The Peacemaker's Toolkit

A Reference Guide for Reconciliation in Your Community

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Search for Common Ground
MULTI-FAITH NEIGHBORS NETWORK
POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB

Contents

Introduction:
A Call to Peacemaking

Peacemaking calls people of all backgrounds to build belonging, connection, and trust as the foundations of a beloved community. For many Christians, peacemaking addresses the question, "What is the role of the Church in the world?" As a central component of the gospel, peacemaking is a way to reconcile people to God and one another. Peacemaking is not just an activity for the Church; it speaks to its identity and role as "ambassadors for Christ" in the world

The need is great. Political division doubled between 1994 and 2014,[1] and reached a record high in 2022.[2] This division doesn't just reduce our quality of life; it also makes violence more likely.[3] But peacemaking is more than just keeping the peace. It requires the hard work of moving through divisions so that we can realize a more united future. This toolkit can help you to start.

About You

This toolkit is for clergy and lay leaders seeking to build peace and renewed strength in their churches, neighborhoods, and cities. It is for those leaders who feel embattled by growing divisions and who seek a better way forward.

As leaders trained and practiced in pastoral care, you already have many of the skills you need to build peace.

These pages offer evidence-based tools and approaches to undertake proactive peacemaking, beyond the cycle of crisis and response. We hope that this toolkit shows you that you are not alone in seeking common ground for your community.

[1] Doherty, Carroll. "Which Party Is More to Blame for Political Polarization? It Depends on the Measure." Pew Research Center, June 17, 2014. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/17/which-party-is-more-to-blame-for-political-polarization-it-depends-on-the-measure/.

[2] "How Democrats and Republicans See Each Other." The Economist. Accessed September 25, 2023. https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/08/17/how-democrats-and-republicans-see-each-other.

[3] Kleinfeld, Joshua. "Manifesto of Democratic Criminal Justice" Northwestern University Law Review, Vol. 111, No. 6, 2017, Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=4067801.

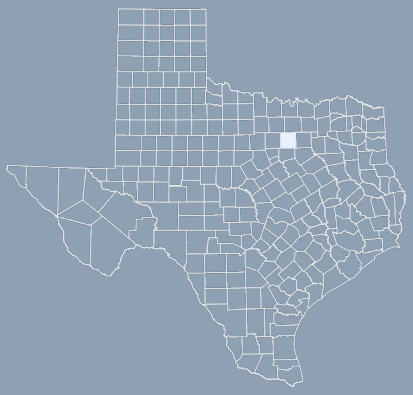
As a peacemaker, you can draw on pastoral care principles such as:

- Active, empathetic listening
- Mediation and problem-solving without stigmatization
- Spiritual care
- Deep scriptural knowledge
- Commitment to a long-term relationship with your parishioners. This is long-term work, frankly multi-generational. Pastors make long-term investments in their communities that sow the seeds of enduring peace.

> "If the church is doing what the Lord intended, it should be a place to gather people despite cultures, despite beliefs."
>
> TARRANT COUNTY RESIDENT

About Us

This toolkit is rooted in a collective 100 years of peacemaking. The Multi-Faith Neighbors Network, based in Keller, Texas, connects Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clergy around the country and the world to jointly build unity and solidarity amongst all people of faith. Common Ground USA is an initiative of Search for Common Ground, the world's largest dedicated peacemaking organization, working across four continents to build trust between unlikely allies and promote healthy and just societies. The Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab at American University hosts a group of premier experts leading the way to test and share proven, community-led solutions to prevent polarization and radicalization.



About the Toolkit

This toolkit is born out of the evidence and experiences of these three organizations, and also the voices of one pilot county: Tarrant County, Texas. Like many counties across the country, Tarrant County is full of people with the warmth, hospitality, and tenacity that make it a beloved home for many. Tarrant County is also one of many American counties grappling with growing divisions. We started working in Tarrant County to unpack and address the unique local dynamics driving this division, as well as to develop a model for other communities around the country to replicate evidence-based best practices for peacemaking. In Tarrant County, we conducted clergy-led listening sessions with close to 80 residents to understand: What is dividing the community? What is uniting the community, often in spite of these divisions? How do local and national history impact the ways that division manifests today? Which leaders and institutions could interrupt these trends, and how? We then worked with local pastors, superintendents, chambers of commerce, school board members, and others to take action based on the listening sessions and what we know works to build peace. **The Peacemaker's Toolkit is the culmination of this pilot work.** This toolkit is particularly tailored to lessons from Tarrant County, including its majority Christian demographics. However, the need for peacemaking is by no means unique to Christian communities, and we intend for this toolkit to bring value across faiths. What works will be unique in each church, city, state, and town, but the principles of peacemaking remain the same. We hope the lessons in these pages inspire your own actions.

The Peacemaker's Toolkit is intended as a reference guide for your ministry. The following pages are not meant to be read cover-to-cover. Instead, look for the sections that speak to the needs of your congregation and community. Return to it as you encounter new opportunities and challenges.

How to Use this Toolkit

This Peacemaker's Toolkit contains three sections:

- **Foundations of Peacemaking** explain the What of peacemaking. This section offers definitions of peace, resilience, and two foundational frameworks for action toward peacemaking—theological and sociological.
- **Scenarios** explain the How of peacemaking. These scenarios depict common dilemmas and options for pastors to respond. These are fictional stories rooted in real experiences found in our research and work with people of faith. As you read these scenarios, you may come across new terms and concepts, explanations of which can be found in the Handbook.
- The **Handbook** explains the Why of peacemaking and its challenges. This section provides a deeper dive into the underlying origins and patterns of resilience, polarization, and extremism.

The Peacemaker's Toolkit is complemented by two additional resources:

- The **Peacemaker's Starter Pack** serves as a brief introduction to peacemaking, for those who may be just dipping a toe into this work. Consider sharing the Starter Pack with fellow leaders to help orient them and generate interest in deepening a peacemaking practice in your church.
- **Practice Cards** are quick reminders for your whole community to carry around and imbue peacemaking into their daily lives. The cards cover six core skills for peacemakers: discussing tough topics, being good neighbors, communicating peacefully, depolarizing social media, avoiding conspiracy theories, responding to hate, and practicing healthy news consumption. Consider incorporating the Practice Cards into a small group study, distributing them in fellowship hall, or using them in another way to benefit your community.

This toolkit does not offer easy solutions to today's challenges. Instead, this guide should give you tools to build and maintain peace—not as a "one-and-done" task, but as an ongoing part of your ministry that will pay dividends in the health and happiness of your community.

Foundations of Peace

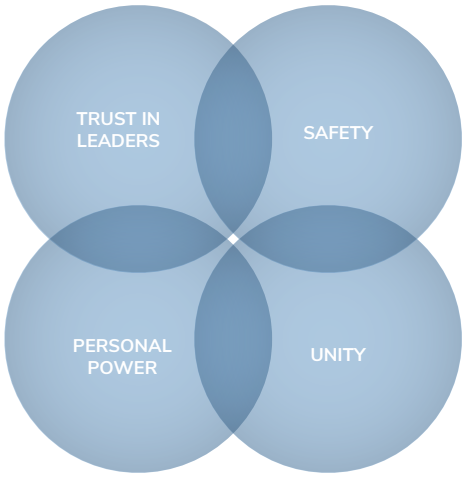
"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God."

MATTHEW 5:9[4]

Many of us struggle to define what peace really is, and what it looks like. Peace is more than the absence of conflict (known as a *negative peace*); it is also the presence of justice, belonging, and fellowship (*positive peace*). Peacemakers around the world defined "vital signs" that together indicate the health of peace in a community.[5] In many American communities, the vital signs of peace include:

1. **Safety:** How safe do people feel in the community? What makes people feel safe?
2. **Personal Power:** Do people believe in their personal ability to create positive change in the community? Are they taking steps to create those changes, or is something stopping them?
3. **Unity:** How much do people trust each other, especially across different groups? How united or polarized do people feel? Do some people feel like another group poses a threat to their inclusion and belonging in the community?
4. **Trust in Leaders:** Do people feel their leaders and institutions take everyone's needs into account when they make decisions?

FIGURE 1: VITAL SIGNS OF PEACE



We strengthen peace by working across these vital signs. None of these signs can stand alone—they affect each other (*see Figure 1*). For example, when we feel safe to express ourselves freely, we are more likely to feel a sense of personal power to create change. When we trust that our leaders are taking our needs into account, rather than playing favorites with the other side, we are less likely to engage in us vs. them polarization to make ourselves heard.

[4] All Scripture quotations are taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

[5] For more information on the vital signs of peace, please see the Peace Impact Framework. Over 100 global peacemaking organizations came together to build a shared understanding of how to understand and measure peace, and together created this Peace Impact Framework.

FIGURE 2: COLLECTIVE IMPACT OF VITAL SIGNS OF PEACE

Peace is the bedrock of resilience to division. If all individuals are more resilient and better equipped to resist division, polarization, and extremism, then the overall community is likely to be more resilient. And vice-versa, the existence of community-level efforts to build peace and resilience is likely to encourage individuals to disengage from division and engage in peacemaking.

Below, we offer two strategic frameworks—one theological and one sociological—to consider as you embark on the work ahead. While these are not exhaustive of all ways to approach peacemaking, they offer inspiration to root in faith and grow a broader community of peacemakers.

A Theological Framework for Peacemaking

> "A theology of peacemaking incorporates a sense of "being" as well as a sense of "doing." Who should the Church "be" in the world informs what the Church should "do" in the world. Both thoughts are brought together in 2 Corinthians 5:20, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us."

"We are ambassadors," people chosen to be the representatives of Christ and his kingdom and given as our task, "the ministry of reconciliation," (2 Cor. 5:18). We represent the message that, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself…" (2 Cor. 5:19). This message not only reconciles us to God, but it brings together people who were once far apart. "But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who made both groups on and tore down the dividing wall of hostility in his flesh" (Eph. 2:14).

In Matthew 5, Jesus summarized character traits for someone representing his kingdom, and said in verse 9, "Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God." Part of our identity as "adopted" (Rom. 8:14-16) children of God is to imitate the role of Jesus as a peacemaker, working toward the reconciliation of people to God and to one another as representatives of Christ's kingdom.

This places peacemaking as a central component of the gospel. Not only do we receive peace with God through Christ, but people who are normally distant from one another are drawn together in Christ. In turn, a theology of peacemaking requires the Church to see itself as "being" peacemakers to effectively "do" the work of peacemaking.

The prophet Micah wrote, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). In response to God's protest against their behavior, the people hoped to pacify him with more offerings. But what God required of them was to "be" people who publicly represent his desire for reconciliation in the world.

James 3:17-18 speaks to the result of this peacemaking work: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy, and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who cultivate peace." Fruit on a tree cannot be forced to grow; it can only be cultivated. In the same way,

the Church will be the kind of influence in the world that cultivates peace by "being" the peaceful presence of Christ, committed to effectively representing him through the ministry of reconciliation.

A Social Movement-Building Framework for Peacemaking

Changemakers have long understood that transformation is incremental. Each individual must go through their own journey into peacemaking. We need to understand where each individual is starting their journey so that we can meet them where they are and walk alongside them. The 1-5 Spectrum is a broadly used tool to identify groups of people based on their relationship to your cause (*see Figure 3*). There are five groups, and they are:

1. **Champions:**
   Your most committed champions and organizers = 1
2. **Passive Supporters:**
   Those conceptually committed, but not particularly active = 2
3. **Undecided:**
   Those that need to be convinced = 3
4. **Passive Detractors:**
   Those who conceptually disagree, but are not particularly active = 4
5. **Spoilers:**
   Those actively working against you = 5

In the case of peacemaking, the 1-5 Spectrum looks like this (*Figure 2*):

FIGURE 2: 1–5 SPECTRUM

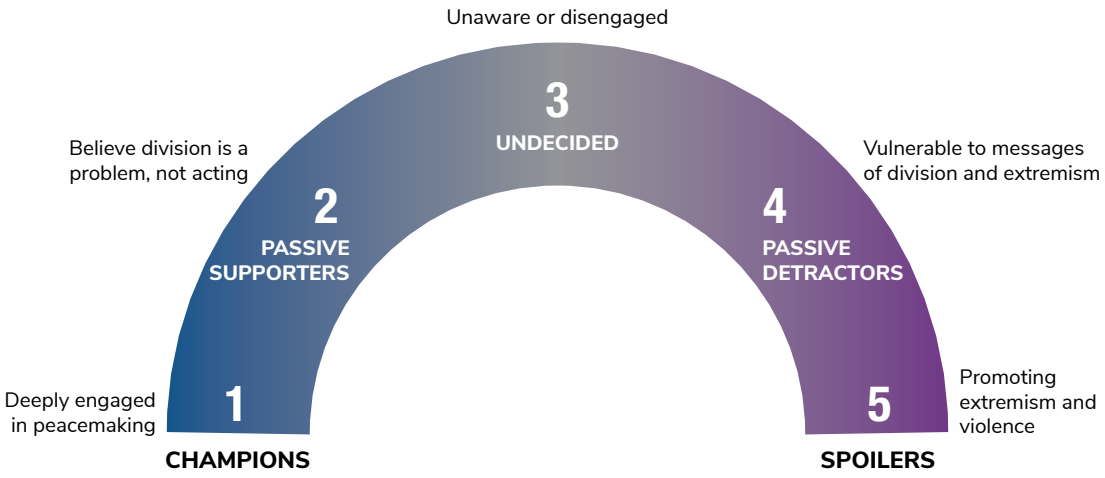
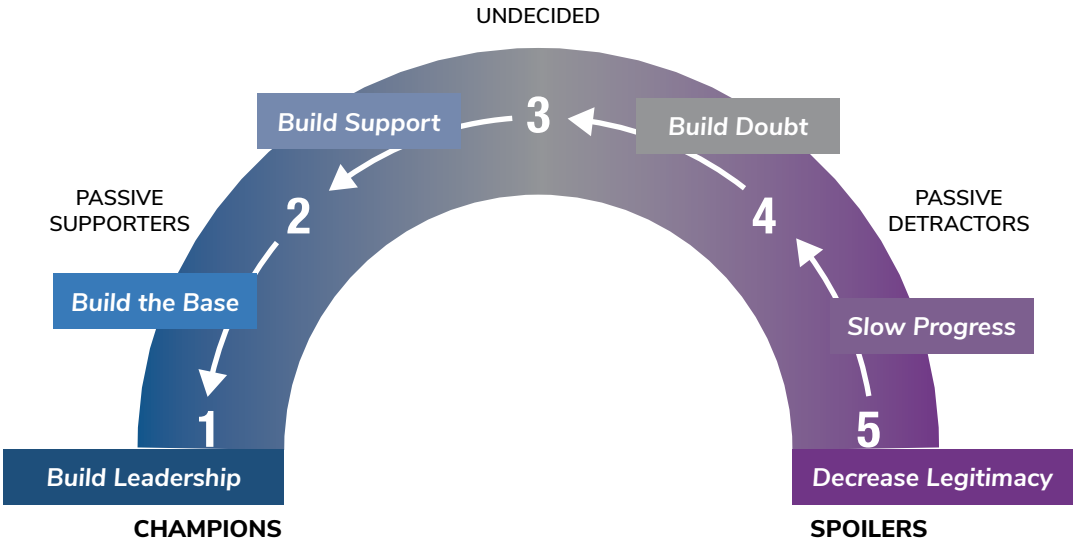


FIGURE 3: ARC OF SPOILERS TO CHAMPIONS



Setting Your Goals

Overall, you are trying to grow your number 1s and 2s. To do this, your goals for each of the groups are distinct and intended to move individuals one step at a time along the spectrum:

1. **Champions:** Offer them leadership, mobilization, and communication skills; platforms and organizational infrastructure to take action and bring in new champions.
2. **Passive Supporters → Champions:** Convince them to act, sometimes starting small, and cultivate them as potential champions. Understand what is preventing them from taking action. Work with them to overcome those barriers.
3. **Undecided → Passive Supporters:** Convince them conceptually that this cause/problem is real and important for them.
4. **Passive Detractors → Undecided:** Build doubt conceptually in the opposition to your cause, or in the usefulness of thwarting your cause, or offer alternatives to opposing your cause that might achieve their same goals.
5. **Spoilers → Passive Detractors:** Make it harder for spoilers to succeed, or a less productive use of people's time.

