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## FAITH AND POLITICS

# Elections, Public Policy and the Christian Witness

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BY GABE SCHLABACH

**The intensity of a presidential contest can serve to highlight the ongoing debate within the Anabaptist community about faith and politics in Christian life.**

The United States is three-quarters of the way through the longest presidential election cycle in history. For 14 months, candidates from both parties have bombarded U.S. residents with television and radio ads, emails and old-fashioned mailers.

For 16 months, the national media has been caught up in the constantly shifting horse race to the White House. It can be difficult to avoid the constant coverage of speeches, debates, quotes taken out of context, minor scandals that disappear by the next day, polls, delegate counts, vote predictions and everything else that goes along with a heated election cycle.

And it is still six months until November.

The intensity of a presidential contest can serve to highlight the ongoing debate within the Anabaptist community about the roles faith and politics should play in Christian life.

Anabaptists have long debated the theological acceptability of interacting with government. Some argue that Christians should focus exclusively on the work of the church; they allege that forays into politics are at best a diversion and at worst a direct engagement with the world (and the sword) that undermines Christian discipleship.

Others feel that some forms of advocacy and interaction with government can in fact be an expression of Christian discipleship; they contend that speaking truth to power should involve a dialogue with governments and policymakers that includes suggestions for institutional improvements.

This debate over the role of politics is significant, and should not be viewed lightly. Nevertheless, most Anabaptists can agree that any Christian approach to government interaction should be deliberate, accountable to the Christian community, and theologically rooted.

This issue of the *Memo* highlights public policy issues where Christian teachings and experience can help provide a unique voice to government. MCC U.S. board chair Harriet Sider Bicksler provides a reflection on Anabaptist faith and politics (p. 3). Gordon Brubacher, former professor of Old Testament Studies at Messiah College, gives an overview of biblical instructions on the treatment of immigrants (p. 4). Valerie Ong reports on how political advocacy and direct congregational support can complement each other to improve the situation of displaced Iraqis (p. 5). Tammy Alexander writes about politically diverse, faith-based efforts to care for creation (p. 6). And Zach Kaufman lays out how predatory lending targets the poor, who are least able to afford high interest rates and deceptive practices (p.7). ■

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BY RACHELLE LYNDAKER  
SCHLABACH

**Jesus taught that even  
a small amount of faith  
could move a mountain.**

## Bigger Isn't Always Better

On July 1, 1968, Mennonite Central Committee opened up a small office on Capitol Hill, with one full-time staff person. Forty years later, the number of full-time staff in the Washington Office has grown to six and we have moved into a larger space.

But, compared to many Washington operations, we remain pretty small. In a city where people talk daily about not just millions of dollars, but billions, our total budget doesn't have enough zeroes to garner a second glance.

And it's not easy to point to a lot of "success stories" as a direct result of our work. It can be rather sobering to read through previous editions of the *Washington Memo*.

Early MCC Washington staffers wrote about many of the same issues—hunger, poverty, civil rights, immigration, Middle East peace, military spending, nuclear weapons—that we write about today.

So if the work we've been doing seems small and, by some indications, ineffective, why do we keep doing it?

For me, the simplest way to answer the question is with one word: faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

In U.S. society—and especially here in Washington—bigger is seen as better. Fortunately, that isn't the way God works.

A little faith can go a long way, as my pastor, Rev. Dennis Edwards, recently reminded our congregation. Jesus taught that even a small amount of faith—the size of a tiny mustard seed—could move a mountain.

It's not a matter of struggling to gain "more" faith. Rather, it's a matter of making sure we place it in the right person: Jesus.

And interestingly enough, God can take our small acts of faith and turn them into some big actions.

After all, not all of the topics covered in those early years of the *Memo* are still with us: apartheid in South Africa, U.S. military aid to Central America, and the Cold War, to name a few significant ones.

More recently, we have seen some positive movement in providing debt relief for heavily indebted nations and shifting some military aid to Colombia into social and economic assistance.

Many faithful people acted in ways, large and small, in each of these situations. And many more faithful people continue to act in response to God's call upon their lives.

Faith provides us the assurance that the yearnings God has placed within our hearts—for a world where children can laugh and play free from violence or hunger, and for justice based on right relationships and equality—will one day be fulfilled.

