

A group of people are seated around a table in a meeting. In the background, a whiteboard displays a flowchart with three stages: 'DAY 1 Learning Objectives', 'DAY 2 Nuancing Co-creating', and 'DAY 3 Collective Re-invention'. The text is overlaid on the image in a bold, stylized font. The main title is in yellow and white, with 'faith leaders,' and '& strategize?' in red and white.

What happens when **GLOBAL GRASSROOTS ACTIVISTS, faith leaders, & gender justice researchers GATHER, COLLABORATE & strategize?**

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee held the Converging Futures convening to explore this question. Leaders came together to examine how **mobilizing at the intersection of faith, democracy, and gender justice could serve the global struggle against authoritarianism.**

Political Research Associates worked with UUSC to produce a report summarizing key takeaways.

**Here are some highlights
of what we learned:**

First, what do we mean when we say: **GENDER JUSTICE?**

Human rights for all people who are marginalized by dominant power structures because of their gender. Trans liberation, feminism, and LGBTQI+ rights are all part of gender justice. As an intersectional movement, gender justice is intertwined with climate, migration, and racial justice, along with every other human rights struggle.

How about: **“ANTI-GENDER”?**

The global right-wing social movement that furthers transphobic, homophobic, and misogynistic ideology. While the exact agenda of anti-gender actors varies around the world, they share a desire to uphold oppressive patriarchy.



Gender justice is not one issue among many to be "added" to a democratic agenda; rather, it is a requirement of democracy. **Any defense of democratic governance that does not insist on gender justice will be outperformed by opponents who weaponize gender.**

Conservative forces have led with an anti-gender agenda for millennia, successfully galvanizing supporters to further their interests.

The Society for Implementation Research Collaboration has documented approximately \$50 million channeled into anti-rights work in Africa, with over \$270 million flowing through groups like Family Watch International and Alliance Defending Freedom..

US-based conservative foundations and Russian Orthodox geopolitical organizers have huge transnational influence.

Sonia Corrêa, long-time global leader in countering anti-gender movements, traced clerical fascism in Latin American Catholicism back to the Inquisition itself, a history of authoritarian Christianity that long predates the contemporary American Christian right.

ANTI-GENDER IDEOLOGY IS NOT A PIPELINE WITH A SINGLE ORIGIN POINT.

It's an ecosystem that circulates, adapts, and converges.

Hindu nationalism's anti-gender dimensions have century-long institutional history through the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates.

Wahhabist influence in Muslim-majority contexts operates through its own funding and institutional channels.

In some cases, the Hindu and Zionist right position themselves as queer- or trans-positive, using "pinkwashing" as a claim of superiority over Muslim populations. Patriarchy is still oppressive, but it operates in different ways.

ANTI-GENDER CAMPAIGNS ARE OFTEN RELATED BUT DO NOT FUNCTION THE SAME WAY ACROSS THE WORLD.

As one participant cautioned: "Simplistic analysis leads to simplistic strategies."



**ANTI-BLACKNESS, CASTE, ANTI-MUSLIM BIGOTRY,
AND WHITE NATIONALISM ARE NOT PARALLEL TRACKS
RUNNING ALONGSIDE GENDER POLITICS**

*but are structurally interwoven
with the mobilization of gender
as a political weapon.*

**The "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory connects
anti-abortion politics to white nationalism;**

**Hindu nationalism's gender politics are inseparable from
its anti-Muslim and anti-Dalit dimensions;**

**and anti-trans moral panics in the US and Europe are laced
with racial anxieties about who counts as a "real" citizen
and who is authorized to "reproduce" the nation.**

PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENTS


cannot win without

FAITH.

As convening participants pointed out, the religious Right understood this decades ago and invested accordingly.

Progressive movements, for a complex set of reasons including secularism, trauma from religious harm, and the conflation of religion with conservatism, have largely ceded this ground.

Skepticism about whether faith belongs in social movement work may be a primarily US-based or Global North concern. But even in this context, skepticism varies. Progressive faith has been a central engine of democratic transformation within the Global North in many instances, from US Black faith traditions leading the Civil Rights Movement to contemporary voter-mobilization.



Participants who have experienced religious harm carry justified distrust.

If movements and queer communities are asked to keep reaching toward faith leaders, **FAITH COMMUNITIES ARE CALLED TO THE RECIPROCAL WORK** of reaching toward, and repairing with, the people they have excluded.

THAT REPAIR IS INSEPARABLE FROM THE SAME WORK.

How do we talk about

DEMOCRACY?

We have to distinguish between:

POLITICAL STRATEGY

We are fighting for true democratic governance, the ideals of which have never been realized on a State level.

MOBILIZATION STRATEGY

"Democracy" has often been imposed by the Global North or used as a cover for economic exploitation. We may need to meet people with language other than "democracy" to bring them into this fight.

