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Rising polarity is "totally counterproductive to the common good, to the call to synodality, to bridge-building," Catholic Charities USA President, Kerry Alys Robinson, told OSV News. "And it's beneath us, frankly, as Americans and as people of faith." (OSV News/Catholic Charities USA)

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Four major nonprofits have launched a joint effort to counteract rising polarization and isolation in the U.S., including Catholic Charities USA, the organization dedicated to carrying out the domestic humanitarian work of the Catholic Church in the United States.

For the Team Up Project, a new initiative to foster service and human connection, Catholic Charities partnered with Habitat for Humanity International, Interfaith America and YMCA of the USA.

"Our mission is to empower people to build connections and work together across differences with others in their communities for the common good," Kerry Alys Robinson, Catholic Charities USA president and CEO, told OSV News in an interview.

"We firmly believe that we have so much more in common as members of the human family and as Americans than we have differences," she said. "We all face similar challenges, we're all susceptible to suffering and joy. We have hopes, dreams, regrets. We all want a healthy, better life for our children and grandchildren. We understand this better when we actually venture outside of our own myopic bubbles, and genuinely encounter those from different communities and backgrounds."

Robinson called the work "synodal" and said it puts "the invitation from Pope Francis to live synodally into concrete practice."

The Team Up Project seeks to highlight and foster efforts to build bridges in community chapters of the partner organizations, according to its website.

"Team Up will showcase bridgebuilding in action, share stories about the positive impact of human connection and elevate ongoing organizational work," states the initiative's website, teamupproject.org. It says Team Up will provide "resources, toolkits, best practices, and training to educate those in communities across the United States about the importance of bridgebuilding and prepare them to connect to local efforts."

Currently, according to the website, the Team Up Project is working with leaders in 32 communities across the country — from Nashville, Tennessee, to San Diego — and has awarded grants to support local pilot projects "focused on creating bonds, fostering understanding and collaborating to address a community need among people with different socioeconomic, ethnic, religious, racial and political backgrounds and affiliations."

Robinson cited as an example a joint project by Catholic Charities in Austin, Texas, and the city's local YMCA, where members came together "to support unhoused community members, and raise awareness through a series of storytelling and dialogues about experiencing homelessness."

"One of the geniuses about the Team Up Project is, although it is these four national organizations coming together to co-create this effort, it's entirely aimed at the local level," Robinson said.

Asked how rising polarization impacts the church's ability to serve the vulnerable, Robinson said, "Especially in an election year, like the one we are currently in, it seems to me that almost anything in life can be used as a political cudgel."

"That is totally counterproductive to the common good, to the call to synodality, to bridge-building," she said. "Frankly, it's also contrary to living out the Gospel. So it distracts us from coming together and solving the challenges before us. It also gets taken to an extreme, calls for violence and violence against different people trying to live out the Gospel or trying to be part of the solution. And it's beneath us, frankly, as Americans and as people of faith."

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The groups involved have themselves partnered with “Belonging Begins With Us,” an Ad Council and American Immigration Council campaign launching a new public service announcement March 5 calling for "a more welcoming nation where everyone can belong."

Jonathan Reckford, CEO of Habitat for Humanity International, said in a statement that bridge-building "is needed more than ever in our society. When we come together and serve, we focus on our shared values instead of our differences, making us stronger and more cohesive."

"This project highlights the value and positive impact of meaningful connections made across differences, particularly in service to others," Reckford said. "We hope to see many more organizations, civic leaders, and others use this platform to inspire shared action for the common good."

Bridge-building activities "at the heart of the Team Up Project foster understanding and a sense of belonging at a time when many people feel disconnected from those around them," said Suzanne McCormick, YMCA of the USA's president and CEO.

"Communities are stronger when neighbors are connected to each other, and Team Up aims to help people build relationships, explore and appreciate differences, and work together toward a better future. We see this as a path to a more united country," she added in a statement.

Eboo Patel, founder and president of Interfaith America, said the Team Up partners are "striving to build a 'potluck nation' where all Americans bring the best of their identities to the table for a shared feast." His organization's stated mission is to make interfaith cooperation "a social norm."

"Of course we will disagree on some things, but that should not prevent us from working together on other things," Patel said in a statement. "Team Up encourages respecting people's diverse identities, building relationships between different communities, and cooperating on concrete projects with common aims."