



RICE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP)

ANNUAL REPORT 2020



USING RESEARCH ON RELIGION TO BUILD COMMON GROUND FOR THE COMMON GOOD

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



This year has brought a myriad of challenges that continue to be felt deeply across the nation and globe. The COVID-19 pandemic has required us all to reimagine how we engage with and support each other. As a result, the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) quickly shifted programming to virtual platforms and began capturing empirical data on how over 350 religious and non-profit communities in Houston are responding to COVID-19.

Increased and needed calls for racial justice also demanded our attention. In response, we deepened the focus on our ongoing efforts to address the connection between religion and racism through both our programming and our research. This is especially important amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic which has disproportionately affected minority communities.

This year has been monumental for the RPLP in other ways as well: We are celebrating our ten-year anniversary as a program; we launched a podcast series, called *Religion Unmuted*; we developed a new website; and we physically moved from Lovett Hall to the newly built Kraft Hall, and then swiftly moved again to completely remote work as a result of the pandemic. In this report, we highlight the many program activities and efforts from this past year. **The RPLP team has always been, and continues to be, committed to addressing the critical issues of our time by using research on religion to build common ground for the common good.**

Our program is funded entirely by private donations. To learn more about how you can support our work, please see page 8 of this report or contact rplp@rice.edu.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Elaine Howard Ecklund". The signature is fluid and cursive.

ELAINE HOWARD ECKLUND

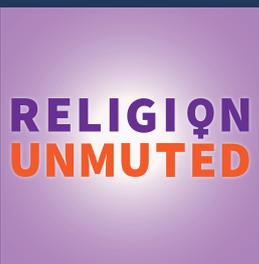
*Founding Director, Religion and Public Life Program,
and Professor of Sociology, Rice University*

CONDUCTING TOP-NOTCH RESEARCH

2020 was a very busy year for RPLP research, with 13 research and outreach projects in progress, including four newly funded studies.

This year, we celebrated successes in ongoing projects through the completion of data collection and the publication of the first articles for the [“Faith at Work: An Empirical Study”](#) initiative. We published our first article for the [“Experiences of Religious Discrimination”](#) study and the [“Giving a Voice to Victims of Religious Bias and Hate Crimes in Houston and Beyond”](#) study, aligned

projects looking at religiously based discrimination and violence across the US. We hosted two large lectures and workshops with over 800 people in attendance (and with six more planned around the globe) for our [“Communicating Outlooks for a New Global Religion and Science Synergy: The Engagement Challenge”](#) project, through which we are sharing findings from our years of studying scientists and their views on religion, ethics, and gender in eight national contexts (check out our first book [here](#); a second book with Oxford University Press will be released in 2021).



The RPLP also launched its **first ever podcast series**, [Religion Unmuted](#), for the [“Turning the Tables on Gender and Religion”](#) project, which highlights women's voices in conversations about religion and gender in relation to key issues, like immigration, race, and politics. This podcast is one of Feedspot's [“Top 35 Religious Podcasts You Must Follow in 2020.”](#) Further, we completed the [“Reaching Evangelical America Leaders to Change Hearts and Minds”](#) project, through which we provided evangelical Christian leaders and constituents with tools for integrating faith and science. This project culminated in a large virtual conference and the release of our director's latest book, [Why Science and Faith Need Each Other: Eight Shared Values That Move Us beyond Fear](#). Also, in an effort to create a subfield within sociology devoted to science and religion, the RPLP has the distinct privilege of distributing \$1.9 million to scholars conducting a variety of projects on science and religion as part of a large re-granting initiative called [“The Sociology of Science and Religion: Identity and Belief Formation.”](#)

CONDUCTING TOP-NOTCH RESEARCH

We are also excited to announce that we have received funding support for four new projects over the course of 2020. First, we obtained supplemental funding for our existing “Faith at Work” initiative [to study the impact of COVID-19 and racism on the relationship between faith and work across the country](#). We are also [exploring the ways 350 religious organizations and non-profits in Houston are responding to COVID-19](#), with emphasis on the impact of the pandemic in at-risk communities. Additionally, RPLP graduate student fellow, Esmeralda Sanchez Salazar, received National Science Foundation funding support for her dissertation research (supervised by RPLP director Elaine Howard Ecklund) looking at congregational affiliation and educational attainment among Hispanic youth.

RESEARCH BY THE NUMBERS

1 book published

7 conference papers

13 articles in academic journals

12 invited lectures

“

A global pandemic is a very, very interesting time to be a sociologist, so I’ve really relished the opportunity to be a part of such a robust social science research enterprise during this time. The skills and perspectives that I’ve been able to gain through my work at RPLP are helpful when thinking about this crisis on a macro level. Being able to contribute to RPLP’s ongoing COVID-related research helps me to feel that I have a role, however small, in both documenting this historic moment and making things better for the future.

