

Capitol Report: Religious leaders launch 'Season of Civility' in this divisive political climate



MAY 22, 2012 5:45 AM • [JESSICA VANEGEREN | THE CAPITAL TIMES | \[JVANEGEREN@MADISON.COM\]\(mailto:JVANEGEREN@MADISON.COM\)](#)

Religious leaders from across the state are launching a program designed to encourage civility in the divisive political atmosphere heading into June's recall election and the November presidential contest.

"I think it is clear to everybody inside and outside the religious community that we are in a political divide," says Lutheran Bishop Bruce Burnside of Madison. "That's not a commentary on one political party or another. What's happening right now is an epidemic, and I believe the church has a role in addressing it."

Burnside joined more than 30 other religious leaders Monday in announcing a year-long "Season of Civility" initiative designed to tone down the political rhetoric by providing religious leaders with tips on how to engage their congregations in less hostile, more civil forms of conversation.

The effort, led by the Wisconsin Council of Churches and the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, cites the need to emphasize the "Golden Rule," the idea embraced by many faith traditions to treat others as you would like to be treated.

Rev. Scott Anderson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council of

Churches, says it was clear to him and others that the state's current political climate, which has been marked by highly partisan protests in Madison and rounds of recall efforts against lawmakers of both parties, including the June gubernatorial recall election, that family members and members of congregations were no longer talking to one another.

"Congregations have historically been safe places for people to talk politics," says Anderson, who is credited with leading the Season of Civility effort. "Now there is a reluctance to discuss a number of topics out of a fear of being demonized or misunderstood. It may sound strange, but there is no safety right now (to discuss political differences) in the public square."

Anderson says one of the most polarizing topics these days surrounds the size and role of government.

Since Gov. Scott Walker took office in January 2011, the idea that state government should be smaller was often cited as a reason his administration and the GOP-controlled Legislature gave for scaling back state aid to public education and subsidized state health care programs.

"We need to care for the most vulnerable and the weakest members in society and our government has an obligation to do that," Burnside says. "When our government fails to do it, I think our churches have a role in facilitating it."

He says the effort is not meant to attack Democratic or Republican lawmakers and is not a partisan effort. There are lawmakers from both parties committed to providing services, including health care, education and public assistance, Burnside notes.

But among the goals of the Season of Civility is one to encourage politicians to take up the cause. As described in a press release about the initiative, it is hoped candidates will "strive to adhere to high standards of civility, integrity and truthfulness and insist that the advertisements produced by their own campaigns, and those of third parties, do the same."

Burnside says the economic downturn, uncertainty for older workers about retirement plans, concerns about health care costs and angst

among parents over whether their college graduate will find a job are worries that combine to drive a wedge in a community of people.

“When this happens, people begin to focus on taking care of themselves,” Burnside says. “They start to look for others to blame. When that happens, the way we communicate and reason with one another is changed.”

Linda Ketcham, executive director of Madison area Urban Ministry, says she joined the Season of Civility effort not as a reaction to the current divisive political atmosphere, but because of what she says has been a gradual decline in public discourse over the past 20 years.

“How do we address homelessness? How do we address poverty?” she asks. “None of these issues are new with this governor or this Congress.”

She says it is now up to the faith community to put pressure on elected officials and raise awareness in congregations. “Until we address the tone of the debates, we will continue to fail on addressing the issues,” Ketcham says.

Anderson says the Wisconsin Council of Churches plans to mail information on the initiative to the 2,000 congregations and 5,000 individuals on its mailing list at the end of the week.

The mailing will include information on how religious leaders can support respectful and honest conversations on public issues and provide online links to sermon ideas for pastors leading up to the fall elections.

Capitol Report blog



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