



# a MATTER of SPIRIT

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## Elections 2020

If this current pandemic crisis has shown us anything, it is that our lives are deeply intertwined, and our actions do not affect just us, but also impact those around us. As we are so deeply connected, particularly at this moment of significant change, we can see how vital this election will be for each of us. We have the opportunity now to think about how our political systems can elicit social change. Additionally, we have to create an authentic, digital presence where there was once mainly a physical presence. This new way of being is changing our political discourse, and it will undoubtedly change the way we vote.

In this issue of *A Matter of Spirit*, we unpack some of the many issues surrounding this election cycle. Gretchen Gundrum addresses the sacredness of voting, as persons of faith to use our right to vote for the greater good. Troy Medlin shares his experience of political engagement as a young voter. Tricia Hoyt highlights the complications of our immigration system as she details her pathway to citizenship. Christina Steffy addresses the spread of misinformation and the dangers of “fake news.” Mohit Nair discusses the systemic injustice of gerrymandering and voter suppression and offers a possible alternative. Lastly, Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers share their insights on how we can create a dialogue that will move us from division to unity.

We hope this issue of *A Matter of Spirit* will inspire you to engage in and think deeply about our democratic process as we get closer to November.



BY GRETCHEN GUNDRUM

**“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity...” so wrote Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The same could be said of our times during the pandemic we’re battling now.**

The uncertainty, the fear, the hypervigilance about enemy germs, giving wide berth to unmasked people on the street, avoiding eye contact (What if they have it?), the incredible grief in the anticipation of, or even perhaps the actual loss of loved ones to Covid-19—all this leaves us in a state of almost constant anxiety. Many distract themselves with Netflix, or binge on TV series they missed during the press of work lives and previously normal routines. Some succeed in doing projects long-delayed. Others are paralyzed and can’t seem to focus on much more than the work that’s expected by their employer—if they’re lucky enough to still be getting a paycheck. Fear lurks like rain pelting the top of an open umbrella, and social distancing leaves us feeling lost and hug-less, at a time when we sure could use a good hug.

Watching the daily news with the latest numbers of deaths and infected, the mismanaged response from the federal government, the confusion among state governments about lockdowns, and seeing coronavirus curves arcing their way across the screen, state by state, country by country, sparks helplessness and despair. A steady diet of reality pushes away hope and humor



as the horror of this relentless disease shocks and saddens us. Our first responders are front-line soldiers risking their lives every day for us and they lack protective armor. With the US leading the world no longer in prosperity or influence but in the shame of terrible statistics, isolation, and ineptitude, we are also in deep grief about losing a place of pre-eminence in the world as a proud democracy. Can anybody even remember we're in an election year? This is probably the most important election any of us will participate in. It will determine our fate in a way that will either push us downward on a path of increasing decline or cause us to rally and take our democracy back.

God, Help us Take Our Democracy Back!

You may already know whom you're going to vote for. I do. If you're a faithful reader of *A Matter of Spirit*, you are conscientious about your civic duty and don't need to be reminded to be well-informed so you can choose wisely. You know voting is a right, a duty, and a privilege. Some would call it a sacred obligation. Nothing must keep us from exercising that right. But whether the will of the people will prevail this year is unknown at this time. Will social media manipulate our thoughts and obscure the truth? Will candidates lie and cheat to win their seats? There is so much at stake and so much that can be blocked or interfered with. How do we protect the integrity of the system?

It seems a total no-brainer that voting by mail should be universal practice, especially now. Democratic senators have introduced such legislation but it has been opposed by the Republican majority. Mischief has been afoot in ongoing attempts to gerrymander districts to favor one party over the other, and through voter suppression, especially in the South among African-American voters. And then there's the Electoral College—that artifact that no longer truly represents the will of the people when a candidate can win the presidency in the Electoral College while losing the popular vote. There are some serious reforms that need to happen for us to take our democracy back. One of the best ideas is automatic voter registration when a young person turns 18. Anything that makes it easier to cast a vote can help preserve our democracy.

Some may take the right to vote for granted but it has been hard-won among minority groups and women. At the dawn of these United States in 1776 only white, male landowners could vote. They represented 6% of the nation. Because they held property and paid taxes they had the right to determine who ran the country. In 1868 the 14th Amendment gave

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**“God does not swoop in to rescue us and make everything all right. We are called to build the earth, to protect the vulnerable, to wage peace. We each have one vote and must use our voices.”**

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citizenship to African-American men but their right to vote was not granted until two years later. It wasn't until 1920 that suffragists won the right for white women to vote; and while Native Americans obtained that right in 1924, disenfranchisement persisted for another 38 years before all 50 states allowed them to vote. In 1965 Congress passed the Voting Rights Act (VRA) to address barriers that still kept people of color from full access to the polls. An important protection within the VRA was struck down by a 2013 US Supreme Court decision, clearing the way for new discriminatory voting laws and subsequent flagrant voter suppression still occurring today in parts of this nation. The fight for fairness and equality rages on.

It is up to us to choose wise leaders of integrity. God does not swoop in to rescue us and make everything all right. We are called to build the earth, to protect the vulnerable, to wage peace. We each have one vote and must use our voices. During this plague of Covid-19 we have witnessed inspiring leadership from beleaguered mayors and governors, from a military officer who lost his command when asking for help for those infected on his aircraft carrier, from physicians and nurses urgently begging for personal protective equipment just to do their jobs. The courage, compassion, and incisive action of these women and men give us a window into the kind of leaders we must choose at the national, state, and local levels this fall. It's all about character. Moral character was the cornerstone of this nation. We shall have no future without it.

▲ *Gretchen Gundrum is a psychologist and spiritual director in Seattle. She also serves on the editorial board for A Matter of Spirit.*

