News



From top row, left to right: Cynthia Hale, pastor of the Ray of Hope Christian Church in Georgia; the Rev. Jim Wallis; Nichole Flores, professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia; actor Gaius Charles; and Sen. Chris Coons D-Del., participate Sept. 30 in a virtual event (NCR screenshot)



by Christopher White

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One night after President Donald Trump refused to denounce white supremacists in the first presidential debate, former Vice President Joe Biden's faith outreach team put the fight against racism in the spotlight, arguing that for people of faith, it should be the defining faith issue of the campaign.

Fighting racism is "at the core of our faith," and the issue will "change the narrative in this election," "said the Rev. Jim Wallis, a prominent Christian social justice leader who moderated the Sept. 30 virtual event.

Wallis said that after decades of refusing to endorse presidential candidates, he agreed to endorse Biden because racism is a "seminal issue" at stake in the campaign for people of faith.

"Anybody who says they are Christian, Jewish or Muslim better have an answer for why it's not their essential issue," he said.



From top left to right: Cynthia Hale, Jim Wallis, Nichole Flores and Gaius Charles participate in a Sept. 30 virtual event. (NCR screenshot)

Meditating on Scripture, Wallis said the book of Genesis makes it clear that humans are made in the image and likeness of God with "no exceptions."

"What's at stake," in this election, he argued, "is whether we are going to throw away the image of God. Every time a voter is suppressed because of the color of their skin, that's an assault on *Imago Dei.*"

Wallis also warned that if Christians don't step up and call out racism, black churches will refuse to work with white churches in the future, and a lot of young people will walk away from the faith because of the hypocrisy they witness.

"This is more than politics," Wallis said, adding that the fight against racism is a "spiritual question, not just a partisan one."

Nichole Flores, a professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia who is Catholic, said that "to have a president, someone who is sitting in the Oval Office right now who cannot condemn white supremacy," is a threat to the human dignity of everyone.

Flores had what she described as a conversion experience after the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia — where white supremacists and neo-Nazis gathered on her university campus.

Noting that while she has spent her entire adult life studying theology, the movement that has emerged in response to those events and the individuals leading the cause have become a "profound theological authority" that has been "life changing" for her.

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Gaius Charles, an actor best known for his role on the television show "Friday Night Lights," said he is struggling with the "total radio silence over this issue of racism" among his fellow Christian believers who are white.

He cited his recent essay in Christianity Today in which he reflected on growing up in a Methodist church and being heavily influenced by white evangelicals.

"How can evangelical Christians ever support a leader whose words, conduct and behavior so starkly reveal his racist character and disposition?" he asked in regards to Trump in the essay.

Cynthia Hale, pastor of the Ray of Hope Christian Church in Georgia, said that "the kingdom of God is all about people being uniquely who they are and living in community."

She said that watching the president refusing to unequivocally condemn white nationalists on Tuesday was initially despairing, yet she encouraged attendees not to lose hope.

"Hope is born anew when we have opportunities like this," she said, adding that "this crisis that we are going through in America has made some of my white friends stand up like they have never stood up before."



Cynthia Hale (top left), Jim Wallis, Nichole Flores, Gaius Charles, Sen. Chris Coons and Josh Dickson, the national faith engagement director for the Biden campaign, participating in the Sept. 30 virtual event (NCR screenshot)

Sen. Chris Coons of Delaware, who was in Cleveland, Ohio, for the Sept. 29 debate, said he was stunned at the president's behavior.

"The things that he said and declined to say," said the senator, "showed me someone who is just living out some of the worst instincts of our history, of our nation. He speaks loudly to some of the most negative aspects of our country's history."

Coons said that before the debate, he joined Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and U.S. Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester of Delaware at the foot of the debate stage for five minutes of prayer. Among the things they prayed was that the event would deliver clarity, which he believes was painfully delivered.

"Joe Biden knows that this nation's founding sin is the sin of racism and the embrace of white supremacy, the consequences of slavery and the incredibly long and deep shadow that that casts," said Coons, adding that this has troubled Biden since his first days in public office.

Josh Dickson, the national faith engagement director for the Biden campaign, concluded the event with a plea to people of faith to take any time off from work they could in the coming weeks to volunteer either in person or remotely, to help get out the vote among people of faith.

"What legacy will we leave?" Dickson asked. "How will we live up to the calling of this moment to serve?"

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This story appears in the **Election 2020** feature series. View the full series.