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OPINION

Overcoming the Supreme Court's Setbacks

Restoring the right to vote

BY MARGE BAKER

Last year, the Supreme Court decimated one of the civil rights movement's crowning achievements. Now, it's time for Congress to pick up the pieces, put it back together and make our laws strong enough to protect our most important right: our vote.

Many folks who lived and fought through the civil rights movement weren't just frustrated by the Supreme Court's decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, which undermined a core



provision of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

They were heartbroken.

The ruling gutted the Voting Rights Act provision that required the Justice Department to pre-approve changes to voting laws in areas with a history of discrimination at the ballot box. For nearly half a century, the Justice Department used that authority to block some of the country's most egregious attacks on voting rights.

The Supreme Court's decision didn't eliminate the Justice Department's preclearance authority itself, but it removed the formula that determined where it could use that authority, rendering the entire preclearance provision useless.

In doing so, the Court opened the gates for a flood of new laws that restrict the right to vote through a range of methods. Since *Shelby*, states and municipalities have pushed through legislation making it harder for millions of people to cast ballots. States have cut back on early voting, made it harder to register, and begun requiring specific forms of identification — documents that many eligible voters don't have and can't easily get.

From shortening the hours the polls are open to moving polling locations, these restrictions fall heaviest on people of color, the elderly, students, and the poor. Now it's up to Congress to solve the problem.

The Supreme Court's ruling left room for Congress to re-

pair the damage and put the law's protections back into effect. And a bipartisan group of representatives have been working to do just that with the Voting Rights Amendment Act. It is a flexible, modern, nationwide solution to combating voting discrimination. And it would provide new tools to stop voter suppression and ensure that any proposed election changes are clear and fair.

Unfortunately, after a bipartisan process in which members of both parties had a hand in drafting the new legislation, House Republican leaders and the chair of the House Judiciary Committee have decided to block the fix and refuse even to hold hearings on the legislation.

That's very bad news for vot-

ing rights and very bad news for our democracy.

Voting rights shouldn't be a partisan issue, and representatives from both parties should be applauded for doing the hard work of repairing one of our nation's most important laws. Now it's up to ordinary people across the political spectrum to take a lesson from the civil rights movement and call out the lawmakers standing in the way of an important bill.

With grassroots pressure, there's no reason the Voting Rights Amendment Act can't become law this year, restoring and strengthening our civil rights protections.

Marge Baker is the executive vice president of People for the American Way.

In an Uneven World, What does Solidarity Mean?

Understand privilege as starting point

BY REV. JON BARNES

I recently returned from a trip visiting international partners in Haiti. On the flight to Port au Prince, passengers boarding in matching t-shirts made it evident that the plane leaving Atlanta was full of church groups going on mission trips. One t-shirt read "GO.LOVE.HAITI!" Another, with the words emblazoned on a cross, said "Mission to the Least of These."

When my wife and I lived and worked on South Africa, we would see the same phenomenon on planes bound for Johannesburg, many of the shirts referring to the need to "save" Africa.

These group journeys to help others, matching t-shirts and all, may be easy targets for us to mock. But I wonder if we mainline Protestants are that different? At Global Ministries, we partner with international churches and organizations in relationships of mutuality and solidarity.

In addition, we have the opportunity to work with many



churches and individuals in North America who want to make a difference in the world. And there is no doubt that this desire comes from our calling to follow God and to work for a world of justice and peace.

But it is also evident that due to our privilege as North Americans, many times we see ourselves as "doers" and agents of change, making it difficult to experience solidarity and learn from these relationships.

When we meet with international partners, one of the most important lessons we can learn is how U.S. political, economic, and military policies affect the lives of the most vulnerable.

During the visit to Haiti, one of the comments we heard over and over is how Western aid, especially after the 2010 earthquake, has actually served to undermine Haiti's ability to respond to the many issues currently facing the country.

Rev. Patrick Villier, president of the National Spiritual Council of Churches of Haiti, noted that true partnership is not about building independence in either Haiti or the United States, but should instead be rooted in our mutual interdependence.

Similarly, in Solidarity Ethics, Rebecca Todd Peters writes that

while international partnerships usually begin by focusing on the needs and poverty of others, they instead need to start with the reality of privilege that many of us in the West take for granted.

She goes on to note that "because a first-world ethic of solidarity begins from a position of privilege rather than a position of marginalization, analyzing and understanding privilege must be its starting point" (Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

Yes, there are needs around the world. And yes, God calls us to minister to the "least of these." But when our solidarity with others begins with the premise of their poverty, it is very difficult for us to relate in any form other than donors or patrons.

We must begin to understand that in a globalized world, it is not always our direct assistance or direction that others need. Rather we must recognize that our culture of hyper individualism and over consumption is tied, both directly and indirectly, to the social realities and deprivations faced by millions around the world (including here in the United States).

If we begin with our privilege as the starting point so that we might be encouraged to fight for change here, we may just have a

chance at realizing relationships of mutuality and interdependence in our globalized and uneven world. And we don't even

need matching t-shirts to do that.

The Rev. Jon Barnes is a justice and peace fellow for the United Church of Christ.

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