



ISAIAH

# CLAIMING OUR VOICES

Building a multi-faith, multi-racial, statewide movement for independent political power in Minnesota in 2018.

DECEMBER 2018

# AN OVERVIEW & STRATEGY

ISAIAH is a multi-racial, democratic, congregation-based community organization, reaching 200 congregations across the state, including 30 mosques with over 250,000 people throughout Minnesota. We work with congregations in urban, suburban, and rural areas, and in Black, white, Latinx, and mixed-race communities. We train grassroots community members to talk about their concerns, share them with their wider community, and seek collective, bottom-up solutions.

After the 2016 election, members of ISAIAH came together and decided that a new politics was required to powerfully respond to the rise of fear and division in our politics, growing income inequality, and racial inequity in Minnesota.

Our path in 2018 was grounded in a vision and a strategy. Our vision is a Minnesota

that embraces everyone no matter what you look like, where you come from, or how you worship. Our vision is a Minnesota where we have a democracy that honors every person's dignity and an economy that allows all our families to thrive. Our only path to realizing this vision is to nurture, co-create, and invest in a multi-racial democracy, where every community—black, white, brown or indigenous, Muslim or Christian or Jewish, rich or poor—is respected for its unique expression and aligned with others around a mission for the common good.

We can only get there if we have a politics that is people-centered, rooted in the power of communities and accountable to making real people's lives better. The only way to do this is through deep, rigorous community organizing. Our compass in 2018 was to organize those most impacted by policies and rhetoric meant to sow fear and division in our communities.

**1**

**Building the capacity of leaders, faith communities, and community institutions to advance people-centered policy-making**

**2**

**Advancing a bold agenda that puts people most impacted at the center of policy-making**

**3**

**Holding politicians and opinion makers accountable for a rhetoric of fear and division that threatens our democracy and endangers our families**

**4**

**Scaled voter engagement rooted in our vision, our values, and our agenda with the people who need to be at the center of our politics**

# OUR BOLD AGENDA



We built a movement of “prophetic resistance” that was about protecting the people we love through a network of over 50 sanctuary churches and thousands of people trained in rapid response. We built rapid response networks that address Islamophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy from Minneapolis to small towns like Willmar.

And we recognized that prophetic resistance

is not enough. Through early 2018 we had several thousand leaders participate in house meetings all across the state. Across race, geography, income, and faith we built a statewide faith agenda that expressed our vision for a thriving democracy and a caring economy. Communities most impacted built a bold agenda that actually meets the crisis facing our families and puts people most impacted at the center of our politics and our policy-making.



## Putting Our Bold Agenda into Political Conversation in Minnesota

With the Faith Agenda in hand, hundreds of ISALAH leaders came together to equip themselves to participate powerfully in the Precinct Caucus process in Minnesota. The strategy was to ensure our vision and agenda could shape the public campaigns unfolding across Minnesota.

Our agenda and our community was our compass, not a candidate or a particular campaign. If our analysis was that Minnesota needed a new conversation to bring it together across race, class, and region and a new agenda that could restore faith in

our democratic process, then we needed to put ourselves in a position to shape the environment around the election with most powerful and potent campaigns in Minnesota—the Governor’s race and Congressional races and the competition for majority control of the MN State House. ISALAH intentionally invited 550 grassroots leaders to build and organize a “squad” to come with them to caucuses. 3500 people committed to the Faith Agenda attended Precinct Caucuses—putting our people and our agenda at the center of the conversation.

## Our Institutions: The Surround Sound for Our narrative and to Build Leadership

Throughout 2018, over 100 churches and 20 mosques committed to using their institutions as surround sound for our narrative. These places became sites for tough conversations that deepen relationships and develop leaders. From pledging to vote to holding candidate forums to getting involved in campaigns, they also became vehicles for people to take action.

Clergy were trained in how to talk to their congregations about how fear and division are being used to turn us against one another and against policies that would help our families. They shared preaching resources and coached one another to take risks in their public leadership in their congregations.

