



LUTHERAN  
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

# Pastor's Update

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*"Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (Isaiah 40:31).*

Because this is a political season, it seems like "spin" is coming at us from every direction. Just about every utterance from someone in the political scene or in the media can be examined from the perspective of spin. Of course with the kind of volatile world in which we live, we have no clue what is going to happen between now and the election in November.

One of the more interesting theories about how people vote was heralded recently in USA Today, an article entitled "Churchgoing closely tied to voting patterns." Written by Susan Page, this piece analyzes how closely our religious beliefs affect the way we vote in elections, and in this case, the presidential election.

The author begins with a series of questions: "Where will you spend Sunday morning? Will you go to church or to Home Depot? Sing in the choir or play golf?" Answer the question and we've been given the most reliable demographic clue about our vote on Election Day.

Page asserts, "Voters who go to church every week or more than once a week usually vote Republican. Those who go to church less than once a week or not at all tend to vote Democratic." Of course there are exceptions to every rule. African Americans, for instance, do not seem to be affected at all by their church-going habits. They vote overwhelmingly Democratic. The same trends are found among Hispanics only to a lesser degree.

"Forget the gender gap," Susan Page writes, "the religion gap is bigger, more powerful and growing. The divide is not between Catholics or Protestants, as it once was, or between Jews and Gentiles. Instead, on the one side are those of many religious traditions who go to services regularly. These are Catholics who attend mass without fail, evangelical Christians and mainline Protestants who show up for worship rain or shine, and many Orthodox Jews. On the other side are those who attend religious services occasionally or never."

"The religion gap is the leading edge of the "culture war" that has polarized American politics, reshaped the conditions that make up the Democratic and Republican parties and influenced the appeals their presidential candidates are making. The debate over same-sex marriage is expected to make the gap even wider this year. Gay

rights, partial-birth abortions, definitions of patriotism and other "value" issues are like to exacerbate the divide between the most observant and others.

Republicans tend to target the most faithful believers for political conversion. At the White House, President Bush has courted people of faith with his policies and his language. The group to which they are appealing is very large, roughly one in four voters say they attended worship every week.

Democrats are divided over whether to respond to this huge divide. Presidential candidate John Kerry is beginning to take some first steps to reach out to religiously observant voters.

Professor John Green does some historical analysis: "Once social issues came to the forefront in America; abortion, gay rights, woman's rights, it generated differences based on religious attendance. More observant people tend to have more traditional morality and they have moved in a more conservative direction because of these issues."

During the Depression and the New Deal, the economic class became the fundamental divide. President Franklin Roosevelt was elected with a coalition of white southerners, northern blue-collar workers, ethnic minorities and African Americans. During the New Deal, people voted more on the basis of their perceived economic interests than their perceived values.

But from the 1960's forward, values became a more important dividing point between the two parties and between political candidates. Since that time white southerners have joined the Republican Party while many affluent women have become Democrats. Before 1972 voters who said they went to church regularly did not vote any different than those who did not. From 1972 through 1992, the gap was in single digits.

But the gap exploded in 1992. Bill Clinton, dogged by rumors that he had dodged the draft and cheated on his wife, won the election primarily on economic issues. (It's the economy, stupid.) But those who attended church each week were much less likely to support

Clinton than others. In 2000, George Bush emphasized the role his born-again faith had played in turning his life around. The gap got even bigger.

The religion gap now dwarfs the gender gap. In 2000 the article points out that women chose Al Gore by 10% over George Bush, but frequent churchgoers chose Bush over Gore by 20 points. This pattern held true even among those from the religious right, who would be expected to be favorable to President Bush. In fact, Bush was supported by 87% of this group who attended church each week, but his margin plummeted 31 points to 56% among the religious right who attended church less often.

President Bush, who calls Jesus his favorite political philosopher, laces his speeches with phrases that echo familiar hymns and Bible verses. He says, "I believe it is in the national interest that government stands side-by-side with people of faith who work to change lives for the better." Bush has signed an executive order making it easier for religious groups to get federal funds to provide social services.

This past week the Bush campaign sent an e-mail to supporters in Pennsylvania hoping to identify 1600 friendly congregations where voters who support Republicans gather on a regular basis. The campaign called for a volunteer coordinator for each congregation. One critic calls this appeal "a breathtakingly bad merger of religion and politics that asks churches to violate their tax-exempt status". Tax law prohibits political activity by churches.

Page continues, "white conservative evangelical churches have become across the south the organizational engine for the Republican party the way labor unions have been organizational engine for the Democratic Party since the 30's." There are risks, of course, for Republicans. Heavy-handed moralizing repels some voters, including many upscale suburbanites who help decide elections.

Meanwhile Democrats have not reached a consensus on a strategy to narrow the religion gap or regain voters the party has lost. Some say that Kerry and other Democratic candidates should only emphasize pocketbook issues of jobs and health care. Others argue that voters who frequently attend church would be receptive to an appeal that recasts some traditional Democratic issues, protecting the environment, for instance, as faithful stewardship of God's creation.

But Page comments, "The Democratic party is very much divided about whether these sorts of appeals are legitimate and whether religion should play a role in the elec-

toral process." However, just a month ago Kerry hired a director of religious outreach, an evangelical Christian who has worked for church-based programs in the area of international hunger and health.

Democratic leaders are planning to have John Kerry share more openly with the American electorate about his faith experience, how it inspired his commitment to public service, and how it influenced his life.

Pastor Merv's comments: "I am troubled that the Republican Party sometimes looks at the church as a "wholly owned subsidiary", and sometimes implies that the vision of the party and of the religious community are the same. John Calvin tried to establish a theocracy in Geneva several centuries ago, not a good result. Mormons are doing this in Utah even now. But if the church and state become one, then we can no longer stand over against the government when it is wrong, when power corrupts."

And I am troubled that the Democratic Party seems often to have lost the language of faith and spiritual values in its search for inclusivity and diversity. Maybe they should listen more carefully to Jimmy Carter, who writes and speaks so beautifully about spiritual matters. It seems like the only time Democratic candidates invoke biblical and spiritual themes is when they visit African American churches.

How about a third party? Not likely. We tried that in Minnesota with Jesse Ventura, but he turned out to be nothing more than a sideshow. His famous quote lingers, "Religion is only for weak-minded people". When pushed, he admitted this included his wife, a Missouri Synod Lutheran.

So, as Pastor Mike says, echoing his Chicago roots, "vote early and vote often. But make sure the candidate you vote for shares your values."