

Pa. pastor, former Trump loyalist aim to help those seeking to exit MAGA find peace, reconnection

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Doug Pagitt, of "Life Beyond MAGA: Healing the Divide," says a common thread running through the MAGA movement are the

fractured families and marriages that have resulted from people falling out over political beliefs.

Pagitt likes to think of political and social movements as food trucks. Whether the food truck is selling Indian food or

tacos, everyone in line is there to get the same thing. When it comes to MAGA, however, Pagitt likens it more to an airport.

"People are there for all kinds of reasons," Pagitt said. "Some people are working, some people are coming home, some people

are leaving home, some people are passing through, but they find themselves in the same place.

For all of them, there's some

shared experience... They find a group of folks who are thinking similarly to them, but they're not all there for precisely

the same reasons."

Pagitt is leveraging that theory to anchor a program that guides people away from extremist movements to a path that offers

them hope of mending broken relationships and reconnecting with family and friends.

Pagitt, founder of Vote Common Good, along with Rich Logis are bringing their program "Life

Beyond MAGA: Healing the Divide,"

to Hershey on Saturday with the intent of attracting people who have felt "the pain of watching a loved one be pulled into

political extremism and are searching for understanding, compassion, and a path forward."

Logis is a small business owner who entered the MAGA fold in 2015. He writes that it took a year of "emotionally wrenching

internal struggle" before he was able to leave MAGA.

"When I finally left...I traded chaos for stability," Logis writes on the Leaving MAGA website. "The decision was liberating.

I no longer had to defend the indefensible or justify the unjustifiable."

Pagitt and Logis will explore the factors that draw people into radical movements; how seeds of doubt begin to grow; and

what it looks like on the road out of it.

"What we found to be dangerous about it, especially with MAGA, is that it kind of combines a political narrative that makes

sense of the world with a literal religious narrative or a pseudo-religious narrative," Pagitt said. "In other words, it gives

a big grand purpose for what they're up to."

MAGA Make America Great Again is the political movement spawned by President Donald Trump that has grown and consolidated

within the Republican Party. A recent poll by Vanderbilt University found 52% of Republicans a majority identify as MAGA,

underscoring Trump's hold on the GOP.

Adherents of MAGA have historically aligned with mis- and disinformation, including the belief that the 2020 election was stolen, that COVID-19 was a bioweapon from China; and that the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol was the work of antifa.

In recent years, surveys have found that a significant number of families had been affected or fractured as a result of someone being a MAGA follower or refusing to follow. A 2020 study out of the University of Missouri found that since 2016, family interactions have been more likely to drive highly partisan relatives apart than bring them together.

Central to the work of Pagitt and Logis is the underlying supposition that MAGA is an extremist movement. The measure, Pagitt explains, is based on the negative impact a movement has on a person's life.

"They think their beliefs are normal and reasonable and any thoughtful person would think the way they do, but they tell that it's cost them relationships or it's cost them their job, or it has had an extreme impact on their life," Pagitt said. "The thing that people in all those spaces who are leaving tell the story that they always had really deep doubts about this, but they couldn't let those doubts be shared within that community."

Pagitt said it's not his role to tell someone that being in MAGA is a problem.

"If they don't see it as a problem, it's not our job to tell them it's a problem," he said. "Our job is to talk to people who have a suspicion or a deep knowing that this isn't working anymore."

Pagitt is no social scientist, but he has some experience in the power of the collective mentality. A pastor and executive director of Vote Common Good, a progressive evangelical group, Pagitt has in recent years traveled the country urging evangelicals and white Catholics to filter candidates through the prism of Christian values such as compassion and love for all.

Pagitt in recent election cycles urged faith voters to reject Trump and Pennsylvania state Sen. Doug Mastriano, R-Franklin, during his gubernatorial bid.

"I've realized that very few of us just stop believing something, even if it's unhealthy for us or unhelpful for us, whether it's religious belief or cultural belief or personal beliefs," Pagitt said. "What we end up doing is swapping one belief for another. But we can't just stop believing. We have to exchange it for something that serves the same purpose in our life as the previous belief. That's what we think is going on."

The common thread that unites many followers of MAGA, Pagitt said, is the personal casualties broken marriages, fractured relationships with children and friends, even job losses.

Even those disillusioned with the movement, however, are not necessarily looking to the Democratic Party as a new destination.

"They feel that MAGA has underperformed or has really cost them a lot, or they don't believe it anymore, but they're not sure what to do and they're not sure where to go," Pagitt said.

Pagitt said many people are willing to put their relationships up against things they believe in deeply. It's the realization that they have done so that guides many off the path.

"Most people aren't worried about how to relate to a stranger they haven't met," Pagitt said. "They're trying to figure out how to relate to their son or their daughter or their uncle or their mom or their spouse. That's where the real heartache lies."

Pagitt said he refrains from dehumanizing people, encouraging anyone dealing with a similar situation in a marriage or family to refrain from treating someone like they are incapable of being understood.

"It is really quite possible to understand a MAGA person if you let them tell you why they think as they do," Pagitt said.

"It's not easy to agree with them. But we know that people are experiencing family heartbreak and if we can help them with that, we think it's helpful."