican is at the center of a controversy, we see the access to our website grows dramatically,” said Grendene, pointing out that on two days in June, traffic on the UAAR website went from a daily average of 120 visitors to more than 6,000.

Not coincidentally, perhaps, a few days earlier the Vatican sent a note to the Italian government, asking to change some of the language in a proposed law aimed at criminalizing discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and disability.

# How COVID-19 has Made the Lives of Aspiring Clergy More Daunting

By Camille Daniels

DECEMBER 27, 2021

*Cooper Young, a second-year seminary student at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, knew he wanted to become a minister, but like many students in the past two years, his education has become a journey. Classes went from on-campus and in-person to online from home, and back again.*

Meanwhile, since graduating from Syracuse University in 2020, Young has gone through other significant changes: He got married and, after an internship in Massachusetts, was hired as an assistant minister by his childhood church in Chittenango, New York. On the downside, he’d contracted COVID-19.

“I was still in my first year of marriage, but then on top of that, it’s a new job at a church of predominantly people over 55,” Young recalled.

Charged with bringing in younger people in the middle of a pandemic, Young said he found himself fighting resistance to his ideas for growth while also fielding the congregation’s objections to the church leadership’s mask policies. “It didn’t seem like a lot was working,” he said.

The torrent of experiences — compounded by the fuzzy consciousness known as “COVID fog” — eventually impacted his mental health.

“I was having a panic attack at one point — the only time it’s ever happened in my life before,” Young said.

For many seminarians, Young is a harbinger of the difficulties many of them will face as they graduate into a religious landscape that has been transformed — spiritually, physically, politically and logistically — by COVID-19, and of the toll this new reality is taking on their mental health.

According to a recent Barna Group survey, pastors have increasingly been contemplating quitting their jobs since the beginning of 2021. In the same poll, female clergy members, like women across all industries, were found to be more likely to quit their jobs than male clergy.



Photo by Diana Polekhina/Unsplash/Creative Commons

Seminaries, like other institutions of higher education, have stepped up mental health services, but how much help students get can depend on the cultural climate of the school, as some schools may offer more services than others.

“Our school is pretty open about it, if you have mental health needs and we have mental health needs and we talk about it quite openly,” said Su Yon Pak, a dean and associate professor of integrative and field-based education at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

But the pandemic has put a greater focus on those struggling with their mental health, Pak said. “Because of all the constraints, the restraints, the quarantine, the fear of dying, people dying in the families, not being able to

connect, absolutely. It’s not just students. We all struggled through it. It was really hard. And as a school we tried to put that upfront.”

Jay-Paul Hinds of Princeton Theological Seminary explained that the range of issues facing PTS students preparing for graduation only begins with the pandemic. “The isolation of COVID has something to do with it, the racial tension in this country, the political uncertainty has a lot to do with it. And for many people, the declining role of the church in our society is of major concern,” Hinds said.

These increasing stressors of being a pastor in a pandemic are affecting the way many seminarians are thinking about their careers.

“It can put those who feel drawn to it at a crossroads when it comes to future employment, especially those looking to become ministers in the traditional sense of leading a congregation,” Hinds said.

One of Hinds’ colleagues, the Rev. Kenda Creasy Dean, a United Methodist minister and a professor of youth, church and culture at PTS, said those concerns are causing seminarians to look for other uses for their degrees. “Our students are far less likely to equate ministry with pastoring a church. They are very likely to see it as working with nonprofits and doing entrepreneurial stuff and ... being in the helping professions in other ways, social work and other stuff.”

But given the needs of the church, and the inevitability that seminarians will hold a church job sooner or later, prospective clergy themselves are looking for ways to safeguard their mental health.

he said, noting that some seminary texts essentially glorify unhealthy long hours.

Seminaries could design their programs to meet students where they are in their lives, Young said. Students with young children or other responsibilities at home as well as a job, he suggested, might be allowed to take classes without the additional work required outside of the classroom, and to move through the curriculum at their own pace.

But Young also offered that those making the transition from seminary to full-time work need to emphasize the positive. After his panic attack, he said, “I kind of readjusted my expectations and my attitude. I honestly came in pretty ignorant and not too gung-ho but wanting a quick fix instead of having to persevere.”