# POLITICS

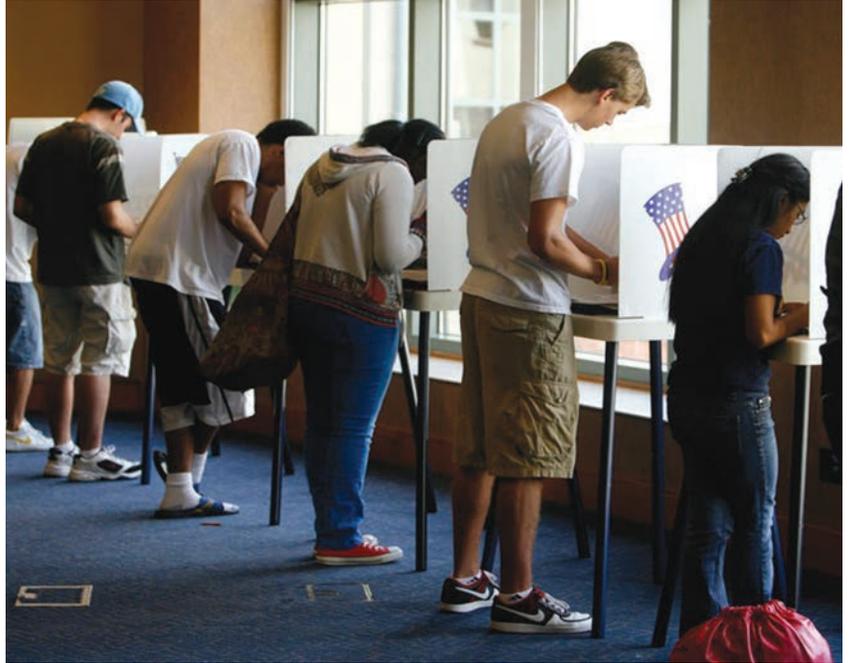
## How we organize our lives together

BY TROY MEDLIN

When I was in 4th grade, I made phone calls for a presidential candidate and then attended that president's inauguration. Since then, I have volunteered for a number of non-presidential campaigns and have attended the last five presidential inaugurations. I'm 29 years old and I realize that, as a young person with a passion for politics, I may seem a little weird. My grandpa was very active in politics and so I grew up talking politics with him, meeting politicians, and going to political events together. Politics was just a part of life. And, really politics is a part of all of our lives. My professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago once said, "Politics is how we organize our shared lives together." This phrase demystifies politics and helps me think about it as merely making sense of the way that I live in the world with other people.

For young people and especially for some young people of faith, it is this epiphany that propels them into civic engagement, whether it is voter registration, volunteering for a campaign, or raising awareness for specific issues through organizing, protest, or even civil disobedience. Young people of faith who are active in politics see the connection between policy, lawmaking, and civic engagement. They see the connection to Scripture which calls us to be our sisters' and brothers' keepers, with Jesus' command to love our neighbor as ourselves, and with St. Paul's exhortation that the only thing that matters is faith working through love. Political engagement for young people of faith often begins by making those connections.

Often the connections between politics, life, and faith continue to grow, strengthen, and flourish as individuals become even more acquainted with the themes throughout Scripture



Fred Prouser

that address justice and mercy. Individuals see how Scripture reveals God as the God of the poor and the God of liberation. Faith then becomes a sustainable and powerful way of engaging politics. At least for me, those things worked in tandem: the more I understood my faith calling me to work for justice, the more I began to see politics as the way that we organize our shared lives together.

It is our faith that is our ultimate source of hope, not the political system, which can lead some of us to feel intimidated or turned off by electoral politics. Data shows that voter turnout among young voters remains low.<sup>1</sup> There are many reasons for this. For many young voters, the political process feels intimidatingly distant. If students are not assigned a civics class in high school or taught the political process, by the time they turn 18 they might not fully understand the complexities of the process and might shy away from it or respond in apathy. Others might find themselves in a state of powerlessness towards the process, feeling as though they cannot make a difference. Others may be focusing on college, finding work, building a career, building a family or raising children. In addition, engaging in the political process can take some work—it takes analysis and intentionality to begin to see the political process as a way of building power for those causes that we care about and a way to see concrete progress

<sup>1</sup> Alexis Duke, "Discussing Why There May Be Low Voter Turnout among Young People," Daily Bruin, March 2, 2020, <https://dailybruin.com/2020/03/02/discussing-why-there-may-be-low-voter-turnout-among-young-people/>

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**“As young people of faith, we can see this work as one way that the Spirit calls us out of our comfort zones.”**

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through legislation. It’s helpful to acknowledge too that the political process is flawed and laborious, and yet it’s a tool that can enact long-term changes in a democracy.

For those young people and others who are apprehensive about getting involved at all, one exercise that I have found beneficial is a two-step process. First, describe together the world as it is by naming issues—for example, poverty, lack of opportunity. What are the current realities involved in those issues? Then imagine the world as it should be. What would a more equitable, sustainable vision be for those issues?

By reimagining the world, we can dream about the world as it should be, as God intends it, and the world we deserve. Some might even describe it as the reign of God. People begin to name things like equal access to parks and recreation, enough food for everyone, health care that is accessible for all, everyone treated with dignity and love, and so on. After this exercise is over, we wrestle together with the ways and tools in the “world as it is” that we can use to work for the “world as it should be,” and one of those is electoral politics. For better or for worse electoral politics is a way we can work for measurable change in the world.

Once we have reflected on the “world as it is and the world as it should be,” the next step is to connect that analysis to our own lives. We can ask questions like, “How have I been harmed by the world as it is?” and “How might my life change if we began living in the world as it should be?” This can help people name their stake and self-interest in the political arena and can motivate people towards a more active role in civic engagement. These exercises may help move people from being passive observers to being active participants in the life of our democracy. Through reflections on these questions, I have been able to articulate better my self-interests in things like more affordable health care, LGBTQ equality, and affordable education. Making these personal connections is another way of seeing that political engagement is how we organize our shared lives together.

In light of COVID-19 unfortunately, it seems that it is easier than ever to see the disparities between the “world as it is” and the “world as it should be” and even to name our stake in working to make things better. The pandemic has put into stark relief things like access to affordable healthcare, paid family leave, a living wage, and the inequities that still exist and are often based on race and socioeconomic status. And, as young people already struggling with student debt and rising costs of living and often paychecks that leave us with less than what we need, we feel this even more deeply.



Author at Moral Mondays Illinois march. Moral Mondays are a series of demonstrations throughout Illinois organized by Fair Economy Illinois and led by clergy members.

So, in this moment of uncertainty and fear, may we be moved by compassion, mercy, justice, love of neighbor, and by our own experiences to name our struggles and our pain and allow that vulnerability to give us courage and power. And may we use that courage and ability to listen to one another’s stories, see each other’s struggles, and then be moved to action. This action will flow from our own lives and strengthen us for the work ahead, and that work will include political engagement as we work for a better world.

As young people of faith, we can see this work as one way that the Spirit calls us out of our comfort zones to bring the reign of God to Earth and work for the day when justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, as the Prophet Amos declared long ago. What would that day look like for you and for those you love? What would “justice rolling down like waters” feel like for you and for those you love? In this current moment, we may even be living that phrase we pray so often, “Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in Heaven.”

