

Building Congregational Community Safety

*Imagine a world where
all people are safe.*

*Imagine a world where
no one's safety depends on increased violence or harm for others.*

*Imagine a world
without police.*

We are living in times that call for prophetic imagination and a courageous willingness to “practice the world we wish to see,” as adrienne maree brown says in *Emergent Strategy*. These times also call for honest reflection on the ways we as white people participate in the perpetuation of white supremacy, particularly through our reliance on policing, and a willingness to repent, to turn, to transform, and to go a different way.

In that spirit, we have created this toolkit for white faith/spiritual leaders and congregations to examine our relationship to policing and police violence, and to practice new ways of creating safety within our own congregational contexts. This project is an act of accountability to people of color who are asking white people to join them in **imagining and taking action toward a world without policing**. This project is also **an act of love for all of us**, because we know that policing does not work to keep any of us safe.

In order to stop relying on police as faith/spiritual communities, we are asking questions like:

How do faith/spiritual communities legitimize and reinforce the “need” for policing?

How are faith/spiritual institutions tied to institutions of policing?

How can faith communities act to disrupt the prison and ICE pipelines?

What might alternatives to policing look like?

What might community safety look like without relying on policing, and how might faith/spiritual communities participate in that work?

Ultimately, how can we invest in each other, believe in each other, trust each other and the rhythms and cycles around/within us, and overall relate to each other differently as human beings?

Who do we want to be?

Campaign Goals:

- Deepen our understanding of the history of policing and its connection to the enforcement of white supremacy; consider whether policing works for white people or not.
- Reflect honestly as white people on the role faith/spiritual communities play in upholding the system of policing.
- Imagine, explore, and engage in alternatives to policing, both internal and community-based, that center accountability to communities of color, collective liberation, and harm reduction strategies.
- Publicly extricate our faith/spiritual communities from unjust systems of policing.

Who can participate:

- Faith/spiritual communities/institutions: congregations, synagogues, seminaries, denominational offices, etc.
- Any religious/spiritual tradition can participate. Our includes Christian, Jewish, and UUA faith leaders, and we are working together to assure we are supporting folks across traditions.

How It Works:

Get the “Building Congregational Community Safety Toolkit!”

This toolkit is designed for faith/spiritual communities and institutions ready to take action to stop relying on police. The toolkit includes a 4-movement model we’ve developed to support your congregation in moving to action, including assessment tools, political education suggestions, action ideas for a variety of scenarios, alternatives your congregation can utilize, and support options..

[Access the toolkit here.](#)

This is great! How do we start?

Wonderful! We are so excited to be on this journey with you. Get the toolkit, review it, and get to work! We will be in touch with you periodically to check in about how it’s going.

Still have more questions? Keep reading for our FAQ below!

Frequently Asked Questions

Can you name some ways faith/spiritual communities participate in policing?

Probably the most pervasive way we all participate in policing is through our quiet, largely unconscious reliance on police as our default response to any emergency that might arise. Most of us who are white have been taught from a very young age to call 911 in an emergency, which summons the police. Unless we deliberately develop and practice alternative emergency plans, we will default to that strategy, and in so doing, someone could be killed. It’s like keeping a deadly weapon in our back pocket.

Some other ways our congregations participate in policing include:

- Calling the police when church property is vandalized or broken into.
- Relying on police to de-escalate people who come into our buildings in mental health crisis, or to remove “unwanted” persons such as folks experiencing homelessness who find shelter at our buildings.
- Allowing our parking lots to serve as staging areas for police actions.
- “Police appreciation” events, such as delivering food or other items as a “thank you” to police departments, sending thank you cards, hosting dinners.
- Participating in insurance policies that require police reports if someone (even a member) embezzles money.
- Relying on police or armed security for our local congregational and denominational events.
- Participating in parades and other events that include police units against the wishes of people of color--e.g., some Pride parades.
- See [more examples here](#).

Are you asking us never to do any of the things you’ve listed above?

That is our ultimate goal. We need to develop true community safety practices that serve and protect everyone equally.

And we recognize that those practices are not in place yet in most of our communities, so part of what it means to participate in this project is that we will work together over the coming years to imagine and build those alternative systems. We provide lots of examples in the toolkit of what various communities are trying.

In the meantime, we will do our best not to call the police. Might some dire situation arise where we have to call? Maybe, but by having gone through this process of reflection and discernment, we will be better equipped to recognize whether this is one of those times or not.

What about if someone experiences violence or a child is harmed?

We understand how scary this thing is that we are asking you to consider. We are not asking you to have all the answers tomorrow. We *are* asking that you join us in imagining how we can keep each other -- all of us, not just those of us with various forms of privilege -- safe.

What we also know is that police, by far, do not solve the problem of violence or [serve to hold accountable perpetrators of violence](#); in fact they often cause *more* harm to survivors and their communities.

Ultimately, our safety is going to come from our commitment to looking out for each other across all lines of difference; that is a manifestation of beloved community, indeed!