The turning point for Young was the young adult group that he and his wife started together, which they called Do Good, “not just for our church but for anyone who wants to come.”

Before long, he said, “people in the area I didn’t even know were checking out the church.” At the same time, he said, the uproar about mask wearing subsided as well.

“God was definitely moving and doing things,” said Young.



Video screen grab

Young believes schools can do more to help their students’ mental health in this period by adjusting curriculum and workload. “I would love for there to be a ‘Less is more’ mentality,”



# Bride's Side or Groom's?

## How Photographers Navigate Gender-Segregated Weddings

By Tasmiha Khan

APRIL 15, 2022

*Photographer Ghila Krajzman has learned that sometimes the only way to get the shot she needs is to hand over her camera. In her more than a decade of shooting gender-segregated weddings, baby showers and bar and bat mitzvah celebrations for New York's Orthodox Jewish families, Krajzman feels she has gained the community's trust — especially, of course, when she's working the women's side of such milestone events.*

Things can be different on the men's side.

"They don't like that I am the one shooting on their side," Krajzman, who identifies as a secular Jew but honors the common Orthodox Jewish practice of avoiding contact with members of the opposite sex who aren't family.

Sometimes, she has resorted to asking the groom's sister to take a photo because a male relative of the groom was not comfortable with Krajzman's presence. At another wedding, the shoot went fine, but when it came time for her to get paid, the father of the bride simply left a stack of cash on a table to avoid the possibility of physical contact.

Florists, caterers, and other wedding professionals have the luxury of keeping their distance or setting up long beforehand. But capturing a wedding's special moments through the camera lens can be a challenge in Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, and other faith communities where strolling over to the opposite gender side to get a shot is a religious violation.

Avi Kugiel sky, an Orthodox Jewish photographer in New York who documents Hasidic life in America, has also worked as a photographer at gender-segregated events. Having grown up in the Orthodox community, he understands the nuances of navigating the norms. According to Kugiel sky, different communities have differing levels of strictness.

"In Judaism, the separation from man and women is a very strong defined aspect of religion," Kugiel sky said, and he tries to observe the modesty rules while capturing as much as he can.

Fariha Wajid, a photographer in the Chicago area, said she feels her mission at gender-segregated Muslim weddings is to be there for

the bride. Women in many Muslim communities have few opportunities to "get decked out, especially when they are hijabi," she said.

For one bride who observed the hijab but wanted an outdoor photo session at her wedding, which would have exposed her to the eyes of everyone who attended, male and female, Wajid scouted the banquet venue ahead of time to find a secluded spot and made arrangements that shielded the bride from the public's view.

But Wajid admits that at many gender-separate events, especially weddings, the special moments that include male relatives are given shorter shrift. There is the feeling, she said, that there are fewer moments to capture among the men, and even when the groom appears on



Photo by Fariha Wajid Photography





Photo by Fariha Wajid Photography

the bride's side of the divided hall "everything is rushed and everyone tries to squeeze everything in," Wajid said.

Often, couples whose weddings are divided by gender simply end up with fewer photos, photographers say.

Some photographers get around the difficulties of a gender-segregated ceremony by hiring a photographer of the opposite sex. That way, said Isaq Hameed, a male photographer in Chicago, "the only time I do go on the female side is if I need to give any specific instructions to my subordinate or when the groom goes on to the female side for photos."

But this approach isn't without its challenges. "Good communication between the two photographers is important to ensure the quality and standard of the content that is being captured is well-maintained," said Hameed. But "from a creative perspective," he adds, "there is not much freedom in such events to capture the vision I have, so I try to keep it pretty straightforward."

But photographing men and women separately can have its advantages. Kiki Khan, a photographer in Bartlett, Illinois, specializes in baby pictures and family photos. While she doesn't advertise as a gender-separate photographer, she is familiar with the modesty rules and is happy to accommodate religious families who want two sets of shots, one with each gender.

"Separate shoots are a great way for each parent to bond with the child," she said. "It makes the kids feel as though something is being done just for them and the parent has taken the time out to hang out with them specifically."