For now, our hopes and convictions may seem invisible and "unseen." But be on the lookout for mountains on the move—for a little faith can go a long way. ■

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WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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# Sorting Through the Messiness of Politics

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Four years ago, I thought the presidential election campaign couldn't possibly last any longer. Little did I know what awaited us in 2008! As I write, my home state of Pennsylvania is the next big delegate prize in the protracted race for the Democratic Party nomination, and we are still six months away from the actual election in November.

I am growing increasingly weary of media talking heads analyzing every small detail of the political campaign. As I write, they have reached a new low as they speculate on whether one of the candidates will be able to convince the people of Altoona, Pennsylvania, to vote for him if he couldn't even bowl a decent game.

What do bowling scores or form have to do with anything, especially one's ability to be president of the United States? Discussing a candidate's bowling skills provides space for lighthearted and tongue-in-cheek commentary, but I fear that all too often these trivial details influence people's votes more than the real issues at stake.

Rather than focusing on the trivial, or spending endless hours parsing a few words a candidate or one of his or her supporters once said, often out of context, as Christians we ought to be discerning to what extent a candidate's views and public policy proposals match the principles and values that are important to us.

Do they care for the poor and vulnerable? Do they look for ways to talk to and reconcile with enemies rather than perpetuate or exacerbate conflicts? Do they care for the earth? Do they protect the human rights of everyone, and do they believe and act as though everyone is created in the image of God, not just people who agree with us, are like us, or who supposedly never do bad things? Are they willing to say "God bless the whole world, no exceptions," rather than just "God bless America"?

Four years ago, during that contentious election process, Sojourners waged a campaign based on the obvious but seemingly often-forgotten idea that "God is Not a Republican, or a Democrat." Their statement called on Americans to measure candidates by "whether they enhance human life, human dignity, and human rights; whether they strengthen family life and protect children; whether they promote racial reconciliation and support gender equality; whether they serve peace and social justice; and whether they advance the common good rather than only individual, national, and special interests." The statement still resonates today.

Given the messiness of the process and the difficult choices one has to make, I am sometimes tempted not to vote, almost convinced that our Anabaptist forebears were right to remain separate from the political process.

However, I am more persuaded that as a Christian citizen of a democratic country, I have a responsibility to participate and help influence the United States to measure up to its own ideals. So I will vote for the person I believe best represents my Christian hopes and values, even as I remind myself that the U.S. will probably not fall apart if "my" candidate is not elected.

God is ultimately in control, and my real citizenship is not in any kingdom on earth but rather in the kingdom of God where he asks us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). ■

## IN OTHER'S WORDS

BY HARRIET SIDER  
BICKSLER

Harriet Sider Bicksler is completing nine years as chair of the board of MCC U.S. She is a member of the Grantham (Pa.) Brethren in Christ Church, and works as a communications specialist for the state Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services in Harrisburg.

**As Christians, we ought to be discerning to what extent a candidate's views and public policy proposals match the principles and values that are important to us.**

BY GORDON BRUBACHER

Gordon Brubacher has a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies and is a former Professor of Old Testament at Messiah College. This article is a summary of his presentation at our Spring Seminar in early March.

**What does the Bible say about the non-citizens in our midst? Their very status as different is to be erased.**

## Non-citizens in a Biblical Perspective

*“The non-citizen who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you. You shall love the non-citizen as yourself” (Lev. 19:34).*

What does the Bible say about the non-citizens in our midst? The surprise and challenge for me is normalization. That is, biblical instructions about so-called “resident aliens” functionally require us to normalize their lives as equal citizens. Their very status as different is to be erased.

Let me show where that comes from, because the word “normalization” does not appear. What we do find clearly, beyond the expected instructions for charity (Lev. 19:10) and not to exploit or oppress immigrants (Exod. 22:21, 23:9), is the following:

1. *One law for all.* Surprisingly, the same law or legal status must apply to citizens and non-citizens alike: “You shall have one law for the non-citizen and for the citizen” (Lev. 24:22; also Exod. 12:49; Num. 15:16, 29; 35:15; Deut. 1:16). Moreover, the stranger must even have the same status in Israelite *religious* life (Exod. 12:49; Num. 9:14, 15:14–15, 26; Deut. 16:11, 14; 26:11–13). Given that religious status as the chosen people was the most exclusive aspect of Israelite society, this equality is unexpected indeed. (In the United States, it might be compared to the right to vote.)