There are usually only a few committed champions or spoilers as compared to the number of passive supporters, undecided, and passive detractors. Therefore, you are often trying to reach people who are in these bigger groups and move them along the arc toward your

cause—meaning you are targeting 2s, 3s, and 4s. To do this at scale, you usually start by activating your champions (1s) to move passive supporters (2s) into becoming champions themselves.

Creating a Strategy in Four Steps:

- **Step 1: Test What Works**
  Test actions and messages with different groups.
- **Step 2: Build the Leaders**
  Activate 1s, move 2s (and 3s that lean 2) to 1s.
- **Step 3: Build Support**
  Have 1s reach out to 4s and 3s to make the case for the cause, and have 1s reach out to 2s to make the case for action.
- **Step 4: Repeat**
  Have multiple goals and phases that give you opportunities to test and build multiple iteratively.

As you move forward to recruit your community to the cause of peacemaking, consider this tool as a simple and effective way to build allyship that meets people where they are. As more and more individuals become champions of peace, you will together make peace the norm in your community.

Peacemaking Scenarios

The following section tells the story of a fictional Pastor Tom as he navigates four common scenarios: creeping divisions in his church, polarization causing broader tensions in his city, the aftermath of a hate crime in his city, and online extremism impacting a young man in his church. When we asked faith communities to share their peacemaking needs, these four challenges repeatedly rose to the top of the list.

TAKE ACTION:

Each scenario provides short, actionable analysis and guidance for what pastors can do to effectively and proactively step into peacemaking in their churches and cities.

DIG DEEPER:

At the end of each scenario, you'll find a "Digging Deeper" section, which lists further resources to explore, both within this toolkit and at other organizations. Feel free to flip through the document or click around as inspiration strikes to learn more about the concepts and practices mentioned here.

Peace in My Church

SCENARIO 1

The town of Americana was known for its close-knit community. Pastor Tom, the long-time senior pastor at a popular church, took great pride in his role in building this cohesive, beloved community. But Pastor Tom was growing increasingly concerned about the division he saw swirling around the country and creeping ever closer toward his church. Bible study groups were starting to derail into political arguments, and group leaders were worried that members would stop coming. With each new issue that became swept up in the national "culture war," Pastor Tom feared that he was ever closer to a tipping point when his church would be impacted. He couldn't ignore the impact of sensationalized news and the spread of misinformation on social media. As people became entrenched in echo chambers, their perspectives grew farther and farther apart. Disagreements were fueled by cherry-picked information and sensational headlines, deepening the chasm between opposing sides.

Pastor Tom knew that other churches around the country were also dealing with political and social divisions seeping into churches. He'd heard stories from some of his old seminary friends whose churches had lost dozens, sometimes hundreds, of members. They told Pastor Tom about how a few members began to increasingly stir up conflict in the church—constantly advocating for their pastor to speak out about

their preferred social/political issues from the pulpit. Eventually, some members left to join other churches whose pastors preached their preferred politics. Other members stopped attending church altogether.

Pastor Tom didn't want his church to suffer the same fate. He wanted to protect his church and build its resilience to divisions stirred up by social media, TV news, politicians, and others. But what could he do to push back against this overwhelming tide?

BREAKING DOWN THE PROBLEM

Pastor Tom is picking up on the growing polarization impacting Americans around the country:

- *Affective polarization* is more than disagreement; it's a dislike and distrust of the other side. Polarization doesn't just lead to conflict in the here-and-now. It also guarantees that conflict will get worse over time. As groups grow farther apart, disagreements tend to become more hostile and "winner-takes-all," a dire, zero-sum mindset.
- *Partisan sorting* is the extent to which people live, work, and play with people with similar politics. It also reinforces affective polarization; meaningful and regular encounters with differences impact our resilience to stereotypes and distrust of other groups. In the U.S. today, many voters live with virtually no exposure to voters from the other party.[6] In churches, this can manifest as church shopping, which 52% of American adults said they had done in a 2022 poll.[7] Of those, about 1 in 4 said that they had left or considered leaving their church because of political differences.[8] For Pastor Tom, this data confirms what his seminary friends are worried about; some people leaving their churches because of politics.
- *The outrage economy* describes the incentives for our politics and media to invoke fear and hostility. Companies and individuals intentionally play on our emotions to get us to log on and stay on their platforms, apps, and online forums. This tactic is particularly popular for politicians and media to compete with one another in a crowded field. For Pastor Tom, this helps to explain the intensifying outrage in national and online spaces, a sense that the tide is growing against him.

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[6] Brown, Jacob R., and Ryan D. Enos. "The Measurement of Partisan Sorting for 180 Million Voters." Nature News, March 8, 2021. https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-021-01066-z.

[7] Hafner, Shay R., and Andre P. Audette. "The Politics of Church Shopping." *Politics and Religion 16, no. 1 (2022): 73–89.* https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755048322000384.

[8] Hafner, Shay R., and Andre P. Audette. "The Politics of Church Shopping." *Politics and Religion 16, no. 1 (2022): 73–89.* https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755048322000384.

WHAT TO DO

Get out of the polarization cycle by proactively building resilience in your church. Peacemakers draw from the wisdom of authentic faith in the face of outrage and fear. Pastor Tom has already identified the most important lesson: start now. Sow the seeds of peace that you can then reap in a crisis.

Peacemaking starts with belonging. Belonging is the sense of feeling emotionally connected, included, valued, and satisfied in our relationships. Belonging is not just fitting in. When we belong, we feel that we can show up as our authentic selves and honestly express how we feel. Belonging is positively associated with the fundamentals of strong communities, like higher trust in our neighbors and local government, civic engagement, and openness to meeting and living in a community with different kinds of people.[9] Belonging is a building block of peace.

Preaching Peace

The Gospel is rife with lessons for peacemakers. For example, the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 can be viewed through the lens of peacemaking. We are instructed to, "pursue what makes for peace," (Rom. 14:19) to, "live in peace," (2 Cor 13:11) and to, "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," (Eph. 4:3).

Consider the fact that we are called to demonstrate the character of the kingdom of Jesus here on earth. Spread the peacemaking character and values of Jesus throughout your ministry. As a pastor, you already have a wealth of scriptural knowledge to support you on this journey. We offer some theological inspiration for peacemakers in "A Theological Framework for Peacemaking" on page 9 of this toolkit.

[9] "The Belonging Barometer." Over Zero and American Immigration Council, March 8, 2023. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/the_belonging_barometer_-_the_state_of_belonging_in_america.pdf.

Belonging in Action:

In California, officials were concerned about a stubbornly high 50% recidivism rate among formerly incarcerated individuals. The Anti-Recidivism Coalition (ARC) brought that rate down to 11% for their members through peer support networks, educational, housing, and employment services. One ARC member commented that, "Where I grew up, you had a bunch of lonely people looking for an outlet...I would find any little thing to set me off and use that as an excuse for a violent act." **Belonging and peace came from helping others within the ARC community.** Another member remarked that while his gang relationships had been conditional on being "loyal to the code" rather than to one another, at ARC, "they recognize you for who you are."[10]

[10] Murthy, Vivek H. *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World. Harper Wave, 2023.*

Constructive Conversations

We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. Peacemaking is born out of connection. When people feel heard, especially by someone with whom they disagree, it reduces their animosity toward that person and the other side.[11] Regular and meaningful interactions with people who are different from us also reduce that sense of animosity (i.e. affective polarization).[12] Constructive conversations across differences can be a great place to start.

HOW TO JOIN CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS:

- **Consider that listening and understanding another viewpoint is not the same as endorsing that viewpoint.** Even if you do hope to eventually change someone's point of view, you'll need to understand their perspective before you can effectively change their mind.
- **Prepare to experience heightened emotions.** Consider ahead of time: how do I want to respond when I hear something that offends me? How can I maintain a calm, non-anxious presence?[13] Check in with your body and stay calm through breathing techniques, prayer, or taking a break to cool off.
- **Practice active listening.** Listen to understand, not to respond. Rephrase what the other person has said, and ask them if you've understood them correctly.
- **Disagree with ideas, not experiences.** While I might not agree with your perspective on an issue, I can't tell you that you didn't experience something in a particular way.
- **Use "I" statements to avoid speaking for anyone but yourself.**
- **Avoid generalizations about others.** It's easy to take a conversation off the rails by making people feel unfairly grouped or categorized.
- **Be curious about the perceptions, emotions, and identities behind what is said.**

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[11] Voelkel, Jan G., Michael Stagnaro, James Chu, Sophia Lerner Pink, Joseph S. Mernyk, Chrystal Redekopp, Isaias Ghezae, et al. *Megastudy identifying effective interventions to strengthen Americans' democratic attitudes*, 2023. https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/y79u5.

[12] Seabright, Paul, Jonathan Stieglitz, and Karine Van der Straeten. "Evaluating Social Contract Theory in the Light of Evolutionary Social Science." *Evolutionary Human Sciences 3 (2021)*. https://doi.org/10.1017/ehs.2021.4.

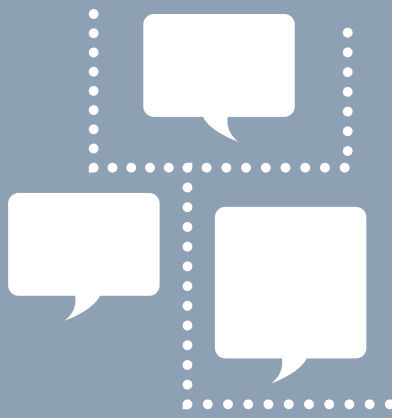
[13] Sayers, Mark. *A non-anxious presence: How a changing and complex world will create a remnant of renewed Christian leaders. Chicago: Moody Publisher, 2022.*

- **Focus on empathy, not just civility.** We should treat one another with respect and decorum, but we fall short when an emphasis on civility comes at the expense of honesty and growth. Recognize that others' feelings run just as deep as our own.
- **Reflect on "your side" with humility.** Acknowledging shared responsibility creates a space for joint problem-solving. This is not about blaming the victim. Rather, by understanding how "my side" contributes to the problem, I'm better able to understand my power to create change.

When people feel heard, especially by someone with whom they disagree, it reduces their animosity toward that person and the other side.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DEBATES & CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

	DEBATE	CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATION
Goal	Winning	Understanding
Nature	Combative	Collaborative
Process	Listening to find flaws and counter-arguments	Attentive listening to understand and find solutions
Type of Communication	One-way communication	Two-way communication
Assumptions	Having the right answer and having to defend it	Having a perspective and wanting to explore other perspectives



Navigating Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations are almost never just about the facts of a matter. They rest upon three underlying conversations:

1. **What happened?**
2. **What are the underlying emotions?**
3. **What does this mean about me and the other person?**[14]

An argument with your spouse is rarely just about the dishes. It's about our different understandings of who was supposed to do the dishes, how I feel overburdened and you feel attacked, and how I worry that you think I'm a pushover and you worry that I think you're a lazy person. When we're aware of those three underlying conversations, we can share more effectively and with less defensiveness, and we invite others to do the same. We walk away with a better understanding of the topic, ourselves, and one another.

[14] Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most. New York: Penguin Books, 2023.

HOW TO CONVENE CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS:

- **Establish expectations.** Explain that you are here to learn from one another, not to debate. You can also acknowledge the limitations—this conversation won't immediately resolve the topic at hand, but it opens the door to future solutions once we're better able to understand the other side.
- **Involve others in planning.** It is best to jointly agree on the purpose ahead of time with other leaders, like church elders or study group leaders. This helps to diffuse and multiply ownership of the initiative so that it's not all resting on your shoulders.
- **Establish ground rules.** Invite your church members to affirm these expectations for ourselves and one another; don't impose them. These shared agreements set the stage for a productive dialogue. Ask people to commit to keeping the conversation confidential, if appropriate. Or, you might agree that participants can share what was said in the conversation, but not who said it.
- **Focus on common ground.** Our polarized environment encourages us to see one another as the problem. Help your community to understand that they are working on a shared project of fellowship and spiritual growth.
- **Talk in small groups (e.g. 4-10 people)**. Bible study groups can be a perfect format to start.
- **Support all participants to speak up.** The more perspectives are heard and heard equally, the more everyone in the conversation benefits from deeper understanding and connection. Here are some ways to enable equal participation:
    1. Ask people participating in the conversation to be mindful of how much they are speaking vs. how much others are speaking.
    2. Remind participants that the purpose of the conversation is to learn other perspectives, not to "win" the conversation.
    3. Use techniques like breaking into groups of 2-3 or using post-it notes to allow people to write out their thoughts before discussing as a group.
- **Plan for disruptions.** Anticipate that difficult conversations will bring up tension, defensiveness, and a desire to defend a currently held position. People rarely change their minds in the moment, and even if they do, sometimes pride and ego will make it difficult to acknowledge in that moment that they were wrong. Rely on previously established expectations for group decorum, try to redirect the conversation if someone is going down a road that is overly hostile or aggressive, and remember that people look to leaders to enforce group norms. Even though you are trying to establish this as a group of peers in conversation with each other, you are still an authority figure in that space. If you do not address a disruptive presence, others in the group will not feel comfortable doing so either.