Photo by Fariha Wajid Photography

# How New York has Answered Religiously Motivated Hate Crime

By **Tori Luecking**

JANUARY 18, 2023

*At the Islamic Cultural Center of New York on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Sheikh Saad Jalloh, the center's imam, reminds his congregation to be aware of the fact that at a busy mosque with more than 1,500 members in the middle of a major metropolitan area, anything can happen.*

And anything often does: Jalloh said the center frequently receives bomb threats by phone and email. People have walked their dogs in the prayer room of the mosque and dumped garbage in the sheikh's prayer station.

Security at the mosque involves both communication with the police — "We have a very good relationship with the 23rd Precinct," said Jalloh — and vigilance from those who attend.

"I always give a brief talk right after the prayer to the congregants," Jalloh told Religion News Service, encouraging them "to be very nice with the neighborhood, to treat them well, to make sure that there's a good relationship between us and them, and not allow hatred, because this may lead to hate crimes or may lead to (an) attack."

New Yorkers of all faiths have faced increasingly daunting numbers of religiously motivated hate crime and bias incidents among the more than 450 confirmed bias and hate incidents reported in their city last year. These attacks range from the personal — two Sikh men were robbed and assaulted in April, their turbans ripped from their heads — to the institutional, as when a Catholic church received bomb threats last May after the draft of a Supreme Court opinion overturning Roe v. Wade was leaked.

In November alone, a Muslim woman was attacked on the subway and two men who made threats against Manhattan synagogues were arrested while carrying, among other weapons, a high-capacity magazine.

But official statistics, experts say, are only



beginning to capture the dimensions of hate crime in New York.

“It’s important to say that the hate crime numbers are underreported,” said Hassan Naveed, executive director of the city’s Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes. Some members of the city’s minority communities “may not necessarily have the same access or comfort level in calling 911 to file a complaint about a hate crime.”

A recent survey, funded by the OPHC and conducted by the New York chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, found that only 4% of respondents who experienced a hate crime reported it to the police.

Naveed’s office, launched in 2019, coordinates the city’s hate and bias discrimination response across several agencies, from the Department of Education to the Police Department. It also partners with local community groups, led by

six anchor organizations focusing on education, community relations and law enforcement.

The anchor groups include the 67th Precinct Clergy Council, based in eastern Brooklyn, which calls itself the “God Squad”; the Arab American Association of New York; Asian American Federation; the Hispanic Federation; the Jewish Community Relations Council; and the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project.

Through these groups, OPHC has helped Jewish organizations and synagogues in the city to bolster security and helped the Muslim Community Network to create its first hate crime prevention survey. With the Sikh Coalition, it organized a hate crime education event for taxi drivers at John F. Kennedy International Airport.

The office also facilitates workshops on how to apply for security grants and distributes information about reporting hate crimes in different languages to reach deeper into

immigrant communities.

“We really have to figure out how to collectively as a society take everything we know and really shift the way we think,” said Naveed. “We are community building constantly. We also ask organizations to work with each other, to get to know each other, to learn from each other.”

Community building also takes place in neighborhoods directly between local police precincts and houses of worship. The NYPD has dedicated neighborhood coordination officers who work within specific precinct sectors, where they get to know the local schools, community leaders, houses of worship and clergy.

With a rash of antisemitic incidents in recent years, Jewish groups have organized additional lines of defense to improve security at Jewish community centers and synagogues around the city. For more than 15 years, the Community Security Service has partnered with law enforcement, local government and other Jewish organizations to train volunteers to protect New York’s Jewish institutions. For more than 15 years today, hundreds of CSS volunteers keep watch over synagogues and Jewish communal spaces in the city.

In the aftermath of the November 2022 Club Q shooting in Colorado, CSS came together with OPHC and LGBTQ Jewish organizations for security and situational awareness training sessions.

Evan Bernstein, CEO and national director of CSS, also believes in a community-building, community-wide approach. He is a co-founder of the Interfaith Security Council, which regularly brings together more than 20 NYC faith-based organizations to discuss best security practices and community concerns, share resources and promote interfaith dialogue.

