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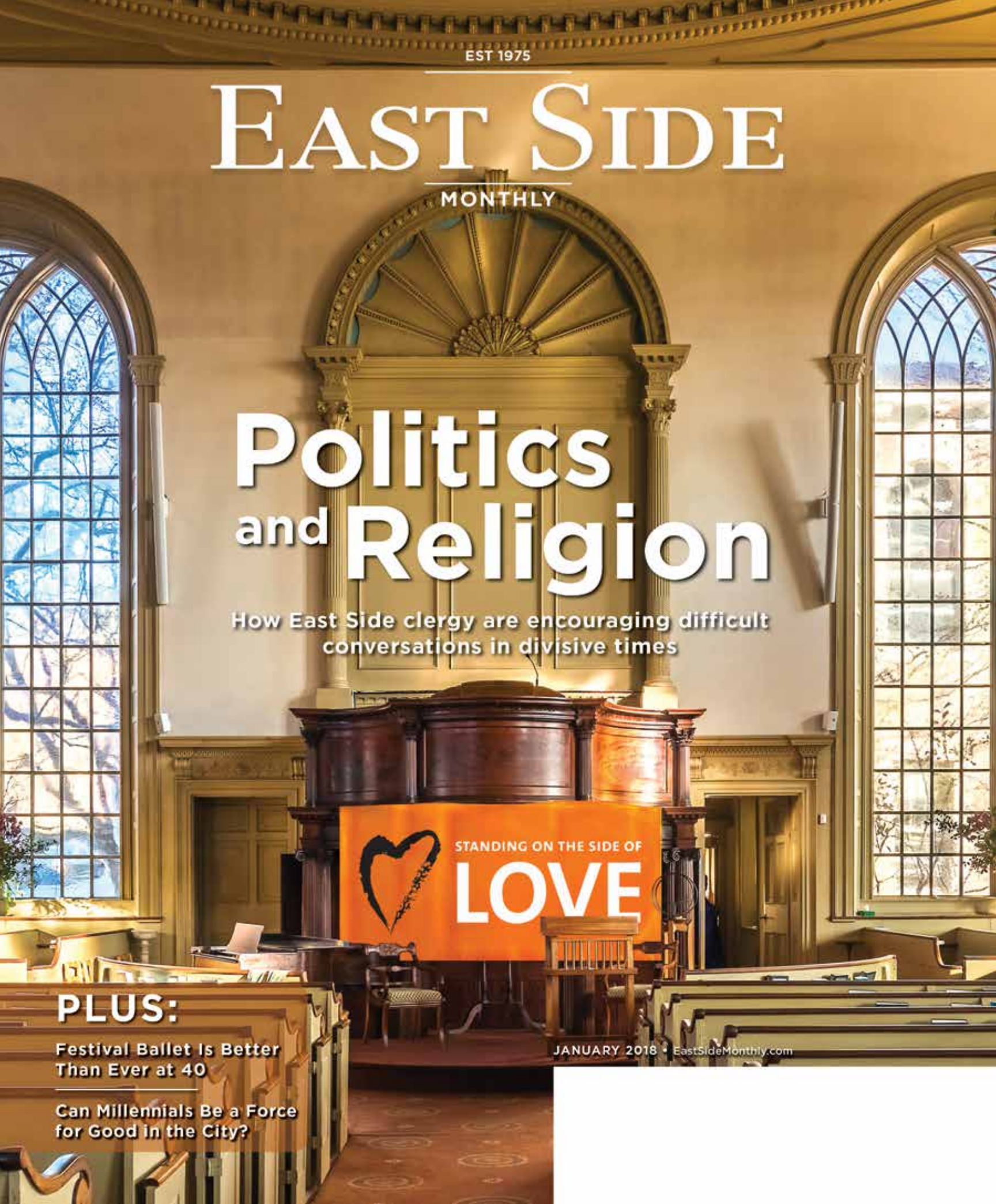
Politics and Religion

