News



Protesters fill the halls in the Louisiana Legislature in Baton Rouge during a Senate committee hearing Friday, May 8, 2026 on redistricting. (AP/Jack Brook)

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On the first Sunday (May 3) after the Supreme Court decided to hollow out the Voting Rights Act, the Rev. Richelle Lewis-Castine offered some clear advice to her congregation in Patterson, Louisiana.

"I encouraged them to early vote," said the pastor of an African Methodist Episcopal Church. "I encouraged them to make sure that they get the information, that they're reading carefully, and to encourage other people — especially those groups in their families who would not normally vote — to vote because it is so very important at this hour."

Lewis-Castine is among a group of Black clergy taking proactive measures in the wake of the ruling, which is already reshaping election processes across the country — including prompting Louisiana legislators to meet on Friday (May 8) to debate redrawing their congressional maps after the court's declaration. The 6-3 ruling stated, in the words of Justice Samuel Alito, "That map is an unconstitutional gerrymander," referring to Louisiana's second majority-Black district.

The New National Christian Leadership Movement, a faith-based social justice group, announced it would gather pastors and community leaders to protest at the Louisiana State Capitol, where the first redistricting hearing was held in Baton Rouge.

On Friday, social media posts from Baton Rouge news outlets showed a crowd of dozens of people outside the hearing room at the state capitol repeatedly shouting "Shut it down!"

Pastor Debra Morton, co-overseer of the New Orleans-based Greater Saint Stephen Full Gospel Baptist Church, received a text about the protest and shared it with

others, including people who joined her for a regular midweek prayer session. In speaking to worshippers, she urged action rather than despair.

"I spoke to our congregation on our prayer call this past Wednesday morning, saying to them, we must, one, vote," she said, pointing to the capitol event as an example. "In addition to that, not be discouraged, not let it take us down, but that we must go to the polls, and then we must fight."

During the state Senate hearing, the Rev. Gregory White of Beech Grove Baptist Church in Baton Rouge spoke in support of a bill that would maintain both of the majority-Black congressional districts in Louisiana. He said he didn't intend to speak at the hearing, but was inspired by the waves of protesters and speakers who voiced opposition to other plans that would eliminate one or both of the districts. He cited Luke 18, referring to a parable Jesus tells in the Bible about a corrupt judge who initially denies a widow seeking justice before eventually relenting due to her persistence.

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"Well, you are the judge, and here are the people," White said, addressing the senators. "And they keep on coming. And they keep on coming. And they keep on coming. I just want you to think about it."

When he finished speaking, state Sen. Caleb Kleinpeter, a Republican who moderated the meeting, asked the pastor to repeat the passage, then paused to write it down.

A few days earlier, African American ministers from across the country and a range of denominations gathered for an online "Emergency Black Clergy Zoom Meeting" hosted by Bishop Erika Crawford, leader of the AME district that includes Louisiana, and the Rev. Barbara Williams-Skinner, co-convener of the National African American Clergy Network. Between prayers led by executives of the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, other denominational leaders on Tuesday took turns sharing their strategies as legislators in Florida and Tennessee were making new congressional maps that could change the current election season.

Bishop Talbert Swan II, director of social justice ministry for the Church of God in Christ, a predominantly Black Pentecostal denomination, ticked off the various ways his denomination hopes to prepare its members to vote.

"We want every COGIC church to become a voter registration hub — that means setting up registration tables at every service, training volunteers and ensuring that every eligible member is registered, not occasionally, but consistently," Swan said. "We need accountability. We need to set goals, track registrations, follow up to ensure that those who register actually vote."

Bishop Charley Hames Jr., chair of the commission on social justice and human concerns for the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, referred to the Supreme Court decision as a "massacre of our rights," prompting calls to action in his denomination.

"We put out a call to our church to have, No. 1, designated voter engagement captains at every local church by the first Sunday in June, charged with verifying registration, assisting with mail ballots and organizing rides to the polls," he said. "We are reenacting Souls to the Polls Sundays, on the Sunday preceding Election Day, encouraging early voting wherever the law permits."

Hames said there will be renewed initiatives with local NAACP branches, ecumenical groups and Black sororities and fraternities — as have been done in the past — and young adults will be encouraged to become political candidates.

"Whether it is a local race, whether it is the state seat, whether it's school board, we are engaging our young people to run for office," Hames said.

Though a range of Black leaders has criticized the high court's decision, their responses were not monolithic. Some Black conservatives, including members of Project 21, a leadership network of the National Center for Public Policy Research, sided with the high court's ruling.

"The Constitution demands that government classifications based on race remain the exception — not the rule," said Linda Lee Tarver, a Christian book author and a Project 21 ambassador and mentor, in a statement. "The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement was to secure equality of opportunity and equal treatment under the law, not to institutionalize racial line-drawing as a default feature of our political system."

But in Louisiana, the Rev. Marques Smith, pastor of two AME churches in New Orleans that are on the verge of merging, said he has stressed to his congregants that "the decision by the governor disenfranchises everybody," referring to Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry's suspension of the primary elections for U.S. House seats the day after the high court's decision.

"I encouraged them — you could say, implored them — that they should cast their ballot," Smith said of his congregants. "The vote has not been canceled. Still go cast your vote. We're still encouraging early voting so that we as a congregation could be available on voting day to help our friends and neighbors get to the polls."

During Sunday's worship service, he said he passed the microphone to an 89-year-old veteran of a march with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who told his fellow congregants that it "hurt his heart" that voting rights debates were continuing.

Black clergy have also rushed to push back against redistricting efforts launched in other parts of the South in response to the Supreme Court ruling.

Clergy in Memphis, such as the Rev. J. Lawrence Turner of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, participated in several demonstrations this week to condemn a Republican-led effort to break apart a majority-Black district based in the city. Turner called it a "deliberate restructuring of power" that disproportionately targets "specifically Black communities." Tennessee Republicans voted to eliminate the district on Thursday, but clergy have vowed to respond with legal challenges and surges of voter turnout.

"We've been here before, and every time this nation has tried to draw us out of history, we have found a way to draw ourselves back in," said the Rev. Earle Fisher, pastor of Abyssinian Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, in a news conference with other clergy this week.