2. *Love.* This equality and nondiscrimination can be summarized by the command to “love the non-citizen as yourself” (Lev. 19:34; compare Deut. 10:19). Given that “love” in the Bible means to act for the well-being of others—no matter what the cost—this is functional normalization or beyond.

The society that follows these principles will have no resident aliens or other second-class people. This would mean, for example, the end of undocumented workers in our midst. They would become citizen workers instead.

True, neither church nor nation are quite ready. In “churchianity,” for example, we tend to spiritualize the biblical theme of the sojourner as our citizenship in heaven (referring to Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11). Or we point to passages about God caring for the sojourner (all two of them: Deut. 10:17–18; Ps. 146:9), and let God do it for us. But the biblical witness does not permit us to dodge. At least 35 passages about non-citizens call upon the people of God to act for them in the here and now, in the reality on the ground.

Could it be we are actually called to implement this normalization? Leo Hartshorn reminds us “that in God’s kingdom, human boundaries are meaningless, and that showing God’s love should not hinge upon seeing someone’s legal papers. . . . Living out this commitment could require serious soul-searching and action by Anabaptist individuals, congregations and institutions” (“Immigration: What is the Church Saying?” brochure, Mennonite Church USA Peace and Justice Support Network). One could add the words of Peter in Acts 5:29: “We ought to obey God rather than any human authority.”

The task may look hopeless, but, created as we are in the image of a creative God, we can use our imagination. Let’s put up another Statue of Liberty at the southern border and broadcast the famous words. Let’s recognize the 11th Commandment (“You shall love the non-citizen as yourself”) and post it with the other ten in public places. Just as the Spirit moved people to end slavery, the Spirit may be calling us to act on the issue of non-citizenship now. Where there’s a will there’s a way, and I vote for following that Way. ■

# Hand in Hand

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As Christians, we are called to respond to the message of Matthew 25:35–36 to attend to the needs of the stranger. Moreover, we should “not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” (Heb. 13:1–2).

One way churches have exemplified this is through their outreach to refugees in the United States. North Baltimore Mennonite Church has established the Asylum Seekers Housing Network (ASHN), a ministry that seeks to serve asylum seekers in a welcoming community. Another church, in eastern Pennsylvania, has volunteered to co-sponsor refugees recently resettled in their communities, helping them get their feet on the ground.

It took Hassan, an asylum seeker from Iraq, more than one year to receive asylum status. He speaks of how long and difficult the process was, but that he was able to face the various obstacles because of the strong support provided to him by the ASHN ministry.

Similarly, Ahmad and Farah,\* two Iraqi refugees, express their gratitude for the friendship and assistance extended to them by their local Mennonite church. Dedicated Muslims, but uncomfortable attending mosque in the United States, Ahmad and Farah feel welcomed worshipping with the church congregation who they call their new American “family.”

Apart from receiving various forms of assistance from churches, Hassan, Ahmad and Farah hold another thing in common. They are displaced, forced to flee Iraq. They are some of the few displaced Iraqis who have had the option of resettling in the United States.

It is clear that the hospitality and love shown by congregations who reach out to refugees and asylum seekers in their communities is valued and important. These gracious acts also demonstrate an alternative to U.S. policies that display distrust and fear in the face of overwhelming need.

The Iraqi refugee population is the fastest growing refugee population and Iraqis are the third largest displaced population worldwide. The United Nations has estimated the total number of displaced Iraqis to be more than 4.4 million people. Conditions in Iraq remain dire: there is a lack of access to food, health care, housing and education. This is often compounded by the influx of those internally displaced. The United States has not provided sufficient funding for the needs of countries in the region hosting refugees (primarily Jordan and Syria).

Furthermore, the U.S. had accepted just 1,608 Iraqi refugees at the end of the 2007 fiscal year, although the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program had allocated space for more than triple that number.

Half a decade has passed since the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the political debate on the war continues in Washington. Regardless of its outcome, displaced Iraqis will continue to face a war against insecurity and instability.

