



The Rev. William Barber, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, addresses a crowd outside St. John's Episcopal Church, Sunday, June 14, 2020, in Washington, D.C. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)

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For nearly four years, President Trump has inspired a cadre of liberal-leaning religious activists to organize, mobilize, protest and pray in opposition to his policies

regarding refugees and asylum-seekers, Muslims, white supremacy and health care.

As they helped plan the annual Women's March, flooded airports in defiance of the travel ban and stared down demonstrators in Charlottesville, figures such as the Rev. William Barber II, Muslim activist Linda Sarsour and Sister Simone Campbell became regular commentators on cable television and Op-Ed pages, bringing what some describe as the religious left to its highest point in decades.

While gearing up for the inauguration of Joe Biden, whose vice president will be a Black woman and who has already promised to expand the number of refugees next year [by a factor of 10](#), these activists are wrestling with how to keep their momentum.

"Instead of having to be constantly reactive to whatever new horrible thing the president does, we'll be able to start looking forward and building a society where people can thrive no matter what we look like or where we come from," said Logan Smith, a spokesperson for the Jewish advocacy group Bend the Arc: Jewish Action.

Indeed, several religious activists told Religion News Service that while they welcome the Biden-Harris administration and laud plans to roll back many of Trump's policies, liberal leadership doesn't dilute the potential for further advocacy. They vow to keep up pressure on the new administration with the lessons they've learned in the Trump era, hoping to push the country even further left than under the last Democratic president.

"I think that our approach to organizing changes: It goes from defensive to offensive," said Sarsour, a Muslim American activist who co-chaired the original 2017 Women's March.

The Rev. William Barber II, a co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, explained that while he [endorsed](#) Biden personally, the cause for activism begins anew after the election.

"We have an election, and then after the election we deal with policy," Barber said, noting that Martin Luther King, Jr. demonstrated while John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, both Democratic presidents sympathetic to the civil rights cause, were in office.

Barber said he is especially interested in continuing his work at the intersection of poverty and healthcare. It's a subject he knows well: Barber was [among the faith leaders](#) who led protests on Capitol Hill to halt the Republican-led attempt to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act in 2017, an effort he referred to at the time as a "sin."

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to ravage the U.S., Barber said concerns about healthcare access have only increased. "We had 87 million people uninsured or underinsured, and now with COVID we might have another 27 million on top of that. So how can we not push?"



Linda Sarsour with Women's March calls out to other activists opposed to President Donald Trump's embattled Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, in front of the Supreme Court on Capitol Hill in Washington, Monday, Sept. 24, 2018. (AP/Carolyn Kaster)

Unlike Barber, who delivered speeches at national Democratic Party events in 2016 and 2019, Sarsour has often kept her distance from the Democratic establishment.

Like many Muslim Americans, she backed Senator Bernie Sanders in the primaries in both of those electoral cycles.

Party leaders have sometimes responded in kind: When Sarsour, a child of Palestinian immigrants, appeared at a Muslim delegates session of this year's Democratic National Convention, the Biden campaign [issued a statement distancing](#) themselves from her, citing her criticism of the Israeli government (the campaign reportedly later [apologized](#) for the statement in a call with Muslim leaders).

Organizing Muslim Americans ahead of the recent presidential election, Sarsour said, was a tough sell because of lingering frustration some Muslims harbor toward the last Democratic White House.

"I don't think that they're very enthusiastic," said Sarsour. "I don't think the Muslim American community truly believes some transformative change is going to happen under a Biden administration in relation to issues of national security and issues that really impact Muslim Americans specifically, or Muslims in general — meaning immigrants as well."

Immigration is one issue on which the liberal faith activists believe they have the most common ground with the new administration. Last week, Biden [announced](#) he would raise the number of refugees the U.S. would admit to the country to 125,000 from a low ebb under Trump of 15,000.

Sister Simone Campbell, head of the Catholic social justice lobby Network, said faith-based groups such as the Interfaith Immigration Coalition and Justice for Immigrants, a campaign of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, have ample grassroots resources that make them "well-poised" to have an impact.

She said Network plans to pressure the Biden administration — whose campaign she informally advised — to roll back the "[public charge](#)" rule restricting poorer immigrants from attaining Lawful Permanent Resident status and efforts to [hobble](#) DACA.

A veteran of Capitol Hill legislative fights, Campbell added that Republican senators such as Marco Rubio, Lindsey Graham, John Cornyn, and Susan Collins have all expressed interest in immigration.

"If we can get the shared concern, the shared interests, then I think that one should be doable," said Campbell, who plans to step down as head of Network in spring of next year.

Sarsour said that Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, seen as more progressive than Biden in general, could be an ally in the immigration push. "One thing Harris has been committed to and is actually good on is immigration," said Sarsour.

But Sarsour added that her colleagues from the religious left won't be satisfied merely to undo what Campbell called "the horrible regulations" of the Trump era.

"A lot of people were applauding this potential new administration for saying 'We are going to repeal the Muslim ban on day one,'" said Sarsour, "but that was because of the organizing that communities and organizers and advocates have done, and also it only takes us back four years."



Vice President Joe Biden walks with Sister Simone Campbell, right, before the kickoff of the Nuns on the Bus tour, Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2014, at the Statehouse in Des Moines, Iowa. (AP/Charlie Neibergall)

"Raising the cap on refugees only takes us back four years. The reinstatement of temporary protective status only takes us back to four years. The reinstatement of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals only takes us back four years. So ... how do you push a Biden administration to be transformative, not just to take me back to where I was four years ago?"

They are starting with some advantages. For one, Biden is a devout Catholic who already seems ready to contrast Trump's transactional relationship with conservative Christians with his own faith's well-established social justice tradition. To wit, Biden cemented his pledge to raise the refugee limit at a virtual event celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Catholic Jesuit Refugee Service.

After four years of protesting Trump, faith-based organizers can also draw upon a deep well of resources. With every major policy change the president instituted, they saw a groundswell of volunteers and donations.

"Four years ago, we were a much smaller organization than we are today," Smith said of Bend the Arc. "We had maybe six chapters ... now we're up to about 30."

They have learned to coordinate their activism and developed close working relationships and united local and national coalitions. "Faith communities are not noted for our hyper-organization, but I think we're on a good track right now," said Campbell. "We're going to be a group to be reckoned with."

Already, the faith groups' work is dovetailing with the administration's. Sarsour plans to spend most of December in Georgia mobilizing Muslim voters before they cast their ballots in the state's two run-offs for its U.S. Senate seats.

If Democrats win both, they will hold half of the Senate, giving Harris the tie-breaking vote on immigration reform and the other proposals the Biden team has them dreaming of.

Meanwhile Barber, who actively rejects the term "religious left," hopes the faith-rooted activism of himself and others will dilute the role religion — and especially what he described as nationalistic forms of Christianity — has played in exacerbating partisan divides.

"The problem with these categories of left and right — particularly for Christians — is we've got a problem and that is this leader called Jesus," he said.

"How do you claim to believe in Jesus and don't care about health care, when Jesus healed everybody he came into contact with and never charged a leper or a sick person a co-pay?"

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