

13 Progressive Faith Leaders to Watch in 2013

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Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK and a Roman Catholic nun, addresses the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina on September 5, 2012.

By **Jack Jenkins**, **Eleni Towns**, and **Catherine Woodiwiss** | February 27, 2013

2012 was a pivotal year for the progressive faith movement. While political and theological conservatives suffered a **series of strategic defeats** at both the state and federal level, religious progressives across the country organized to **meet the challenges** of poverty, climate change, and voter disenfranchisement, among other issues.

In the midst of this political shift, innovative progressive faith leaders and activists from a variety of religious backgrounds rose to prominence in 2012. As we look at this year—where debates over gun-violence prevention, immigration, marriage equality, and climate change are heating up—the Center for American Progress’s Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative

has compiled a list of the 13 progressive faith leaders who we expect will take the lead on these and other issues in 2013.

1. Sister Simone Campbell—executive director of NETWORK, as well as a Roman Catholic nun, lawyer, and poet—made headlines in 2012 when she catapulted **NETWORK**, a Catholic social justice lobby, into the national spotlight. After Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) attempted to **tie his Catholic faith** to slashing social services in his House budget proposal, Campbell challenged his claim and took NETWORK’s message of economic justice on the road. She led the multistate **“Nuns on the Bus”** tour that decried Rep. Ryan’s “immoral” budget cuts and visited faith-based charities relying on government support to help the poor and vulnerable. Campbell reiterated this call for economic justice during an impassioned speech at the **Democratic National Convention**, inspiring a nationally televised audience and garnering a standing ovation from convention attendees. Campbell’s voice on economic justice and the critical protection of social services has inspired a chorus of support and is changing the national conversation on economic inequality. Be on the lookout for her trailblazing advocacy again this year.

2. Richard Cizik—president of the **New Evangelical Partnerships for Common Good** and former vice president for governmental affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals—made waves in 2012 for leading a groundbreaking effort to strengthen support among evangelicals for family planning. The partnership encouraged church leaders to address the issue within their congregations, issuing a document titled **“Call to Christian Common Ground on Family Planning, and Maternal, and Children’s Health.”** The document affirmed the use of contraceptives as a “responsible and morally acceptable” means to ensure the health of a woman and her children; addressed the financial struggles women face in accessing health insurance and reproductive health services; and highlighted the **positive impact** of providing federal funding for health clinics that offer essential services to women and their children. Given the **fierce opposition of many conservatives** to providing access to contraceptive coverage in employee insurance plans under the Affordable Care Act, Cizik’s efforts to showcase evangelical leaders standing up for the morality of contraception will be crucial to reproductive-justice advocates in 2013. Keep an eye out for Cizik’s leadership as this debate continues.

3. Rev. Delman Coates—pastor of the 8,000-member **Mount Ennon Baptist Church** in Clinton, Maryland—is a bold leader in a growing movement of faithful African Americans who support marriage equality. In 2012 Coates joined African American faith leaders such as the Rev. Al Sharpton in supporting an effort to legalize same-sex marriage in Maryland. Coates spoke at press conferences and appeared in **television ads** expressing his support for marriage equality, **saying**, “I would not want someone denying my rights based upon their

religious views, therefore I should not deny others based upon mine.” As the same-sex marriage debate continues to gain national attention, Coates is poised to keep breaking down stereotypes and offer a prophetic voice among those advocating for marriage equality.

4. Rabbi Laurie Coskey—a rabbi and executive director of **Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice of San Diego County** and co-chair of **Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice—California**—is a champion of faith-based advocacy for labor rights. Under her leadership, the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice has advocated on behalf of working families in San Diego County by launching campaigns that work with grassroots activists and policymakers to address the issues of living wage policies, immigration, and affordable housing. Coskey has spent years trying to shed light on the struggles of **San Diego mall janitors**, and in 2012 she joined forces with the Employee Rights Center and **spoke in support** of a group of San Diego hotel workers claiming \$250,000 in wage and hour theft from their employer. Coskey, who also serves on the national board of **Interfaith Worker Justice**, offers a faithful witness on behalf of workers and working families in California and looks to remain a powerful agent for change in 2013.