The Interfaith Security Council was co-founded by Pastor Gil Monroe, executive director of

the New York City Office for Faith-Based and Community Partnerships. The OFCP works with houses of worship on solutions to gun violence, mental health concerns, affordable housing, food insecurity and security threats. Besides teaching security measures directly, the council facilitates training on security grant applications for different communities.

“Our office exists so that all faith groups are represented in terms of city government, and also to be able to share the resources that our city provides to all faith communities, to help them navigate the complexities of the city of New York. Our work is to be that bridge between the city and our faith leaders and faith communities,” said Monroe.

On the day Monroe spoke to RNS, he attended a call between houses of worship and the NYPD that served as an opportunity for faith communities to express any concerns and for law enforcement to check in on security.

“We work better in groups in terms of doing as opposed to standing alone,” said Monroe. “So when one person or group is doing something, we are all doing it.”

With thousands of faith communities in the city of New York, Monroe said, security for its houses of worship depends on collaboration and mutual concern.

“Every day there are people who wake up thinking about how we keep our community safe. That is our challenge,” said Monroe. “To make sure that we are providing the resources and really looking at the dangers we face collectively, and that we are able to tackle them head on for everyone.”



Photo by Victor Rodriguez/Unsplash/Creative Commons





AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana, File

# DC's Faith Communities Rally to Protect Bused-in Immigrants

**By Emily Neil**

NOVEMBER 29, 2022

*The day in April that the first busload of migrants arrived in Washington, D.C., happened to be Holy Thursday, the feast on the Christian calendar that remembers Jesus washing the feet of his disciples the evening before his death.*

The Gospel story is about service, of care, the Rev. Sharon Stanley-Rea explained. Stanley-Rea, a Disciples of Christ minister and then-director of the denomination's Refugee and Immigration Ministries, showed up at a news conference with a basin of water and a towel after that first bus arrived — symbols, she said, of the spirit of welcome she felt the faith community in the nation's capital was being called to emulate.

And not just Christians, she recalled. Holy Thursday fell during Ramadan, the holiest month for Muslims, and Passover, a major Jewish holiday, began a day later. "Thankfully, from the first moment that the initial bus arrived," Stanley-Rea said, "I think we need to hold on to the power of, of that timing, as we have continued to see that spirit power, that commitment to service."

Since then, thousands of migrants have been bused to the city, many without having been told where they were going, others told before boarding that after a stop in Washington they would be able to go on to other destinations where they had family members or loved ones. New York, Chicago and most recently Philadelphia began receiving migrants not long after.

The migrants had been sent north from Texas and Arizona, whose Republican governors, Greg Abbott and Doug Ducey, hoped the mayors of Washington, Philadelphia, New York and other cities would fulfill their promises as being a welcoming city for immigrants so that "overrun and overwhelmed border towns can find relief," Abbott said in a statement at the time.

The Congregation Action Network, a coalition of more than 70 faith-based organizations formed in 2017 in response to the Trump administration's "Muslim ban," had begun providing social services and food during the COVID-19 pandemic. When migrants began arriving in Washington this spring, the coalition

immediately began meeting the newcomers' most urgent material needs.

"You have a lot of faith communities, and groups that were already serving people who are food insecure, or unhoused, kind of well positioned to then transition some of that support to these newly arrived migrants," said Elias Johnson, director of CAN.

Stanley-Rea said she saw "incredibly creative partnerships" develop in order to greet and support migrants.

A rotation schedule was set up in which local churches, synagogues, mosques or other houses of worship opened to the migrants on different days of the week. She estimated that Washington-area faith communities have invested more than half a million dollars in sustaining the migrants in the past several months.

The first face many migrants saw as they stepped off the bus was that of Claudia Tristán, immigration policy director at MomsRising Together, a 16-year-old grassroots organization that advocates for women's and children's issues. Tristán welcomed migrants at the designated drop-off locations and explained the resources available to them. She then transported them to one of the respite centers, where the displaced migrants could get a meal and a change of clothes.