Constructive Collaboration

Take action together. We deepen trust, solidarity, and belonging through constructive collaboration. Joint action also provides tangible results that keep peacemaking relevant in a busy world. Constructive collaboration can also be a great place to start when faced with division. It is not always best to attack a problem head-on. Sometimes, it is better to start by redirecting people's energy toward positive goals based on shared values. Find shared values and agreed-upon goals that further the cause of peace in your community, and act as if you were all on the same team. Frame your work in terms of the shared values and the challenges you both face together.

For example, today there is a great deal of conflict over school curricula. And yet, most people agree: it is good to help children learn. You might direct your community's energies toward that goal to (re)build trust after a fissure. Charitable works, like a school supplies drive or tutoring, can help people to see that they share common ground. In faith communities, prayer is another powerful unifying action. When you start on common ground, you pave the way for reconciliation.

Find shared values and agreed-upon goals that further the cause of peace in your community, and act as if you were all on the same team.

Healthy Media Habits

Teach your church about healthy media consumption. A lot of information online isn't always factual or fair, and the outrage economy intentionally directs us toward this kind of toxic media. Consider sharing healthy habits with your church.

- **Outsmart manipulative media.** There is an industry whose job is to say something so outrageous that you click on it and forward it. Learn the warning signs of manipulative media. Propaganda Critic offers a list of common forms of manipulative rhetoric.
- **Learn how to spot inauthentic content.** Teach your friends and family how to be a savvy consumer of news.
- **Empathize with loved ones when discussing misinformation they have shared and point to credible sources.** Don't publicly shame people for sharing misinformation.
- **Seek out the good; don't just avoid the bad.** Seek out content that is humanizing and thoughtfully provides different perspectives.

- **When consuming media content, ask yourself:**
  - Is it true? Do a quick Google search to see if other trusted media outlets are reporting the same thing.
  - Is it honest? Consider if the content is misleading. Does the article try to paint one event as indicative of a broader trend, without evidence? Is it specific about what has happened? Is the headline misleading?
  - Is it helpful? What is this media intending me to do and feel, and is that a constructive part of our world? How does it make the other side look? Is it inflammatory? Does it encourage me to disregard, dismiss, hate, or fear another group?

DIGGING DEEPER

If you want to learn more about building belonging to protect your church from division, consider the following resources and organizations:

- To learn more about the theological framework for peacemaking: page 9 of this toolkit
- To learn more about polarization, extremism, their origins, and their consequences: page 46 of this toolkit
- For quick resources to share with your church, see these practice cards in this toolkit:
  - “Can we talk about tough topics?”
  - “Can we peacefully talk to one another?”
  - “Can we talk about news consumption?”
- For guidance on constructive conversations:
  - Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen
  - Living Room Conversations
  - Braver Angels
- For balanced news coverage and media bias ratings:
  - AllSides
  - Tangle News
- For resources on division in your church and community:
  - Baylor University, Center for Church & Community Impact (C3i)

Peace in My City

SCENARIO 2

As the upcoming election loomed, Pastor Tom's heart weighed heavy with concern. The scars from the previous divisive election period were still visible, not only within his congregation but also beyond the church walls, affecting the entire community. During the last election cycle, the divisions were felt in schools, workplaces, and social events. Local projects and charitable initiatives lost momentum as people hesitated to collaborate with those who held opposing views. Instead of coming together to address common challenges, they were consumed by animosity and suspicion. The divisive climate didn't spare the schools either. Teachers struggled to maintain a neutral environment, and students absorbed the contentious atmosphere, sometimes mirroring the hostility they observed in adults. The community's social fabric, once tightly woven, seemed to fray.

Pastor Tom felt compelled to act proactively to prevent the same divisions from taking hold again. He believed that the core teachings of Jesus emphasized love, compassion, and unity. The divisions plaguing his community were antithetical to these principles, and he knew he had a responsibility to help lovingly interrupt the pathway to polarization.

"Instead of asking 'how is my church?', ask 'how is my city?'"

PASTOR BOB ROBERTS JR.

BREAKING DOWN THE PROBLEM

Like in the "Peace in My Church" scenario, Pastor Tom is navigating growing polarization in his church. In this scenario, Tom is concerned with how polarization in the broader environment affects his church. Some of the key factors at play include:

- **Many Americans are experiencing *threats to belonging in a changing world*.** For some, there is a sense that traditional ways of life are rapidly shifting, which can instill fears about losing their place in society (unbelonging).[15] Others may feel that they have never been accepted for who they really are, and so they feel compelled to fit in or exist on the margins. When people feel powerless and left out, they are more susceptible to "us vs. them" polarization, or even hatred.[16]
- **Declining trust turns up the stakes of disagreements; it makes us feel like the other side isn't just wrong, they can't be trusted.** Less than one in four Americans believe that the federal government, American corporations, and national media are honest. Just one in three Americans believes that their local government is honest. Nearly three-quarters believe that trust in our fellow Americans has declined in the last 20 years.[17]

WHAT TO DO

Broader societal divisions are seeping into churches, especially during tense national and local "flashpoints" like election periods. Pastors can take proactive action toward peace both in the church and in their cities, working in partnership with other leaders across sectors. Here are some steps that pastors can take to build peace in their cities.

Peace Teams

Peacemakers need allies. Working together multiplies your impact across your community and offers solidarity with other leaders as you undertake this hard work. Peace Teams can be one way to build out your bench of peacemakers.

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[15] Mary Healy : "To 'unbelong' is to have what was thought to be certain or taken for granted removed, disconnecting us from others...In such cases, membership belonging has been revoked, removed or challenged in some way...unbelonging becomes positioned as a place of exile and danger, of Homelessness and rootlessness for those who once belonged, but are now abandoned as outsiders." One in three Texans is concerned about being left behind in a rapidly changing Texas, according to a 2021 study by More in Common. In Tarrant County, our research found particular concern about changes and divisions brought by outside influences, like "outsiders" moving in. See Healy, M. (2020). The other side of belonging. Studies in Philosophy and Education, 39, 119–133. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09701-4

[16] Fischer, Agneta, Eran Halperin, Daphna Canetti, and Alba Jasini. "Why We Hate." *Emotion Review 10, no. 4 (2018): 309–20.* https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073917751229.

[17] More in Common, "Two Stories of Distrust", https://www.moreincommon.com/media/yfcbfmmp/mic_two-stories-of-distrust.pdf.

1. **Identify 6-12 leaders from across your city.** As a faith leader, you have a good deal of influence and relationships across the community—with school administrators, community organizations, city officials, business leaders, local journalists, youth centers, and others. Try to engage people with influence who hold a diversity of perspectives.

2. **Meet with each leader one-on-one to discuss proactive peacemaking to deepen your city's resilience to division.** Some leaders may be reluctant to talk about peacemaking, for fear that it will open up conflicts. This is where it's helpful to consider the 1-5 Spectrum—each person is in a different place in their peacemaking journey. Just as you walk with your parishioners on their spiritual development, lead with empathy and curiosity to meet each person where he or she is. When you are first establishing a Peace Team, it is helpful to start with leaders who fall in the "1" range of "champions" (people actively working to build peace) and the "2" range of "passive supporters" (people who see a need for peacemaking but are not currently acting). By working with both 1s and 2s, you're both deepening and expanding your base of peacemakers.[18]

3. **Diagnose the health of peace in your city in collaboration with the other leaders.** When you plant a church, you often start with cultural exegesis to understand how your ministry can best serve the local community. Similarly, peacemaking is most effective when it is responsive to the local context. It is also important for your team to start from a shared understanding of your city's strengths and points for growth.

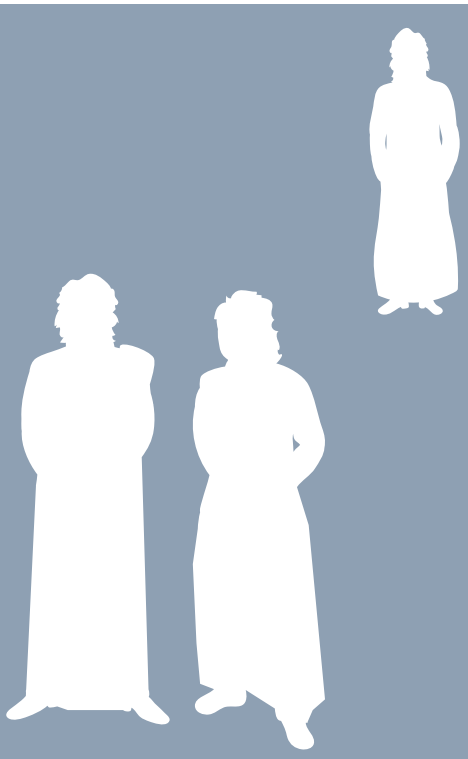
   This may be an uncomfortable conversation for some, and it may trigger defensiveness. Frame the conversation by focusing on your shared values and a shared mission to reinforce peace and resilience in your city. You may share how your faith informs your call to peacemaking, or refer to national research on growing polarization and your desire to preempt that division in your community (see the Digging Deeper section of this scenario). To prepare, review best practices for convening constructive conversations (page 21).

   Once you feel that you have sufficient buy-in and trust, you can try some of the below approaches to jointly assess peace in your city:

   a. **Vital Signs of Peace:** Take the temperature of peace in your city by discussing each vital sign of peace (page 7).

   b. **Envisioning Peace:** What does peace mean in your community? What does it look like if your city's vital signs are all healthy? How do leaders and residents feel and act in that environment?

[18] See page 10 of this toolkit for more information about the 1-5 Spectrum.



Who is your Mark?

In Acts 15:36-41, Paul and Barnabas prepare for their second missionary journey, but they disagreed about taking Mark with them. Paul did not want to take Mark along because Mark had deserted them on the first journey. Displaying his characteristic view of mentoring, Barnabas insisted on Mark's presence. The disagreement was so sharp that they parted ways with Barnabas taking Mark in one direction and Paul taking Silas in another. Later, reconciliation occurred as Paul instructed Timothy to "Bring Mark with you, for he is useful to me in ministry." (2 Timothy 4:11)

c. **Stakeholder Mapping:** Who are the influential institutions and individuals in your community? In times of crisis, where do people turn to make sense of an event and get more information? For each stakeholder, consider how much influence they have and where they sit along the 1-5 Spectrum. As you consider how to strengthen peace, see how you can engage these influencers to achieve broader impact.

4. **Make a plan based on your diagnosis.** Like a doctor prescribing blood pressure medication, think about actions to improve your community's vital signs. Many ideas can be found in this toolkit: constructive conversations, constructive collaboration, teaching healthy media habits, and holding small group conversations around each of the Peacemakers Practice Cards.

   a. **Define who you want to engage in your plan, as specifically as possible.** Consider where they might sit on the 1-5 Spectrum and how you might move them along the spectrum.

   b. **Review your plan with a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis.** Discuss the strengths and weaknesses that will help get you toward that vision. Which leaders, traditions, and local institutions (like sports teams, churches, civic associations, schools, etc.) are uniting people? What are the weaknesses driving people apart? How can you leverage your strengths (opportunities) and what might be barriers to success (threats)?

5. **Repeat.** Peacemaking is a long-term endeavor. Decide how often you should meet and where. Clarify team roles, like meeting scheduler, meeting facilitator, notetaker, and leaders for each part of your action plan. At your team meetings, revisit your diagnosis of peace in your city, reflect on the efficacy of your action plans thus far, and make new action plans to incorporate your reflections and any changes in your diagnosis.

DIGGING DEEPER

- To learn more about movement-building approaches to peacemaking and the 1-5 Spectrum: page 10 of this toolkit
- To learn more about the state of belonging in the U.S.: The Belonging Barometer
- To learn more about the state of trust in the U.S.: More in Common: Two Stories of Distrust in America
- To learn more about what works to address polarization and support democracy: Stanford University, Megastudy identifying effective interventions to strengthen Americans' democratic attitudes
- To learn more about the Vital Signs of Peace: Peace Impact Framework

Peace Against Hate

SCENARIO 3

Pastor Tom knew that polarization and us vs. them narratives were taking hold around the country. But he didn't see how it could happen in his town, where he sought to foster a sense of fellowship in his church and beyond. That's why he was so surprised and distraught to learn that several local residents had woken up with flyers, adorned with white supremacist symbols and hateful messages, in their driveways.

The message was clear: the people behind the flyers were trying to stoke old fears and hatreds of different races and religions. Tom knew in his heart that this was not an isolated act committed by a few misguided local teens. He knew that he had to take action to stand in solidarity with those who were targeted by the hateful messages and demonstrate that this was not what their town should stand for.

BREAKING DOWN THE PROBLEM

- *Extremism* is any set of beliefs that divides people into an "in-group" and "out-group," claims that these groups are in irresolvable conflict, and says the only solution is for one group to dominate, expel, or exterminate the other.
- *Moral disengagement* is a consequence of polarization and a symptom of extremism. It consists of deciding that others are not worthy of moral consideration, whether because they hold a different identity or disagree on politics.
- *Hate* is an extreme way of classifying something or someone that elicits strong emotions like disgust and anger. Hate amplifies aggressive behavior toward out-groups while reducing personal responsibility for such behavior. Recent research shows that hate can become "hardwired" into our brain's pathways.[19] The more we hate, the harder it is to learn peace, and the more easily we are manipulated by demagogues.

