



Ministry in the Mix

An election year provides an opportunity to reflect on those ways we understand ourselves as a nation. The understanding of the majority should, at least in theory, be reflected in the outcome of the election. Candidates seek to embody certain values and understandings of our role as a nation, then offer themselves to the public, and hope to win an election. In light of this, it is clear that there are shifts in the national self-understanding. The national mood varies, and we witness the rise and fall of candidates and parties over the decades. Yet there are some things that remain constant as well.

Those things that remain constant are the principles and values expressed in documents written at the time of the founding of our nation and, more generally, in the national saga. Those things that vary can be discerned in the polls, the opinion columns, and the popular culture.

The national self-understanding has an impact on ministry. And ministry should have an impact on our national self-understanding. Essays in this issue of the journal monitor both, but they are primarily about ministry in the mix of understandings that make up America. Senator *Paul Simon* provides a fresh and vigorous discussion of the relationship between religion and public life. He finds an inevitable tension between the two in that politics frequently requires practical compromises. Major religious leaders understand that, but some religious people do not. He goes on to discuss the positive and appropriate role of religion in politics. *Ross Paulson* takes up the question of our identity as Americans. He goes back to eighteenth century sources and shows that the habit of mind in America is to think in terms of polarities in both politics and religion. He proposes the possibility of a "Lutheran interpretation of American culture" and sketches some of its features. *Foster McCurley* reviews myths that Americans have held about their country which are based on biblical sources. He shows how that makes for a poor reading of both Scripture and American history. But he concludes with a discussion of how portions of the biblical story, particularly the creation accounts, "provide a certain picture of life" that Christians in America should seek for their country. *Doug Wallace* comments on recent films.

What do they say about the national mood? He discerns within them "invitations to hope." Moreover, he draws our attention to scenes and lines within these films which both express and illustrate theological themes. *Kent Johnson* narrates and discusses some interesting facets in parish life during a critical era in U.S. history (1933-41). While official statements of the churches were either non-existent or timid concerning major issues (the Depression, war and peace, racism, anti-semitism, etc.), there was more going on in church basements and parish halls than one might expect. Johnson reviews curricular materials and shows that issues were being raised and addressed in adult classes in at least one sector of the church. *Craig Watts* raises the question whether civil religion and ecumenism might be at odds. The former seeks a unity that

transcends sectarianism and that undergirds the nation's self-understanding; the latter seeks a unity that transcends nationalism and that undergirds the church as a global fellowship. He finds that civil religion is, in fact, implicitly antagonistic to ecumenism as a broader unity since it inappropriately exalts the nation. *James Ford* has spent many of his years in the ministry as a chaplain in very public places (West Point and Congress). He shares interesting anecdotes, discusses similarities between the work of a chaplain and a pastor, and takes up the issue of doing ministry in pluralistic settings where many (or even most) present do not share the particulars of one's own confessional convictions. *Paul Hinlicky* maintains that the task of Lutheran political thought for our time should be the elaboration, defense, and advocacy of human rights. He asks where one might ground this task in Lutheran sources and proposes the doctrine of justification as the most fruitful.

Our Resources section opens with brief essays by *Rolf Hanson* and *Ronald Johnson* on the question whether politics belongs in the pulpit. This is followed by a review essay by *Jack Schwandt* on one of the most talked-about books of our time. Finally, the Texts in Context essay, written by *Wendell Frerichs*, is devoted to the texts from Ephesians assigned for Sundays 8 through 15 in the lectionary.

A.J.H.