Tristán said volunteers continue to support immigrants who decide to settle in Washington. Teams of volunteers organized by the Migrant Solidarity Mutual Aid Network familiarized the new arrivals with the Washington Metro subway system and helped them enroll their kids in schools and enroll themselves in English-language classes.

"There's a lot of all of this sort of background stuff that is happening, that people don't typically see or hear about, but it's a lot of work.



And there's a lot of volunteers that are taking up that work, just to make sure that these kids, their parents, are feeling welcomed in their new home," she said.

Tristán says the organizing efforts in Washington have become a blueprint for other cities. "Chicago and New York, they were thankfully more prepared because they got to communicate with organizers in D.C. about what to expect, what resources they need to make sure they have on hand," she said.

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Hyattsville, Maryland, on the northeast border of Washington, started housing immigrants when the buses began arriving and has continued to serve as a place of refuge for immigrants coming by bus or other means.

The church, whose congregants are 80% Latino, has offered housing for as long as the immigrants need, as well as food and clothing. Once someone secures a job and housing, the church pays for the first month of rent, if possible, so that the person can start off feeling supported.

The Rev. Vidal Rivas, who leads St. Matthew's, said that even though the mostly Venezuelan and Nicaraguan immigrants are coming primarily from Pentecostal churches at home, many have stayed in touch with St. Matthew's and told Rivas they aim to settle nearby because of the care and community they've found there.

"A church is going to be a church when it welcomes the poor, the marginalized," Rivas said. "The only thing that needs to motivate us

... is love. Because they deserve love."

CAN and other faith organizations and advocacy groups have recently been fighting legislation being considered by the D.C. City Council that they say would cause a rift and contribute to tension between unhoused populations in the city who aren't immigrants and newly arrived immigrants who are also in need of shelter and basic resources.

The Migrant Services and Supports Act of 2022 seeks to codify support for migrants and stipulates that anyone awaiting immigration proceedings at an office outside of D.C. is ineligible to receive city resources that are otherwise available for unhoused D.C. residents — but the ICE field office responsible for D.C. residents is actually in Northern Virginia, and many immigrants bused to the city have immigration hearings scheduled at that office, in Baltimore or at another field office outside of the city itself.

Though the City Council already passed emergency legislation to create an Office of Migrant Services, a public hearing on permanent legislation was held on Oct. 20, and CAN, Sanctuary DMV and other groups voiced opposition to the bill in its current form.

"I think faith communities are really well positioned to try to push back against that to say, 'Look, these are both populations that we care about, that we serve, that we value and want in our communities. And thus, you need to expand services overall and not exclude these migrants from the services,'" Johnson said.

"I think that we'll continue to see that faith communities are able to really advocate from that place and bridge some of what otherwise is sometimes a gap in that organizing and advocacy," he added.

The faith communities and other volunteer groups are nimbler than city government, which

only in September created an Office of Migrant Services.

Giovana Oaxaca, the program director of migration policy with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said the human stories of migrants are all too often missing in the political conversation.

Though her work is on the policy side of migrant affairs, Oaxaca hosted a family that arrived by bus from Texas and called it a powerful reminder of why she has dedicated herself to the question of immigration.

"My apartment was filled with the sound of laughter and music. I was cooking arepas with my guests. They also opened up to me about their experience, telling me about the hardships they had endured, their determination, and, of course, the disorientation they were feeling having arrived to Washington, D.C., with the bags that they could carry with them, essentially," she recalled.

"Just having that personal encounter with this family felt like it was a reaffirmation of what policy is trying to do right. If the experience for them had been so dehumanizing ... connecting to them at that individual personal level felt like a return to what values we speak of when we talk about a more just, a more humane immigration system," she said.

Stanley-Rea, noting that "our Scriptures call us to welcome the vulnerable, to be the balm in Gilead, to offer healing to those who have been traumatized," said that healing cannot come only from handing out benefits. "It's got to also come through relationships, it comes through prayers, it comes through the sharing of hearts and the warmth of friendship," she said. "And all of those are special strengths and gifts I think that faith communities have to offer."



AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin



# Starz's Hit Series 'P-Valley' Finds Sacred Community in a Strip Club

By Amethyst Holmes

DECEMBER 6, 2022

*The spiritual types circling The Pynk, the Southern strip club in Katori Hall's series on Starz, "P-Valley," range from a former security guard who is trained in Hoodoo to a strict Christian pastor whose daughter dances at the club.*

The series, set in the fictional town of Chucalissa, in the Mississippi Delta, toys with the assumption that anyone who works in the adult entertainment industry setting has strayed from a path of piety to surrender to fleshly desires. Hall wants you to see that the spirit is alive in The Pynk — but not only in African folk beliefs or Christian fundamentalism: The Pynk itself is a sacred space for Hall's characters, offering refuge and belonging.

"They're seen as these folks who are devoid of moral authority, who are devoid of even adhering to a standard of morality, a standard of holiness," said D. Danyelle Thomas, founder of Unfit Christian, a digital faith community for

Black post-evangelicals. "Yet we see them deeply involved and entrenched in so much religious, spiritual practice."

Teddy Reeves, curator of religion at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, said of the show's first two seasons, "They broke bread, they fellowshiped, they prayed, they did all the things that happen in religious spaces."

The inhabitants of The Pynk encounter domestic abuse, mental health, abortion and colorism, which the show treats with delicate (and rare) nuance.

"It's not a lot of us who live at the intersection of race, class and gender," said Hall, a Memphis, Tennessee, native who won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for drama for her play, "The Hot Wing King," in an August interview with NPR's Code Switch. In "P-Valley," she said, "we just don't see the complexity of that often in media. We're trying to put vitamins in Kool-Aid. We're trying to talk about real stuff that everyone is going through this very specific lens so that it can feel and be very universal."

The intensity of these lives demands some recourse to faith. Uncle Clifford, The Pynk's nonbinary owner, offers a prayer before

opening The Pynk's doors. Hometown rapper Lil' Murda serves as a death doula for Clifford's grandmother. Mercedes, the pastor's daughter, considers eschatological questions raised by abortion with her own pregnant daughter, Terricka.

"Momma, you think I'm gone burn in Hell?" Terricka asks.

"If you do, I'ma be right there witchu," Mercedes replies.

Reeves, who co-leads the museum's Center for the Study of African American Religious Life, said the Black spirituality the show depicts mirrors trends in broader Black culture. Black millennials and Generation Z populations, particularly, are locating themselves in "liminal spaces of faith," Reeves said. Not bound by the exclusivity of major faith traditions, they are creating their own pluralistic practices.

According to Pew Research Center's recent

report on faith in Black America, younger Black Americans are less connected to churches than their elders. Millennials and members of Gen Z are twice as likely to say they rarely or never attend religious services (though they are still more religious than their non-Black peers).

"The church, the mosque or the synagogue no longer carries the premium or exclusive rights to faith formation for a generation," Reeves said. "Faith formation can happen at a music festival, faith formation can happen at brunch, faith formation can happen in the strip club."

"If a group of millennials are saying, 'I'm not coming to church,' but are going to brunch at the local bar, go to the local bar and have brunch with them. That becomes an extension of the ministry," said Reeves.

The depictions of spirituality in the show, however, are not just stand-ins for Black church. When Diamond, the club's former security guard and trained practitioner of Hoodoo, gives the



Image courtesy of Starz





Image courtesy of Starz

exotic dancer Keyshawn a necklace decorated with a stone belonging to a dead serviceman for strength, or when he later uses rootwork to help Mercedes recover from an injury, he summons a deeper history of Black spirituality.

“The fact that our ancestors brought their spiritual practices and beliefs to this country, merging them with their knowledge of the earth in order to survive, is a testament to our resilience and our Africanness,” Hall tweeted.

Kaila Story, associate professor of women’s, gender and sexuality studies at the University of Louisville, said the mix of folk religion and Christianity “shows what three-dimensional and robust Black Southern living is, as opposed to these stereotypes and controlled images of Black Southern life.”

The drama also shows how formal sacred places can be made profane. Pastor Patrice Woodbine, played by Harriett D. Foy, seemingly has a genuine heart for her congregants. “These streets know my knees. And these folks — the tired, the hungry, the poor — they know my soul,” Woodbine declares. But she is also ready to abuse her position to maneuver for political power.