[19] Danesi, Marcel. *Politics, lies and conspiracy theories: A cognitive linguistic perspective. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023.*

WHAT TO DO

When a crisis or hateful incident occurs, our response means the difference between a stronger community or a weaker one. The below guidance will help you to respond to an incident.

Preventing Hate

1. ***Focus on the long-game of peacemaking.*** Unfortunately, we don't often see the decisive, "Hollywood"-style resolutions we'd like, where the bad guys are defeated and driven away permanently, and the community can return to its previous sense of peace and safety. Hateful speech is protected under the First Amendment, and facing it must be a matter of ongoing work. To begin this work, you and your community will need to understand the state of peace in your community, how people are drawn to hate groups, and how to recognize a hate group. See more resources in the "Digging Deeper" section on page 32 of this toolkit.

2. ***Assemble a team before an incident.*** Your response will be more effective if you already know who to call and if you already trust each other. Consider how to identify and convene peacemakers across the community. See guidance on Peace Teams on page 25 of this toolkit.

3. ***Decide where to draw the line of acceptable behavior, ideally before an incident.*** Some lines are easy to draw. Few would tolerate calls for violence against people in their own community. And most people recoil at openly racist statements. However, other boundaries are more difficult. Some might be passed off as jokes, harmless and outlandish conspiracy theories, or immature behavior by kids. These "gray area" cases are difficult to judge. That's why you must plan ahead for them. Take time to reflect, pray, and try to answer these questions:

    a. Do these ideas encourage seeing a whole group as inferior?

    b. What kind of language will prevent my entire community from participating in the life of our church?

    c. What topics will drive people apart if we allow them to become the subject of ongoing debate?

    d. Where do these ideas logically lead? What is the point of no return?

    e. What are the consequences of diverting attention away from our mission?

Responding to Hate

IN YOUR CHURCH

- **Move fast, but not *too* fast.** Address the matter as soon as possible, without appearing panicked or moved by external pressure. A delayed response or a lack of response will be seen by many as apathy or, worse, a quiet endorsement of the incident. However, a too-quick response may drive tensions higher by increasing your congregation's sense of urgency. It could also lead you to move too quickly on a decision when not all information about an incident is fully and accurately available. For most incidents, the following Sunday will be soon enough. However, for national or local tragedies, you will want to speak out immediately.
- **Identify the Christian value that was violated by the incident.** Align yourself against that violation in the clearest terms possible. Be specific. Lead with the Gospel and show your congregants the proactive steps that will help them live their lives as Jesus would have lived it. This is the "Gospel Remedy"—not to react in knee-jerk outrage but with patience and charity.
- **Form a team to respond.** Make sure there are clear channels to report when incidents like these happen. Input from your peers will aid you in moments of indecision and also help to avoid mistakes.
- **Come back more resilient than ever.** If you have put good systems for reporting and responding in place before an incident, then you will see a church that is stronger and more vibrant by virtue of overcoming hate and division. Do not get discouraged when these problems don't go away overnight. There are deeply entrenched problems in our nation that make this work difficult—but also necessary. By working steadily, you will gradually move away from the threat of negative conflict and toward peace.

IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- **Move fast.** It is sometimes easier to determine if an incident in your wider community is important enough to address. Once you've decided to respond, do so quickly and calmly. Follow the steps described above to address your congregation. You might also consider offering your presence as a mediator or calming influence during moments of local controversy and tension. If the disputing sides in an incident will allow it, try to facilitate dialogue. Offer your support and solidarity to the victim-survivors on behalf of your church.

- **Offer to lead relief services in the community.** This could be something as simple as publicly praying for victims. Or, it could be a public display of support that brings together different groups from your community in a spirit of peace and reconciliation. Always ask: What role can my faith community take to make a difference, first in the short-term, and then in the long-term? Never speak without action.

NATIONWIDE

- **Practice discernment.** Many seeming national crises are actually pseudo-events. That is, they are ginned up to create division rather than reflecting an existing conflict. Prayer can be a helpful way to organize your thoughts and receive guidance when making this discernment. Also, ask yourself "Are there real life examples of this issue in my community? How many or how often? Does the media reporting far outweigh actual occurrences?"
- **Resist culture-war framing.** It is impossible to keep up with every trend or political controversy. Don't get trapped in the outrage cycle, and try to keep your community out of it, too. Potential signs of culture-war framing include rhetoric that attempts to divide, inflame, and oversimplify.
- **Shift your congregation's point of view to the long-term.** Proactively set goals with your faith community that deal with issues of unity, inclusion, political polarization, and the difference between constructive disagreement and destructive conflict. Focus on shared interests, values, and goals, and work to separate people from problems. Help your community to understand that they are working on a shared project of fellowship and spiritual growth.

DIGGING DEEPER

- To learn more about spotting an extremist group or movement: page 61 of this toolkit
- For quick guidance on hate and responses: "Can we talk about hate?" practice card in this toolkit
- To stay informed about trends in hate and extremism:
  - Life After Hate
  - The McCain Institute
  - Anti-Defamation League

Peacemaking Across Faith Communities

In January 2022, a gunman held four people hostage for 12 hours at Congregation Beth Israel in Colleyville, Texas. In the face of this antisemitic terror, local leaders were able to come together for a united response against hate. This response—by the Jewish community, Muslim community, Christian clergy, and police—provided loving solidarity and prayer to the survivors' families during this moment of fear. After the hostages returned home safely, local clergy made joint news appearances to clearly communicate that they did not stand for this kind of hate, and retributive attacks against Muslims would not be tolerated. **This response, faith communities standing shoulder-to-shoulder with one another, demonstrates the power of both proactive and responsive peacemaking.** These leaders had built relationships ahead of time so that they had open lines of communication and trust with one another. They were then able to leverage that proactivity to protect one another and reinforce their community's strength in the aftermath of the crisis.

Peace Against Radicalization

Note: There are as many pathways out of extremism as there are into it. This makes disengagement from extremism a complex and difficult process. There is rarely an obvious course of action, a fact reflected in the more open-ended nature of this scenario. Importantly, it is hard to define a set of 'warning signs' for radicalization. It is important to have a conversation to understand what is happening so that you can get ahead of a problem if you identify one. If you encounter a situation like the one below, it may take a great deal of time, patience, and creativity to see it improve. Do not get discouraged if someone continues to hold troubling beliefs like those described here. Change is always possible.

SCENARIO 4

Pastor Tom sat in his study as he listened attentively to the voice on the other end of the phone. The voice belonged to Mrs. Thompson, a devoted member of his congregation, who was worried about her college-age son, James. James would infrequently attend church with his mother, mostly on holidays. Tom knew that James had once been a regular churchgoer, but lately seems to have drifted away. Pastor Tom hears that James has always had trouble in school, both socially and academically, but he had seemed to be on the right path after enrolling in a few courses at the local community college. Pastor Tom had begun to hope that things might finally turn around for James and his mother. Maybe, Tom had hoped, James might even begin to participate more fully in church life. But as Mrs. Thompson explained, the situation was going south once more.

Mrs. Thompson told the pastor that James had been spending an excessive amount of time online, engrossed in video games and chatting with his gamer friends. Lately, she had noticed a disturbing change in his behavior. During family dinners, James began expressing troubling opinions about women, parroting some of the toxic rhetoric he had encountered online. He said that his online friends had opened his eyes to the ways that ultra-feminist groups were pushing real men to violence. Worried for her son's well-being as he began to use more militant and dehumanizing language, Mrs. Thompson turned to Pastor Tom for help, knowing that he had a deep understanding of the Christian faith and a genuine love for the congregation. Pastor Tom agreed with Mrs. Thompson that this was worrying, and that it most likely came from a place of frustration and sadness rather than from malice. Tom promised to do what he could to help.

BREAKING DOWN THE PROBLEM & RESPONSES

The New Media Landscape

Sadly, today's media can make the problem of radicalization even worse: more likely to happen and more difficult to solve. Social media can make us feel envious, embarrassed, or afraid of losing status. Everyday problems are made to seem like life-and-death struggles by media figures with strong financial motives to sow division. All the information coming at us through our devices creates real risk to the integrity and unity of our communities.

Online radicalization, like the kind James appears to be engaged in, is most often targeted at young men. It takes their very real concerns about an uncertain future, and their questions about what it means to be a man, and misdirects it into fear and hostility. James appears to be scapegoating women, but he could just as easily be directing his anger toward racial and religious minorities or other marginalized groups. Remember, radicalization is less about the extremist ideology itself and more about the sense of power and control that the ideology promises to a vulnerable person.

> *The anger, provocation, and compulsive use that online media encourages can be obstacles to cultivating a life of faith. Pastor Tom has been working with his youth minister to address the risks posed by online media, including risks of radicalization. Tom and the youth minister know that the best way to stop youth from radicalizing online is to educate them before they encounter "supply-side" material. While James had not received this protection, all the youth in Tom's church who participate in the church youth group now do.*

It's very important to remind your community (and yourself!) that the internet is full of manipulative messages, intended to short-circuit our ability to make good judgments. When we allow ourselves to be manipulated in this way, our freedom to make up our own minds is taken away, and we can be made to act against our best interests. Unfortunately, being intelligent is no defense against manipulation. Intelligent people are manipulated by propaganda as easily as anyone else. Well-intentioned people can also be susceptible to manipulation. Our best intentions can be twisted in the interest of a harmful ideology. The only defense against being manipulated is to recognize the dynamics of online propaganda.

> *Pastor Tom decides the best course of action is to speak with James and his mother together. In this case, Tom decides it makes the most sense for him to act as a mediator and a reconciler of mother and son, rather than as an authority figure for James or a stand-in for his mother and father. Over the course of his meeting with James and Mrs. Thompson, Pastor Tom tries to focus on two things. First, he wants*

> *to get things out in the open. Isolation and secrecy seem to be part of what is driving James's behavior. On one hand, James enjoys feeling like he holds the key to powerful, "forbidden" knowledge about women and men. On the other hand, by consuming this "forbidden," radicalizing content privately, James turns his loneliness into a feeling that he is special. Tom thinks that if he can bring things out into the open, the power of that secrecy will be lessened. Secondly, Pastor Tom wants Mrs. Thompson to understand the process through which James has come to his present beliefs. If she can understand that, she will be able to intervene better. By the same token, if James understands it, he may eventually come to understand how he has been manipulated into a worldview that contradicts the Gospel's message of men and women uniting in love and faith.*

In today's digital age, there is a wealth of worrying material available to download, consume, digest, and share. All someone must do is look, and they can find just about anything. Sharing extremist propaganda during face-to-face interactions or online may indicate that someone is being exposed to extremist ideologies. Depending on the substance of the content, things like pamphlets, videos, manifestos, and memes can all be associated with extremist groups and movements. Content can have blatant indicators like symbols (e.g., a swastika or flag associated with a group), hateful or inciting language, derogatory comments about a particular group of people, or is associated with an individual who has carried out a violent attack. In other cases, content can be less transparent, integrating conspiracy theories or using humor. At first glance, humorous content like memes and videos can seem harmless because of the incorporated elements of jest or irony. However, it is usually at the expense of a targeted population, and can involve the suggestion of violence, while offering levels of plausible deniability. Sharing such content is a red flag of someone being exposed to extremist ideologies.

There are many different ways that a person with demand-side risks for radicalization might consume extremist content, and proceed down a pathway to extremism. The Handbook section of this toolkit contains all the essential information you need to educate yourself about these dynamics. A few concepts would be especially relevant to James's situation.

Pills

Individuals following a similar path as James frequently employ the terminology of being "redpilled" or simply "pilled." The phrase "taking the red pill" comes from an image in the 1999 blockbuster film, *The Matrix*. In the movie, our hero can choose to take a red pill, which will cause him to see the true, hidden reality of society, or he can take a blue pill, which will allow him to remain in a state of blissful ignorance. Extremist groups and movements have adopted these symbols because they are a powerful means of disguising the reality of radicalization: adopting false and harmful beliefs is "awakening to the truth," while conventional morality is cowardly and blind. To claim that one has been "redpilled"

typically suggests that they have become ensnared in the ideologies of various conspiratorial movements. If someone genuinely identifies themselves as "redpilled," it is a significant sign that something may be amiss.

Misogynistic Expressions

In 2022, the Secret Service pointed out an increasing threat in the United States—misogynistic extremism. A prejudiced or male-dominant view about women and girls can manifest in various ways, including attempts to control or dictate their actions, concerns that some forms of feminism are negatively affecting society, and, in extreme cases, a belief in sexual nihilism. Sexual nihilism, such as the "incel" (involuntary celibate) movement, sees sex as unattainable for certain groups of men. On the opposite extreme, anyone who is not constantly engaged in sexual conquest is deemed socially worthless. Behaviors like harassment, struggling with the opposite sex, or a history of inappropriate conduct towards women can indicate misogynistic or male-supremacist leanings. James's statements suggest that he is experimenting with this form of extreme sexism after being "redpilled."

Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles

The online space has a tendency to push us into "echo chambers." Echo chambers are social spaces where disagreement and dissent are rare, or even forbidden. Echo chambers can occur online or off, such as in a chat where open discussion is shouted down or in a church where congregants may not question their pastor's opinions. Echo chambers create dangerous conditions where the most extreme voices tend to dominate and moderating voices are eventually driven out. This can distort the judgment and values of people inside the echo chamber. Outside of these echo chambers, this type of rhetoric is fringe but inside the echo chamber, it is the norm which can distort a person's sense of reality.

Similarly, "Filter Bubbles"[20] are the result of our digital technology's tendency to filter disagreement and dissent into hostile opposition, through increasingly personalized online media habits. Our choices in social media connections, streaming audio and video selections, etc. produce a highly personalized media diet. Social media algorithms and other design choices can produce a very limited range of perspectives for us to consume. However, this does not completely prevent us from encountering differing opinions. Rather, it leads us to view those differing opinions as "outside" our circle of trust, and thus more worthy of suspicion and even hostility.