▲ *Troy Medlin is a candidate for Word and Sacrament Ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and a MDiv candidate from The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.*

# Ethical Journalists and Discerning Readers



BY CHRISTINA J. STEFFY

**T**he 2020 presidential election is just around the corner, and it will bring a flurry of media activity. If we learned anything about this activity from the 2016 election, it's that news spreads quickly through social media, especially when that news is sensational, emotional, or false. We also learned we live in a world where artificial intelligence can be used to spread false information on social media, and where cries of “fake news” are ubiquitous. This fake news era erodes trust in credible media, and it also means information is being used as a weapon to deceive and manipulate; thus, it is more important than ever for those of us entrusted with delivering information to the public to do so in an ethical manner.

## Creating and Spreading False Information

The internet has democratized the creation and spread of information. Anyone with an internet connection and an understanding of how to use basic digital tools can create and share information, regardless of its veracity. The internet also democratized access to information by providing alternative outlets to traditional media and their subscription fees. While the internet removed subscription fees, it also removed fact checkers, editors, and safeguards on information quality. This environment is ripe for the creation and dissemination of what has been dubbed “fake news”—a generic phrase used to refer to different types of information that ranges from flawed to completely fake to unflattering but factual. The fake news category can be broken down into misinformation (information that is inaccurate but was not created to spread harm), disinformation (information that is inaccurate and was created to spread harm), and mal-information (information that is based in reality but is manipulated to cause harm).<sup>1</sup>

## Separating Fact from Fiction

But shouldn't it be easy to separate fact from fiction? After all, there is no denying proven facts. Unfortunately, even when you're confronted with a fact, it's surprisingly easy to dismiss it if it doesn't conform to your current beliefs. This is partly because people want to be part of a community, so they will stick to ideas that others in their social circles believe. In fact, as Adrian Bardon argues, “a human being's very sense of self is intimately tied up with his or her identity group's status and beliefs. Unsurprisingly, then, people respond automatically and defensively to information that threatens their ideological worldview. We respond with rationalization and selective assessment of evidence—that is, we engage in ‘confirmation bias,’ giving credit to expert testimony we like and finding reasons to reject the rest.”<sup>2</sup>

When sharing information on social media to form a community, people often only follow and share what they agree with, creating their own echo chambers; this encourages social media algorithms to continue to display similar information, thus forming filter bubbles. It's difficult for opposing viewpoints to penetrate the walls of these echo chambers and filter bubbles, and it's also difficult to stop the spread of fake or flawed news through them once it's begun. This is because filter bubbles surround us with ideas we're already familiar with and ideas we already agree with, making us overconfident

<sup>1</sup> Claire Wardlee & Hossein Derakhshan, Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Accessed March 26, 2020. <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Bardon, “Humans are hardwired to dismiss facts that don't fit their worldview,” *The Conversation*, January 31, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/humans-are-hardwired-to-dismiss-facts-that-dont-fit-their-worldview-127168>

in our knowledge of the world.<sup>3</sup> Breaking out of your filter bubble can help you check your biases and assumptions and help stop the spread of incorrect information. The simplest ways to do this are to go outside social media for your news and to choose credible sources you normally avoid because they challenge your points of view.

Americans know fake news is a problem; unfortunately, they may overestimate their ability to spot it. This is partly attributed to the filter bubble and our resulting overconfidence in our own views of the world. Also, people's ability to evaluate news is flawed, and it is a remnant of the days when news was delivered through media outlets with gatekeepers,

occasionally taken over by humans) are sophisticated AI methods of spreading misinformation within your filter bubbles. Trolls are people who post misinformation to provoke others.<sup>5</sup> Not only is it difficult to spot this false information, but also, because it is spread through your filter bubbles, you're already predisposed to believe it.

While AI helps spread false information, it is also being used to fight it. Facebook is utilizing humans and AI to flag incorrect or misleading articles. You can also download the following browser plugins to help you determine whether a site or article is fake or flawed: NewsGuard, TrustedNews, and FakerFact, and SurfSafe.

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## “Clearly information is power... We have a moral obligation to provide the most accurate and complete information possible.”

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when it was clear which sources could be trusted and which sources needed to be scrutinized. This outdated method of source evaluation relies on vertical reading (staying within a source rather than going outside of the source to fact check it) to determine credibility. For example, people look at who shared the source (if it came from someone else in their trusted network or a source that shares their ideals), the author, the content of the source, and whether there are references in the source. But all of this information can easily be faked. The best way to verify the information is to engage in lateral reading, or going outside of the source to search and fact check it against other sources. Next time you want to check the credibility of a website, open up a new browser tab and search for the author of the article and look for other information on the claims made in the article. If sources are cited, click on links to those sources. If links aren't provided, search for the citations. Finally, utilize fact-checking websites such as Snopes.com, FactCheck.org, and PolitiFact.com.

It's also important to understand that even reliable print resources can succumb to sensationalizing headlines and reporting items out of context. Headlines must grab your attention immediately. Often, difficult and detailed concepts are distilled down to less than 1,000 (and often less than 500) word articles. While this information may not be fake, it may be flawed or misleading because there is always information that must be left out.

### False Information and Artificial Intelligence

The 2016 US presidential election was plagued by cyber mis- and disinformation campaigns; in fact, researchers determined that, between September and October 2016, one in five election-related tweets were sent by bots.<sup>4</sup> There's no reason to believe future presidential campaigns will not be plagued by a combination of artificial intelligence (AI) and real people spreading false information. Bots (completely autonomous computer programs that post information) and cyborgs (autonomous programs that post updates and are

### Ethical Journalism

Journalism is a pillar of democracy because it provides the information people need to be informed citizens; thus, it's critical when reporting on functions of democracy such as politics and voting that we do so ethically. However, journalism must balance its own principle of fairness with an obligation to serve the greater good through social justice and pointing out wrongs against society. Journalists must also check their own biases by reporting the facts and not editorializing or drawing conclusions that don't exist. They cannot choose to cover one issue or candidate more than another simply because that's their preference. Unfortunately, publishers may cater to certain groups and want certain angles on stories. Journalists must work to provide the most accurate, complete information given their time, story, and publisher constraints.

### Encouraging Dialogue

Conversations about politics are tricky because they are emotionally charged, yet these conversations are important to learn from each other. We must start from a place of mutual respect for each other, understanding that we all want what is best for our communities; we may differ on how we get there, but we share the same fundamental beliefs. Once we determine that we don't differ on the outcomes, we can discuss the strategies to achieve those outcomes. Effectively discussing and then acting on those strategies requires accurate information provided by ethical journalists.

▲ *Christina J. Steffy is the Director of Library Services, and an adjunct English faculty member at Pennsylvania College of Health Sciences. She holds a MLIS from Rutgers. She is currently completing an MA Professional and Digital Media Writing from East Stroudsburg University where her research focus is the ethical reporting of health news.*

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<sup>3</sup> Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 84.

