A Call to Action: The November 2020 Election Accompaniment Project

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Friends, for some time now, I've been discerning a call to organize a non-partisan effort to train/ prepare/ mobilize people (clergy especially, but all people of faith, as well as those who identify as secular and who are concerned for their neighbors) to become poll workers and election observers to ensure free and fair elections this fall; as well as to be ready to observe/ report/ assist any marginalized people or populations in our communities that may be targeted for violence leading up to and following the elections.

I am choosing to make this effort *non-partisan*, because I believe that the vast majority of people in the United States can agree, regardless of party affiliation, that we don't want anyone to be harmed as a result of this.year's election.

We have several potential sources/ types of violence, and potential consequences of such actions, that seem possible under our present circumstances:

1. **Election Day Intimidation/ Violence:** Interfering with the elections by intimidating marginalized groups to stay away from the polls (maybe that would take the form of white nationalist 'militia' type guys in trucks, as we've seen elsewhere this summer, patrolling marginalized neighborhoods and at the edges of polling sites). We may also see Black and/or Brown people incorrectly turned away from their local polling sites, without recourse, as has happened in the past. We can help reach out to communities who may experience voter suppression by accompanying them to verify their eligibility in advance of the election. We can also encourage as many people as possible to vote early or by mail, to reduce the level of personal risk. We need to call on as many clergy and church folks as possible to take the day off to become poll workers and poll observers in these communities--equipped with their phones to take pictures/videos, and report such incidents as needed. We may also need people to provide rides or other forms of safe accompaniment to/ from the polls.

2. **State-Sponsored Violence/ Oppression:** I believe we need to be prepared in case the incumbent is re-elected, for a significant increase of discriminatory policies and state-sponsored violence against already-marginalized communities. This could take the following forms, based on previous actions and stated intentions of the present administration, and previous government responses during civil rights movements:

    a. increased ‘roundups,’ detentions, and deportations of immigrants/ foreign-born citizens;
    b. further stripping of civil rights from LGBTQ+ persons, especially transgender folks;
    c. further harassment of minority religious groups and their members; increased police violence against Black people and other marginalized racial groups;
    d. further suppression of people protesting non-violently for civil rights and equality; including excessive use of force, prolonged detentions, removal of social media accounts, and monitoring phones/ communications;
    e. further removal of social safety nets for people living in poverty (food, housing, healthcare assistance, unemployment);
    f. further stripping of community-based options for people with disabilities (cutting services and protections and returning to the 'warehousing' model); and
    g. lack of police intervention against white nationalist/ alt-right aligned 'militia' groups that may also be targeting these groups.

3. **Disruption to the Peaceful Transition of Leadership/ Retaliatory Action:** As several major news sources have noted, there is some possibility in the event the opposition candidate is elected, that we may see an initial or prolonged refusal of the incumbent to allow for a peaceful transition of power, possibly backed by some sectors of the police and military who are strongly loyal to the incumbent, or at least an unwillingness of some Sectors of police and military to enforce the presidential transition if the incumbent is unwilling to leave (although I hope this is the least likely scenario). However, perhaps more likely, is that white nationalist 'militia' groups will try to engage in acts of intimidation and/or violence against already-marginalized groups; and, as we have already seen this summer, the police and military may be unwilling to intervene.

4. **Violence in the Event of Contested or Uncertain Election Results:** It is possible that election results may not be clear right away due to a number of reasons--such as a high volume of absentee ballots, equipment failure or reporting sabotage (similar to the Iowa Caucus event), a very close election, or that neither candidate concedes the election and a recount is needed (such as in Bush v. Gore). Violence could be used to pressure a candidate to concede before the full count is known.

5. **Internally/ Externally Displaced Persons in Need of Accompaniment:** I think we need to be prepared for the possibility that there may be enough and/ or prolonged violence and/or discrimination incompatible with basic quality of life against already-marginalized groups (LGBTQ+, BIPOC, immigrants, religious minorities, people with disabilities, people in poverty), that people in these marginalized groups may have to consider migrating away from their neighborhoods, communities, states, or regions to safer/ more welcoming neighborhoods, communities, states, or regions; or, if things get quite violent/ oppressive, people in these marginalized groups may find the need to leave from the United States altogether. If there is no good way within our civic and individual means to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people in these groups where they live, then we need to be prepared to help them move to safety. We may need to prepare for hospitality to an internally displaced persons situation, or to help people safely reach a bordering country if necessary. Pandemic restrictions on travel raise legitimate concerns; but it may also be possible to arrange for quarantine stations en route. We will need allies in bordering countries. People who may need to leave for safety reasons may not have the resources to do so. We may need to organize networks to offer rides, food, shelter, and funds for resettlement. Congregations may in some cases offer natural 'sanctuaries' along the way; however, these may also be risky places, knowing most congregations have at least a few members who may be opposed to aiding marginalized populations and who may even sabotage congregation's efforts to do so. It may be safer to provide housing via hotels and/or personal homes.