How East Side clergy are encouraging difficult conversations in divisive times



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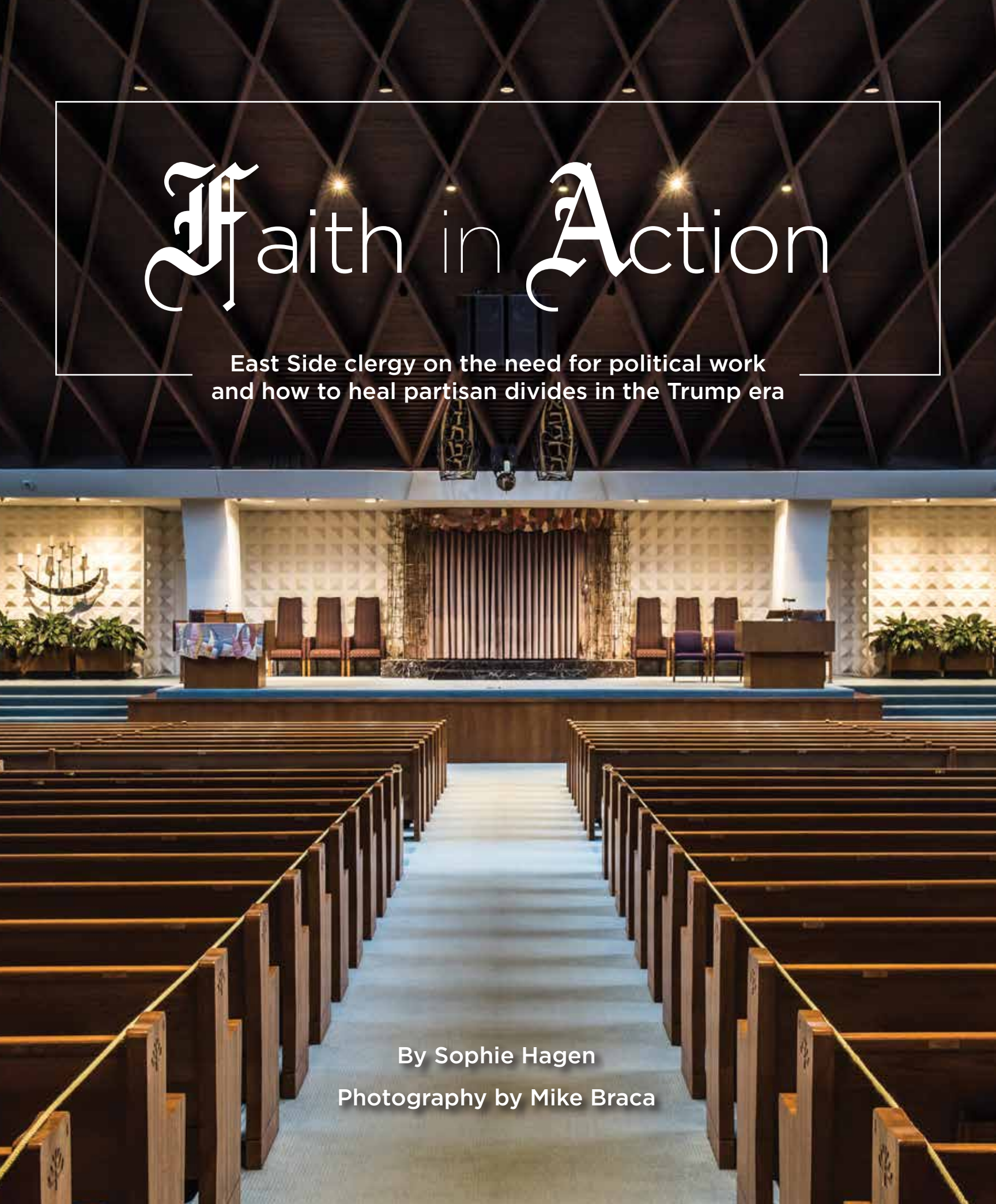

Faith in Action

East Side clergy on the need for political work and how to heal partisan divides in the Trump era

By Sophie Hagen

Photography by Mike Braca

Along with our daily dose of panic-inducing headlines, there's been a steady drumbeat of reminders that the country is descending ever deeper into stone-cold partisanship. Wading through paragraph after paragraph on why we won't make friends across the aisle, it's still hard to assuage the fear in all camps that the other side's views are literally life-threatening, likely to produce death, sorrow and violence on a massive scale.

