

# Opinion Conversations about our broken system aren't enough

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Americans are frustrated.

Frustrated with a broken and polarized political system and by Washington's seemingly endless failure to solve basic problems. Frustrated with political parties and politicians, with tribal politics and with a media that don't seem to understand and that seem intent on creating further divisions.

We agree with those frustrations. And "we" happen to be an evangelical pastor from conservative West Virginia and two rabbis from progressive-leaning Washington.

Our communities are about an hour apart by car or train, but the ideological differences sometimes make that distance seem much greater. President Trump won West Virginia with 68 percent of the vote. In the District, he got only 4 percent. With our politics today often defined by our opposition to or support of this one individual, it's hard not to feel that the divide here may be too wide to bridge.

We disagree.

Since the 2016 election, there have been increased calls for civil dialogue in response to our country's growing divides. We applaud those efforts. But, in 2018, we also recognize that our divides go deeper than just a lack of civil dialogue.

Today, in the wealthiest country in the history of human civilization, 20 percent of our children live in poverty. The gap in life expectancy between our richest and poorest counties is more than 20 years. That's about the same as the gap in life expectancy between Japan and Yemen — the same Yemen that is in the midst of a civil war and a cholera outbreak. Today, race relations sometimes seem to be going backward after years of progress while many communities of color still feel excluded from the American Dream. Overall, life expectancy is going down, thanks almost entirely to our devastating opioid epidemic.

So rather than talk about our differences, demonize each other or ignore each other, we have decided to take a different path. We're going to act together.

In partnership with community leaders, health officials, other faith communities in Washington and West Virginia, and the national organization the One America Movement, our two communities are rolling up their sleeves to work together to fight opioids in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle. West Virginia leads the nation in overdose death rates. In 2016, the state's overdose death rate was nearly triple the national average.

We recognize that opioids are not an issue only in predominantly white communities, and that drug epidemics in white and black communities have been treated very differently. That's why we're connecting our work in West Virginia with the work being done to fight opioids in African American communities in Washington. Instead of fighting over resources, we can share best practices, share stories and work together.

In West Virginia, we're going to start by organizing volunteers from faith communities, connecting them to existing resources and, most of all, making this fight as public and visible as possible to combat a disease that thrives in isolation and silence.

In that sense, opioids aren't so different from the polarization plaguing our country. While opioids thrive on shame and stigma — each family is afraid to admit to their community that their child or loved one is addicted — polarization thrives on the unspoken fear of being stigmatized by our own "tribe" for daring to reach out across divides.

Social scientists note, for instance, that humans often develop what is called "motive misattribution" — the idea that our side acts only out of love and their side acts only out of hate. This makes working across divides even harder ("How can you talk to those people?"). And this, in turn, means we don't work with people from the other side, which means our mistrust of each other's motives grows even more. A vicious cycle.

Acting together isn't important only because we have much to act on; it also helps us create new identities together. The teamwork instills a sense of "we" where before there was only "us" and "them."

The three of us disagree on a lot, but now is the time to stand up for a country where we treat each other with respect rather than devolving into warring tribes. Where we do more than just learn to disagree with civility or "tolerate" each other, but instead we work together to fight for the kind of country we want.