



## Personal Musings of a UCC Minister on Church and Politics

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Summer is upon us, a season often associated with outdoor barbeques, beaches, and vacation fun. This is also the start of a presidential election campaign season, where the political parties have selected their candidates to be our country's next president and vice-president. One third of the Senate and all members of the House of Representatives are up for election or re-election.

In addition to those races are elections for state and local officials and proposed policies on the ballot that will affect millions of lives, some of which could be detrimental to our most vulnerable populations.

Pastoral leaders and congregations find themselves questioning how best to discern what exactly is meant by the separation of church and state. Some understand it as the church staying out of politics completely, whereas those of us who grew up in the Civil Rights movements of the twentieth century know that if it wasn't for our churches and religious institutions that stood up for the oppressed and demanded justice for all, racial segregation, for example, may still be in place.

In my work with small town and rural UCC churches, leaders often ask me why the UCC national setting is so "political." I try to respond thoughtfully by asking what political means for them. I like to frame the actions of the national setting of the United Church of Christ as actions of prophetic witness for the world based on scriptural examples found in the Bible, especially as modelled by Jesus.

I personally feel that Jesus was less interested in the workings of the Roman empire and more focused on how

some were willing to use religion for personal gain and power to exploit and harm people in the name of God. Jesus rarely called out Roman authority. Rather it was the religious leaders of his day that he engaged with, and it was the religious leaders that used the Roman system of justice in their attempt to silence Jesus which led to his death. Jesus teaches us that we must preach truth to power, and for pastoral leaders that usually means from the pulpit.

The rise of politicians trying to equate nationalism with Christianity is a dangerous trend that should concern us all. Being an American doesn't mean we have to be Christian, for our Christian faith extends beyond any artificially created national borders. As pastors we need to find the courage to preach the message of Christ, even to those who may feel we shouldn't wrestle with social and political realities in our communities and globally in the church. Jesus' detractors didn't like it either when Jesus taught his message of universal love and the kingdom of God for all of creation.

In our political system, religious organizations that claim non-profit status are prohibited from endorsing candidates or ballot initiatives. However, nothing stops us from discussing and educating ourselves about a candidate's position on important issues or on proposed measures and from prayerfully discerning how to vote for what is best for our communities.

I understand that conversations about religion and politics can be and are complicated, messy even, but so is life. The core purpose of both is to find common ground to exist together as a people. It is in that spirit that I pray as we approach this election season while celebrating with our loved ones in those backyard get togethers this summer.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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