There will be those who do not want to talk of such things, for fear they will happen, or for other reasons. I believe it is better to be prepared for a situation that may not happen, rather than to be unprepared for a situation that does happen. It may also be in the process of preparation for these potential events that people's hearts are softened

or moved out of complacency to work on friends and family members who may be more ardently supporting violence and discriminatory / oppressive policies against already-marginalized populations. I believe we should do as much as we can in the early stages as openly, transparently, publicly as we can. (Everything up to helping people relocate for safety reasons if needed, since confidentiality would then be essential to the safety of persons en route). Perhaps the awareness that many eyes are watching, especially among clergy, will help in itself to minimize the threat of violence. It is also important to note that for those who say, “It can’t happen here,” that our country already has a long and painful history of intimidating and blocking access of already-marginalized groups from participating in elections; as well as forcing members of already-marginalized groups out of their neighborhoods and communities; or rounding up members of already-marginalized groups for detention and displacement/ deportation, and/or for prolonged incarceration. Sometimes, perhaps as best known in the 1960s Civil Rights movement, even white people trying to accompany already-marginalized groups seeking their full civil rights, were beaten, arrested and imprisoned, and even killed. We also know that those who choose to accompany non-violent civil rights protesters this summer--as medics, legal observers, and journalists, even as clergy--have been arrested, beaten, tear gassed, and/ or shot with ammunition that has caused serious injury to eyes, head wounds, and other serious impacts.

One of the more painful realities is that in this time, as in the 1960s; and as in the 1860s; and in the 1940s as well--large segments of Christianity have been co-opted by the white nationalist movement under the guise of being ‘pro-life.’ While very little evidence exists to suggest that the white nationalist movement and its political leadership have any true commitment to continuing ‘pro-life’ stances following the election, it also must be said that a Christian ethic affirming human life must extend to the born as well as the unborn, throughout the entire human lifespan--regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, income level, country of origin, ability or disability, or even criminality or political affiliation, as was modeled in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. We must not forget that large numbers of white Christians despised or were simply complacent toward the work of Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Medgar Evers. We must not forget that large numbers of white Christians used the Bible to support the enslavement of Black people and the destruction of Native American lives, families, communities and culture. We must not forget that the majority of white Christianity supported or were complacent to the policies of Nazism that targeted religious and ethnic minorities, foreigners, LGBTQ+ persons, protesters, and people with disabilities. While initially Nazism had a wide appeal to those looking for a

revival to the national economy and their own economic struggles, it was after the election that the full wrath of earlier statements and actions against these marginalized groups was unleashed. In every age and season, we must not exchange the human rights and dignity of our neighbors for a handful of empty promises. There is always another and better way.

I know there's a lot going on this fall: pandemic precautions; people internally displaced by natural disasters/ climate change (fires, storms, etc.); and clergy burnout.

We will need to ground and renew ourselves in communities of faith, hope, and love. We will need to encourage one another and remind each other of what is at stake; the very real human costs; and also the future which we envision and work towards: one of human rights, equality and justice for all.

Colleagues, I would welcome your thoughts and questions in this process of discernment and faithful organizing. I would also welcome your help. This goes beyond the “preaching and teaching prophetically” goals of the Clergy Emergency League; this is committing ourselves to creative nonviolent direct action, at levels of increasing personal risk as the situation may warrant, and leading our people faithfully to do the same. I would note that for those of us serving in or belonging to some marginalized communities, this is already the norm for clergy. For others, it is a fairly new and uncomfortable consideration or undertaking. We do not, and need not, do this alone. Within many of our larger communities, and within our shared religious traditions, there are already quite a few good, solid organizations that have led the way in their commitment to creative nonviolent direct action in pursuit of human rights/ civil rights, and their solid work on voter rights, and I believe that all of us who share these values can work together to magnify our efforts and impact. Where such organizations already exist, please do work together--offer your help, and accept guidance and feedback from your local community partners. For those of us in smaller communities without these established organizations available, let us take the time now to do the planning and coordinating work that we need to do with our local clergy colleagues, partner organizations, and concerned citizens.

Not everyone will be comfortable committing themselves to all of these tasks. This is understandable. However, everyone can do something to help, in their own local community, that they know best. I would, as a starting point, encourage all clergy to be

prepared to serve as election observers and/or poll workers for Election Day, and to invite members of their congregations to do the same.

Preach hope, clergy colleagues. Keep watch, and be prepared to put our faith into action for the sake of all our people.

About the Organizer:

Rev. Le Anne Clausen de Montes (she/ her/ hers) is a pastor in the PC(USA) and passionate advocate for universal human rights. She holds an M.A. in Christian-Muslim relations in addition to her M.Div., and worked with Christian Peacemaker Teams (www.cpt.org) in Israel/ Palestine, Iraq, and on the U.S./ Mexico border. She helped to train the original delegations of the International Solidarity Movement, and also the original Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel for the World Council of Churches. She served as an election observer in several of these settings. She studied at the World Council of Churches headquarters in Geneva, and interned at the Middle East Council of Churches in Jerusalem. She has participated in and/ or led interfaith peacemaker delegations with Fellowship of Reconciliation to Iran, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria. She has been active in local interfaith and ecumenical peacemaking and cooperative projects throughout her adult life. She is currently the founder/ leader of the Iowa Faith Leadership Network.

Link to the November 2020 Election Accompaniment Project Facebook Page:

(Where additional training resources, links, helpful news articles, etc. will be posted)

https://www.facebook.com/The-Election-Safety-Project-100117135182235

Link to this text as a Google Document: (updated document in real time)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rx0luMoA9w4SlWKL_FPze0eGPdTeLESgCUZBPvvbOxw/edit?usp=sharing