<sup>4</sup> David Klepper, "Cyborgs, trolls, and bots: A guide to online misinformation," February 7, 2020, [apnews.com/4086949d878336f8ea6daa4dee725d94](https://apnews.com/4086949d878336f8ea6daa4dee725d94)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

# Proportional Representation

## One Solution to End Voter Suppression

BY MOHIT NAIR

I recently spoke to a community leader who said to me: “Many of our vulnerable residents are first-generation immigrants who do not have the privilege to be thinking beyond basic necessities.” There are so many pressing priorities: access to healthcare, access to unemployment resources, and addressing racial disparities in testing and care, to name a few. Improving democracy and the way in which we vote seems tangential in this moment.

### Except it isn't.

How your elected representatives respond to a crisis partly depends on how accountable they are to the electorate. The accountability of elected representatives, in turn, depends on how well they represent the majority of the electorate and how much they have to worry about addressing voter concerns to keep their seats.

In other words, we need competitive elections that do not just protect incumbents at all costs.

We are in the middle of a pandemic in 2020, but this is also a Census year, which means we will soon be redrawing congressional and legislative district boundaries. Every 10 years, the process of redrawing district lines brings forth the insidious power of gerrymandering, a practice where seasoned politicians manipulate legislative district lines to disenfranchise political and racial groups.

This results in districts that snake their way in and out of the margins, with no rhyme or reason (*see map on right*)

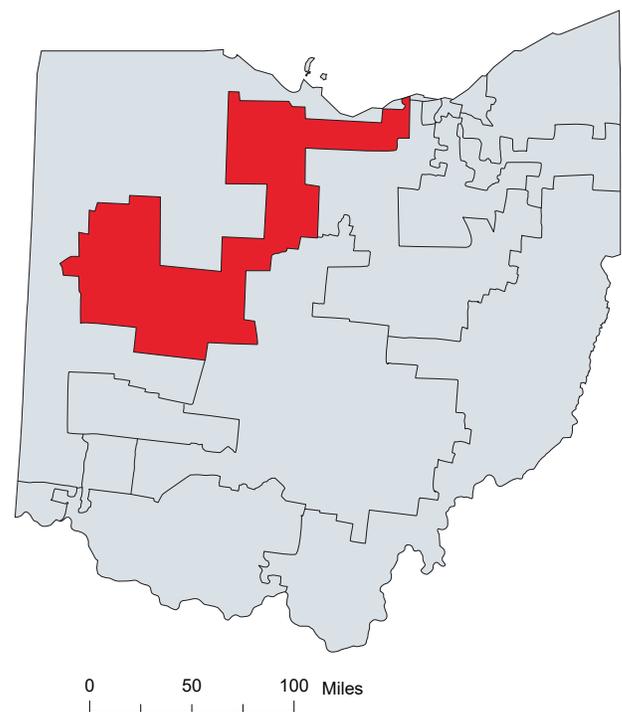
Here in Washington State, we have a bipartisan redistricting commission, which reduces the potential for partisan gerrymandering. While the last Commission had two Republicans and two Democrats, it was not exactly representative of the diverse electorate in Washington. And the only woman on the Commission was the non-voting Chair.

Admittedly, our process has resulted in less outrageously gerrymandered districts than some in states like North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> But it has not been great at ensuring competitive elections—we still have a strong bias in favor of incumbents who are rarely redistricted out of their seats.

A fair and functional democracy requires a vibrant and engaged electorate. Making elections less competitive and suppressing voting rights lowers voter turnout—and that is the point.

By international standards, voter turnout in the United States consistently lags behind other member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>2</sup> For instance, 56% of the U.S. voting age population cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election compared to 80% in Denmark and 87% in Belgium.<sup>3</sup>

Turnout among young voters and people of color tends to be even lower, especially in primary elections. While a number of factors are responsible for low voter turnout at the national level, intentional policy decisions such as gerrymandering make the problem even more entrenched.



Ohio's 4th District

Source: The Fulcrum

<sup>1</sup> David Meyers, “12. North Carolina Campuses,” The Fulcrum (The Fulcrum, n.d.), <https://thefulcrum.us/worst-gerrymandering-districts-example?rebellitem=6#rebellitem6>.

<sup>2</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an intergovernmental economic organisation with 36 member countries, founded in 1961 to stimulate economic progress and world trade.

<sup>3</sup> Drew DeSilver, “U.S. Voter Turnout Trails Most Developed Countries,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, May 21, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>.

## How do we fix the problem?

One of the ways in which most democracies tackle this problem is to get rid of single-member districts altogether, create larger districts with multiple representatives, and use the proportional form of ranked-choice voting to elect those representatives. With proportional representation, candidates are elected in proportion to the votes they receive. This eliminates the possibilities of unfair representation produced by gerrymandering.

**“Gerrymandering is only successful in a winner-take-all system, where 51% of voters get 100% of the representation.”**

Simply put, rather than competing for one seat from one district, multiple candidates would run together for several seats in a larger election using ranked ballots.

Voters would rank all candidates in order of preference: first, second, third, and so on. The first step is to count all first choice votes for each candidate: any candidate who receives enough votes to reach a defined threshold wins a seat. (Thresholds are calculated based on the number of candidates running.) If no candidate reaches the threshold, the candidate with the least number of votes is eliminated. The voters who listed that particular candidate as their first choice now have their second-choice votes counted. Similarly, if one candidate receives far more votes than necessary to secure a seat, those surplus votes are transferred to the voters’ second choices—this ensures that there are no wasted votes and the process continues until all seats are filled.

Gerrymandering is only successful in a winner-take-all system, where 51% of voters get 100% of the representation. Under proportional representation, partisan or racial gerrymandering is ineffective—it doesn’t matter where voters live or how the district lines are drawn. Voters gain a stronger

voice, more choices, and more civil elections by using ranked-choice voting. “Ranked-choice voting expands the range of options for voters,” said Lisa Ayrault, Director of FairVote Washington, a non-partisan non-profit dedicated to advancing ranked-choice voting in Washington State.

Versions of proportional representation systems have been adopted in 20 cities in the U.S., and Maine uses it statewide. “Cities that use ranked-choice voting are seeing much more civil campaigns,” Ayrault said. “That’s because candidates don’t want to alienate voters who are voting for other candidates first, but who might be willing to rank them second or third.”

Even in a normal election year, gerrymandering and tactics to suppress the vote are very successful at disenfranchising voters and discouraging young people from voting.

And yet, 2020 is not a normal year. At the time of writing, there are already more than 1.9 million COVID-19 cases globally and 120,000 deaths—16 States have postponed their Presidential Primaries as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic.

