

LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS
2020 Virtual Assembly

A Call to Women Religious

Three young adult activists share their insights on their advocacy work for racism, immigration, and climate change.

Heather Malveaux

There are two things that I have long known but have been highlighted for me in very bold ways recently.

First... this country and its government was founded on white supremacy and white domination. Unfortunately, it continues to function with the same values and morals of the founding fathers who robbed and killed Native Americans and brutally and fatally enslaved Africans. Our systems aren't broken. They are functioning by design to deny non-white persons their basic civil rights and protection of the law in our society.



The acknowledgement of this calls for radical and courageous systemic change, relentless and fierce advocacy, and what the honorable John Lewis called "good trouble." It is time that we all start to uproot and dismantle the ideology and practices that permeate through every institution we interact with and are a part of. That includes white supremacy that is embedded in the Catholic Church. Things like defunding and closing Black Catholic parishes and schools, not having accurate depictions of Jesus Christ as he is described in the bible, lack of non-white leadership at the highest levels, and a lack of canonization of African Americans as saints. No institution or system is untouched by racism--conscious or unconscious.

The second thing that has been highlighted for me is that Black women need to be protected just as fiercely as Black men. I think Malcolm X said it best-- "the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America is the Black Woman." As the country erupted in protest for George Floyd and debated the value of Black lives over the value of property, Breonna Taylor, who was killed in her home by undercover police officers before George, became an addendum. She and countless other Black women and Black trans women are victims of police brutality, fatality, and sexual assault in growing numbers. I am not begrudging the outpouring of demands for justice for George Floyd and every other Black man that has been lynched by the police, I just want the same for Black women and every other intersectional identity that exists in Black bodies.

Black women are facing increasing numbers of incarceration, the maternal mortality rate is four to five times higher for Black women than white women--regardless of education level or

socioeconomic status--and Black trans women are being killed without much acknowledgement or justice.

But I will say that I am hopeful as I see a rainbow of races join together in solidarity to chant Black Lives Matter. I am hopeful as I hear mainstream media talk about systemic racism and white supremacy. I am hopeful that white people will start and continue to do the personal and necessary work needed to advocate for racial justice, to amplify the voices of the marginalized, to demand equity and justice for all, and to dismantle white supremacy.

Thank you.

Giovana A. Oaxaca

There's nothing fair about a society that deprives people of a dignified life. It's hard to find any justice in the treatment of migrants at the border under ICE and CBP, which continues to indiscriminately hold children and families in criminally negligent facilities. And in just the last few weeks we've witnessed massive social upheaval over the murders of Black people at the hands of police. It's evident that we need a massive overhaul of our law enforcement and immigration systems. The moment we're living in has forcefully made us acknowledge the deadly consequences of decades of policy failures.



I grew up listening to the announcement of workplace raids on the radio between jaunty ranchero music. Immigration enforcement was that permanent fixture in my life. It's only escalated under Trump, who has decided to undermine the rights of immigrants at virtually every turn, making it harder for them to access healthcare, and jobs—even now during a pandemic.

That's the most important thing I can say about the pandemic: It's a pivotal moment to redefine our values outside of the parameters of the normal social context. As a casualty of the pandemic and everything else we're living through, we're forced to find new meaning in the normlessness that typically follows periods of social, economic, and political restructuring.

We need to each do our part to ensure our great nation lives up to our founding principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all, not just a privileged few.

The pandemic presents numerous opportunities for change. For one, because we're not bound by strict social conventions, it means we have to explore new ways to bring issues inside people's home. The pandemic adds new dimensions to pervasive social issues. And it means we can't avoid difficult discussions around race because the pandemic brings into focus all the

ways society fails Black, indigenous, and other communities of color, not just through policing, but through healthcare, education, and social and economic opportunity.

This pandemic will leave an indelible mark on all of us. This period of time will have caused us all to reflect on our responsibility to others. I hope that this means that we will take a collective mindset—the kind of collective mindset that only seems to emerge in moments of national crisis like the one we’re living through now—I hope we take that mindset into the future and apply it towards problems that have long evaded solutions.