We developed a bi-weekly series of church bulletin inserts that posed questions and offered reflections about connecting faith

in politics and about voting through faith and love not fear. These bulletins were consistently used in over 20 congregations and another 50 churches and mosques used flyers and handouts as tools to spread our narrative and encourage people to vote.

Over 70 faith institutions held forums led by leaders. These were often conversations with anywhere from 10 to 60 people coming together to wrestle with difficult questions and to find ways to take action on our agenda through their faith and values. These forums also served as leadership development tools where leaders planned agendas, led conversations, asked difficult questions, shared their stories, and followed up to build deeper relationships. These forums were a primary way that people entered the work of our organization and ultimately took action to phone bank, door knock, or join an ongoing campaign.

# BY THE NUMBERS



**1,025**

Volunteer Shifts



**1,000**

Events Held



**3,400**

Text Conversations



**2,000**

Call Conversations



**2,500**

Doorknock  
Conversations



**2,500**

Congregational  
Calls



**2,262,969**

Digital Impressions



**235,112**

Social Reach



**1,706,963**

Video Plays

# NEW INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZING

In 2018, we significantly expanded our institutional organizing to include community institutions that are not congregations. We decided to go to other trusted institutions where people gather, build relationships, and often grapple

with big questions about politics and values. In particular, we built networks of barbershops and childcare centers where these institutions began to organize from—workers to owners to clients and surrounding community.



## Childcare Centers

The Kids Count on Us Coalition of independent childcare centers now has 200 members. Largely run by women and people of color, these centers are anchors in their communities. They interact with their paid caregivers and parents every day and have the potential to be hubs of information and advocacy for their communities. During

the election season, 50 centers participated in a care voter pledge drive. Workers, parents, and directors pledged to vote for a care agenda that includes investments in childcare funding. These centers were able to sign up over 3,000 “care voters” through their organizing.



## Barbershops Creating Change in the Community

Barbershops Creating Change in the Community (BCCC) is a coalition of Black barbers, beauticians, and owners in Minnesota who are advancing a more just Minnesota for their communities. The institutions of the Black barber and beauty

shops have a rich and robust history in the Black community as well as grounding in civil rights and social justice. These shops became hubs of political conversation and action around our agenda and our values.



*Christian Ray*

**“I was never very interested in politics until I realized that it is because of our political landscape that we are in a fight for the soul of our state and cities. When we work together, we can decide what’s possible in our communities.”**

Through his work with Barbershops Creating Change in the Community and ISAIAH, Christian knows the power of his voice. Beyond knocking on countless doors, sending texts, and making calls in his community, Christian has created video content, published a letter to the editor, and spoken at a press conference.





## Voting Our Values for People-Centered Policy Making

Our institutional organizing was the primary vehicle through which our leaders influences the election around our agenda and our values.

Congregations called through their own church lists, recognizing that a conversation with someone you sit with each Sunday would mean more than a random conversation with a stranger about voting. It also provides a great opportunity for follow up and engagement after the election.

Similarly, we texted and called our list of 30,000 people who have been involved with ISALAH in some capacity. Then, we engaged with these folks and their friends over social media through videos of our leaders telling their stories and talking about our agenda. We also engaged this list through an email program throughout the election.

Mosques talked about voting every Friday and volunteers drove people to early voting. Imams created videos in Somali and English about the importance of voting to living out our faith values. Muslims texted with other Muslims in the state about voting and

our agenda. Throughout the community voting became connected to living out important values of love and community and responsibility.

People of faith from across our congregations filled over 1,000 shifts to call other people of faith across Minnesota to talk about voting. Leaders who attended a church forum or had a conversation at Friday prayer showed up at our phone bank and text bank events one week and brought friends with them the next. Many leaders signed up for 10 phone banks just themselves.