Woodbine’s by-any-means-necessary journey to the pastorate — she starts her own church, making calculated decisions along the way —

may call her judgment into question but also addresses how women in ministry are edged out of leadership roles.

“That’s the complicated thing (Hall)’s trying to get us to examine by using Patrice Woodbine as an effigy for these things and an amalgamation of all these issues,” Thomas said. “She’s a complex character, but she is that force that we have to reckon with in terms of what does it mean to be Black, woman-bodied and Christian, and to deal with all the complicated legacies of this particular faith practice.”

Hall’s refusal to make Woodbine either completely evil or sufficiently good is a hallmark of the show, letting no one, even critics of religion, off the hook. But so is Woodbine’s insistence on creating her own space for sacredness. Setting a show in adult entertainment, Hall redefines what sacred space can be and who gets to create it.



Image courtesy of Starz

For secularized modern viewers, more importantly, it examines what sacred space is for in the first place. “It complicates and nuances this idea of what we as Americans understand as the profane,” Story said. “The Pynk, even though it’s a strip club, almost serves as a waystation for lost souls, souls that are in need of family, need of love, need of community. The Pynk does that for them.”

# In Philadelphia, Artwork Brings Catholic Church’s Synod to Life

By Kyle Desrosiers

DECEMBER 1, 2022

*A diverse group stands in front of an imposing church: A young person wearing a T-shirt reading “Pride” in rainbow lettering. A female priest wearing a red stole — the liturgical color of Pentecost, the feast celebrating the Holy Spirit’s role in revelation, according to Christian belief.*

“We are the young people of the future and the future is now!” reads a banner streaming up from the group.

This imaginary scene depicts the dreams of many Catholics: a church that welcomes LGBTQ people, allows women to be ordained and gives young Catholics a platform for their ideas.

The scene appears in a series of digital art pieces created by Catholics in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia as part of the Vatican’s Synod on Synodality, a churchwide exercise started by Pope Francis and meant to increase the Catholic

hierarchy’s engagement with the laity — especially with young and marginalized people around the world.

The digital artwork came out of an effort called Synodality in Catholic Higher Education in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, which conducted 48 listening sessions last spring and summer at 14 colleges and other Catholic campus organizations in the Philadelphia area, including Villanova, La Salle and St. Joseph’s universities.

The sessions involved nearly 400 students and were guided by a 40-person leadership team whose aim, according to the SCHEAP 2022 Summary Report, was to “elicit students’ joys and obstacles of journeying with the church, as well as their hopes for its future.”

Art played a central role in this work. Becky “Bex” McIntyre, a St. Joseph’s alumna and muralist raised in Philadelphia (“the mural capital of the world,” according to some), acted as a “synod animator” for the student listening sessions. Her “visual notes” helped those who attended clarify and catalog their ideas.

“Visual notetaking is a new dimension of listening, where people are listening and discerning with each other,” McIntyre told Religion News Service. “Words are one thing,



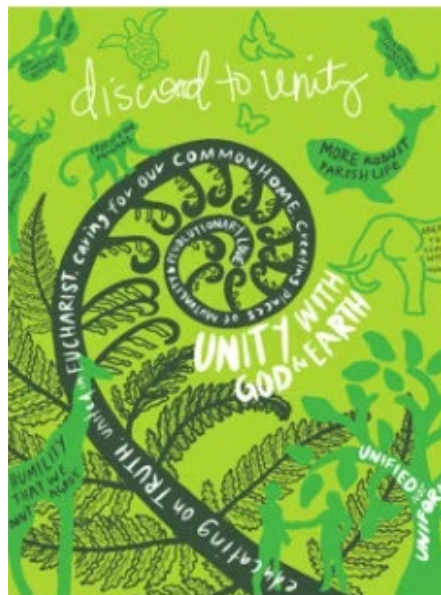


Image courtesy of Becky McIntyre

but for people to see what they are sharing in images is important in visualizing the church we are talking about.”

