

Clergy Leadership in Faith-Rooted Organizing



PART 2 Developing Moral Narratives

2

Research has shown that we understand the complex world we live in through narratives, stories that help explain why things are the way they are. These meaning-making narratives are repeated in the media, in public debate and in everyday conversation to the point where they appear to be “the truth.” These narratives are typically shaped, managed and disseminated by political and economic elites.

In our country, narratives have been used historically and continue to be used today to maintain white supremacy and to oppress Black, Indigenous and people of color community members. In these dehumanizing narratives, people of color are portrayed as being unworthy, lazy, criminal, and dirty. These narratives have perpetuated unrelenting violence against Black Americans and have contributed to the killings of dozens of unarmed Black people by police in recent years.

At times, these narratives appear subtly, in films, TV shows, political campaigns and pop culture. At other times, they are highly explicit and visible. In the debate over immigration, President Trump portrayed Mexican and Central American immigrants as drug dealers and as carriers of disease. He created a narrative that provided a rationale for mass deportation, the separation of immigrant children from their parents, and the warehousing of orphaned children. The underlying logic of this false narrative is that “unworthy” people should be punished and excluded. In the video that accompanies this article, faith leader Umar Hakim-Dey observes that these narratives are typically driven by fear.

At the local level, city leaders will create narratives to justify their subsidies of private development. They’ll claim that downtown renewal is the key to prosperity in the region and will invest millions of public dollars in private sports stadiums, market-rate housing and other developments targeted to affluent communities. These investments typically enrich a small number of elites and exacerbate income inequality and racial wealth gaps in a region, driving up rents and increasing homelessness. The private developers receiving the subsidies are often major donors in local politics. Policy debates typically hinge on competing stories tied to (positive and negative) values and beliefs which vie to take hold in the public imagination and carry the issue.

In faith-based organizing, we seek to create moral narratives, rooted in core values from our various faith traditions, that challenge the status quo and that lift up the dignity and worthiness of all people. Our narratives promote inclusion, rather than exclusion, and equity, rather than inequity. In the video, Rabbi Jocee Hudson talks about the divine

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spark that is in each person, and how this divine spark ties us together. She believes that it is critical for faith leaders to identify and promote narratives that cause our divine lights to shine brighter.

As leaders who draw from moral traditions, clergy have a unique role to play in developing and bringing forth counter narratives. When faith leaders speak at a City Council meeting or legislative hearing, they can call attention to the moral nature of an issue in a way that few others can. Clergy can bring forward a strong critique of racist or xenophobic narratives and reveal how these narratives seek to divide us, by dehumanizing and “othering” some members of our community.

In developing moral narratives, clergy are guided by the particular scriptures and theologies of their traditions. They also must respond to the social and political contexts in which they find themselves. In the video, Rev. Brendan Busse, S.J., shares how he seeks to develop narratives through authentically listening to people who are being directly impacted by policies and systems. In the closing of the video, Rev. Dr. Andre Bennett echoes this sentiment when he stresses the need to have those closest to the pain play a leadership role in organizing, including in the development of narratives that frame the effort.

Faith in Action describes this clergy role as serving as a “prophet of the resistance.” We have a long and rich tradition of such prophetic speech, going back centuries. Unfortunately, some clergy choose to use their role to justify the dominant narrative, and as such, can find themselves complicit in spreading exclusion and inequality. Politicians love it when a clergy leader stands by their side and brings moral authority to their narrative, and to their policy decisions. When clergy play this role and serve to provide moral “cover” for immoral policy actions, these clergy are essentially abandoning their prophetic responsibility and instead are serving as “chaplains to the Empire.”

To learn more about these dynamics of prophetic resistance versus service to the Empire, please visit: <https://faithinaction.org/podcast>