

SEASON of CIVILITY: Clergy call for reconciliation in wake of political divide

As Wisconsin continues to struggle through another year of divisive campaigning and elections, church leaders are voicing concerns that hostile political rhetoric is overstepping the bounds of civility, even decency.

A group of 35 religious leaders from throughout Wisconsin are calling upon citizens to enter a "Season of Civility" amidst the partisan rancor of the recall campaigns and the anticipated divisiveness of the fall election cycle.

"As a result of 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," a statement from the group says.

Rev. Scott Anderson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, which represents 14

Christian denominations, commented that "politics 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. From the perspective of Wisconsin's religious community, the current political environment is unacceptable in our public life."

Local clergy react

"I applaud the statement and those leaders who signed it," said Father Vic Capriolo from Holy Family Catholic Parish.

"The sentiments expressed are most appropriate in the light of all the attack ads the electorate were subjected to during the election just completed," he said. "I dread seeing what the upcoming national campaign will bring. The truth is hard to find and

Advertisement

the 'Golden Rule' has all but been totally disregarded. If anyone can come up with a foolproof way to achieve the expressed goals of this season of civility, that individual should receive the Nobel Peace prize."

The "Call for a Season of Civility" statement declares that the "ability to cooperate to solve common problems and achieve shared goals is now undermined by rampant disrespect, disinformation, distrust and disregard for the interests and ideas of others."

Calling for change, it draws a parallel between the religious values embodied in the "Golden Rule" — to treat others as we would like to be treated — with the idea of democracy, which is based on regard for the value of each and every individual.

Pastor Ken Nabi of Community Church in Fond du Lac quotes a Bible verse from the book of Romans that states: "For the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."

"The law is to be honored and respected and in our democratic process, the value of morality must

undergird all of our discussion and decisions," he said. "Democracy will only work when we value one another above our differences even when these differences are passionately held."

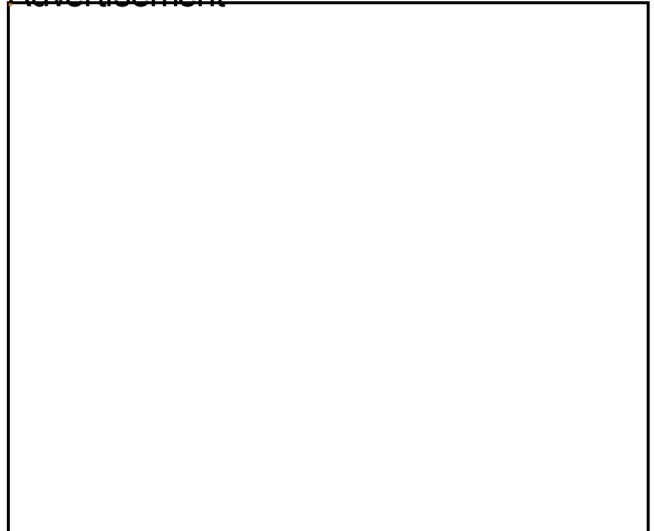
Sister Stella Storch, social justice coordinator for the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Agnes, said people need to develop better listening skills.

"It's about learning how to listen to another person and understand what they were saying, instead of listening in order to give a response. If we listen long enough we will come to understand that we all share the same values," she said. "I don't think there is a person in the state of Wisconsin that wants us to be divided."

Intolerance

Ascension Lutheran Church Pastor Jeff

Advertisement



Blain said in a culture that claims tolerance, no one seems to be tolerating anyone. He is reminded of Martin Luther's comments on the Christian commandment to not bear false witness against a neighbor.

"He said that when we are talking about other people we should 'defend them, speak well of them, and explain their actions in the kindest way.' It's so easy for us to descend into innuendo, but we have to be able to speak fairly about the people we disagree with," Blain said.

Civility is not only needed after the "winners" and "losers" have been tallied, but has been sadly lacking in recent political discourse and decision making among citizens and leaders, said Pastor Brian Hastings of Memorial Baptist Church.

"As a Christian, I am saddened to see how often and how easily politics becomes equated with the Gospel — the belief that one party or another has a monopoly on representing the Christian perspective," he said. "It does great harm to our credibility and our community."

Hastings, along with the other local clergy, points to working for the common good.

"When disrespect, disinformation, distrust and disregard for the interests and ideas of others are rampant in our behavior toward those we disagree with, it is correspondingly difficult to achieve this, or even to see and recognize another person's basic humanity and dignity," he said. "The starting point is respecting the other as a human being, not as a label or caricature."

The initial list of 35 signatories to the Call for a Season of Civility is expected to grow over the next several weeks as more religious leaders are invited to support it.

Advertisement

**'Season of Civility'
project**

The Season of Civility statement marks the launch of a year-long "Season of Civility" project by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee and other local partners to provide resources and training opportunities for clergy and other congregational leaders from many denominations and faiths to practice respectful conversations among people of differing political persuasions. The Council of Churches is also encouraging pastors to preach on the topic of civility during the fall election cycle. Sermons

More

Advertisement