Opinion
Guest Voices



More than 1,700 people gather at a housing justice rally hosted by the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury in 2024. Organizing groups included the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. (Courtesy of GBIO/Leah Cirker-Stark)



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Before he was an ordained minister, Steven Watson worked as a teacher and principal in the Massachusetts public school system. "The students taught me that no one cares about how perfect our beliefs are," Watson, now the senior pastor at Reservoir Church in Cambridge, tells National Catholic Reporter. "Everything really hangs on how perfect our love is."

To Watson, that love is reflected in church programs that include things like criminal justice reform and public housing improvement. It will also be reflected this Monday as he joins other clergy and interfaith groups from around the Boston area to participate in a Labor Day March to "bear witness publicly to shared sacred values that our Federal executive branch is violating, specifically around lack of due process of law that protects the dignity and liberty of all residents of the United States." The march, organized by the group Prayers for Liberty, will culminate with an interfaith prayer service.

Watson is part of a broader tradition of New England faith activism that goes back to 19th-century abolitionists.

"Bringing faith values to your activism adds something beyond just your commitment to the issues," says Lew Finfer, who has spent the last five decades working with a wide range of individuals and organizations in the Boston area, including Massachusetts Communities Action Network and, more recently, Mass Action for Justice, which he founded in 2023.

And yet faith-based activism has gotten complicated in recent years, as President Donald Trump's supporters loudly and proudly blend politics and religion in ways that don't always uphold basic Christian principles.

This confusion has put community leaders like Finfer and Watson in a difficult position. While one faction of Americans uphold what critics call a hurtful, hypocritical version of Christianity, another assumes all devout Christians — Catholic and Protestant — to be right-wingers.

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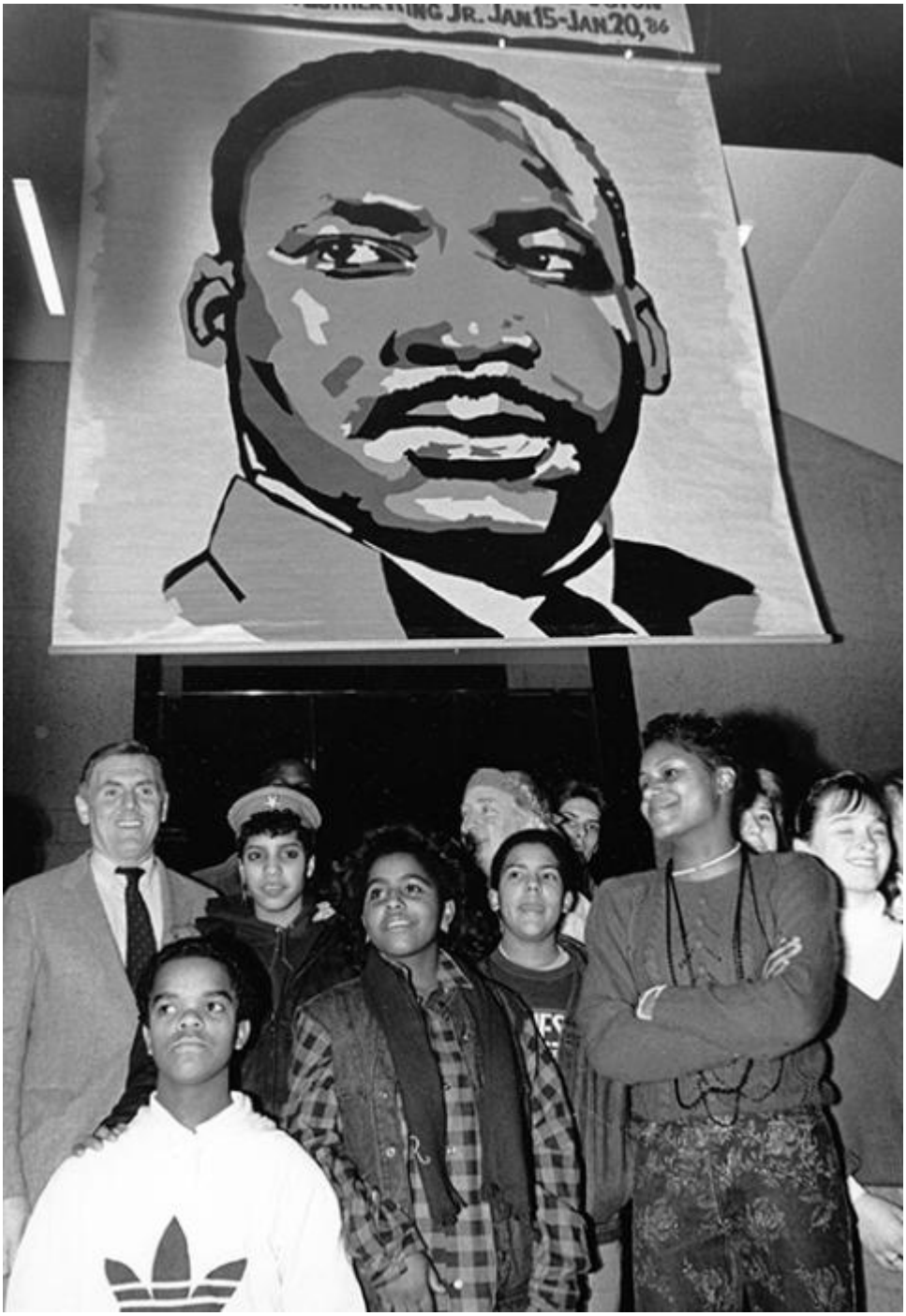
"Some people who are more secular might assume certain things when you start talking about Jesus and religion. They might be suspicious initially," said Finfer. "It's another challenge we have to face. It just shows how important it is to actually listen to each other."