Slippery Slope

Radicalization does not usually happen all at once. Transformation comes gradually, as what seemed to be harmless or idle beliefs become more extreme. A person struggling with contradictory thoughts and conflicting emotions, a person whose conscience might want to resist radicalization, often begins to create convincing justifications to validate their

[20] Pariser, Eli. 2009. The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You. New York: Penguin Books.

increasingly radical views and actions. When combined with groupthink, these self-justifying stories can ease them further down the path of radicalization. It is a step-by-step progression that involves becoming more involved with increasingly extreme ideas, activities, and social circles. As this process unfolds, individuals can also become desensitized to those feelings of guilt and conscience that ordinarily keep us away from extreme hatred and violence.

What all these beliefs share in common is the promise of power and safety, and the justification to do "whatever it takes" to get there.

An Idealized Past

People on a radicalization journey will often become nostalgic for a past that they never experienced, and indeed never existed. Sometimes this takes the form of belief in a time of perfect social harmony based on a lack of racial or religious diversity. Other times, this can refer to an idealized past when men ruled over women like dictators (some benevolent, some not). It can even take the form of outlandish pseudo-histories like belief in the lost continent of Atlantis or alien kings from outer space. What all these beliefs share in common is the promise of power and safety, and the justification to do "whatever it takes" to get there. That can mean domestic abuse in the case of male supremacy, such as James is espousing.

> *When he meets with James and Mrs. Thompson, Pastor Tom tries to ask questions and listen more than speak. But when he hears something that reminds him of the dynamics described above (or in the Handbook), he points it out. He mentions that it is not unheard-of for people to engage in that kind of behavior, but that it can be emotionally and spiritually harmful. When possible, he brings up the teachings of Scripture to shed light on the errors that can lead people to this behavior and points to the correct course of action instead. James does not leave this meeting "cured" of his interest in misogyny. However, he does seem open to hearing that his online friends might not be a very good influence. This is good: it is more important to help someone disengage from a radicalizing social environment than it is to make them change their beliefs. Pastor Tom thinks that he has planted a seed that may grow into healing. Mrs. Thompson is much better equipped to understand what is happening and to stand up to it. Pastor Tom continues to check in from time to time and, if necessary, mediate between mother and son.*

WHAT TO DO

Early Intervention and Offramping

You may pursue the following steps to intervene with a person of concern, *so long as there is no possibility of violence.* If there is the slightest suggestion of possible violence, it has to be reported. There simply is no alternative. You must keep yourself and your community protected, physically and legally. These approaches will likely work best in the early stages.

PRE-EMPT

It's best to educate your community about the risks of manipulation they will face in their day-to-day lives. Propaganda exists because it is effective, and no one is immune. Moral, intelligent, well-meaning people fall for false, harmful stories every day.

As soon as you become aware of a destructive political movement, conspiracy theory, or cultural trend, learn about it. Consult the sources listed in the Digging Deeper section to understand the common narratives and methods used to spread it. With that in hand, speak to your community. Start by pointing out that there is a lot of false and harmful information in our society today. This information is harmful because it can mislead, or even manipulate people away from their morals, values, and beliefs. In the end, it harms people's ability to freely make up their minds and live by their values. Explain that no one is immune to this manipulation, and that the only way to protect yourself is to know the ways that these false teachings manipulate others. Finally, describe the narratives and methods you identified previously. Explain why these tactics are manipulative, why they are false, and why they contradict the values of your community.

Decades of science have shown that this is one of the most effective ways to protect people from manipulative propaganda if you follow the formula described here. You may do this one-on-one, in small groups, or with an entire assembly. If you can spot at-risk individuals within your community and reach out to those people quickly, you might save them a great deal of unhappiness. If you can reach people before the peddlers of hate, conspiracy, and misinformation, you will prevent many people from getting tricked.

DISENGAGE

Once someone has begun to consume "supply side" content, it is important that you try to convince them to stop. However, if someone has made contact (especially offline contact) with extremists, it is *essential* that you convince them to stop. This kind of disengagement is more helpful than trying to change someone's mind overnight, because it means they are less likely to become more immersed in harmful ideologies or engage in violent or illegal behavior. You might say something like this: "I'm not trying to make you give up your beliefs, even if I pray you do someday. Right now, I just want to make sure you're safe."

REDIRECT

Disengagement leaves a vacuum in the life of the individual. If something positive does not fill that vacuum, they will likely slip back into the Radicalization Curve (see page 57 of the Handbook) or pursue other unhealthy solutions to their needs. This means redirecting their energy in three key ways:

1. **Spiritually and psychologically.** Address the demand-side vulnerabilities. This will probably call for counseling of some sort. Extremism is a sickness of the soul, so your experience as a faith leader will help you here. Psychological counseling may also be necessary if the individual has significant experiences of trauma or other emotional vulnerabilities.
2. **Socially.** Involve them in better activities, ideally in-person activities with other people. Service activities create a sense of self-efficacy, healthy pride, and concern for others over self.
3. **Behaviorally.** Break the habits that expose them to supply-side material. Stop using the online channels, stop watching the television shows and listening to the radio shows. People have a hunger for content just like they have a hunger for food. They will need new sources to get that intellectual and emotional nourishment.
4. **Support.** Check in and keep checking in. Keep asking questions. Continue to facilitate the previous three steps.

Note: People who have become involved in extremist scenes, conspiracy theory subcultures, or other destructive movements are generally more informed about *your* beliefs and expectations than you are of theirs. Be careful that you are not being told what you want to hear or being "yessed out the door."

EARLY INTERVENTION CHECKLIST

1. Does this individual have a personal support network? (e.g. family, friends) Is this support network virtual or "in real life?"
2. Is this network strong? What kind of support do they offer (e.g. emotional, moral, financial)?
3. Who in this network is concerned about the individual's behavior?
4. Is this individual living through a period of transition or change?
5. Has this individual suffered a recent loss (e.g. loved one, job, divorce, etc.)
6. When did the concerning behavior begin? Was it sudden, or has it been building for some time?
7. Are there spaces that they regularly visit online to consume content related to this issue?
8. Are there broadcasters, influencers, or other people not personally known to this individual, who supply most of the troubling content?
9. How often do they consume online or broadcast content?
10. Has this individual separated from their friend group?
11. Do they have online friendships with specific, like-minded individuals?
12. Are they meeting with like-minded individuals in person?
13. How frequently do they meet with these people?

Look at your answers for questions 1-5. Use the answers to get a sense of the individual's "demand-side" vulnerability. Are they socially isolated? If not, is their social circle a healthy one, or not? Are there acute stresses that might be causing this problem to surface? Adjust your approach based on the severity you see. If they are early in the process and their symptoms seem mild, focus on a preemptive message while encouraging disengagement and diversion. If they seem further along the pathway, work to understand the negative messages and attitudes which they've already absorbed, and focus on disengagement and diversion. Then, follow up.

Look at your answers to questions 5-10. Use these answers to get a sense of the individual's "Supply-Side Direction." What subcultures, political movements, or conspiracy theories are they consuming and associating with? Are these movements violent? What social needs are being met by associating with them or consuming their content? What are the spaces and places where this happens (e.g. a website, gaming chat, or physical location)? This will help you to create a disengagement and redirection strategy.

Look at your answers to questions 11-13. Use these answers to get a sense of how strong the individual's social connection is to others who share these concerning beliefs. If the social connection is strong, particularly if they are making contact offline, then the situation may have progressed beyond your ability to intervene. At that point, your responsibility shifts to keeping your community safe and free from toxic influence. You might insist that the individual not discuss this topic, or topics relating to it, in your church or at its events. In extreme cases, you might request that the individual refrain from attending events until they have disengaged. However, it may be worthwhile for you, as a community leader, to maintain contact and continue to encourage disengagement. Religious counseling against hate and the conspiracy mindset may help. You might even consider referring the individual to a reputable deradicalization group, such as Life After Hate.

Note: We strongly recommend that you look to others in your network for a second opinion. This need not be very formal. Meet and describe the situation to your peer while protecting the private identity of the individual. Walk them through your assessment of the Early Intervention Checklist and ask for feedback. If you yourself are tapped to help with peer review, try to think of questions that will shed more light on each Checklist item. Perhaps there is more personal background you could gather. Perhaps you have insight into the social context (e.g. family, political climate) surrounding the at-risk individual, which will help to add nuance to the assessment. If, by the end of your meeting, you determine that you need more information, make a plan to gather it all quickly and in the least intrusive manner possible. For example, you might reach out to the at-risk individual's teachers, coaches, or friends. However, if by the end of your meeting, you have not clarified or confirmed a course of action, reach out to another network ally for more input and peer review.

Again, *if there is the slightest possibility of violence or self-harm*, you must report it. There simply is no alternative. You must keep yourself and your community protected, both physically and legally.

DIGGING DEEPER

- To learn more about propaganda and manipulation tactics: "Radicalization: Patterns & Pathways" on page 54 of this toolkit
- To learn more about radicalization patterns: "Radicalization: Patterns & Pathways" on page 54 of this toolkit
- For quick guidance on online dynamics:
  - "Can we talk about conspiracy theories?" practice card in this toolkit
  - "Can we talk about social media?" practice card in this toolkit
- For more guidance on how to support a young person in your life: A Parent & Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization
- For support with counseling individuals of concern:
  - Life After Hate
  - The Prevention Practitioners Network

Peacemaker's Handbook

The Peacemaker's Handbook is a practical encyclopedia of key concepts, definitions, and history related to the problems of polarization, social division, and political conflict. It is a digest of subject-matter expertise, which collects the core principles of peacemaking organizations, psychology, and social work, and scholars of social and political conflict. You should not expect to retain every idea contained in the Handbook, at least not after your first reading. Instead, revisit the sections that seem applicable to the issues you see around you.

THE HANDBOOK IS DIVIDED INTO FOUR SECTIONS:

1. Polarization: Roots and Consequences
2. Radicalization: Pathways and Patterns
3. Extremism: Signs and Symptoms
4. Glossary of Key Concepts

POLARIZATION

The first section, Polarization, describes the conditions that make people vulnerable to polarization, radicalization, and extremism. It describes the social, emotional, and psychological traits that can lead a person to these behaviors, and it describes the role of media, conspiracy theories, and ideologies that can encourage a vulnerable person in the wrong direction. It then looks at the consequences of polarization, radicalization, and extremism—for the individual, his family, community, and all of society.

RADICALIZATION

The second section, Radicalization, dives deeper into the ways that propaganda and hate spread. It describes the qualities to watch out for to help the people in your community avoid manipulation. This section then goes into detail as to the ways that a person can change—sometimes slowly, sometimes very quickly—toward division and hostility. It describes the "radicalization curve," a model of this process that you can use to determine how best to help someone you think might be at risk.

EXTREMISM

The third section, on Extremism, builds on that foundation, with insights that will help you recognize if a person has become radicalized into a divisive or even dangerous group.

GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS

Finally, the Glossary of Key Concepts is simply a source of terms that are important for this work but may be new to some readers.

We hope that you return to the Handbook whenever you have a question or concern that applies to your community. Instead of a textbook to be memorized, this is a resource and a support for your work. Apply what works and set aside what seems unnecessary for now.

Polarization: Roots and Consequences

Causes of Polarization

Broadly speaking, the problems that face us involve *polarization, radicalization,* and *extremism. Polarization* is when people's attitudes drive them farther and farther apart, leading to hostility and suspicion. *Radicalization* is any process that causes a person to move in the direction of extremism. *Extremism* is any set of beliefs that divides people into an "in-group" and "out-group," claims that these groups are in irresolvable conflict, and says the only solution is for one group to dominate, expel, or exterminate the other.[21]

Today, these dynamics are worsened by several factors. Our politics are hostile and divisive, as politicians and activists vie for a base that increasingly demands ideological purity and longs to see its opponents punished and humiliated. Digital media, especially social media, filters us into ever-narrower audiences, all while rewarding the most outrageous and aggressive voices. The sheer volume of information available to us has made it more difficult than ever to spot misinformation, as many turn to conspiracy theories to make sense of a world that feels spinning out of control.

Small fissures grow into unbridgeable divides. Everyday grievances and hardships fester into hate. Polarization and radicalization are, at their core, problems of division. But that is not where the problem ends. Sometimes, the outcome is "social divorce," when members of the same community no longer want to live together. In the worst cases, division leads to radicalization—the belief that co-existence is impossible and the only solution is violence. As we have seen from a supermarket in Buffalo, where ten Black shoppers were murdered by a white supremacist, to the Colleyville, Texas Synagogue where a rabbi and his congregation narrowly escaped death at the hands of a hostage-taker, the deadliest violence can occur in the most everyday places.

[21] See Berger, J.M. 2018. Extremism. Cambridge: MIT Press.

How do these tragedies happen? While they may seem sudden and random to us as bystanders, they are only the final, horrible outcome of a long—but avoidable—process. Radicalization does not happen overnight. That means we have the chance to recognize it and intervene long before it has the chance to damage our communities, or, worse, turn to violence.[22]

So, what should people be on the lookout for? This toolkit is not meant to turn pastors into police. Instead, the work of prevention is the work of making peace, building strong churches and families, and creating communities where discord and division cannot flourish. If we can accomplish that, then extremist violence should be a rare thing indeed. There are many complex causes of polarization and radicalization, and no two cases are exactly alike. However, there are several patterns that occur again and again, with tragic consequences.

Supply and Demand

Experts will often speak of both a supply side and demand side for extremist materials. On one hand, demagogues and propagandists offer a *supply* of ideological material, imagery, entertainment, and opportunities. This material is often slick, professional, and highly emotionally stimulating. This stimulation is essential to unlocking the *demand* side of the problem. People consume such material—and ultimately become absorbed by it—because of the psychological needs it promises to meet. Moral disengagement offers permission to act on our darkest impulses of selfishness and rage. Supremacist thinking confers feelings of power and value. The conspiracy mindset promises easy answers to a world of frightening complexity, and conspiracy theory communities offer a number of psychologically satisfying rewards, including prestige, power, and influence in a community; a sense of expertise and mastery over a body of knowledge; a feeling of being an enlightened, radical truth-teller; and camaraderie with a group of like-minded individuals.

Demand Side Causes

When we talk about "demand" what we mean is the motives and needs that lead people to radicalizing behaviors and that keep them coming back for more. This is a complicated matter, because many of these risk factors originate in painful experiences. However, there is always an element of moral choice, which we should not ignore. The vast majority of people who experience trauma, uncertainty, or grievance do not radicalize, because they understand the harm it would inflict on innocent people. As pastors, you are uniquely well-equipped to understand that delicate balance of pain and personal responsibility. Never forget that these behaviors cause real harm to the individuals and groups that become the targets of extreme attitudes and behavior.

