

A contentious political year has prompted calls to bridge divides and restore civility in Wisconsin.

Churches, groups urge reflection after recalls

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Carol Grabins, a supporter of Republican Gov. Scott Walker, was watching election returns Tuesday at a bar in rural Dane County when she let out a whoop of excitement at the latest results.

A woman at a nearby table gave her the finger, and another yelled, "You're the reason my daughter and I will have to go on welfare."

That's when Grabins, who helped start the bipartisan, pro-civility group Reach Out Wisconsin, knew there was still a lot of work to do. "When we hurt, we lash out," she said.

The recall election, in which Walker defeated Democrat Tom Barrett, thrilled many Wisconsinites but plunged others into despair. Now some organizations, particularly churches, are stepping in to give people a place to cool off, reflect and, especially in liberal Madison, heal.

Sixteen people attended a "post-election prayer service" Wednesday night at Memorial United Church of Christ in

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The Rev. Twink Jan-McMahon, an associate pastor at Memorial United Church of Christ in Fitchburg, lights candles before a post-election prayer service Wednesday night. After a contentious political year, some Madisonarea churches are promoting messages of healing, forgiveness and civility.



Supporters of Republican Gov.

Scott Walker celebrate his win late Tuesday at the Capitol, where they were greatly outnumbered.

At left is Frank Manning, 18, of Deerfield. The man holding the sign refused to give his name.

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Fitchburg. The event sought to comfort all those “who have had their lives, their well-being and their relationships torn asunder by the political machinations of the last year,” said the Rev. Phil Haslanger.

During a time for public prayers, one man said he hoped people on both sides could find the strength to voice their opinions without fear. Another prayed for families riven by politics. Haslanger lifted up the names of Walker and Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, praying that they lead “with wisdom and a spirit of finding common ground.”

Diane Eddings of Middleton, a social worker who said she took Barrett’s loss “very personally,” was glad the Republican office holders were mentioned. “It’s putting aside political differences and focusing on them as human beings and the enormity of the job they have to do.”

Becky Rice, an administrative assistant from Fitchburg, said she spent the time contemplating how liberals can best move their cause forward. It’s not through the “chains” of bitterness, she said. “If we keep demonizing people, the anger will just eat us alive.”

This Sunday, the Rev. Karen Gustafson will lead two services at First Unitarian Society in Madison, a largely liberal congregation, intended to address “Wisconsin’s divided community.” The services were planned before Election Day, Gustafson said, but she was struck by their need when she saw a post-election map of state voting patterns. “It is clear there are some things about the way the rest of Wisconsin thinks or believes that we don’t understand very well in Madison,” she said. “That’s certainly part of the task as we move forward, to recognize that the only way we are going to get to a deeper understanding is to engage in a different conversation. We need to talk to people who don’t agree with us.”

Both Haslanger and Gustafson are fans of the Wisconsin Council of Churches’ “call for a season of civility,” signed by a growing number of religious leaders, 143 so far. It calls on people to make a genuine effort to understand opposing viewpoints and to state their own positions “without arrogance.”

Churches need to be safe places for people to talk about difficult issues, especially now when “that safety is no longer present in the wider culture,” said the Rev. Scott Anderson, the council’s executive director.

The Rev. Nic Gibson, pastor of High Point Church in Madison and a Walker supporter, said it was often difficult for himself and others in the months leading up to the recall

election to get the opportunity to explain the moral reasoning behind their conservative positions. Opponents cut them off or publicly maligned them, he said.

“I’m all for civility,” he said, “but only if it’s with an eye toward creating something better for November, not as an apology after the fact.”

He won’t be addressing the election from the pulpit Sunday. “I have always told my parishioners not to put their hope in government,” he said. “Every politician breaks your heart.”

Grabins, the co-founder of Reach Out Wisconsin, recommends that friends or family members with opposing views take a break from discussing politics for a while. She’s checked in with her liberal friends but kept the conversation to personal matters.

The next meeting of Reach Out Wisconsin, set for 6 p.m. June 19 at Kavanaugh’s Esquire Club in Madison, will avoid the election entirely. Instead, liberal and conservative participants will try to come to a consensus on how best to create jobs.



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Carol Williams, left, and Winton and Tammy Boyd reflect during a postelection prayer service Wednesday at Memorial United Church of Christ in Fitchburg. The Rev. Phil Haslanger urged attendees to remember the prophet Micah’s message: Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.