

ELCAvotes: Bible study

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. Acts 6:1-6

COMMUNAL COMMITMENT AND A VOTER'S VOICE

by the Rev. Amy E. Reumann

The emerging Christian church in the book of Acts defined itself as a community that cared for all of its members, regardless of station or situation in life. Its members addressed economic disparities by pooling and sharing their resources, "distributed to each as any had needs" (Acts 4:35) so that no one lacked for necessities. Despite this communal priority to ensure sufficiency for each person, Acts 6 opens with a crisis in which widows were being left out of the daily distribution of food. These women, who had lost the protection and support of a male head of household that was necessary at that time, were among the most vulnerable members of that society. Reduced to poverty, they relied for their survival on the communal commitment that all would be fed. The 12 apostles quickly addressed the situation and confirmed this commitment by appointing seven new leaders commissioned to serve the widows.

This conflict was between the Hellenists and the Hebrews, new Christians who clung to identities based on their ethnic origins. The early church was a community struggling with differences in cultural, linguistic and social status, as it strove to unite as one body in Christ. Many of Paul's letters address early Christian infighting as they learned how to live together without imposing or prioritizing various ethnic or cultural practices on one another.

Volunteer recruitment for the early church's food pantry is a far cry from how we choose leaders in our modern system of representative democracy and electoral politics. But there are instructive parallels to ponder here for how we reflect and vote our faith values in society. How does God's vision of a just world where all are fed drive our public witness as individuals and congregations? How does our faith commitment to prioritize care for those who are forgotten or neglected in our public decision-making get expressed in the voting booth? Just what do we expect from our leaders as we struggle with divisions in race, gender, class or ethnicity?

We live in a nation with the highest level of poverty in the developed world, yet the scandal of poverty is seldom mentioned in national campaigns for elected office by

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ELCAvotes is an initiative to:

Expand the role of the church in encouraging faithful and non-partisan voter participation by providing faith based resources around voting;

Provide a framework for all Lutherans to understand and speak out about the intersection of voting/elections, racial/gender and economic justice;

Provide young adults the tools to understand and speak about what it means to be a young person of faith who is civically engaged; and

Engage with and equip ethnic communities to talk about voting rights and race and their connection with elections today.

"[It is] resolved, that members, congregations, and synods of this church be encouraged to 'promote public life worthy of the name' by speaking out as an advocate and engaging in local efforts such as voter registration and supporting legislation to guarantee the right to vote to all citizens ..."

- Social Policy Resolution
"Voting Rights to All Citizens"
adopted Aug. 2013

either major party. Faith communities have the commitment and the opportunity to raise concerns about poverty, based on the experience of our community ministries and our social teaching, and make it part of public decision-making. A moment in a voting booth is one such opportunity but so are many other actions – communicating with candidates, attending or hosting town halls and forums, writing letters to the editor and mobilizing congregations to support voter registration and education.

Discussion questions

- How is the Acts community commitment to make sure the most vulnerable are fed happening in the church and in our society today? How is it not? What can we do about it?
- In what ways does your faith inform your decision to vote? What faith values support your approach to candidates and issues?
- Opinions differ on whose responsibility it is to care for poor. What is your opinion on the role of the church? The role of government? What are the strengths and challenges for each?
- In addition to meeting the immediate needs of the widows in the Acts text, what difference could structural change to property practice or support options have made? How can you raise immediate and long-term justice considerations in the electoral process?

Prayer for responsible citizenship

Lord God, you call your people to honor those in authority. Help us elect trustworthy leaders, participate in wise decisions for our common life, and serve our neighbors in local communities. Bless the leaders of our land, that we may be at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

from *Prayer Book for the Armed Services*, p. 70

Nonpartisan resources and tools
for civic engagement and poverty at
elca.org/votes and elca.org/advocacy