[22] See McCauley, C. and Moskalenko, S. 2011. Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

TRAUMA AND UNCERTAINTY

When people experience loss, trauma, and uncertainty, they are more likely to seek out and embrace destructive belief systems. In psychological literature, this is called a search for *compensatory control*. That is, when our lives feel out of control, we seek to compensate through activities and beliefs that promise certainty and power. They look for scapegoats for their feelings of anger and powerlessness. They accept easy answers for problems that might not have clear solutions. And they are more willing to join toxic social groups to feel like they belong. The scale of trauma and uncertainty necessary to invite radicalization can vary widely. It can be as bad as the worst kinds of child abuse or as seemingly minor as graduating from high school and feeling lost and untethered in the adult world. This vulnerability to radicalization is not lost on bad actors and extremists—they will try to recruit people who have experienced trauma by framing that traumatic experience as intentional and the fault of an out-group that extremists want to vilify.

The scale of trauma and uncertainty necessary to invite radicalization can vary widely. It can be as bad as the worst kinds of child abuse or as seemingly minor as graduating from high school and feeling lost and untethered in the adult world.

GRIEVANCE

When people feel that something has been taken from them—or even that something *might* be taken from them—they may become more susceptible to radicalization. Sometimes this comes from a negative experience with one person, blaming their entire race or religion for the experience. But this is also particularly true of intangible social assets. When we feel that our social position is threatened by changing societal norms or demographic changes, that can create a dynamic known as *status threat*. Communities who are experiencing rapid changes may feel their status is threatened by newcomers. This can lead to hostility, suspicion, or worse. When trying to recruit someone into an extremist group, extremists will use a strategy of tying someone's legitimate grievance to a broader conspiracy to hurt people like them. For example, a man is treated unfairly during a divorce process, or a worker loses a promotion to a coworker they see as less deserving; the extremist recruiter will argue that this individual experience is part of a broader conspiracy to hurt all men or all non-minority workers.

LOVE

As strange as it may sound, love can drive people to adopt conspiratorial beliefs or extreme attitudes. When a loved one begins to slip away, some people may prefer to join them in the trip "down the rabbit hole" of conspiracy or hate. Or, the need to feel loved can drive a person to join toxic communities in a search for belonging. Some people gravitate to extreme beliefs out of a genuinely misguided desire to improve society, without considering the violent consequences.

Others enjoy riling up people they see as their opposition, or sending them disparaging messages in order to make someone they do not like/agree with feel uncomfortable or scared.

ENJOYMENT

Troubles in life are not the only cause of destructive behavior. We must acknowledge that there is also a kind of pleasure that people take from the emotions of outrage, superiority, and even hate. Some enjoy the feeling of power that can come from dominating or manipulating others. Others enjoy riling up people they see as their opposition, or sending them disparaging messages in order to make someone they do not like/agree with feel uncomfortable or scared. Despite whatever struggles we face, we are always responsible for the consequences of our actions. It is never acceptable to embrace hate in the face of adversity. Faith leaders may be especially well-equipped to address the role of destructive pleasure in causing strife in the community.

Supply-Side Causes

When we talk about "supply-side" causes of polarization and radicalization, we mean the external factors that channel discontent, fear, resentment, and other negative traits toward extremism. These typically take the form of highly ideological media content, ready-made narratives that pin the blame for complex problems on easy scapegoats. It is important to understand that supply-side causes do not work independently from demand-side vulnerabilities. In other words, simply viewing extremist propaganda will not radicalize a person unless they nurture the grievances that contribute to radicalization. Unfortunately, many people do harbor vulnerabilities, and many figures in our communities and media seek to cultivate these resentments in the interest of their own ambitions.

NARRATIVES

As people, we understand the world around us through stories, which guide us through a world that is too big and complex to experience everything firsthand. These stories (or "narratives") offer us maps through life, telling us of distant times and places, predicting human behavior, and helping us avoid mistakes. The stories of the Bible, for example, offer a library of endlessly rich narratives, which instruct its readers not just in morality and theology, but also human psychology, the natural world, history, and more.

Unfortunately, the power of narratives can easily be used to sow division and spread conflict. Sometimes, people will believe an emotionally powerful narrative even if it contradicts facts they know firsthand. They behave as though the story were true and reality were false. Stories that are untrue, or which cast innocent people as villains, or which predict political or cultural doom unless immediate, drastic action is taken—all of these are extremely dangerous if they begin to take root in your community.

While these are often designed to elicit negative emotions, other narratives incorporate the appearance of more positive goals. A positively driven narrative might try to bring people together to build a vision for the future, which appears positive to hide its darker implications. For example, many extremist plans for utopia involve eliminating some out-groups, violently if necessary. This sinister element of the "positive" narrative will not be introduced at first in order to gain support and avoid condemnation.

It can be difficult to counter false narratives. On one hand, they satisfy deep emotional needs for certainty and a sense of self-righteousness. On the other hand, they usually incorporate enough provable facts that it can be difficult to untangle truth from fiction. Sometimes, a narrative may be entirely true, but it uses the facts to draw a conclusion about the future, which is false and harmful. Instead of trying to act as a community "fact checker" it is much better to evaluate narratives by following them through to their logical conclusion. Ask, if this story is true, then what action would have to be taken? Would that action lead to harming others? Does this call to action serve to unify or divide your community? Is it in service of others or in violent opposition?

IDEOLOGY

An ideology is a system of beliefs and values, which are connected with ideas for how society ought to be organized, governed, and run. Like narratives, there is nothing inherently wrong with having an ideology; most people have opinions on these issues, after all. However, there are ideologies that pit members of a community against each other, which demonize others or seek to stifle all opposition. People with grievances or a thirst for power will latch onto toxic ideologies because, like narratives, they offer a map for taking action in the world.

Ideologies offer people a plan for bringing order to the world. People who have experienced trauma, or who fear the loss of social privilege may enthusiastically adopt extremist ideologies as a form of *compensatory control* (see Key Concepts). When a person with demand-side vulnerabilities encounters extremist ideologies, they frequently help to channel that person's grievances in a destructive direction. You should be on the lookout for people who seem to have both demand-side vulnerabilities and an interest in unusual ideologies. When these two factors meet, radicalization may be taking place.

> Living in this onslaught of negative media is harrowing and stressful, as we rocket from one panic to the next, unsure what fresh fear lies around the corner, waiting to snatch us.

CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

The images and characters that populate our media and culture are not just objects of entertainment. They are symbols, which contain an immense amount of information and emotional power. As a result, they can be attractive to people with demand-side vulnerabilities, and they can spread division and discord without openly admitting to it.

Some cultural symbols are easy to identify as divisive or extremist: a swastika, an antisemitic joke, or a violent cartoon. But increasingly, extremists understand that they can influence more people through subtlety. The culture of the extremes gives people an opportunity to "try on" ideologies and allegiances without formally committing to them. People obtain emotional rewards from consuming the culture and entertainment of extremes, too. This can ease entry into extreme attitudes. For example, a person might dress in clothing associated with militia groups in order to project a tough, militant image. This image offers an inroad to identifying as sympathetic to the militia movement. Gradually, that identity can become involvement and commitment.

Often, these cultural experiments can take the form of humor or provocation. This is especially true in online spaces, where irony and outrageous behavior are more common. Humor, taking the form of envelope-pushing jokes or "trolling" provocation, also permits people to experiment with divisive and antisocial ideas. At the same time, it begins to connect these ideas with the gratification of social media attention and getting a rise out of others.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

The oldest form of radicalization is still the most powerful: real-life relationships. Personal relationships are still the most effective spreaders of propaganda and social division. If a person with demand-side vulnerabilities meets another person with false solutions and easy scapegoats, then radicalization can be extremely fast and dangerous. The literature on radicalization tells us that once a strong social bond is formed between individuals with antisocial behaviors, outlandish worldviews, or extremist ideologies it becomes very hard to pull them back into the fold of the community.

This is why individuals who spread hate, conspiracy theories, and divisive rhetoric are so poisonous to our communities. Individuals seeking to inject this division have to be addressed for the good of the entire community.

THE NEW MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Unfortunately, our modern media tends to worsen both the demand-side and supply-side aspects of this problem. Social media fuels envy, and fear of losing status, while broadcast media sensationalizes the ordinary conflict of life into dire struggles for life and death. Living in this onslaught of negative media is harrowing and stressful, as we rocket from one panic to the next, unsure what fresh fear lies around the corner, waiting to snatch us. Meanwhile, there are all too many content creators, influencers, and political figures who are all too willing to stoke the fires of our fear and uncertainty for their own cynical gain. Add to this the firehose of supply, a barrage of content directed at us through our computers, phones, and televisions, and we find ourselves in a dangerous place. In this environment, even healthy individuals can find themselves at a growing risk of being manipulated. Intelligence, honesty, and morality are not always enough. It takes awareness of the problem, too.

Effects of Polarization

This is not merely a matter of people not getting along or of politics getting ugly. The polarization and radicalization that increasingly affect our communities can have severe consequences. Churches, whose mission is to bring their congregations together in worship and community, are riven with disagreement, suspicion, and hostility.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

Polarization leads to mistrust, bad feelings between neighbors, and if left unchecked, extremism and even violence. These outcomes lead to a raft of negative mental consequences, both for the individual and the larger community. At the most fundamental level, extremism separates people from reality, because it seeds our worldviews with misinformation and conspiracy theories so that our "pictures" of reality are false.

Polarization and extremism build us a world of mental stereotypes, which reduce the people around us to mere cartoons. That in turn robs us of the spiritual gifts that come with living in harmony with others.

Living with polarization and extremism also can take a turn on our mental health, which affects our physical health. Hostility (which is turned outward against one's perceived enemies) and anxiety (which is in response to perceived threats) both have negative impacts on mental and physical health. This impacts mental health and may result in depression, anxiety, and PTSD[23]. This is even more the case for people belonging to groups targeted for hate by extremist groups[24,25,26]. One study found that "living in areas with higher hate crime rates may confer higher odds of hypertension, diabetes, and obesity." More specifically, higher state-level hate crimes "were associated with higher odds of incident diabetes."[27] If your faith calls you to "carry each other's burdens" and "seek for the good of others," then eliminating extremism for the benefit of victims is an important part of practicing that calling.

However, mental states do not belong only to the individual. We can also speak of *social intellect*, that is, the general ability of a community to think, reason, debate, and decide together. This social intellect is essential to harmonious communities, and our system of republican democracy cannot function without it. Polarization and extremism destroy the social intellect. On one hand, they color our perceptions of reality with negative emotions, so that even if we share the same set of facts, our interpretation of those facts comes into conflict. One person's idea of progress is another person's catastrophe, and it is impossible to reach a sensible compromise.

On the other hand, extremism rejects the very idea of thinking and reasoning together. To extremists, we do not achieve stronger communities through problem-solving together, but by dominating our opponents and stripping them of any power at all. Of course, not everyone in a community will always see eye-to-eye.

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[23] Global Perspectives on the trauma of hate-based violence—ISTSS. Accessed September 25, 2023. https://istss.org/ISTSS_Main/media/Documents/ISTSS-Global-Perspectives-on-the-Trauma-of-Hate-Based-Violence-Briefing-Paper_1.pdf.

[24] Gero, Krisztina, Farzad Noubary, Ichiro Kawachi, Christopher F Baum, Robert B Wallace, Becky A Briesacher, and Daniel Kim. "Associations of State-Level and County-Level Hate Crimes with Individual-Level Cardiovascular Risk Factors in a Prospective Cohort Study of Middle-Aged Americans: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youths 1979." BMJ Open 12, no. 1 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-054360.

[25] "Raising Awareness of Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents during the Covid-19 Pandemic." Hate Crimes | Raising Awareness of Hate Crimes and Hate Incidents During the COVID-19 Pandemic | United States Department of Justice, May 20, 2022. https://www.justice.gov/hatecrimes/resource/raising-awareness-hate-crimes-and-hate-incidents-during-covid-19-pandemic.

[26] Relihan, Daniel P., Nickolas M. Jones, E. Alison Holman, and Roxane Cohen Silver. "Shared Social Identity and Media Transmission of Trauma." *Scientific Reports 13, no. 1 (2023)*. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-33898-2.

[27] Gero, Krisztina, Farzad Noubary, Ichiro Kawachi, Christopher F Baum, Robert B Wallace, Becky A Briesacher, and Daniel Kim. "Associations of State-Level and County-Level Hate Crimes with Individual-Level Cardiovascular Risk Factors in a Prospective Cohort Study of Middle-Aged Americans: The National Longitudinal Survey of Youths 1979." BMJ Open 12, no. 1 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-054360.

Even if polarization and extremism have not yet crept into our own community, their presence in society undermines our ability to think, both as individuals and together. We may begin to question the honesty of the people around us whenever we discuss issues relating to politics or cultural controversies. Can we trust that they are speaking in good faith? What if they are really "dog whistling," speaking in coded language to make awful ideas sound reasonable? Questions like these paralyze constructive dialogue. It isn't enough to avoid polarization and extremism. We must actively work to build a healthy, resilient community, where honest and compassionate dialogue thrives, and everyone can feel truly at home.

PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

As explained elsewhere in this toolkit, *moral disengagement* is a consequence of polarization and a symptom of extremism. It consists of deciding that others are not worthy of moral consideration, whether because they hold a different identity or disagree on political questions. When the rot of moral disengagement is allowed to grow, violence is frequently the outcome.

Polarization and extremism can both become reciprocal processes. As some people grow more distant, intolerant, and extreme, it drives others to grow more extreme in their opposition. Families, who mix together through their children's schools and activities, can grow alienated from one another. People frequently move places of worship, or even homes, in response to polarization. This dynamic is called "geographic sorting," and it is a very natural response to feeling as though you don't belong. Leaving one's house of worship for a reason like this is sure to invite bad feelings, which in turn hardens people further against reconciliation.

