

Politics is not about campaigns or candidates or even elections. Politics is about the water you drink and the air you breathe and making sure both are clean. Politics is about children not going to bed hungry. Politics is about all of us having access to the health care we need. Politics is about people being at war or at peace.

Politics is about distributing economic goods and defining what property rights are. Politics is about determining what a crime is and how it will be punished. Politics affects the degree to which we can speak or write or even worship. Politics defines who will be accepted as members of a community and who will be placed in the margins. Politics even seriously influences how you raise your children by determining the circumstances of family life and, don't forget, establishing much of the subject matter of their education.

So, then, the question "should religion have a role in politics" is the wrong question. It does. Religion matters. A better question is how should religion and politics interact or relate? Religion has long been important to people who are concerned about politics, and politics have been important to the people who are most concerned about religion.

Let me say it another way. Those who are serious about politics must also take religion seriously and those who are the most deeply religious must pay attention to politics.

Throughout history, and perhaps never more so in this country than in the last 25 years, many different avenues have emerged for religious people to become active in politics. For example, some have portrayed their struggle for political power as the very essence of religious life.

At the other extreme, some religious folk have conceived politics as a summary of all the evil against which the righteousness of God stands. Both of these perspectives, while they differ sharply in the details, take politics seriously. So then, how should religion and politics interact?

If religious values are to influence the public sphere, they ought to make our political discourse more honest, more civil, and more spiritually sensitive-

especially to those without the voice and power to be fairly represented. Recently, the increased visibility of partisan religion in politics has often made our political discourse even more polarized and even less sensitive to the poor and the dispossessed. You see, what is at stake here is not just politics; it's deeper than that. In a way, it's deeper even than faith itself. At stake here is the very meaning of our life together.

I challenge, even reject, any political litmus test that distorts the independent moral conscience that faith can bring to politics.

I challenge those who want to undermine the integrity of any religious conviction that does not conform to some narrow ideological agenda. I am deeply concerned about the distortion of prophetic religious faith when wealth and power are extolled rather than held accountable and when more comfort is brought to those on top of society than to those at the bottom.

At the West Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, we are seeking to bring all of this and more to the table. It is the table where some families, at least, still gather together for a meal. It is the table that cements social and spiritual connections. It is the table of gathered loved ones that sometimes marks a reunion or a holiday celebration. It is the table where we have conversations sometimes light and lively and sometimes difficult, even uncomfortable.

When we come to this table, we see each other's faces, and we remind ourselves of the ties that bind us together regardless of our race, our religion, and our economic or social status. At this table, we rededicate ourselves to who and what we are meant to be. At this table, we have an opportunity to be thankful. At this table, new political visions can be born. At this table, we can see the possibilities for poor as well as rich that can bring us together.

Anyone can come to this table and if there are not enough chairs we will get some more. If there is not enough room, we will make the table larger. Even the shape of this table will change as we discover who we are and who we are becoming.

All of us, you and I, can find a place at this table. At this table, we will have some honest discussions and maybe even debates. At this table, we will share our resources - resources of time, energy, finances and connections. Who knows, at this table, we may even laugh together or shed a tear. We will write letters, we will organize visits, and we'll study issues and do credible research. We will educate others and try, oh we'll try, to mobilize. We will advocate with and on behalf of

those underrepresented. Some of us may support forums, town meetings. Some of us may march or do a demonstration.

You see, at this table we will remind each other and apply the lessons of David and Isaiah, of Jeremiah and Nehemiah, of the councils and teachers, of Jesus and his followers. The lessons of Gandhi and George Fox, of Rosa Parks and Saul Alinsky, of Martin Luther King Jr. and Oscar Romero, of Hussein Nasar and Martin Buber.

These are lessons that will teach us that new politics depend on all of us and on each of us. Each of us is like an individual trickle of water, which, when they come together, turn into streams and then merge and become rivers. And with enough energy and force these rivers can become mighty rivers, so mighty that they could have the power to shape or reshape the very landscape around them.

Today, our public landscape could use some new shaping. So let's create a new table. All of us, a whole bunch of little trickles, let's form together into streams that become a mighty river.

Let us join our voices with the prophet Amos and say let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Nathan Wilson