Through all this work, we not only had over 10,000 total conversations with voters, but we built and strengthened our base. Thousands of leaders took on leadership and took risks. The entire program centered on the people most impacted taking leadership to move their own communities. By connecting with our own communities in churches, barbershops, childcare centers, or mosques, we build long-term accountability and trust. This sets us up for achieving big parts of our agenda in 2019.

# SHIFTING THE PUBLIC NARRATIVE

The struggle for our values and our agenda in Minnesota is not simply a debate about the “right” policies. It is fundamentally about who is in and who matters in our democracy and our economy. Many candidates and politicians used fear of Muslims and

immigrants as a tactic to turn us against one another and win votes. Therefore, our work was not just about the agenda and our values but about shaping the environment through which those values could win over those who are being told to be afraid.



## Greater Than Fear Campaign

We shaped the narrative of the election through our *Greater than Fear* communications campaign that was adopted by 15 other organizations. The campaign implemented the winning race/class narrative research we did in partnership with Demos and Anat Shenker-Osorio. We ran a dynamic communications campaign

integrated into digital work, earned media, video ads, events and direct voter contacts/canvassing. The rallying cry of “greater than fear” gave people the opportunity to have an honest conversation about how fear is being used to divide us and call people into an imagination of what might be greater than that fear.



## Authentic Messengers

We used authentic messengers - leaders from our various communities who had been involved in organizing - to spread our narrative and build their followings. Through the primary and general election these leaders told their stories through their own personal network; they were featured in

videos and general communications with our organization; they were key spokespeople for events, earned media, and letters to the editor. Our authentic messengers wrapped around our institutions and our base for 6+ months, building trust and shaping a message.



## Rapid Response

We used public moments as moments where we operationalized our narrative, highlighted our authentic messengers, invited voters to make a choice again, to be Greater than Fear, and to vote! These took the forms of

a fight around a welcoming resolution in Willmar, a fight for our care agenda in Saint Cloud, rapid response to Islamophobia, and the kidnapping and detention of one of our leaders by I.C.E.



## Victories that shift the narrative of what is possible and who matters

Along the way in 2018 we not only built strong relationships in communities most impacted by our agenda in Minnesota, but we also had some concrete victories that helped us build momentum and shape the story of how we both protect people we love and build a multi-racial democracy where everyone can thrive. Here are some notable victories we're excited to celebrate:

- In Hennepin and Ramsey Counties we passed immigrant legal defense funds that will allow immigrants facing deportation to receive legal representation. Having access to this representation means they are more likely to be able to stay in the U.S.
- Saint Paul Mayor Melvin Carter has signed a \$15 minimum wage ordinance and 56,000 workers—disproportionately women, workers of color, and immigrants—will get a well-deserved raise over the coming years. ISAIHA leaders played a significant role in making this happen by showing up and acting in concert to amplify our power!
- Leaders in Northfield Minnesota passed a Municipal ID Ordinance (the first of its kind in Minnesota) so that immigrants, students, elders, and others are able to receive and use a city identification card. Northfield also began the process of developing a climate action plan for the city that includes a pledge and plan to get to 100% renewable energy.
- In the midst of heated anti-Muslim and white nationalist rhetoric (in some cases coming from elected officials themselves) and instances of physical violence, leaders in Willmar were successful in passing a welcoming resolution through the city council as well as rezoning parts of the city to allow the first Somali childcare center to be built in town.
- Leaders across the state developed a care agenda that includes policies like paid family leave, investments in affordable childcare, eldercare, and healthcare. Through campaigns, actions, earned media, and deep institutional organizing, the care agenda became a key talking point in the election by journalists and candidates at all levels.
- Legal Defense Funds will give legal nonprofit organizations the ability to hire more lawyers. This will help when people are recently booked into county jails. Organizations will have capacity to show up and sit down with the people in jail to let them know their rights and options depending on their case. These funds allow greater likelihood for legal representation at a person's first hearing and beyond, if needed.





[isaiahmn.org](http://isaiahmn.org)

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