In some ways, Hassan, Ahmad and Farah are living testimonies of the benefits that can come from better U.S. policies and congregational outreach. Better U.S. policies would allow more refugees like them the opportunity to return home or to make new homes in third countries. Likewise, congregations can continue to reach out to those who are able to benefit from U.S. policies but still need assistance. ■

BY VALERIE ONG

**Congregations’ hospitality to refugees demonstrates an alternative to U.S. policies that display distrust and fear in the face of overwhelming need.**

\*Ahmad and Farah are pseudonyms. Their real names are not being used for security reasons.

# Creation Care—from the Left and the Right

BY TAMMY ALEXANDER

Not long ago, the environmental movement was thought to be narrowly confined to those on the left side of the political aisle. Recently, however, there has been growing awareness of the idea of “creation care” within Christianity—and many conservative and evangelical churches and denominations have joined the cause.

Last summer, the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works held a hearing on faith and global warming—the first of its kind. The witnesses, coming from traditions such as Catholic, Episcopal, Baptist, and evangelical, agreed on many points, including the importance of creation care and the need to consider how climate change—and measures to address climate change—affects the poor.

Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, noted that, “While many of the faith communities represented here today may disagree on a variety of issues, in the area of global warming we are increasingly of one mind. The crisis of climate change presents an unprecedented challenge to the goodness, interconnectedness, and sanctity of the world God created and loves.”

A recent poll by Ellison Research found that 84 percent of evangelicals support legislation to reduce the pollution which leads to global warming. In February, evangelical pastors and lay leaders gathered for the first-ever Creation Care Conference. Rev. Richard Cizik, vice president of the 30 million-member National Association of Evangelicals, said, “We as a nation will face a judgment from God if we don’t do this.”

Although there is general agreement across the political and religious spectrum that humans are having an effect on the climate, there is not always agreement on how to respond. Concern for the poor and personal responsibility for how our own actions contribute to climate change have emerged as areas of common ground.

This summer, “America’s Climate Security Act” (S. 2191) is expected to come up for a vote in the U.S. Senate. Many faith-based Washington offices, including MCC’s, have yet to take a stance on the bill due to concerns that its reforms do not go far enough and that it may be altered and weakened before a final vote.

While the bill provides assistance to low-income communities in the U.S. and abroad to ease the transition to a low-carbon economy and to mitigate the negative economic effects of climate change, MCC would like to see these provisions strengthened. Additionally, the bill calls for curbing carbon emissions by 4 percent below 2005 levels by 2012 and 70 percent below 2005 levels by 2050, targets which fall far short of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recommendations (25–40 percent below 1990 levels by 2020 and 80–95 percent below 1990 levels by 2050).

To address the devastating impacts of climate change, pollution, and irresponsible consumption, we will need to continue to find ways to work together, across the aisle and across denominations, heeding the call to love our neighbor and to care for God’s beautiful creation. ■

“As stewards of God’s earth, we are called to care for the earth and to bring rest and renewal to the land and everything that lives on it.”

—Article 21, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective

“God has entrusted the care of the earth to all people, who are responsible for managing its resources. Good stewardship uses the earth’s abundance to meet human need, but resists the unjust exploitation of the earth and its peoples.”

—Article 15, Confession of Faith, U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches

“God has given humanity the role of caretaker of the earth. Therefore we are responsible for its cultivation and preservation, and our use of its resources.”

—Articles of Faith and Doctrine, Brethren in Christ of North America

## Pontius' Puddle



# A Predator in Our Midst

“If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.” These words from Exodus 22:25 remind creditors to exercise grace and mercy when lending to the poor.

However, current lending practices in the U.S. reflect quite the opposite. Lending institutions have long forgotten this biblical call. Predatory lending practices—whether from the subprime mortgage market, payday lenders or credit card issuers—have made victims of those with the fewest financial options.

The most notable example involves the subprime mortgage market, a market for those who don't qualify for the prime market. As a result of less competition and regulation, the subprime market is ripe for exploitation by lenders. Exploitation comes in the form of excessive fee structures, variable rates that rise quickly or failure to take into account a person's ability to pay.