”



Rose Kantorczyk, Rice University
'20 and RPLP undergraduate
student fellow 2019-2020

TRANSLATING RESEARCH FOR RELEVANT COMMUNITIES

The RPLP began its spring 2020 programming calendar with in-person events held on Rice University's campus and at our director's home, but once COVID-19 entered our collective vocabulary, the RPLP worked quickly to adapt and transform our programming for the remainder of the spring and summer. This included our first online event in early May, a Religious and Civic Leaders Gathering to discuss current responses of religious communities to COVID-19 and possibilities for ways forward. Shortly thereafter, we quickly transitioned our research conference on June 5th, [“How Science Can Strengthen the Faith of Your Church,”](#) to an online format for three plenary sessions and three break-out sessions that reached over 300 people.

All events remained online for the fall semester. While we may have missed the opportunities for in-person interactions, holding events virtually allowed us to significantly expand our reach to a more diverse pool of participants as well as include more outside speakers in our programming. Through our Fellows Meetings and Religious and Civic Leader Gatherings, we explored how religious and civic organizations can respond to racism; research related to Black atheists and Black minority religions; the impact of COVID-19 on racial inequality; the state of religion, race, and diversity on college campuses; and more. Additionally, we have held several public events addressing the impact of racism and COVID-19 on our society. In the days leading up to the 2020 presidential election, we held a public panel event entitled [“Race and Religion in the Presidential Election.”](#) RPLP director Elaine Howard Ecklund interviewed sociologist Gerardo Marti and religious studies scholar Stephanie Y. Mitchem about how increased national protest, conversations about racism, and the pandemic would affect how religious Americans made voting decisions.



TRANSLATING RESEARCH FOR RELEVANT COMMUNITIES

We engaged with people over the impact and influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, and inequity in ways beyond online events. In addition to formulating our events around these topics, we responded with an array of op-eds including [“Why Religious Congregations May Be Crucial to Halting the Spread of COVID-19”](#) in *Religion News Service*, [“It’s Hard to Close Black Churches amid COVID-19”](#) in *Christianity Today*, and [“How White Churches Can Work for Racial Justice”](#) in *Religion News Service*, among others.

ENGAGEMENT BY THE NUMBERS

12

conferences, panels, and gatherings

1,539

people reached through online and in-person programming

1,405

mentions in national and international media



“

I will continue to attend RPLP events in the future because they have contributed a great deal to my development in ministry and service to the community.

”



Attendee from “Race and Religion in the Presidential Election” on Oct. 27, 2020

TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF THOUGHT LEADERS

Our team of scholars grew to 25 during 2020, including staff, postdoctoral fellows, graduate student fellows, post-baccalaureate researchers, undergraduate student fellows, and non-resident research fellows. This year we welcomed Bethany Boucher, who filled the new position of Post-Baccalaureate Fellow for Non-Profit Leadership, as well as Dr. Jacqui Frost, who joined our team as a postdoctoral fellow after receiving her Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Minnesota in June. In addition to new people and positions, fellows also took on various new leadership roles as a result of our work and programming moving online. For example, graduate student fellows have had the opportunity to lead fellows meetings and facilitate Zoom breakout room discussions during our Religious and Civic Leader Gatherings. In what has been a difficult year for universities across the nation, our fellows have adeptly adapted to new environments and structures and have showed strength in the face of adversity.



“ I am convinced that the decision to work for RPLP was one of the best I have made in my life. The skills I have learned, the people I have met, the stability I have been given, and the mentorship I have received all have made for a truly life-altering experience, one that has helped clarify my passions, calling, and goals. ”

➔ Michael McDowell, Rice University '20 and RPLP undergraduate student fellow 2018-2020

SCHOLARS BY THE NUMBERS

3 new scholars trained and mentored

22 fellows meetings

HELP US BUILD COMMON GROUND FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Our strategy at the Religion and Public Life Program is to leverage our situation at a premier research university to do top-notch research, then to translate that research to relevant communities, all the while training the next generation of thought leaders to do the same. Although we have been very successful in getting grants to conduct research, these grants only support research, staff, and programming around designated topics. We need to raise \$600,000 per year in current-use funding to achieve our core goals outlined below.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Through our research, and the way we translate our research into societal benefits, the RPLP is making a real difference. We hope you will join us in building common ground for the common good. Please consider supporting:

Our research to respond quickly, effectively, and impartially to current events happening in our city, nation, and world.

Our community partnerships and outreach, so that we can bring our research to the people who need it most.

Our efforts to bring new intellectual energy to Rice University and to Houston that will expand our teaching and research initiatives.

SUPPORT THE RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE PROGRAM

To Give Online:

Visit riceconnect.rice.edu/donation/support-religion-and-public-life. When making a gift, choose the "Religion and Public Life Program" designation from the drop-down menu.

To Donate by Check:

You can make the check payable to Rice University and include "Religion and Public Life Program" in the memo line. Please mail the check to Program Manager Hayley Hemstreet at the address below.

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