5. Very Rev. Gary R. Hall—an Episcopal priest and dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C.—is becoming a leader of faith-led support for gun-violence prevention. In the wake of the mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, Hall **declared** in a sermon that, “The gun lobby is no match for the cross lobby” and has joined with other faith leaders to keep attention on the issue and to urge lawmakers to pass sensible, effective legislation. As an advocate for social justice, Hall is taking up other challenging issues as well: He recently **championed** the National Cathedral’s decision to **begin performing same-sex marriages** and instituted the use of the Episcopal Church’s new rite for same-sex blessings at National Cathedral services. As the debates over gun-violence prevention and marriage equality continue, expect Hall to keep lifting his voice in support of the gay and transgender equality, gun-violence prevention, and other pressing issues.

6. Valarie Kaur—a filmmaker, civil rights advocate, and organizer—is a standout figure in the world of interfaith organizing and activism. In addition to helping lead campaigns for racial dignity, religious pluralism, immigrant rights, prison reform, and gay and transgender and gender equality, Kaur was recently put in charge of **Groundswell**, a nonprofit initiative of Auburn Seminary that uses online tools to help people of faith mobilize for social action. As founding director of the initiative, which is dynamically strengthening faith-based organizing in the 21st century, Kaur is making headway toward achieving a goal long sought by faith-based activists: making interfaith open-source organizing efficient and accessible to the masses. A third-generation Sikh American, Kaur also advocated for the victims of last August’s shooting in a **Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin**, visiting the town several times

in the aftermath of the tragedy, and playing a leading role in the relief efforts. As Groundswell grows and as Sikh Americans join with others to mobilize to expand federal hate-crime classifications, look for Kaur and her innovative work to continue to be at the forefront of progressive change.

7. Rev. Debbi Lee—a United Church of Christ minister and director of the **Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights**—works at the intersection of faith and social justice on issues of race, gender, economics, antimilitarism, and immigration. As one of the board members for the Network on Religion and Justice for Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender People, Lee produced the 2009 film **“In God’s House: Asian American Lesbian and Gay Families in the Church.”** Her other organization, Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights, has worked on behalf of immigrant populations in northern California for more than 20 years. More recently, Lee mustered her talents as a **speaker** and organizer to work with the **Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice—California** to help amplify immigrant voices. As debates over marriage equality and immigration reform heat up in 2013, look for Lee to continue to organize for gay and transgender equality and for a system that works on behalf of immigrant families.

8. Ben Lowe—national organizer and spokesperson for **Young Evangelicals for Climate Action**—is at the forefront of the faithful response to environmental issues. In 2012 Lowe helped launch the Young Evangelicals for Climate Action in partnership with the Evangelical Environmental Network. The Young Evangelicals for Climate Action follows a decades-long tradition of evangelical support for **“creation care”** but steps up its message by connecting and mobilizing young evangelicals to call on church leaders and policymakers to take action on climate change. Under Lowe’s leadership, Young Evangelicals for Climate Action **joined a range of faith-based climate organizations** at a White House and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency briefing around Earth Day and held headline-making prayer rallies at the campaign headquarters of the presidential candidates, as well as at the presidential debates. What’s more, in a year where even devastating natural disasters failed to register climate as a priority in election season debates, Lowe publicly declared that **climate change is an election issue** for a growing number of young evangelicals. Energized from 2012, Lowe’s voice and the Young Evangelicals for Climate Action’s model of faith-based coalition building are on track to expand the urgency of addressing climate change this year.

9. Pastor Michael McBride—lead organizer for **PICO National Network (People Improving Communities through Organizing) Lifelines to Healing Campaign**—is a leading voice among faith-based efforts to address the causes of urban violence and crime and the mass incarceration of people of color across the United States. An eloquent orator, McBride offered impassioned pastoral reflections on the impact of gun violence and the dangers

facing urban communities during **an impromptu gathering** in front of the White House immediately following the Newtown tragedy. Earlier this year, McBride **joined religious leaders** at Vice President Joe Biden's Gun Violence Prevention Task Force to discuss the faith community's role in curbing violence. McBride, who is also a pastor of a church in Oakland, California, has witnessed the impact of gun violence on children, families, and communities, and believes faith leaders have an important role to play in the national debate surrounding gun-violence prevention.