Payday lending involves short-term small amount loans that carry exorbitant interest rates averaging 450 percent annual percentage yield along with steep fees for late payment or bounced checks. Statistics show that short-term payday lending debt can easily become a long-term phenomenon. An estimated \$793 is repaid for a \$325 loan by the average borrower. The last few decades have seen a proliferation of payday lenders, with more than 24,000 today.

The increasingly complex credit card industry is also implicated. Hard-to-decipher disclosure agreements disguise interest rate and fee structures, increasing the likelihood that penalty rates over 30 percent or expensive fees will be triggered. These rates can be triggered by missing one payment to any creditor or simply by signing up for a new card.

How can people of faith respond to practices that frequently disadvantage the very people who Jesus was most concerned about—the poor and marginalized?

We can start by using our own resources to support and advocate for socially conscious lending. Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA), an Anabaptist financial and insurance services company, serves as an advocate on behalf of victims of predatory lending. Using its leverage as a shareholder, MMA supports resolutions calling for more just and transparent lending practices.

Financial institutions engaging in lending remain a powerful political voice in Washington. Although many states regulate small loans, standards vary greatly and some states offer no protection at all. Two years ago, Congress passed legislation to cap interest rates on loans to military families at 36 percent. Urge your members of Congress to support or cosponsor the introduction of similar legislation protecting all U.S. families. ■

BY ZACH KAUFMAN

## PRIME NUMBERS

**90%**

Payday lending revenues due to fees charged to borrowers

Source: *Center for Responsible Lending (2006)*

**20%**

Share of the market held by high-risk lenders in predominantly minority neighborhoods, in a 2006 analysis of seven major U.S. cities

**4%**

Share of the market held by high-risk lenders in predominantly white neighborhoods in those same cities

Source: *Paying More for the American Dream: The Subprime Shakeout and Its Impact on Lower-Income and Minority Communities (2008)*

## CAPITAL QUOTES

*“The battle in Iraq is noble, it is necessary, and it is just.”*

—President Bush, Mar. 19, 2008, speaking on the fifth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

*“Why [does a country like Iran feel it needs nuclear weapons as] a deterrent? Because the big boys continue to . . . say we need nuclear weapons, mini-nukes, bunker busters, but it is bad for you to have nuclear weapons. If you go anywhere people will tell you this is called [a] double standard.”*

—Mohammed El-Baradei, Feb. 11, 2008, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency

*“When more than one million students a year drop out of high school, it's more than a problem, it's a catastrophe.”*

—Gen. Colin Powell, founding chair of America's Promise Alliance, which issued a report in April saying that 17 of the 50 largest U.S. cities have high school graduation rates below 50 percent.



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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### The Migrant Trail

The Migrant Trail is a 75-mile walk from Sasabe, Sonora, Mexico to Tucson, Arizona to raise awareness about the reality of death and inhumanity in the borderlands. This year, several staffers from the MCC Washington Office will participate in the walk, in hopes of helping to put a human face to those who make the walk each day. To learn more, to follow the Washington Office on the walk or to send prayer reminders to those on the trail this May, please visit [mcc.org/us/washington/walk](http://mcc.org/us/washington/walk).

### Waging Peace in Sudan: Free Posters and Study Guides

“Waging Peace in Sudan” is a web-based education and advocacy resource from the MCC Washington Office complete with background materials, small group resources, and advocacy tools. Go to [mcc.org/sudanaction](http://mcc.org/sudanaction) to learn more about the root causes of the conflicts in both southern Sudan and Darfur and to find out how you can advocate for peace.

The first 100 congregations who sign up at the web site will receive four *free* campaign posters and five *free* copies of the six-week small group study. Sign up now at [mcc.org/sudanaction](http://mcc.org/sudanaction) or call 202-544-6564, x113.

### Resources on Israel-Palestine

Sixty years ago the state of Israel was founded, an event known by Palestinians as the “nakba” or catastrophe. The World Council of Churches will mark the anniversary by sponsoring a week-long “International Church Action for Peace in Palestine and Israel,” June 4–10. Materials include a prayer for use in churches on Sunday, June 8 from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem. Visit [mcc.org/us/washington](http://mcc.org/us/washington) for more information.