



FACE . . .

The Congregation and Politics: Doing Charity and Justice

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“A thousand whacks at the branches are not worth one at the roots.”

—Henry David Thoreau

IF I WERE STANDING AT THE BOTTOM OF A CLIFF AND SAW PEOPLE FALLING off the edge and landing in front of me, my immediate response would be to administer first aid. If after several hours the people continued to pile up, however, I would wonder why I was spending all my time responding to the symptom and not addressing the cause of the injury. Perhaps a railing needs to be installed at the top of the cliff, and perhaps a safety net halfway down the side. Maybe these, combined with other remedies, would prevent the injuries altogether.

In my experience Christian people are much more comfortable with individual, congregational, or denominational acts of charity (binding up wounds) than with acts that seek to do justice (advocating for a safety net). The prophet Isaiah spoke of justice as something one does: “Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; do justice for the orphan, take up the cause of the widow” (Isa 1:17). Most of us will bring a can of soup to the shopping cart in the narthex of our congregation. Many will volunteer at the food shelf to deliver the can of soup to a hungry person. Such actions are consistent with our faith. First aid comes first. That is, after all, what the Good Samaritan story tells us. But what comes second...or third...or fourth? We must not ignore the person lying injured at the roadside. Yet, we cannot realize justice without going directly to Pharaoh.

Why is it that despite our countless acts of charity, there are in Minnesota:

- 16,000 homeless people, over half of whom are children?
- 55,000 hungry children under the age of 12?

In Minnesota, thirty-one congregations of various faiths have begun to seek a way to respond to the root causes of poverty in their midst.

Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners (IOCP) and Interchurch Community Association (ICA) are organizations that have provided over 20 years

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TO FACE

The Congregation and Politics: Forming a Political Conscience

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RELIGIOUS LIBERALS AND CONSERVATIVES ALIKE AGREE THAT RELIGIOUS CONVIC-
tions should have an impact on politics. But how? What is the calling of the local Christian congregation in this arena?

It is *not* the church's task to proclaim the "Christian" or "prophetic" position on political issues or to call America back to its "Christian roots" or to engage in hypocritical and possibly self-serving denunciations of "power" and "privilege." But neither should the church avoid controversial issues or pretend that the gospel has no political implications.¹

The chief political task of the Christian church should be assisting its members and congregations to form a mature political conscience that seeks to discern what Christian faithfulness requires and what is the will of God in the political issues that confront us. This does not mean that all members of a congregation or a church body will come to the same conclusions on social and political issues. Some members may well develop radically differing consciences on key issues—whether abortion or homosexuality, health care access or the environment. But it should be impossible that the teaching, preaching, prayer, and service of a congregation should not touch on these issues, and it should be impossible for faithful members to think that the gospel has no bearing on these matters. How might a congregation go about aiding its members in the formation of both individual and corporate political conscience on specific social issues?

Consider the issue of sexual violence. Confirmation classes routinely discuss murder as a violation of the Ten Commandments. But far more of our children will be victims and perpetrators of sexual violence than murder, and sexual violence should be clearly identified to them as contrary to the fifth and sixth commandments. The issue can also be lifted up before the congregation in prayers for victims. Preaching can make clear that this is contrary to Christian teaching. At the

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¹This paragraph summarizes the argument Kyle Pasewark and I made in *The Emphatic Christian Center: Reforming Christian Political Practice* (Atlanta: Abingdon, 1999) 89-92 and 111-123.

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of direct social services throughout an eight-county area in the wealthier western suburbs of the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Leaders in these organizations have observed that most congregations do “a ton of direct social services.” Even with growing staff and volunteers, however, the need for direct services seems to be a black hole that cannot be filled. Services provided—food shelf, transportation, furniture and household items, emergency financial assistance, referrals—are clearly not sufficient to address the causes of poverty. In the past five years IOCP and ICA have started to address community needs by moving into the arena of policy and advocacy. In the winter of 2000 these two faith-based organizations, along with nine others (including the Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota), organized the West Metro Faith Communities in Action Campaign. Thirty-one area congregations were represented. How could the Faith Communities in Action be sure elected officials heard the concerns to address root issues of poverty? The group formed three action teams to implement the following plan, one that we hope might stimulate others to act in similar ways.