While Wisconsin forced voters to show up to polling booths in person, Alaska led the nation in extending vote-by-mail and using ranked-choice voting. Washington voters have voted-by-mail for all elections since 2011, but more than 350,000 voters wasted their vote in this Presidential primary election by casting ballots for candidates who dropped out of the race before March 10th.

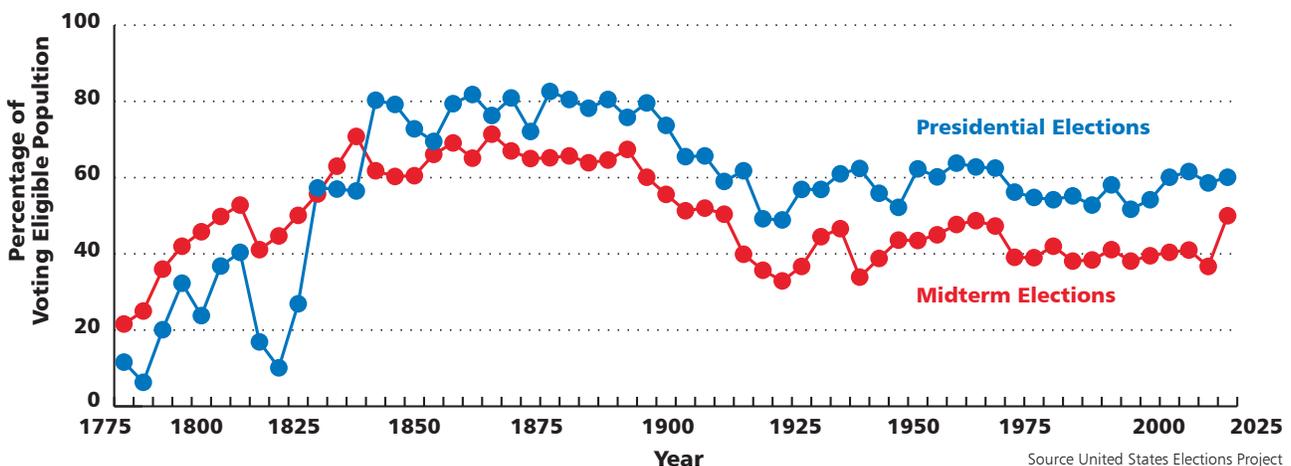
Imagine what could have been possible if voters had the option of ranking their ballots.

As public health and politics intersect in these uncertain times, we must simultaneously ensure our communities have access to the resources they need, while fighting for a fair and functional democracy.

This is exactly the time to be talking about ranked-choice voting.

▲ Mohit Nair serves as the Partnerships Director of FairVote WA. He focuses most of his efforts at FairVote WA on building an inclusive coalition of stakeholders and partners who are passionate about electoral reform. He holds a Bachelor of Science from Cornell University in Biological Sciences and a Master of Public Health from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

United States Voter Turnout Rates 1789–2018





Jim Hoyt

Author (on the right) after her citizenship ceremony with her two daughters and granddaughter next to the statue of Justice O'Connor at the Sandra Day O'Connor, U.S. Courthouse in Phoenix, Arizona.

# Beaming and Voting



BY TRICIA HOYT

A year ago, the judge told me I had a new birthday, April 12. I hadn't thought I needed a new birthday, but the moment she said that I surprised myself by tearing up and swelling with pride. My new birthday: The day I became a U.S. citizen.

Truth be known, I had not expressed much eagerness to become a citizen over the 38 years I had already lived in the States. I mean no offense by that. It's just that I was born and raised in Ireland, and loved it—both the country and its people. We saw ourselves as quirky, good-humored people with a tendency toward loquaciousness; a strange, cherished, inferiority complex; and a chequered national history replete with saints and scholars, freedom-fighters, and traitors. And we knew we inhabited one of the most beautiful spots on the planet.

But the island is small, so traveling abroad is common. It wasn't special that I studied in Paris after secondary school, and procured residence status there. And it didn't raise an eyebrow that I took a teaching contract in Arequipa, Peru after college, and stayed there as a legal resident for over three years. It follows that I was a bit blasé about finding myself in Arizona when I married a U.S. citizen who didn't want to live in the blustery, damp climes of my beloved homeland. Obtaining my legal residency was pesky, but not prohibitive. It was 1981, and the Green Card, when issued, had no expiration date.

I should have applied for citizenship earlier. I know that.

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**“If the gift of democracy is its participative nature, the right and duty to vote is its beating heart.”**

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But secretly I resented the oft-articulated assumption that I would want to do so as soon as possible, and it felt like a bit of a betrayal of Ireland. So, I let it go. I paid my taxes, obeyed all laws, and always registered my address with USCIS, as required of residents. Then, one fine day in 2018, as I prepared to board a plane to return to the U.S. from a brief visit to a nephew in Honduras, I was held back. “We’re not accepting this Green Card anymore,” the Homeland Security told me, refusing to pay heed to my protests while acknowledging that my legal status was not in question. “You need the new one that expires every 10 years and has a bar code.” “We need police clearances from every country you have lived in. Why did you reside in three other countries before coming here?” Three hectic days and multiple visits to the U.S. Consulate later, I had a folio that gave me one-time entry back to the U.S., at a cost of \$575.

And so it was that I finally, reluctantly, decided to file the application for citizenship and found myself experiencing

a most unexpected, exhilarating, and inspiring journey. It's that citizenship test, you see. It introduces you to the context surrounding the founding of the country, the purpose of the Constitution, the cry that "no one is above the law," and so much more. You find yourself wanting to know what those Federalist Papers were that John Jay, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton wrote. You want to learn more about why two U.S. senators each represent their entire state while the various members of the House represent only their district. And you now know what lay behind those first ten Amendments. It was thrilling. I couldn't get enough of it.

More than anything, though, I heard the clarion call to exercise one's citizenship by participating in the electoral process.

If the gift of democracy is its participative nature, the right and duty to vote is its beating heart. When we 63 new citizens were sworn in two years ago at the Phoenix Courthouse, the judge, a member of the Hopi Nation, emphasized the privilege of voting by reminding the courtroom that Native Americans did not gain the right to vote in Arizona until 1948. There was an audible gasp. Every one of us new birthday celebrants stood in line to register as voters that very day. I've been beaming—and voting—ever since.

