



# PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

## HOW SHOULD WE THEN BE FORMED?

Vol. 7, 2018

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### Caring for Elected Officials in Our Local Congregations

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**Jim Talen** is a forty-year member of First Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan and is serving his eighteenth year as a Kent County Commissioner.

A recent conversation I had with Stephanie Summers, CEO of the Center for Public Justice, has compelled me to reflect on my relationship as a long-time elected official (eighteen years) with the church, and with my own congregation in particular. I've been a member of the same Christian Reformed congregation for over forty years and hadn't, until recently, really thought about what that relationship should, or could, look like. In my brief conversation with Stephanie, I mentioned that I would be retiring from a full-time job while retaining my part-time elected work. I noted that one of the things that I wanted to do with my newly available time was to try to connect with local churches to offer my knowledge of government and politics, with the hope of helping members become better educated voters.

I had already begun that effort by offering to lead an adult education class for my congregation on any government or political topic within my areas of knowledge and experience. When I mentioned to Stephanie that I had never been asked to speak to a group at my own church, I learned that this was a common theme for many elected officials in their local congregations around the county, and I was surprised that my experience wasn't unique. This got me thinking more deeply about what the relationship between the church and its members who serve in elected office might be.

Earlier in January, I was privileged to be part of an online conversation on the topic of faith and politics. Several comments by my fellow conversants nudged me to think further about the church as an institution and its relationship to politics. Angela Cowser, Professor of the Sociology of Religion at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, pointed to some fascinating similarities between Christian congregations and political parties. "We have... political parties and Christian congregations mirroring each other in institutional maintenance [fundraising, administration], fielding winnable

candidates (new members), and outreach and evangelism [fundraising]. Every two to four years, we ask citizens to vote (many do, but many more do not); and every week we ask people to attend worship (many do, but many more do not)."

Kevin den Dulk, Executive Director of the Henry Institute for the Study of Religion and Politics at Calvin College, (he wrote an article earlier in this series on [citizen formation in schools](#)), concluded one of his contributions to that conversation with this observation: "But is there anything churches should be better equipped to tackle than disciples who turn their tribes, partisan or otherwise, into an idol? Partisan polarization requires a multifaceted response that matches its complexity. But perhaps seekers of shalom should start when they gather with each other."

All of this taken together has raised this fundamental question for me: *Is it reasonable to talk about churches embracing their politicians rather than ignoring them?*

The work of Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper and that of others who have explored how Christians ought to live in a pluralistic world has deeply influenced my thinking on my political engagement. Philosopher and professor Evan Runner has also been an inspiration, particularly in these closing sentences of his Foreword to a compilation of a series of his lectures titled *Scriptural Religion and Political Task*,

We need men and women to live politically out of a whole-hearted commitment to Jesus Christ and the whole revealed Word of God. Then, perhaps, the present young political revolutionaries—and there will be more of them—will learn to fight for political, social, and economic justice on the side of the Lord of Creation, whose Kingdom will surely come, and is coming daily through our own acts of obedience to His revealed Word.

I've approached my political involvement from this framework of sphere sovereignty and the belief that the leading responsibility of government is to ensure justice. That orientation has been very helpful in my work at the local government level. But I hadn't started connecting the dots between my work as an elected official and my local congregation's support of this until lately.

For many today, even hearing the word "politician" leaves a sour taste. The current and mostly well-deserved disdain for all things political is making it increasingly difficult for good people to choose to serve in elected office. Getting through the negativity of a competitive election campaign is bad enough, where elected officials are fair game for all sorts of public demonization. I've reached the point where I'm uncomfortable with sharing my public role in the community in social settings where I'm meeting new people. But I wish it wasn't this way, particularly within the church.

Recognizing the appropriate role of government in our lives, alongside other institutions like families, businesses, schools and churches, how can we also support, in a distinctive way, those in our

congregations who are called to labor in the political arena? And what might that look like? In this, my years of experience as a teacher provide some helpful insight.

I taught elementary school for several years right out of college. I supported technology for teachers and students in a private, K-12 Christian school system for ten years, and I taught classes for several years as an adjunct at a community college. My local congregation typically designates one Sunday each year, usually around the beginning of a new school year, in which a portion of the liturgy recognizes and commissions teachers and school support staff. Following some background readings (i.e., excerpts from Ephesians 4), teachers acknowledge their calling and vow to be guided by the Spirit and Word of God. The congregation responds by pledging their support.

As a Christian community, we understand the unique role of schools and the special calling of some people to serve as teachers, and we want to recognize and support them. We similarly commission lay missionaries, Sunday school teachers, and congregational members who travel long distances to participate in service projects. So, might we consider commissioning the elected officials in our congregations, thus recognizing and supporting their unique calling to uphold public justice and serve the common good?

Some churches, including my own, support their pastors by assigning a few congregational members to sustain them personally, and long-term, in their work. I believe that type of support could be very helpful to members who hold elected office and are similarly responsible for the political care and well-being of the communities they serve. One of my congregational pastors always supported my election campaigns by campaigning door-to-door near election day and by showing up at election night "win, lose, or draw" gatherings. He also inquired regularly about community issues and how they could be addressed. That was incredibly affirming for me, but I suspect that this is not something that my elected colleagues experience very often.

Perhaps because of my experience as a teacher, I'm drawn to comparisons with schools and our attitudes within the church towards teachers. Teachers are often called upon to use their expertise to support educational endeavors at both the congregational and denominational level. I would argue that congregations can benefit similarly from the expertise and experience of public officeholders. Elected officeholders can help members of their own congregations recognize the distinctions between levels of government, understand issues, and generally become more aware of and engaged with their political communities. For example, I once had a rare opportunity to lead two education sessions at a downtown church in which we explored economic development, homelessness, poverty and mental health—all significant issues in the surrounding community that involve government in some way. Those sessions were part of a larger conversation about how the congregation could positively engage with its neighbors and had the additional benefit of increasing their understanding of how to partner with local government.

At a community level, there have been occasions when Christian churches in my area have banded together to hold community prayer vigils for elected officials. Some issues of public justice can supersede most denominational lines – issues like homelessness, mental health, poverty, and the environment (think clean drinking water). While we need to be careful not to fall prey to partisanship in this activity, it can be a helpful way to support those who are called to this particular work.

Another area to consider is how different faith communities might be able to find common ground in the political realm. In our pluralistic context, where people of diverse faiths are affirmed by election to public institutions, can congregations also provide personal support to politicians of differing faiths? How exciting would it be for me, a Protestant Christian, to be affirmed and supported by the members of one of our local Islamic congregations. It would be wonderful to dialogue about what our faiths might teach us in how we go about ensuring justice for all in our community.

Finally, I wonder how congregations might encourage their members to participate in our political process, not only as elected officials, but as informed advocates at a local level. How might churches help their members weigh in on matters of justice such as mental health funding for the most vulnerable in our community, or the importance of affordable housing for our low-income neighbors?

In my personal experience, I have often been discouraged by how little people in church congregations know about their local government, so that when they are moved to action on something, they are less able to effect change. Being informed about issues and familiar with political systems is key to effective citizen political involvement. Congregations can foster that familiarity by hosting internal educational and political discussion that focus on justice issues rather than personality or partisanship. (The next and final article in this series will reflect on how Christian citizens can cultivate meaningful habits and skills for their political engagement.) I hope and pray that churches can be places where citizens can practice respectful conversations and be a tempering influence in our divisive politics, gathering together as “seekers of shalom.”

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