Like I said earlier this a moment of reconstruction. And I am excited about what the future holds.

Miko Vergun

Hi, my name is Miko Vergun. I’m 19 years and old currently living in Beaverton, Oregon. I’ve been a climate activist since I was 13 years old so I’m very passionate about the environment and the climate crisis. I, myself am religious, as well. I’m Jewish so I want to preface this video with saying that I am so grateful for religious communities who take the steps to educate themselves more about the climate crisis and what they can do about it, including my favorite, showing up in big groups with the names of your congregations on big banners at marches. I love it.



Climate change is a huge issue that we are facing, that’s not something new, and it has been an issue for a while, which brings up the question: Why hasn’t it been treated like the crisis it is? People like to put climate change on the backburner. They’ll say things like, “Oh, there’s a deadline in two years, we’re ok.” “I’m not affected as much as other people, so I’m fine.” Whereas we see other crises and tragedies such as COVID, being treated appropriately and with as much urgency because it directly impacts people’s lives and it affects their ability to go to work, as well as others to go to go to work, and an economy crash. Climate change does that too, if you think about it. With that being said though, I have hope that if we can address and acknowledge a crisis we can do the same for the climate crisis.

As I said at the beginning, I’ve been an activist since I was 13 years old. When I was at that age the amount of youth activists in my area was a very small demographic. Now, I see in 2020 that we are leading the movement which is super powerful to me. However, because there weren’t any youth activists when I was at that age I found it challenging to really feel connected to the issue. It wasn’t until my faith really pulled me in to realize that it does affect me, emotionally and physically.

While my faith and values are the reason why I am so involved with activism, it is also important that I acknowledge my Marshallese heritage. I was adopted from the Marshall

Islands. If you don't know where that is, draw a diagonal line from Eastern Australia to Hawaii, and it is roughly in the middle, or as a family friend likes to say, you get to Hawaii and you make a left. The Marshall Islands is mostly made up of atolls, which are circles of tiny islands. However, it is one of the places that is most impacted by climate change. I would consider it a frontline community as it is affected by more dangerous typhoons, by ocean acidification, and coastal erosion and floods caused by rising sea levels. Over there, climate classes are available, whereas here it's an option. The people who are most affected, are often part of those frontline communities, learn about climate change and what it will do to their homes if we don't act on it.

When I visited the Marshall Islands for the first-time after being adopted, I had the privilege of speaking to students ranging from elementary school to college and what I really took from that trip was just being able to talk to them and them asking me questions it was very impactful to me.

When I went into an elementary climate change class, the kids welcomed me with a song. But it was bittersweet departure from the classroom, as I left grateful for having time with them but sad because what I took away from that was that they were scared that the ocean was going to put the islands underwater, their homes underwater, and that as a result they would die. When I left the Marshall Islands, I knew that if I wasn't already fighting for myself and future generations, then I was also fighting for those kids.

My question for the group, for which I have a few suggestions is: As an adult do you find it a challenge to find your place in the climate crisis, like you don't want to be on the sidelines but you also don't want to cast a shadow on youth and other important voices?

One thing that I've learned from going to services for my whole life is that the whole family must come. We need that same energy out on the streets, especially since youth are the most impacted by climate change. Bring your families to marches, rallies, protests, city council meetings to get your city to divest from fossil fuels. I believe that there is no specific way of activism. Activism can be many things, especially with COVID happening, lots of people are taking their activism to the internet, which is really effective. You can make a blog or make an account that raises awareness on these types of issues.

I hope that helps a little by relieving those feelings of helplessness or hopelessness or feeling like nothing you do is enough, which I can relate to a lot. But all of you will be learning a lot during this conference, which I think is really, really cool, by the way and I hope you all take something home with you because this is where the learning and where the action starts.

I want to thank everyone that made it possible for me to speak, as well as a huge thanks to you guys for amplifying my voice. Thank you!