▲ *Tricia Hoyt is an educator, leadership trainer, and biblical scholar living in Arizona. Tricia also serves on the editorial board for A Matter of Spirit.*

## WOULD YOU PASS? Some of the Questions on the Citizenship Test

- 1 The House of Representatives has how many voting members?
- 2 Under our Constitution, some powers belong to the states. What is one power of the states?
  - a) provide schooling and education
  - b) provide protection (police)
  - c) provide safety (fire departments)
  - d) give a driver's license
  - e) approve zoning and land use
- 3 Why did the colonists fight the British?
  - a) because of high taxes; taxation without representation
  - b) because the British army stayed in their houses through boarding and quartering
  - c) because they didn't have self-government
- 4 When was the Constitution written?
- 5 The Federalist Papers supported the passage of the U.S. Constitution. Name one of the writers.
  - a) James Madison
  - b) Alexander Hamilton
  - c) John Jay
  - d) Publius

### Answers

- 1 Four hundred thirty-five
- 2 b) provide protection (police)
  - c) provide safety (fire departments)
- 3 a) because of high taxes; taxation without representation
  - b) because the British army stayed in their houses through boarding and quartering
- 4 1787
- 5 Madison, Hamilton, Jay are all writers of the Federalist Papers

# We need more than civility—

## We Need Grace

BY BETH SILVERS AND SARAH STEWART HOLLAND

As the 2020 presidential race rapidly approaches, it's easy to wonder if our Democratic Republic can handle another national election. Whomever we voted for, scars from 2016 run deep. Those wounds are opened and exacerbated by a National Emergency Declaration, the vetting process for an endless sea of candidates, consequential and complex investigations, and relentless tweets.

A large portion of Americans are horrified by this administration's policies and pronouncements. A large portion of Americans are horrified by what they believe Democratic leadership would create. And entire industries are built on the foundation of that conflict, creating systemic incentives to keep it alive and raging.

Calling for civility has become a standard response to our ever-increasing polarized politics—so standard that the idea of “civility” has become controversial in its own right. Civility proponents can seem naive when a civil war seems more likely than civil dialogue. Critics rightly argue that civility is often an out-of-touch plea from those



### Let's disagree – with grace.

these are real conversations to help us understand politics, democracy & the news, while treating each other like thoughtful human beings

privileged enough to believe that polite conversations are the answer to oppression and injustice. If we value productive discourse with our fellow Americans, we need to reexamine what we're asking of one another and especially what we're asking of ourselves.

The word civil has shifted in meaning over the centuries but originally arose from the Latin *civilitas* meaning relating to citizens. It's why we called that war that almost tore our country apart a Civil War—not because it was polite but because it was between citizens. It is that origin - relating to *citizens* not politeness—that can offer a path forward. Civility is necessary but not sufficient. We need political grace.



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## “Civility is necessary but not sufficient. We need political grace.”

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Grace has traditionally been understood as a religious idea defined as something like the unmerited favor of God. A secular principle of unmerited favor can apply to us as citizens. America is the idea that citizenship is based on more than borders or ethnicity. It is a citizenship rooted in democratic ideals and grace—inalienable rights freely given and often undeserved.

Of course, that is only the American *ideal*. The history of America is filled with those excluded from citizenship or included in our nation against their will. And yet that great, unfinished national promise we continue to strive for is an opportunity available to everyone. What is this promise, if not grace? Those who continue to fight for their right to that promise in the face of oppression and violence exhibit the truest sense of civic grace. And over 240 years following our founding, more than 280 million of us were simply born in this country—allowing us to reap its benefits based on nothing more than the luck of birth. What is that, if not grace?

All of us who share this nation—regardless of when and how we received our citizenship—have a responsibility to embody and spread this political grace. Our conversations with one another are grace-starved, and we can fill this void by going beyond civility. Call for civility seems to ask us to give respect to those we feel haven't earned it. Grace asks that we acknowledge that we have all—as citizens—received gifts and privileges that are unearned.

Civility calls for a formal courtesy when emotions are running high. Grace asks us to acknowledge that our fellow citizens are human beings filled with sadness and anger and fear, joy and promise, love, and loneliness. It asks us to tap into our shared identity as citizens, to see each other through the lens of common duty rather than competing ideologies.

Sometimes civility seems to ask us to treat all arguments as equal. Grace means separating the argument from the very real human being making it. This separation allows us to stand in our values firmly, often uncompromisingly, without dehumanizing those with whom we disagree. It means that we refuse to dehumanize even those who dehumanize us because we cannot simultaneously overcome oppression and become oppressive.

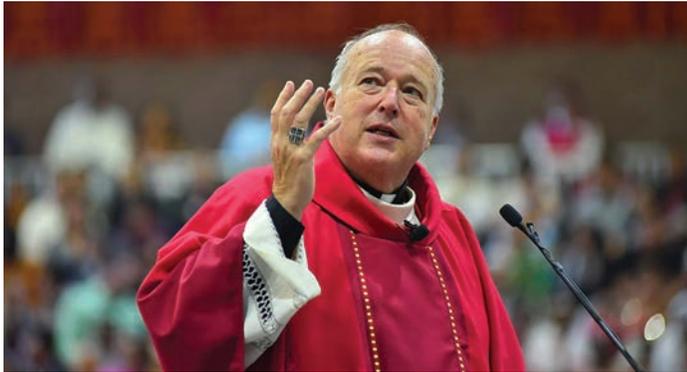
Grace tells us that we can survive and thrive in our disagreement. We don't have to find validity or even empathy in the arguments others make. We can and must separate truth from lies. We can and must say that what is wrong is wrong. We can and must uphold the dignity of our fellow citizens, especially those fellow citizens who have been denied living in that dignity. We can and must hold those who abuse power accountable.

We can and must do all of these things while still upholding the humanity of those with whom we share our country. Civility asks us to be polite. Grace invites us to dig into our relationships even when “polite” has left the building. Grace asks us to hold on when we are ready to discard each other.

Grace is the foundation of the American promise, and it is also asking us to love America through our repeated failures to live up to that promise. And grace counsels us to embrace our citizenship and participate fully, curiously, open-heartedly in another election cycle with the knowledge that we will still be here together on the other side of it.

▲ *Beth Silvers and Sarah Stewart Holland are the cohosts of a bipartisan podcast called *Pantsuit Politics* and coauthors of the book entitled *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening): A Guide to Grace-Filled Political Conversations*. Their podcast *Pantsuit Politics* aims to use real conversations to engage with politics, democracy, and the news through thoughtful and respectful dialogue. To check out the podcast go to: <http://www.pantsuitpoliticsshow.com/podcast>.*

# Conscience, Candidates & Discipleship in Voting



Chris Stone

Excerpts from “Conscience, Candidates and Discipleship in Voting,” an address by Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego delivered on February 6, 2020.