Through all the noise, there are fiercely committed clergy on the East Side who have taken up the political mantle themselves – those who have protested xenophobia, advocated for marriage equality, opposed war. These are people who are all about love, trust and making friends across the aisle. How do they reconcile their political beliefs with the need to love each and every one of their congregants? What do they have to say to faith leaders who follow their sacred texts to completely different political endpoints? How do you live the spirit of brotherly love when it feels like your brother wants to kill you?

We asked them.

Leaders of Temple Beth-El (left), First Baptist (right), First Unitarian and Congregation Beth Sholom are engaging their communities in political discussion

Rabbi Sarah Mack believes that her political activism goes hand in hand with her role in the community

Rabbi Sarah Mack's political work is part of a spiritual practice, she says. "It is very much a part of what being Jewish means to me, and that means stepping up to speak up and stand up for the vulnerable. That's something that comes through in Jewish text and tradition and law."

A rabbi at Temple Beth-El, she spoke out against the Muslim ban and works with the Religious Coalition for a Violence-Free Rhode Island and the RI Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty, as well as the Sisters of Salaam Shalom, a discussion group for Jewish and Muslim women.

"I certainly know that my faith compels me into that sphere," says Reverend Jamie Washam, who joined First Baptist Church as pastor in 2015 (she arranges the often irreverent messages on the sign outside the church, such as "Spell-check is my worst enema" and "Tweet others as you would like to be tweeted"). Her political work is informed by the discrepancy she observes between Jesus's teachings and actions and the world as it is. In addition to testifying in support of marijuana legalization, advocating for marriage equality and speaking out against the Muslim ban, Reverend Washam was recently active in supporting a bill, signed into law by Governor Raimondo in October, requiring those who plead guilty to or are convicted of domestic violence to surrender their guns within 24 hours.

"I felt fine advocating for that because this is an issue of justice, protection for people in vulnerable positions," Reverend Washam says. "People in my church will come tell me when they're victims of domestic abuse – clergy know firsthand what that looks like. My faith compels me to not keep my mouth shut about these things."

"If faith is to be meaningful in the world, it has to have real world applications," says Reverend Liz Maclay, who started at First Unitarian Church of Providence in August and was officially called in October. "So in the one sense the work is political; in the other sense the work is faithful." She was politically activated at her former church in Silver Spring, Maryland, first by the work of diversifying

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>
> -Rabbi Barry Dolinger

the congregation to better reflect the "multicultural, multiracial community" that surrounded it, and then by the fight for marriage equality. She has been active in support of the DREAM act and DACA, and in building connections with local Muslim communities. "I think Unitarian Universalists tend to believe that it's important to manifest our faith," she says.

These calls to political/faithful work can even lead to advocating for religion to take a step back. Rabbi Barry Dolinger of Congregation Beth Sholom, for instance, spoke out against the same-sex marriage ban specifically based on an argument for the separation of church and state. "That intrusion of religious ideology in preventing others gaining civil rights was something that I thought that people of faith had to speak up against," he says, even as other orthodox Jews opposed it.

These public political conversations can benefit from a faith-based perspective, but specifically when their input is distinct from the experts already testifying on an issue. "I can be most effective when it's value-added," Rabbi Mack says, "reminding those in power that they're created in the image of God."

"I think it's incumbent when folks speak out on political matters, that the message should be a spiritual one," Rabbi Dolinger echoes. "If I'm going to speak about bus prices in Rhode Island, or the ban on panhandling in Cranston, it has to be more than just a partisan aim. It can't be about Democrat versus Republican. It has to be about the dignity of people, not valuing them based on money."