See also this [FAQ from MP150](#), and this resource “[What About the Rapists.](#)” See also this excellent resource from Survived and Punished, “[Safety Planning and Intimate Partner Violence: A Toolkit for Survivors and Supporters](#)” and the related webinar, “[Intimate Partner Violence and Abolitionist Safety Planning.](#)”

Can you name some alternatives communities are trying?

These include self-defense classes, mental health first aid and de-escalation trainings, granny knitting circles in neighborhood hotspots, community peace walks, community defense zones, transformative and/or restorative justice circles, and more. Check out [this great set of graphics](#) imagining alternatives!

The police were great when our congregation experienced [X], why would we want to jeopardize that relationship? and/or Our congregation has a good relationship with police--why would we participate in this campaign?

Policing and other institutions that uphold white supremacy have persisted for so long because they work fine for white people, especially middle and upper class white people, who hold most of the power in our society. If we really want to dismantle white supremacy, we have to listen to the experiences of people of color, and what we have learned from doing that is this: when we call the police, we endanger the lives of any Black or Brown person in the vicinity of our congregations/spiritual communities, as well as all poor and working class people, and people with mental illness and disabilities.

We all want to be safe and secure in our communities. We believe that the Divine calls us into a vision of community safety and care that does not rely on violence against people of color and poor people that our current policing system represents. Moving into this vision is moving into unknown territory, which we believe our faith/spiritual traditions calls us to embrace.

Wouldn't it be better to try to work with police departments to reform them?

We can't say definitively that this is impossible, but based on a study of the history of policing in the United States, we believe the institution was created for problematic purposes in the first place. Policing originates, in the South, with the fugitive slave patrols; and in the North, with the need of the mercantile class for a compliant workforce that wouldn't disrupt production with riots and strikes, as were common in the 1800s as urbanization progressed. (For more information, check out the articles in the first section of our [Political Ed. Resource List](#)).

The role of the police as a system has been to preserve a peace that is really no peace for people of color and poor people in this country. The powerful, monied interests are still very invested in this original purpose and will fight any effort to reimagine policing from within.

We believe the role of the faith/spiritual communities is to offer bold visions of a world that is safe for everyone and in which everyone has enough. Creating alternative community safety practices seems to us to be one move in that direction.

We have police officers in our congregation. What do we do about that?

We recognize and honor the fact that many people became police officers out of a genuine desire to protect and serve the community. Our struggle truly is against systems and structures that cause harm, not individuals. We further recognize that the police force (and other militarized professions such as military service, correctional officers, ICE detention center guards, and security guards) are some of the only ways out of poverty for people born into it. Part of our work in re-imagining community safety will have to involve developing new pathways to life-giving employment for people who currently work as law enforcement.

In the meantime, we recommend having one-on-one conversations with these members before launching this project in your congregation. You can urge them to share fully in the discussions--both the things they love about their work and the things that are difficult or feel out of integrity. [See our resource here](#) for more.

What if my congregation is already working on social justice issues?

Wonderful! It's great that you are already proactive and involved. Since policing intersects with so many social justice issues, you have a structure for learning and introspection at your congregation. Homelessness, food insecurity and poverty, immigration/sanctuary, mental health, domestic violence -- these issues and many more are impacted by the system of policing.

Use whatever issues your congregation has dedicated themselves to as lenses into better understanding how policing functions in these specific areas. Use that reflection as resources for committing your congregation to stop relying on police.

What if this work brings up questions/conflict in our congregation?

This work is bound to bring up questions and perhaps even conflict in your congregation. Questions and conflict can be an opportunity to go deeper. See the [attached guide](#) for one way to plan for one-on-one conversations about policing within your congregation. Knowing one another's stories and taking time to honor where we come from is a critical part of racial justice work. Whiteness often functions to separate us from one another, and this is one way to push back directly, breaking down individualism and building community to disrupt white supremacy.

Who can participate in the campaign? I see a lot of stuff for Christians.

This campaign is intended for congregations/spiritual communities of any faith/spiritual/religious tradition. Our team includes leaders from various different faith and spiritual traditions and we are working together to assure we are supporting folks from different religious/spiritual traditions.

That said, you will sometimes see resources crafted for a particular tradition because of that tradition's particular needs/relationship to white supremacy. For example, there are many resources already for Christians because of the way white Western Christianity is so deeply connected with the development and perpetuation of white supremacy.

I'm interested, but I don't think my congregation is ready. What should I do?

That totally makes sense. The toolkit is designed so that you can begin from wherever your congregation is ready to start, from the first messy conversations about the purposes and problems with policing through the process of creating alternative policies and systems to replace the need for police. Even if your congregation decides not to take on the project, we believe the process of wrestling with these issues will ultimately result in more critical thinking about policing and less reliance on militarized violence to solve community disputes.

You can also refer to our [Political Education Resource List](#) for articles, books, videos, etc. to support initial conversations in your congregation prior to engaging with the toolkit as a whole.

Is there support for our congregation as we work through the toolkit?

Yes! We offer an ongoing Community of Practice for congregation members doing this work as well as regular public trainings, and can also offer tailored trainings and coaching for your congregation.

Have more questions?

Contact our team at congregationsafety@gmail.com

Ready to get to work? [Get the Toolkit here!](#)