Radicalization: Patterns & Pathways

Propaganda & Manipulation Tactics

Propaganda messaging employs a wide variety of tactics. They use a variety of media, including images, spoken word, text-based content, and videos. Extremists are adept at tailoring their propaganda and understand how specific combinations of messaging strategies and forms of media resonate with various segments of their target audiences. For example, extremist propagandists might rely more heavily on memes and sharing them via social media sites to connect with younger audiences while for older audiences, they might pivot towards creating lengthier written content for Facebook posts and emailed newsletters. In relation to the content itself, propaganda relies on a range of narratives and rhetoric that employ the persuasive techniques of *ethos* (appeal to credibility), *logos* (appeal to logic), and/

or *pathos* (appeal to emotion). These approaches can be further broken down into sub-categories, the "seven common propaganda devices" of "name-calling, glittering generalities, transfer, testimonial, plain folk, card stacking, and the bandwagon."[28]

J. Michael Sproule provides a concise overview of what these seven propaganda devices entail which is quoted on the next page.[29]

Although this framework gives us a base for understanding the dynamics of propaganda, more recent expert work tries to account for the ever-growing prominence of online communication. Online environments have facilitated extremist recruiters' ability to connect with individuals beyond their own geographic location and ensure that their propaganda is disseminated far and wide. Direct contact between a propagandist and his audience, as well as the ability to operate in online environments with little to no oversight, creates an ideal environment for extremist manipulation.[30] When it comes to more personalized forms of contact, extremist manipulation may mirror a gradual socialization process where the recruiter seeks to build a friendship with their target while simultaneously feeding the potential recruitee extremist propaganda and isolating them from outside influences that do not align with the extremist recruiter's ideological worldview.[31]

Direct contact between a propagandist and his audience, as well as the ability to operate in online environments with little to no oversight, creates an ideal environment for extremist manipulation.

Regardless of the specific method, extremists go to great efforts to exploit every angle of vulnerability. However, building an awareness of their various manipulation tactics can strengthen resilience against their harmful messaging and calculated socializing processes.

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[28] Sproule, J. Michael. "Authorship and Origins of the Seven Propaganda Devices: A Research Note." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs 4, no. 1 (2001): 135–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41939653.*

[29] Sproule, J. Michael. "Authorship and Origins of the Seven Propaganda Devices: A Research Note." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs 4, no. 1 (2001): 135–43. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41939653.*

[30] "Building Networks & Addressing Harm: A Community Guide to Online Youth Radicalization." PERIL Research, May 30, 2023. https://perilresearch.com/resource/building-networks-addressing-harm-a-community-guide-to-online-youth-radicalization-resources-for-trusted-adults-mentors-community-leaders/.

[31] "Building Networks & Addressing Harm: A Community Guide to Online Youth Radicalization." PERIL Research, May 30, 2023. https://perilresearch.com/resource/building-networks-addressing-harm-a-community-guide-to-online-youth-radicalization-resources-for-trusted-adults-mentors-community-leaders/. /;. Harv., Sunstein, Cass R. Felix Frankfurter Professor Of Law,. *Going to extremes—how like Minds Unite and divide. Oxford University Press Inc, 2011.*

SEVEN PROPAGANDA DEVICES

1. **Name calling**
   The propagandist conjures hate or fear by attaching unattractive labels to out-groups and ideologies.

2. **Glittering generalities**
   The propagandist associates his or her program with positive values and virtues without making clear how they are connected.

3. **Transfer-Here**
   The propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he or she would have us accept. This includes "hijacking" religious or national symbols to support ideologies of hate.

4. **Testimonial**
   The propagandist links an idea or program to some specific, favored person or institution.

5. **Plain folk**
   Persuaders and leaders present themselves as 'just plain folks' to establish an identity with ordinary people.

6. **Card stacking**
   The propagandist overemphasizes some points and underemphasizes others to put a spin on his or her ideas or proposals.

7. **Bandwagon**
   The propagandist works to have people 'follow the crowd' to accept an idea or plan because 'everybody's doing it.'

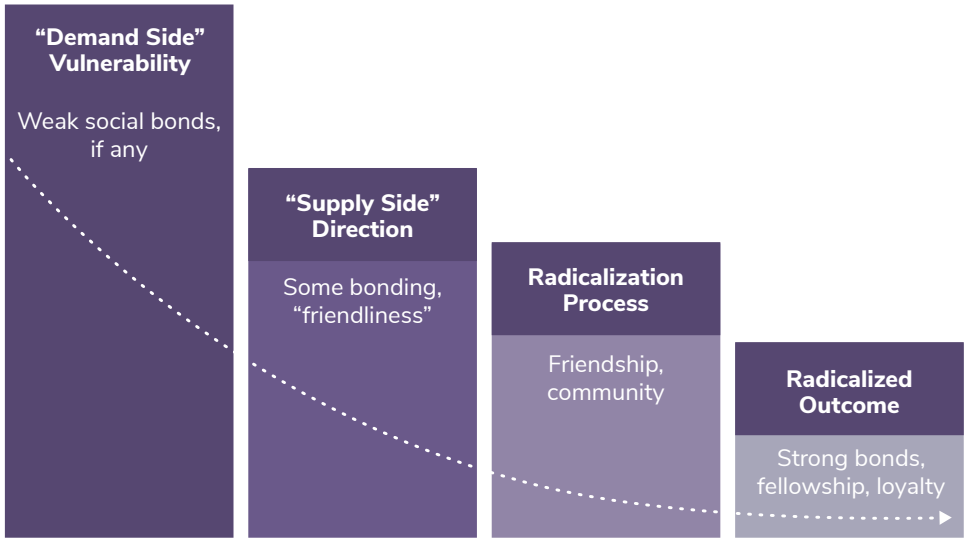
Radicalization Patterns

The "Radicalization Curve"

Friendship and community are powerful motivators, which can be misdirected in the interest of destructive social and political movements. People who become involved in these movements often follow a recognizable "curve" which progresses based on the social connections they make. This process can lead people away from the principles of family and community, and replace them with selfish pride and a thirst for power over others.

The following diagram shows how the process of radicalization might happen.

FIGURE 4: THE RADICALIZATION CURVE



In your capacity as a community leader, you want to halt the Radicalization Curve as far to the left of the Radicalization Curve as possible.

At each stage of transition, there is an increase in social bonding.[32] By the time an individual is moving from the Radicalization Process to the Radicalized Outcome, they have usually established strong social bonds with others who share their destructive new beliefs. At this point, it becomes very difficult to reach them.

[32] See also: Einstein, Mara. 2007. Brands of Faith. New York: Routledge.

Slippery Slope

There is usually no one moment when someone becomes radicalized. Instead, it is a gradual process where over time, seemingly innocent or harmless ideals become more extreme. While internally someone may have contradictory thoughts about their behaviors, cognitive dissonance increases a person's justifications for their actions, creating a personally persuasive narrative, and validating their opinions and deeds. When paired with groupthink, this doubling-down effect provides a *slippery slope* toward radicalization. This step-by-step progression includes engagement with more extreme views, activities, and social groups that espouse othering beliefs which can lead to dangerous and sometimes violent actions. Through this process, individuals also become desensitized from emotions of guilt associated with committing acts of violence. Therefore, the further down the slope a person goes, the more radicalized they can become.

Risky Shifting

Social groups are powerful. Have you ever gone to a sports event, and felt no attachment for either of the teams playing, yet the group of people you were with supported one team over the other and you found yourself doing the same? This is a benign example of *risky shifting* or *group polarization*. When people come together with a majority of pre-established ideas on a topic, enhanced agreement transpires, shifting the average opinion of the group. Consistent dialogue on a topic, steered in a particular direction by group members, can produce group polarization. This can take place in-person or online while inhibiting group members who have differing views, from speaking up for fear of being ostracized. For polarizing or risk-taking issues, risky shifting can also guide people toward more extreme attitudes and behaviors, aiding in the radicalization process.

Relevant Argument Theory

Relevant argument theory contends that culturally, one side of an argument is preferred over another, thereby producing greater societal favor for that argument. Risky shifting goes hand-in-hand with this concept. When someone is developing an opinion on something, they seek out information from a collection of opinions. If this collection is made up of similar arguments that are culturally preferred with an imbalance of new arguments to be had, this lack of argumentative diversity influences people to adopt culturally dominant opinions, pushing people in the direction of opinion conformity. From a radicalization standpoint, conformity or being part of a group, strongly affects people's perceptions and actions, sometimes leading toward extreme consequences.

Social Comparison

Group polarization is also affected by *social comparison*. As individuals, we determine our social standing and self-worth based on those around us. Through this comparison process, we also evaluate our own actions, behaviors, and beliefs with the actions, behaviors, and beliefs of our social group. People with more group-esteemed ideals tend to garner more

favor within a group since their collective stance demonstrates an intense devotion to the group. Throughout history, we have seen many extreme yet charismatic figures rise to prominence due to their outspoken, group-esteemed beliefs. From a group perspective, these individuals are seen as more "liked," providing them with greater influence and status. This likable authority has the power to sway the opinions of average group members who also want to be liked, while pushing the group toward more radical, group-centric, beliefs. People then become judged internally and externally not only by their perceived devotion to these beliefs but by their actions in relation to the group. Thus, beliefs and actions are influenced by group norms which are powerful dynamics in the radicalization process.

Consistent dialogue on a topic, steered in a particular direction by group members, can produce group polarization.

Reciprocal Radicalization

Extremist groups are not immune to the complexity of relationships. Groups with seemingly divergent ideologies encourage each other's rhetoric and actions in mutually beneficial ways. *Reciprocal radicalization* refers to this process. Differing groups and movements can share parallel goals, like bringing down a government or creating a utopian society. They can also share similar narratives (e.g., a race war or a war on Islam), imagery such as knights, Crusaders, and cross-over propaganda that incorporates far-right meme culture with Salafi-jihadist rhetoric and vice versa. Although packaged somewhat differently, these shared traits are reciprocal in nature. Reciprocal radicalization also encourages opposing groups to ramp up their actions and deeds whether through the intervention of one group or the escalation of another thereby feeding off one another's worldviews.

In-group Competition

Just as with reciprocal radicalization, *in-group competition* can bolster radical thoughts and actions. The need to be seen as more radical than your peers pushes individuals, and thereby groups, to greater extremes. Social Comparison theory plays a part in this process since our assessments of self are based on the company we keep and the examples we consume. From a social identity perspective, in-group competition helps solidify identification with a group and its members offering belonging which is a powerful mechanism in the radicalization process. Additionally, in-group competition helps fuel this progression toward radicalization since competition can invoke feelings of satisfaction and commitment, while pushing people to outdo one another. This desire to outshine peers, shifts the dynamics of a group, encouraging greater risk-taking as well as excessive behaviors.

Condensation

When individuals share strong ties, the suffering of one at the hands of another can foster *radicalization by condensation*. Much of the time, these responses involve an enhanced commitment to violence. For example, when a fellow associate is imprisoned or killed a common reaction is leaving "no man behind" or "an eye for an eye" with some sort of action or payback considered. These thoughts elicit feelings of anger however, anger is not the only feeling that fuels radicalization by condensation. Survivors' guilt can also be a determining factor. Those not imprisoned or still alive may feel guilty that good people have suffered, while they have not. This can also influence concepts of martyrdom whereby an ultimate sacrifice is reflected upon for fellow companions and the group.

False Martyrdom

Martyr, derived from the Greek *martur* meaning "witness," is rooted in the persecution of early Christian witnesses who died for their beliefs. There are many recorded instances of Christian martyrs including Stephen, John the Baptist, St. Lucy, and St. Cecilia among others. From a radicalization standpoint, martyrdom is used to influence group members, as well as mass audiences since from a propaganda perspective, self-sacrifice is depicted as the ultimate price for one's cause. However, there are many less altruistic motivations for someone choosing to become a martyr, like personal status, glory, or going down in history as the perpetrator of an act. Although such personal motivations can still have a radicalizing effect on social groups, the mere act of planning martyrdom negates its essence. Martyrdom does not involve a single deed or using your body as a weapon of destruction. This is *false martyrdom,* and it is used as a propaganda tool to further the goals and motives of political extremism.

Hate

Radicalization involves significant emotion. The more these emotions become heightened, especially when personal or group grievances are present involving insult or anger, extreme views on certain people, issues, and policies can develop. Hate is an extreme mode of classifying something or someone. It elicits strong emotions that are powerful and destructive. Ardent negative opinions about another, have a habit of building momentum. At the group level, this is even more apparent since group thoughts, feelings, and goals tend to mirror each other with members feeding off group unity. A classic example is a group of colleagues complaining about a difficult boss. As everyone shares their negative experiences, the group becomes more and more adamant about what a rotten boss they have. In more extreme cases, this progression can lead to in-groups (those who belong to a group) viewing out-groups (those who do not belong) as less than human. This dehumanizing effect has been shown to amplify aggressive behavior toward out-groups while reducing personal responsibility for such behavior. Furthermore, many individuals who hate others tend to find enjoyment in the suffering of those they hate. When there is a lack of personal responsibility factored with group conformity, a radicalizing effect takes place with the ability to amplify hateful beliefs and violent behaviors.

Extremism: Signs & Symptoms

It can be very difficult to identify hate groups nowadays. Most hate groups no longer try to present a counter-cultural appearance like they did in the past. While groups like nazi skinheads still exist, they are increasingly overshadowed by hate groups who adopt a much more mainstream look and approach for "optics".

It is not possible, or even a good idea, to try to keep track of every new conflict and conspiracy. But make an effort to stay aware of broad trends in political extremism so that you can recognize common symbols and slogans used by extremist groups.

How to Recognize an Extremist Group and Movement

Extremist groups and movements have overarching themes of "them" against "us." They view their world and structure their goals around in-group vs. out-group competition, viewing out-groups in some way as detrimental to their existence. Hate, entitlement, and fear are all drivers of their philosophies and behaviors. By nature, extremist groups and movements have exclusionary beliefs, view nationalism as restrictive, and incorporate principles of authoritarianism, xenophobia, racist and misogynistic expressions, along with conspiratorial outlooks. The future of these groups, movements, and ideologies exists in radicalizing new individuals into their folds.

As pastors, you are trusted members of your community. Many of you have long-standing relationships with the members of your parish. You know them and their families on a deeper level and may even have watched them grow up. This provides you with important insight and the ability to see warning signs sometimes before others do. There are certain red flags or warning signs that a person is becoming radicalized. Although the radicalization process is gradual and an individual journey, several indicators, outlined below, can help identify people who may be traversing down this path.