What happens when they meet religious leaders whose spiritual beliefs have led them to opposite conclusions on political questions?

"I think that in a pluralistic world our faiths can bring us to different conclusions," Rabbi Mack says. The important thing, she says, is "how we treat each other in the conversation. Civility is paramount."

"I may not agree with everybody about what each of us holds sacred or stands behind," says Reverend Maclay. "But I certainly respect people who think it's not enough to profess something, you have to actually get behind it in meaningful ways."

An essential part of the work, according to several of these clergypeople, is committing to self-reflection in the face of conflict. "Part of the idea of Unitarian Universalism is that revelation is never finished; it's ongoing," says Reverend Maclay. "So you need to be leading an examined life all the time." While polarizing comments can provoke a "knee-jerk reaction of self-righteousness, offense," they also prompt reflection on her own assumptions: "*Oh, that's not a thing I'd thought about. What does that then do to what I thought I knew. Maybe nothing. Maybe something.*"

"The first step is to try to separate people from their opinions," Reverend Washam says. While inflammatory bumper stickers can provoke a "visceral reaction," "I know someone that I know that I love believes those things. If they can believe those things, and are complete human beings and are complicated, what else don't I know." And humility in the face of alien perspectives tends to be more effective, she says, "than trying to bludgeon someone with the Bible."

But there's a limit to the self-reflective process. "When I think that the perspectives that they're holding are actually doing real damage to real people," Reverend Washam says, "that emboldens me to just

Reverend Jamie Washam has been outspoken on progressive issues: "My faith compels me to not keep my mouth shut about these things"

call it out. When children who are brought here as immigrants are locked up in detention centers through no fault of their own… At that point, it *is* my obligation to name those things. My job isn't to make sure everyone likes me and likes what I have to say. It's to ask really hard questions." And, she says, "to hold people in positions of power accountable."

The First Baptist congregation, Reverend Washam says, was well aware of her political past and considered it a boon — a way of leading the congregation in new and exciting directions. "And I'm reminded of that when I'm feeling timid," Reverend Washam says. When she wonders, "*Should I hold this in or should I speak out?* I'm reminded that they didn't call me to hold it in."

The very act of making in-person contact is itself essential to these reckonings with opposing points of view. It's important, Rabbi Mack says, to "see the hurt and the pain and the whole picture of why someone is believing something. Online, it's easy to say things that are hurtful and terrible."

"Something remarkable happens in church," Reverend Washam says. "At Coffee Hour I see people who are very conservative and very progressive, people who live on either side of the poverty line, people who live in comfort and people born all over the world, and we choose to come together every week. Tasty baked goods after church really help go a long way to forming community."

Several of the interviewees pointed out that the Trump era, rather than creating a need for action, has merely intensified it. Although the need to do political work has always been present, it's "magnified in these times because there's more to do," says Rabbi Mack.

And while this certainly punctures the illusion that today's events are aberrations rather than standard U.S. practice, it means that techniques from our spiritual and political collaborators are already in place for addressing vicious times and deep divisions.

The Johnson Amendment in the U.S. tax code prevents nonprofits, including religious institutions, from endorsing political candidates. The Republican tax bill is likely to eliminate it, opening the floodgates to clergypeople advocating politically, and specifically, from the pulpit. The law's repeal is likely to alter, drastically, the flow of money into politics.

Reverend Liz Maclay sees the importance in her congregation "manifesting our faith" through political action

But perhaps there is a bright side in the turn of more and more clergy toward the political arena – not in the sense of backing candidates, but in viewing themselves as called, spiritually, to political work. "It's important for people of faith to be involved in politics," Rabbi Dolinger says. "Religion should seek to cultivate concern and activism about the society we live in." And religious contexts, at least diverse ones, may be one of the few places left where those who disagree politically can still connect to each other.