

## Phil Haslanger: Season of Civility aims for consensus

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In some ways, it must seem like a terrible mismatch.

In the weeks leading up to the recall elections in Wisconsin, two very different faith-based organizations entered the public square.

The Faith and Freedom Coalition — the political organization of the religious right led by Ralph Reed — blitzed the state in the week leading up to the elections, aiming for 600,000 voter contacts with evangelical Christians, Catholics and tea party supporters, according to a press release from the group.

“We have fired up grass-roots activists who will be turning out hundreds of thousands of conservative voters to the polls to vote early and make their voice heard,” the release said, quoting Tony Nasvik, from Hudson, chairman of Wisconsin Faith and Freedom Coalition.

There was nothing subtle about their pitch. Reed put it this way: “We support Gov. Walker’s common-sense reforms to deal with the budget deficit he inherited, and our campaign guarantees we will have a large faith-based and conservative vote on June 5.”

So here you have one of the most powerful, well-funded campaign vehicles of Christian conservatives doing its part to protect the Republicans who control the government in Wisconsin.

Those of us who have a different understanding of what the Gospel says about the imperatives of caring for the poor and vulnerable in society were pretty much run over in political terms by the Faith and Freedom Coalition.

But there was another voice that entered the public square in the last few weeks as well. A coalition of religious leaders — Christians, Jews, Muslims, Bahai, Hindus, Unitarians, Buddhists — called for a “Season of Civility” as Wisconsin deals with the deep political divisions in our state.

“As a result of the extreme political polarization in Wisconsin, many in our congregations and communities feel marginalized or demonized by their neighbors on account of their economic status, occupation or political beliefs,” the coalition said in a statement.

“Politics in a democracy is not a zero-sum game or a winner-take-all contest. Rather, it is a joint effort to reach a workable consensus on how to advance the common good.”

The words are useful, but even more useful is the organizing effort that goes with them. The Wisconsin Council of Churches — an organization representing primarily the traditional Protestant denominations — is calling on congregations to join together in the months ahead to engage people of differing viewpoints in ways that might be more life-giving than divisive.

There are training sessions, ideas for preaching, plans for congregational study groups, all designed to ease the polarization and find enough common ground to address the issues facing Wisconsin, whether they be poverty or education or environment or the role of government.

The Season of Civility does not shy away from the basic call in faith traditions “to be concerned about the common good and the well-being of our neighbors.” But it acknowledges that people of good will may well disagree on the best methods to achieve those goals.

This is not the traditional political activism of Ralph Reed and his crowd, who specialize in using religion as a tool for shoring up one candidate or another.

It’s a respectful approach that draws on the best of faith traditions to seek a better world and to do it in a way that can nurture relationships rather than tear people apart.

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## About the columnist



Phil Haslanger

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