Pills

Continuing from the explanation in the fourth scenario, many extremist groups and movements have adopted the language of "redpilling" as a way of indoctrinating individuals into their conspiratorial philosophies. Individuals exposed to or consuming extremist rhetoric, oftentimes mention having a political "awakening." Being "redpilled" points to someone being pulled into the folds of far-right, racist, antisemitic, or conspiratorial ideologies. The red pill is not the only pill to swallow. There is an assortment of radical or categorical pills to choose from. Including but not limited to the black pill which embodies nihilism, the idea that the system is beyond repair and that the only realistic solution is to accept and embrace this nihilistic hopelessness, along with the siege pill which gains its name from neo-Nazi publications encouraging accelerationist approaches to bring about a race war, the collapse of society, and a new utopian future. Individuals who take the siege pill believe in the use of violence toward these goals.

Paranoia and Displacement Conspiracies

The desire to bring about a new "golden" age stems from idyllic notions of the past. Usually, these recollections involve tearing down the system to build a new one that fits with the ideals and goals of an extremist ideology. Beliefs in conspiracy theories, a powerful global elite, anti-government rhetoric, or the idea that a white majority is being replaced by minorities, fuels this desire. These thoughts can present themselves in anti-immigrant blaming, racial tropes, antisemitic, and other discriminatory views. They are based on paranoia and fear of displacement, especially in relation to social status. Concepts like "White Genocide," "Race War," or "The Great Replacement" go hand in hand with the longing to bring about a utopian society. Although these beliefs have grave consequences from a radicalization standpoint, they can be lethal when words and thoughts shift to a need for action. When individuals believe that using violence is the only way to bring about change, this is a major red flag.

A sense of superiority helps validate fabricated realities about social groups, ethnic populations, and personal identities.

Misogynistic Expressions

In 2022, the Secret Service noted that misogynistic extremism is a growing threat in the United States. Misogynistic or male supremacist attitudes toward women and girls, present themselves in several ways. Including policing or controlling their behaviors, the idea that some extreme forms of feminism are destroying the fabric of modern society, and in more extreme cases sexual nihilism, where sex is seen as unattainable, and lacking value, with women and society being the cause. Sometimes behaviors such as interpersonal difficulties, harassment, or having a history of inappropriate conduct toward women are signs of misogynistic or male supremacist leanings.

Blaming

Victim narratives are a common trait in extremist ideologies. A sense of superiority helps validate fabricated realities about social groups, ethnic populations, and personal identities. Minorities and immigrants often become the scapegoats and are blamed for societal flaws. Women are often reproached for male sexual repression or stepping outside of traditional gender roles. While anti-government extremism is exhibited in comments about breaking the system or an anticipated second Civil War in the United States. Such beliefs point to concerning behavior as well as a lack of awareness socially and individually. Blaming others for our shortcomings is a slippery slope toward accepting more extreme and unrealistic solutions which sometimes present themselves in conspiracy theories that offer answers to uncertain things.

Sharing Propaganda or Online Content

In today's digital world, a vast array of concerning material is readily accessible for download, consumption, and sharing. All it takes is a quick search, and nearly anything can be found. Sharing extremist propaganda, whether in face-to-face interactions or online, often signals that someone is encountering extremist ideologies. Depending on the nature of the content, things like pamphlets, videos, music, manifestos, memes, and even short catchphrases can all be used to promote extremist groups and movements. This content might clearly display indicators of extremism such as symbols (like a swastika or a flag associated with a specific group), inflammatory or inciting language, derogatory remarks targeting a particular group, or connections to an individual who has carried out a violent attack. But in other instances, the connection can be less obvious, incorporating conspiracy theories or humor. Initially, humorous content like memes and videos may appear harmless because of the humor or irony involved. However, often, this humor is at the expense of a targeted group and may imply violence while providing a level of plausible deniability. Sharing such content raises a red flag about someone's exposure to extremist ideologies.

How to Respond to Red Flags

First, remember that not everyone displaying red flags is becoming radicalized. There is a good chance that a person is misinformed about something, has stumbled across content online, and is unaware of terminology or the facts of an issue. Take care to avoid profiling based on specious evidence. The best approach is to investigate and learn more, modeled in the fictional *Peace Against Radicalization* scenario above. Ask questions, listen, discuss, and expose false narratives, misinformation, and disinformation. Dialogue helps all parties involved understand where certain thoughts and ideas are coming from. It also encourages critical thinking, which is an important tool for countering extremist ideologies. In our ever-changing, tumultuous world, many of us can feel overwhelmed or scared about the future. Extremist groups and movements take advantage of uncertainty, feeding off these fears. Share your vision for the future and empower people to take positive control of their lives. Come from a place of *empathy* but *challenge* harmful labels that promote hate or encourage violence. Be a role model through *acceptance* and *kindness*. Sometimes all someone needs is a trusted confidant willing to be a logical sounding board. Remember that as a pastor, you have many tools at your disposal. Faith, community, and acceptance are all powerful elements to help someone who is veering toward a worrying path. Finally, if you need further help, there are resources available. Consult the Peace Against Radicalization scenario (page 34) for guidance and resources.

Glossary of Key Concepts

In order to address polarization, radicalization, and extremism, it is helpful to know some key concepts related to these problems. You will likely have already noticed some of the dynamics described below, whether in the media or in your own community. A shared vocabulary can help to identify problems when you see them and work with others to find solutions.

COMPENSATORY CONTROL

Compensatory Control describes a psychological process, in which someone searches for certainty and safety in unhealthy ways as a means of dealing with loss, trauma, or other conditions outside of their control. When our lives feel out of control, we seek to compensate through activities and beliefs that promise certainty and power. This can lead to involvement with extremism, cults, gangs, drugs, and self-harm.

CONSPIRACY MINDSET

A *Conspiracy Mindset* believes that events in the world do not occur randomly or naturally, but rather are a result of orchestration by external parties—secret societies or powerful elite cliques. This is different from believing that divine forces such as God and the devil, good and evil, shape our lives and the course of history. Instead, a conspiracy mindset looks for *human* "puppet masters" instead of accepting the complexity of our world. Conspiratorial thinking is what happens when a normal feature of our brains is put into overdrive. Humans are always looking for patterns in their environment that can help them make sense of their world; the conspiracy mindset applies that behavior to unconnected events/people and conjures a story that explains how dark, powerful forces are responsible for all the bad things that happen.

CONTROL BY THE INTOLERANT FEW

Control by the Intolerant Few is a concept that describes how a very small, vocal, and aggressive group can control an entire organization or community. This small, intolerant group is often more committed to its narrow interests than the larger group is committed to the good of the whole. An intolerant minority will use aggressive and even hostile tactics to make the cost of opposing them too high for most members of the community, who will either give in or go someplace else.

ECHO CHAMBERS

Echo Chambers are social spaces where disagreement and dissent are rare, or even forbidden. Echo chambers can occur online or off, such as in a chat where open discussion is shouted down or in a church where congregants may not question their pastor's opinions. Echo chambers create dangerous conditions where the most extreme voices tend to dominate and moderating voices are eventually driven out (see "The Risky Shift," below). This can distort the judgment and values of people inside the echo chamber. Social media is especially good at creating echo chambers due to the nature of digital algorithms and our natural tendency to seek out information that affirms our preexisting beliefs.

EXTREMISM

Extremism is the belief that one group of people is in direct and bitter conflict with other groups who don't share the same racial or ethnic, gender or sexual, religious, or political identity. Extremist ideologies separate the world into simplistic, black-and-white categories of "us" and "them," and believe that conflicts can only be resolved through separation, domination, or other forms of violence.

FILTER BUBBLES

Filter Bubbles refers to the way that our digital technology can filter out disagreement and dissent from our increasingly personalized online media habits. Our choices in social media connections, streaming audio and video selections, etc. produce a highly personalized media diet. Social media algorithms and other design choices can produce a very limited range of perspectives for us to consume. However, this does not completely prevent us from encountering differing opinions. Rather, leads us to view those differing opinions as "outside" our circle of trust, and thus more worthy of suspicion and even hostility.

MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

Moral Disengagement means abandoning the moral codes that should guide a person's life. Moral disengagement often sets the stage for acts of betrayal or violence against family, neighbors, or violence against people with whom we disagree politically.

MORAL LUCK

Moral Luck refers to the context in which a moral (or immoral) choice must be made. Many people never face difficult moral choices, and so they are considered morally lucky. Or, if a person were forced to perform an immoral act under threat of violence, we might assign less blame to them because they were morally unlucky. Some people who adopt extremist or otherwise harmful attitudes do so under very difficult circumstances (see Roots and Origins). That is, they are morally unlucky. However, we are still responsible for the moral consequences of our actions.

PARTISAN SORTING

Partisan Sorting is the tendency for people to join groups that match their political values. This is different from polarization because it applies to moderate viewpoints as well. Just as people with conservative social values will gravitate to the Republican party, people with liberal economic values will gravitate to the Democratic party, and vice versa. This dynamic also occurs with religious communities, for example, when people change churches to find a pastor or community that matches their existing political values.

POLARIZATION

Polarization is the tendency for members of rival political or cultural groups to adopt increasingly distant opinions about how to solve social problems. Along with that tendency to grow farther apart, political and cultural disagreements tend to become more hostile and "winner-takes-all."

PSEUDO-EVENTS

*Pseudo-Event*s are events and issues that are concocted for the purpose of gaining media attention. In the past, pseudo-events were such things as the press conference before a boxing match or commercial publicity stunts. But in today's hyperpolarized attention economy, we see entire cultural controversies manufactured in this way, to attract viewers and rally the political base. Disingenuous news headlines, purposefully clipping or editing video/audio to make someone look bad, or taking a quote wildly out of context are all ways that media can facilitate pseudo-events.

RADICALIZATION

Radicalization is any process that leads a person to hold extremist beliefs or "us versus them" ways of thinking in which the other group is seen as a dire and existential threat to oneself, family, or people now or in the future. These beliefs may or may not lead to overt violence. Radicalization is usually a gradual process in which people are socialized into an extremist belief system that sets the stage for violence, even if it does not make violence inevitable

RECIPROCAL RADICALIZATION

Reciprocal Radicalization is a type of extreme polarization. It occurs when one "side" of a disagreement takes increasingly extreme positions, which in turn motivates the other side to adopt more extreme versions of its own positions. This process can continue until the point where both sides are radicalized, and come to see each other as threats who cannot be reasoned with or share the same community.

THE "RISKY SHIFT"

The "Risky Shift" is a form of group radicalization. It happens when a group shares values or ideology and begins to reward people for taking more extreme positions. By taking an extreme position, a group member can be seen as more committed to their values, or more "pure." This leads others to take even more extreme positions in order to seem even more committed and pure. This dynamic is sometimes also called "outbidding" because it resembles a kind of "ideological auction," where the person who can raise the stakes to the most extreme position wins social recognition and respect.

SOCIAL COHESION

Social Cohesion describes how well (or badly) a community lives together. Communities with high levels of social cohesion are able to work through conflicts constructively, trust the social institutions that exist in their society (e.g. the legal system, the education system, the healthcare system), live with their differences, and work together to make a better future for themselves and their children. Communities with low levels of social cohesion are weakened by distrust, unhealthy competition, and unresolved conflict. Low social cohesion is a major risk factor for radicalization and extremism within a community.

SUPEMACIST THINKING

Supremacist Thinking means falsely claiming inferiority and superiority between entire groups of people. This is different from merely believing that some ways of life are better than others. Supremacist thinking assumes the *inherent* inferiority of whole groups with certain characteristics–such as religions, sexual orientation, or disabilities–and concludes that domination and even extermination are justified against "inferior" groups.

Conclusion: The Road Ahead

We sincerely hope that the *Peacemaker's Toolkit* offers you as a ministry practitioner a resource for understanding and responding to challenges of division in your churches and broader communities. The knowledge and skills in this document are designed to bolster the skills you already possess in pastoral care, communication, mediation, and discipleship. Keep the *Peacemaker's Toolkit* within reach and refer to it as often as necessary to understand, prevent, and respond to division in your church and broader community.

This toolkit's structure reflects the nature of peacemaking: that it starts by proactively building unity in your immediate community.

The work of proactive peacemaking—through actions such as those described in the *Peace in My Church* and the *Peace in My City* scenarios—is the first, best prevention for division. It is critical to respond to division when it arises, but proactive peacemaking shrinks the space for that division to fester in the first place. Human beings will always face differences and divisions. But proactive, consistent peacemaking ensures that conflicts are managed quickly and for the common good. By cultivating positive peace—a peace of belonging and fellowship—you and your congregation build your resilience to division in the short-term and bring closer an enduring, beloved community. Within the fertile ground of positive peace, leaders can move beyond the urgent cycle of crisis and response and toward deeper spiritual growth.

Leaders who stand up to sow peace can feel isolated in a divisive culture. We have included links in this toolkit to just a handful of the many people and organizations who are also working to expand peace and minimize polarization. Build solidarity with others on this journey to learn from and support one another.

Thank you for your interest in leading people of faith to be peacemakers. We trust that because of your efforts, we will have stronger congregations and a healthier democracy in our country.

The Peacemaker's Toolkit

A Reference Guide for Reconciliation in Your Community

"Peacemaking is an enormous challenge when people are constantly tempted to respond to the latest outrage. Pastors are inundated with polarizing voices in their churches and the communities they serve. This toolkit puts valuable information in their hands to navigate the difficult landscape, serve their people well, and lead their congregations to be peacemakers in the public square."

BOB ROBERTS, JR., FOUNDER, GLOCALNET, KELLER, TX

"This is a comprehensive tool pastors can use as necessary when community events necessitate a response. It will also prove helpful in planning preaching, teaching, and training events for local congregations and their communities."

DAVID BOWMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, TARRANT BAPTIST ASSOCIATION, FORT WORTH, TX

"Peacemaking is not a passive effort. Peacemaking involves inserting oneself into moments of conflict to make peace, not just keep peace. This toolkit can help pastors and leaders to make peace in their churches and communities, and can help train others to be peacemakers, too."

WESLEY SHOTWELL, PASTOR, ASH CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH, AZLE, TX