10. Rev. Cameron Partridge—one of the **first transgender chaplains** at a major university (Boston University) and one of **seven openly transgender priests in the Episcopal Church**—is a rising leader in transgender advocacy, both inside and outside his religious tradition. In 2012 Partridge was part of **TransEpiscopal**, an organization that collaborated with other advocacy groups to urge the Episcopal Church to amend its canons and **formally include transgender people** as candidates for all forms of ministry. Partridge has also worked with the **Interfaith Committee for Transgender Equality** to push for the passage of Massachusetts's 2011 **Transgender Equal Rights Bill** that bars discrimination against transgendered people in employment, housing, education, and lending, and enables prosecutors to bring hate-crime charges in attacks that target someone for being transgender. Recently profiled by **Religionandpolitics.org** and the **Huffington Post** for his work, Partridge, who also lectures at the Harvard Divinity School, is quickly becoming one of the leaders of faith-based transgender advocacy and is an example of increasing diversity among university chaplains.

11. Rev. Gabriel Salguero—president of the **National Latino Evangelical Coalition**—is a powerful voice on issues that affect Latino communities in the United States. Focusing on poverty, immigration, and education, Salguero's leadership of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition in 2012 offered an important voice for growing diversity and changing demographics in our country. In addition to his work with the **Circle of Protection**—an ecumenical consortium of faith groups that seek to preserve social programs that help the poor—and his strong calls for immigration reform, Salguero, through his organization, founded **Nuestro Futuro**, a Latino youth-targeted voter-mobilization campaign in Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Arizona, New York, and New Jersey in 2012. Salguero also delivered an invocation at January's **inaugural prayer service** at the National Cathedral, echoing his moving prayer at the Democratic National Convention last fall. As energy around immigration reform grows and as changing demographics continue to shape the electorate, Salguero will be a leader to watch in 2013.

12. Remziya Suleyman—director of public policy at the **American Center for Outreach**, a Tennessee-based nonpartisan organization that was established to inform and empower

Muslims—has worked to strengthen civic engagement on the local, state, and federal level. Suleyman seeks to build stronger connections between the government and the Muslim community, while also supporting advocacy for issues such as immigration reform and religious freedom. She has pushed back on anti-Sharia state laws, as well as offered support to Muslim communities where the construction of mosques has faced opposition. In 2012 Suleyman’s work at the American Center for Outreach played an important role in **getting out the vote** among the estimated 63,000 Muslims living in Tennessee. In partnership with other faith-based organizations, Suleyman is sure to continue her advocacy efforts on behalf of Muslim Americans, as well as push for sensible and humane immigration reform legislation in 2013 and beyond.

13. The faith-based organizer. Often the unsung heroes of the progressive faith movement, faith-based organizers are rapidly expanding their ability to use community-organizing tactics to influence policy debates. Established community-organizing groups such as People Improving Communities through Organizing, Industrial Areas Foundation, and other organizations used highly trained faith-based organizers to help win a slew of state-level progressive victories in 2012—**proving once again** the value of congregation-based organizing. Similarly, smaller grassroots efforts led by concerned church members helped defeat **voter disenfranchisement efforts** in Florida this past year, and **faith activists** also played a key role in defeating a conservative-backed effort to set a constitutional limit on revenue collection and spending in Florida. We can expect on-the-ground organizing efforts to exert even more influence in 2013, as faith-based campaigns for progressive policies become increasingly sophisticated and data driven. Indeed, faith-based organizers have already made their voices heard this year on **gun-violence prevention** and **immigration reform**. With elevated national debates on climate change and marriage equality just around the corner, it’s a safe bet that you will be hearing more about progressive faith-based organizers in the coming year.

These 13 progressive faith leaders were selected by the Center for American Progress’s Faith and Progressive Policy Initiative because they are dynamic examples of America’s growing progressive faith movement. To be sure, their work—combined with the tireless efforts of countless other faith leaders—has already positively changed the social and religious landscape of our nation. Look for the efforts of these faith leaders and others to continue to build a stronger, healthier, safer, smarter, and more inclusive America in 2013.

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