During a cross-campus listening session with more than 50 students from all 14 institutions, attended by Philadelphia Archbishop Nelson Perez, McIntyre helped students assemble an interactive art installation about their journeys with the Catholic faith.

McIntyre’s artwork represents many of the students’ dreams, sorrows, worries and hopes for the church: women’s ordination, the inclusion of LGBTQ people, the engagement of religious and ideological diversity, the pursuit of racial justice and a collective response to ecological crises.

“All of the words and all of the images in the report came directly from students,” McIntyre said. “A lot of students shared how they were feeling this tug of war.”

SCHEAP’s emphasis on art, as well as the scale and comprehensiveness of its listening sessions, was recognized in the synthesis report that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops sent to the Vatican, summing up the findings in all the U.S. dioceses.

Maureen O’Connell, professor of Christian ethics at La Salle University, said the SCHEAP coalition addressed “the question of ‘how do we invite students into their roles as protagonists in this church?’” O’Connell, the author of a 2012 book, “If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice,” said artistic responses to a question generate a “productive ambiguity” that assists in discernment.

“The arts preclude us from making God too small and comfortable and familiar, which denies in some ways the mystery and magnitude of God, and at the same time, art gives us an emotional, embodied, sensorial connection and experience of the Divine,” O’Connell said.

But when the Vatican Synod posted some of the artwork that came out of the SCHEAP sessions, traditionalists on Twitter critics pounced. “Delete this and repent,” said one commentator, who accused the creators of “giving a wink and a nod to sodomy.” Others posted traditional paintings of biblical scenes as examples of true Catholic art.

McIntyre defended the panels, saying they could not be properly understood outside of the written report. “This was in the context of students’ words,” she said, “and what I was hoping for and praying for was that the people who were against this would listen, would lean into the process of the synod and just listen to each other. That is what this is calling for.”

Synods have come to be associated with a meeting of bishops, but they have a longer history as a time for Christian leaders to listen to the faithful. In Francis’ vision, the Synod on Synodality will listen especially to communities that aren’t often given a voice in the church. Critics and proponents alike have called the synod “Vatican III,” casting it as a vehicle for revolutionary change by comparing it to the Second Vatican Council of the mid-1960s, or Vatican II.

The Rev. Stephen DeLacy, vicar of faith formation with youth and young adults for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, said the synod can teach American Catholics the value of collaboration and dialogue in the country’s polarized culture.

“The divisiveness of our culture is not of God,” said DeLacy. “I believe that those in the church can be a powerful catalyst to shift the culture from an intensely competitive, divisive, polarized culture to one leading towards authentic dialogue and communion,” DeLacy said.

While it aims to discover the issues on the hearts of global Catholics, the synod’s supporters point out, the synod itself is hardly a reversal of the

church’s top-down structure, as it was ordered by the pope. Listening to the wishes of the laity is a goal in itself; any changes that come of it will be decided, too, by the hierarchy.

“We are a church that believes in divine revelation, and by having the global synod, we are actually responding to the hierarchical instructions of the church that we believe lives out the revealed truth of Christ,” DeLacy said.

The findings of the Philadelphia Archdiocese’s listening sessions mirror much of what was compiled in syntheses from another diocese in the U.S. and elsewhere. The question of women’s roles in the Catholic Church, long regarded as a concern mostly in the West, appeared in the national conference of bishops’ reports from every continent, along with loss of trust in church leaders due to clergy sexual abuse. Even in places where homosexuality is still criminalized, the syntheses from local bishops showed support for LGBTQ Catholics.

As the synod moves to the “continental” phase, in which representatives on six continents will assemble to study the results from around the world, Cardinal Mario Grech, general secretary of the Vatican’s synod office, said that though the issues raised are contentious, he professed faith in the power of the Holy Spirit working in the global church. “There are some resistances, but it’s OK. Come forward! Let us walk together,” Grech said.

In Philadelphia, O’Connell said that the reaction to the archdiocese’s artwork was evidence of the synod’s necessity. “The invitation is to figure out: How do we hold on to our dreams, but not so tightly that they deny the hopes and dreams of others, and that is the critical next step in the synod,” O’Connell said.





# Interfaith America

with Eboo Patel



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