1. *Listening to community leaders.* The Community Research Visits Team set out to discern the needs in their communities. If congregation members were to draw credible attention to the poorest in their communities, then they would need powerful and insightful stories that highlighted the needs they were addressing. In the summer months, pairs of interviewers visited with mayors, senior-high principals and teachers, bankers, apartment managers, nursing home representatives, the local Chamber of Commerce and business leaders, religious leaders, etc. ICA and IOCP had already made the move to have clients they served give testimony at legislative committee hearings. That testimony would be even more persuasive if these congregations were alongside them in helping to shape public policy.

2. *Informing church members.* The second step in the process was to inform congregations about the findings of interviews with community leaders. The Issues Forum Team planned a forum for the fall to highlight the findings of the community research visits. Obstacles that made it difficult for low-income people to leave poverty would be discussed. The purpose of this gathering would be to organize and equip congregation members to attend the upcoming candidate forums in order to make sure the concerns of those hidden in the margins of poverty would be heard.

3. *Talking with candidates.* The culmination of the campaign’s efforts was a series of meetings organized by the Candidate Forums Team. In these forums, persons from the community speak to the candidates about issues affecting the poor in their midst. Congregations host these forums and make sure they remain non-partisan in nature. They also publicize these same issues and encourage that they are raised at the local League of Women Voters candidate forums. All of this serves to build relationships and deepen accountability as next year’s legislative session approaches and advocacy with elected leaders increases. ⊕

same time, sexual polarization should be avoided insofar as possible: sexual violence is not a women's issue; it is everybody's issue.²

A different example: Marriage, divorce, and cohabitation are rarely discussed in liberal and mainline churches today. Yet how many young people in our churches know, as they contemplate their own decisions about marriage and child-bearing, that children of divorced parents do worse on three out of four measures of child welfare? Or the correlation between single parenthood and poverty?³ Or that evidence is mounting that domestic violence is more frequent among cohabiting couples than married ones? We should be making it clear in confirmation classes, in youth groups, and in adult education—even as we continue to support divorced persons and single parents—that, on the average, marriage leads to better outcomes for children.

I am not suggesting that we substitute formation of political conscience for individual and corporate action. Sustained attention to any issue should lead to action. Individuals, groups, and entire congregations might decide to organize or support a shelter for victims of sexual violence; they could also choose to offer more support for engaged couples (including a public ritual of engagement) and married couples. Others might well choose to support various public policy initiatives related to discouraging sexual violence or encouraging marriage.

Many other examples could be given. A sense of the goodness of the divine creation and of the human role as caretaker of that creation is sadly missing from most of our liturgies, prayers, and preaching. Or how about prayers for those who cannot get adequate health care along with prayers for our own members who suffer from illness? I do not hereby mean to repudiate the centralized educational and public policy efforts of various church bodies. (I do, however, question the top-down approach that sometimes characterizes them.) Nor do I mean to denigrate approaches that downplay political issues and emphasize the local congregation as an alternative community of peace and justice, although I think that this approach neglects the providential work of God in creation.

What must be avoided at all costs, however, are the twin perils of pride and sloth: the pride that makes us believe that we are in possession of *the* “just” or *the* “Christian” answer to a social and political issue, and the sloth that leads us to do nothing because we do not know the absolutely right thing to do. And pride and sloth are, of course, the two chief forms that sin takes among us—which is precisely why we need the formation of political conscience. ⊕

²Ibid., 240-250, esp. 248-249.

³Ibid., 231-240, esp. 232-235.