

God Gets Out the Vote

Two views of faith involvement in politics.

The season of intense partisan politics has just begun, and already we are learning that this election will be different from any that we have known. The growing intrusion of religious concerns, particularly from the evangelical and fundamentalist right, has already shaped this current Bush administration and will be a large and influential part of the election campaign.

Let me say that I am part of a mainline Protestant tradition that sees a vital connection between personal faith and our call to heal and invigorate the social world. I work out of faith for justice and peace. As the leader of Presbyterian and Methodist churches in Newport, Reedsport, Harrisburg and Coburg, and in two vibrant Portland neighborhoods, I have encouraged my congregations to join this work. Many of my church leaders have also been community leaders and their church congregations have worked to heal hunger, homelessness, joblessness, lack of medical care and other painful social inequities.

So I am pleased at the new connections between church and world – and deeply disturbed by some of the forms it is currently taking. At worst, there is a kind of religious partisanship that threatens the wise, freedom-giving clarity of our Bill of Rights. Two recent events in Eugene show me the difference between appropriate faith involvement and a religious outreach that threatens our traditional ways of relating church and state.

Recently, the Rev. James Forbes, pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, made the kind of visit to Eugene that enhances the possibilities of church-community relationships. Forbes is leading a campaign called Let Justice Roll. The campaign addresses the growing gap in this country and the world between rich and poor. It calls for public solutions to the pain of poverty and it seeks to bring change, in part, through increased voter registration, as well as discourse in the churches and in the public square.

At the heart of Forbes' call to action is a profound commitment to the prophetic voice in all religions, the Voice that calls for human dignity, social well-being, daily bread and hope for the future. He speaks for a compassionate God who cares for the "least" among us, and for a passionate Jesus who called us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and bring the "oil of gladness" to those in despair.

Forbes spoke at the First Congregational Church, a "welcoming and affirming" church. It was widely announced in the community as an interfaith event open to anyone. Leaders in the event included people of many faiths and leaders of community action of various political venues. Forbes spoke slowly and eloquently, and there was time for questions and discussion.

Quite different was this week's religious-political event sponsored by the Republican National Committee at the Willamette Faith Center, an attempt to foster a very partisan participation in our political process.

Speaker David Barton is an historian and founder of a Texas-based organization called Wallbuilders. Barton is a prolific writer of historical tracts and creator of videos and CDs. One of his goals is to counter historical writing that sees our government as founded in secularism. In contrast, he wants to revitalize what he admires as many years of life-giving connection between church and state. His lengthy presentation was rapid-fire, laden with information, and he offered no room for questions and discussion.

The Republican gathering, unlike the Forbes gathering, was a closed-door affair. Attendance was by invitation only and attendees, while warmly greeted, were vetted at the doors. The press was excluded, so reports in the media came from interviews after the event.

Barton's initial presentation, historical in nature, with its genuine recovery of our roots, soon gave way to the partisan purposes of the gathering. We were instructed in the evangelical agenda: school prayer, preservation of the "under God" statement in the Pledge of Allegiance, use of the Ten Commandments in public places, the end of abortion rights, the selection of judges who use God's law. All these things, we were told, are the desire of a vast majority of Americans, whose will is thwarted by biased judges and Democrats in Congress.

We were urged to get out the evangelical vote, which has been too small in recent elections. And we were urged to tap into the widespread and growing anger about gay marriage. Gay marriage, we were told, has lighted a fire in the hearts of evangelicals that can be used to bring in their votes.

Evangelicals taught me to pray, and I am grateful for their concern for social values often neglected in our wealthy, consumption oriented, pleasure-seeking society. But a presentation like this makes impossible the dialogue we need about the truths we each might bring to the social world.



The Rev. Joan Pierson of Eugene is a retired Presbyterian minister.

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