Bishop McElroy begins by quoting Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

*An authentic faith...always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it.*

How do we do that? McElroy says we do that primarily through participation in the political process.

*It is primarily through the votes of Catholic women and men, rooted in conscience and in faith that the Church enters into the just ordering of society and the state. And it is primarily in voting for specific candidates for office that believers as citizens have the greatest opportunity to leave the earth better than we found it.*

Forming and exercising our consciences in voting requires us to look at both issues and candidates.

*Much focus is placed on individual policy issues and their moral implications in Catholic social teaching. If the primary role of citizens were to vote on specific issues, this might be sufficient. But a vote for individual candidates inevitably encapsulates a wide range of policy options...as well as varying capacities and intentions among the candidates.*

**Issues.** Bishop McElroy identifies at least ten “salient goals” that emerge from the Gospel and the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching that are relevant to the upcoming 2020 election:

- ✧ The promotion of a culture and legal structures that protect the life of unborn children.
- ✧ The reversal of the climate change that threatens the future of humanity and particularly devastates the poor and the marginalized.
- ✧ Policies that safeguard the rights of immigrants and refugees in a moment of great intolerance.
- ✧ Laws that protect the aged, the ill, and the disabled from the lure and the scourge of euthanasia and assisted suicide.

- ✧ Vigorous opposition to racism in every form, both through cultural transformation and legal structures.
- ✧ The provision of work and the protection of workers’ rights across America.
- ✧ Systematic efforts to fight poverty and egregious inequalities of wealth.
- ✧ Policies that promote marriage and family, which are so essential for society.
- ✧ Substantial movement toward universal nuclear disarmament.
- ✧ The protection of religious liberty.

**Candidates.** As important as these issues are, we generally do not vote for issues, but for candidates.

*In America today a faith-filled voter is called to approach voting from a stance of bridge-building and healing for our nation. Such a voter is also called to integrate into his voting decisions the major salient elements of Catholic teaching that touch upon the political issues of our day, understanding that these teachings vary in priority and claim, but are united in their orientation to the common good.*

*But voting for candidates ultimately involves choosing a candidate for public office, not a stance, nor a specific teaching of the Church. And for this reason, faithful voting involves careful consideration of the specific ability of a particular candidate to actually advance the common good. In making this assessment, opportunity, competence and character all come into play.*

**Opportunity**—will a candidate be likely to advance a particular issue? How likely will she or he be to make changes in key areas to promote the common good?

**Competence**—is the candidate competent to carry out her or his duties effectively to advance the common good?

**Character**—especially in a climate of political divisions and degradation in public life, character is more important than ever.

*For the disciple of Jesus Christ, voting is a sacred action.*

*In the closing remarks of his address to Congress in 2015, Pope Francis said a nation is great when it defends liberty as Abraham Lincoln did, when it seeks equality as Martin Luther King did, and when it strives for justice for the oppressed as Dorothy Day did. Let us pray that our nation moves toward such greatness in this election year, and that faith-filled prudent disciples are leading the way.*

▲ The full text of Bishop McElroy’s talk can be found at <https://www.sdccatholic.org/bishops/bishop-mcelroy/conscience-candidates-and-discipleship-in-voting/>.



## ► Gratitude

Patty Bowman, IPJC's Executive Director, will retire this summer. Our IPJC Community has been blessed by Patty's welcoming and collaborative spirit. Her commitment to the church and passion for justice and our Earth have enriched all of us. We thank Patty for her contributions to IPJC and wish her blessings in her new ventures.

Sister Judy Byron will serve as Interim Executive Director while the Board searches for a new director.

## ► IPJC Works Remotely

During the COVID-19 pandemic, IPJC found creative ways to build community and create change:

- NWCRI has been calling on CEO's to lead their companies for *all* of their stakeholders—employees, suppliers, customers, and communities.
- Pharmaceutical companies: urging collaboration and urgency in testing, treatments and vaccines.
- Walmart and Tyson Foods: proposing steps to ensure the health and wellbeing of frontline workers in essential industries.
- Apparel brands sourcing in Bangladesh: urging prompt payment to suppliers for existing orders and prioritizing worker health and safety.
- Online Young Adult Justice Cafés and Happy Hours.
- Collaborated with Catholic Climate Covenant to encourage virtual celebrations of Earth Day.
- Virtual training for Women's Justice Circle facilitators.
- Advocacy for undocumented persons and those not included in federal economic stimulus packages, and for health and safety protections for farmworkers.

How are you working for justice online? Please let us know how we can support you.

## ► Donations

**In Honor of:** Kit McGarry, NWCRI, Martin Luther King Jr.

**In Memory of:** Paula Ann Boyd



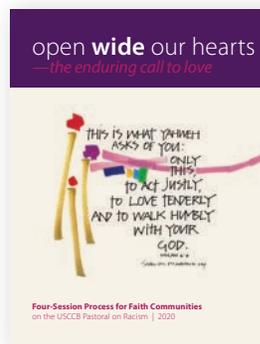
Patty Bowman at the Immigration Summit at Seattle University

## ► Take Action

The 2020 Census is happening now. Responding to the census is your civic duty. You can complete your questionnaire by phone (844-330-2020), mail, or online at [my2020census.gov/](http://my2020census.gov/)

- The 2020 Census questionnaire will take about 10 minutes to complete.
- It's safe, secure, and confidential. Your information and privacy are protected.
- Your response helps to direct billions of dollars in federal funds to local communities for schools, roads, and other public services.
- Results from the 2020 Census will be used to determine the number of seats each state has in Congress and your political representation at all levels of government.

## ► Timely Publication



IPJC's new publication, **Open Wide Our Hearts—the enduring call to love**, on the USCCB Pastoral on Racism, is a helpful resource for individuals and groups who want to consider how racism is evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Cost:** \$5 + postage per copy  
**Contact IPJC**