These new challenges in and around Boston reflect national tensions among U.S. Democrats. Some argue that, along with resisting Trump's drastic cuts to social programs, progressive politicians also need to build bridges with religious voters.

"The increasingly leftward lurch of the Democratic Party as a whole ... has alienated millions of people of faith," power broker Jim Kennedy recently wrote in The Hill. A former aide to Bill and Hillary Clinton, Kennedy believes this religious disconnection "raises serious questions about the ability of our party to regain the White House in 2028. How do you 'awaken' an entire party's apparatus to embrace religion?"

Don Gillis studies 50 years of the good, bad and ugly politics in and around Boston — and, by extension, America — in his book *The Battle for Boston: How Mayor Ray Flynn and Community Organizers Fought Racism and Downtown Power Brokers*. A onetime adviser to the Catholic former mayor, Gillis describes the impressive social justice coalition assembled by the working-class South Boston native.

Faith was central to Flynn's public service from 1984 to 1993, before he was tapped by President Clinton to serve as Vatican ambassador from 1993 to 1997. Under Flynn's tenure as mayor, Boston's City Hall featured images recognizing the works of St. Francis, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. "That's my politics right there," Gillis remembers him saying.



In 1986, Boston Mayor Raymond Flynn, left, poses for a photo with young people underneath a portrait of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (Wikimedia Commons/City of Boston Archives)

In the wake of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Boston had plenty of tension and violence involving race, class and religion, most prominently during the notorious years of bussing and desegregation. Nevertheless, Flynn managed to "implement an

economic justice and progressive social policy agenda as mayor," Gillis writes, adding that the city's current progressive leadership "can learn from the past and know that a more just and equitable 'city on a hill' is within reach."

As America's diversity is increasingly exploited to sow division, groups like Greater Boston Interfaith Organization identify common goals among Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and Jews. "Interfaith groups have a broader reach [and are] more representative of the population," said Finfer, a member of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization.

Gillis said, "We can see every day that faith communities are working together to help their members and their neighbors."

In 2024, more than 150 clergy members from across Massachusetts helped launch a Greater Boston Interfaith Organization housing justice campaign, demanding that "something must be done," in a letter sent to state lawmakers. The same year, more than 1,700 residents and clergy gathered for a rally on the same issue at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center in Roxbury.

Since then, according to local tenant leaders and the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, state lawmakers and Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey have set aside more than $2 billion to be used for public housing improvements over the next five years.

But such a focus is harder to maintain in 2025, local activists say, amid Trump's flurry of deep budget cuts, controversial crackdowns and executive orders.

Many Boston-based organizers are now forced to contend with a series of day-to-day crises. "More groups are working on immigrant rights now, just because of what's coming out of the Trump administration," says Finfer. "These deportation threats touch upon so many other areas: health care, housing. It's been such an attack on so many people."

The Labor Day march from Lexington to Boston is meant to draw attention to these pressing matters. It comes after a similar march back in late May, as well as interfaith "Prayers for Liberty" gatherings in August intended to raise awareness that "shared sacred values ... are being violated by the current United States presidential administration," according to organizers such as the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, the Massachusetts Council of Churches and Board of Rabbis.

In the face of these challenges, Flynn — who turned 86 this summer — still offers valued guidance, Gillis believes. "He's always said: Get involved, stay involved, whether it's through your neighborhood association, faith-based group, local sports league, your school. Utilize your power to shape the direction of your community."