These are complementary, not contradictory, tasks.

Our movements need shared language that is honest about democracy's failures without ceding the concept to those who would replace it with theocracy or ethnonationalism.

Where do we go from here?

FOR FAITH LEADERS:

Continue to speak publicly and name your progressive values specifically (grow this muscle!)

Our opponents have trained media to seek conservative religious voices. Progressive faith leader allies must become equally available, media-trained, and willing to speak on contested issues, including trans rights, reproductive justice, and democratic governance.

Lead the intra-faith work

Progressive faith communities cannot credibly challenge authoritarian religion while harboring unexamined hierarchies of race, gender, caste, and sexuality. This internal work, including formal apologies, reparative action, and genuine power-sharing, is not a distraction from the external fight. It is a precondition for credibility.

Connect locally, coordinate transnationally

Coordinated networks exist: the Global Interfaith Network, the Alliance of Inclusive Muslims, the Rights Faith and Democracy Collaborative, SIRC's Community of Practice, and more (these are examples not an exhaustive list). Faith leaders should actively seek out these networks and draw on the shared intelligence and mutual support they provide.

Invest in the next generation

Faith leaders should actively nurture, resource, and learn from young, emerging leaders, rather than expecting them to conform to existing institutional models.

Where do we go from here?

FOR FAITH-RELATED ORGANIZATIONS:

Play an ecosystem role

Lean into the role of bridge-builder, not as top-down coordinators but as connectors that support locally-led work. The model should ideally be an ecosystem rather than a coalition, nurturing connections across a diverse field.

Invest in political education

The convening revealed a significant gap in shared analytical language across the movement. UUSC and PRA are exploring the possibility of a year-long political education series featuring educators from across the movement's traditions and geographies.

Produce and disseminate the evidence base

Funders and policymakers need concrete evidence that investing in faith-based organizing produces democratic outcomes. UUSC and PRA will produce a strategy guide that provides a focused analytical framework.

Center faith leader voices

Faith-adjacent organizations can prioritize platforming faith leaders directly in publications, at conferences, in funder briefings, and in media.

Respect the leadership of local actors

Support proposals designed and budgeted by the people who will execute them as a standard practice.

Where do we go from here?

FOR GENDER JUSTICE ORGANIZATIONS:

Consider engaging with faith as a strategic asset, not a problem to manage.

Movements that engage faith leaders and communities as partners gain access to relational infrastructure and mobilization capacity that cannot be built from scratch. This does not require movements to become religious, but it does require us to stop treating faith as inherently regressive.

Integrate gender analysis into democracy work, and vice versa.

Gender justice and democracy are not separate issues but constitutive of each other. Gender justice organizations should make this case explicitly in their coalitions, their communications, and their funder relationships.

Build cross-movement communication infrastructure.

Gender justice organizations should invest in joint communications infrastructure, including shared rapid-response protocols, cross-movement media strategies, and collaborative storytelling platforms, that can match the speed and reach of the opposition's messaging apparatus.

Deepen the analysis of gender across ethnonationalisms.

The "anti-gender" frame that works for analyzing Christian nationalism does not map neatly onto Hindutva or Zionism, where pinkwashing and other inversions complicate the picture. Gender justice organizations should invest in the analytical work needed to understand these differences

Where do we go from here?

FOR FUNDERS:

Recognize that faith-based organizing is democracy infrastructure.

Shift from approaching faith as a niche to treating progressive faith actors as a core component of democracy defense. The evidence is documented in political outcomes, policy victories, and sustained community resilience across multiple countries.

Extend timelines.


The Right invests in decades and thinks in millenia. Progressive philanthropy often operates on one-to-three-year grant cycles. Funders could create dedicated long-term funding vehicles for faith-based movement infrastructure, with evaluation frameworks that can capture relational and cultural change rather than only policy wins.

Break the silos.

Faith-based organizing currently often falls through the cracks of common funding categories. Funders have an opportunity to create cross-portfolio convenings and shared funding initiatives that bring democracy, gender justice, racial justice, and faith funders into the same room.

Learn from the other side's funding model

anti-rights groups have achieved devastating impact with remarkably small investments, often by mastering digital platforms and leveraging religious infrastructure. Progressive philanthropy should study these models to understand the asymmetry: flexible, trust-based, rapid-deployment funding achieves outsized impact compared to the rigid, compliance-heavy, project-based models that currently dominate progressive grantmaking



Converging Futures resulted in a shared analytical framework, a network of relationships, and a clear diagnosis of what the field needs next.

Gender justice and progressive faith leaders need resources, coordination, and the recognition that their work is not peripheral to the defense of democracy but central to it.

Read the full report:
uusc.org/converging-report

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