**Justice for Women 20th Anniversary Booklet.**  
Contact IPJC if you would like a copy.

# PEACE & JUSTICE CENTER

NEWS • ANNOUNCEMENTS • UPCOMING EVENTS

## Dear Friends of IPJC

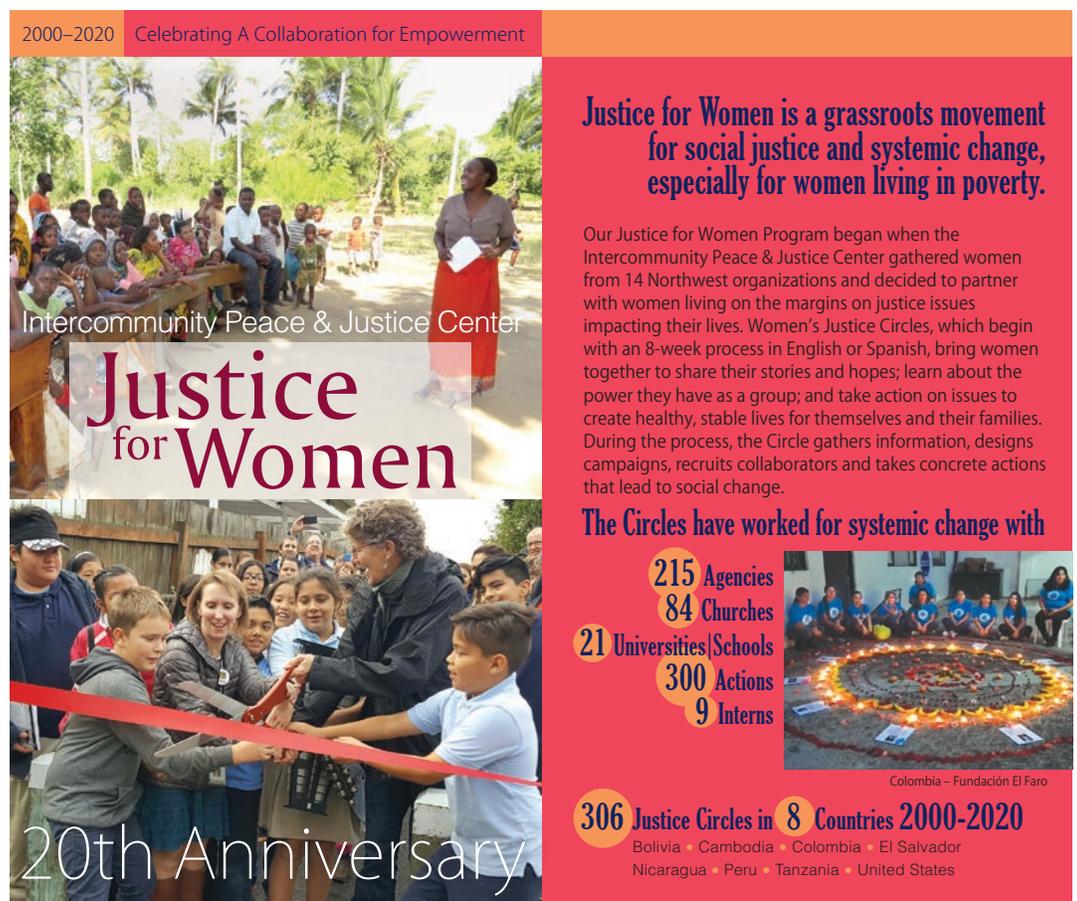
We are holding each of you in our prayers, hoping that you and your loved ones are safe and well. As our nation and world have been grappling with the coronavirus pandemic over the last few months, we have been experiencing *Grace on the Margins*—God present in the least expected places, working together with humanity to transform our world.

Due to the stay-at-home order, we had to cancel our Spring Benefit dinner. We always look forward to gathering with our IPJC community, and we will miss seeing you. At the Benefit, we had planned to celebrate the **20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our Justice for Women Program**, a grassroots movement for social justice and systemic change with women living on the margins.

## We invite you to experience *Grace on the Margins*!

- From Tacoma to Tanzania, the Northwest to New Jersey, in 72 cities and 8 countries women have gathered in Justice Circles!
- Changes in housing, transportation, education, healthcare access, and social service systems have resulted because of the Circles!
- Over 300 groups have collaborated with us in a common vision for the common good!

We are full of gratitude for all the women through the years who have developed their leadership skills and taken action, in over 300 Justice Circles to create healthy, stable lives for themselves, their families and their communities.



2000–2020 Celebrating A Collaboration for Empowerment

Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center

**Justice for Women**

**20th Anniversary**

**Justice for Women is a grassroots movement for social justice and systemic change, especially for women living in poverty.**

Our Justice for Women Program began when the Intercommunity Peace & Justice Center gathered women from 14 Northwest organizations and decided to partner with women living on the margins on justice issues impacting their lives. Women's Justice Circles, which begin with an 8-week process in English or Spanish, bring women together to share their stories and hopes; learn about the power they have as a group; and take action on issues to create healthy, stable lives for themselves and their families. During the process, the Circle gathers information, designs campaigns, recruits collaborators and takes concrete actions that lead to social change.

**The Circles have worked for systemic change with**

- 215 Agencies
- 84 Churches
- 21 Universities | Schools
- 300 Actions
- 9 Interns

Colombia – Fundación El Faro

**306 Justice Circles in 8 Countries 2000-2020**

Bolivia • Cambodia • Colombia • El Salvador  
Nicaragua • Peru • Tanzania • United States

**Your support and collaboration with IPJC has made this possible.  
Thank you!**



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## Reflection

**Individually, or as group, read and reflect on this issue of *A Matter of Spirit*.**

**Leader:** As we begin our reflection, let us ask God to open our hearts to one another in dialogue. Together may we commit to be responsible citizens and participate fully in our 2020 elections.

- 1.) Gretchen Gundrum explores the thought echoed in Bishop Robert McElroy's address, "Conscience, Candidates and Discipleship in Voting." How can we see voting as sacred, as a moral act to uphold the greater good?
- 2.) Troy Medlin invites us to imagine "the world as it should be." How can political participation create a space for reimagining a better world for future generations? Young voters will inherit the world we are shaping now; how can we encourage young voters to engage in the political process?
- 3.) Christina Steffy points out that many of us, through information sharing, create our own echo chambers. How can we cultivate self-awareness around our biases and create constructive dialogue with those who might not share our point-of-view?
- 4.) Tricia Hoyt shares her story about her pathway to citizenship and voting. What new insights did you gain about the immigration process in the US? How can we use our power or privilege to advocate for those who cannot vote?
- 5.) Mohit Nair proposes to eradicate gerrymandering and voter suppression through proportional representation. Where do you see problems in our electoral system? Do you see proportional representation as a solution? What other solutions would you like to explore?
- 6.) Beth Silvers and Sarah Stewart Holland call for more political grace in our discourse. Where do we see grace lived out in our daily lives? How can we infuse both grace and civility into our conversations? How can we encourage grace-filled dialogue with those with whom we disagree?

**Leader:** Let us close our reflection with prayer:

*May each of us come to understand that, ultimately, "my" experience of freedom, justice and peace is inextricably linked to the freedom, justice and peace of every other person in our county and city, our country and our world. May we open our eyes to the invisible lines of connection that unite us, and with clarity of vision, continue to work for a world where every person's life is valued, cherished and loved. Amen.*

—Rabbi Andrea Goldstein