

Public Policy Focus from Dr. Peter Bakken

We Speak Thriving – Not Hunger

February 25, 2019

Sunday through Tuesday of this week, 1100 persons from across the U.S. are gathering at the annual Anti-Hunger Policy Conference sponsored by Feeding America and the Food Research and Action Center in Washington, D.C. to learn, network, build advocacy skills, and lobby in pursuit of a common goal – ending hunger.



Workshops I attended the first day of the conference addressed some thorny questions for anti-hunger advocates: How can we help the voices of those who have had to rely on food pantries and government safety net programs to be heard by lawmakers – to be advocates with them, rather than only advocates for them? How can we speak effectively to media outlets or policymakers who don't share our views on the root causes of hunger and the role of government in addressing it? How can we mobilize swift and powerful responses to damaging policy proposals – and what do we mean by “success” and how do we measure it?



At lunch, Lisa Blunt Rochester, Delaware's first woman and the first African American elected to Congress, gave what many called the best AHPC keynote ever. She was funny, heartbreaking, triumphant and inspiring as she spoke of her path to Congress – her first elected office – and her role in fighting for a Farm Bill that would help, not punish, people dealing with both joblessness and hunger. She revealed her personal grounding in faith in her comments on her sense of vocation and what keeps her going —and when she led the audience in the sort of call-and-response of her own church's worship tradition: “We're not going back — because I've got your back!”

A comment the congresswoman made during the Q & A has stuck with me: “We don't speak hunger, we speak thriving.” That is an antidote to the cynicism and even despair that can come from a seemingly interminable struggle against human suffering. It affirms the essentially positive, hopeful vision – the “holy imagination” – of human well-being that drives, I believe, everyone who gives to a food pantry or writes to their elected official or is in any other way involved in the fight against hunger.

And it also acknowledges that “people do not live by bread alone” – that having reliable access to enough nutritious food is bound up with other facets of human thriving including health, growth, work, play, family, faith, community, and connectedness to creation. Our faith as Christians tells us – and we are not alone in this – that this is what God wills for all people, and that in serving God by loving our neighbor, our own lives are enlarged and enriched.



On Monday and Tuesday, together with several others from our state, I will be visiting the offices of Wisconsin's congressional delegation. You can join us in advocating for our hungry neighbors – children, seniors, veterans, seniors, people with disabilities, working families, jobless adults, and others – through the WCC's Legislative Alert Center.

People of Faith paying attention – even in primary elections!

August 10, 2018

When I was living in Chicago in the mid-1980's, I learned what sociologist Robert Bellah meant when he said “Democracy means paying attention.”

Adlai Stevenson, III, won the 1986 Democratic primary for Illinois governor. However, the candidate meant to be his running mate in the general election lost to that of the far-right “National Democratic Policy Committee” affiliated with extremist Lyndon Larouche. As a result, Stevenson and his chosen candidate for Lieutenant Governor had to run on the ticket of a third party, the “Illinois Solidarity Party,” created for that specific purpose.

As Stevenson’s opponent, Gov. Jim Thompson, said, “This is insane. It’s going to be a very long year.”

Many explanations for the upset were offered – including low voter turnout, party overconfidence, unfamiliarity with the candidates, and even the perceived ethnicity of their names. But to me, it mostly boils down to voters’ failure to pay enough attention.

While there is no reason to expect anything like that to happen in this year’s Wisconsin’s primaries, it’s a good lesson to keep in mind. Primary elections are important. They draw far fewer voters than general elections, but they deserve as much attention, for they can set the tone – and the stakes – for the general election.

Wisconsin’s 2018 Partisan Primary is Tuesday August 14. Offices on the ballot are Governor, US Senator, US Representative, odd-numbered Wisconsin State Senate seats, and all Wisconsin Assembly seats. Your polling place will be open from 7 am to 8 pm. Have you set aside time to vote?

As people of faith, we need to pay attention to the choices that will affect our communities, our natural heritage, and our neighbors – especially children, seniors, those struggling with hunger or poverty, and other vulnerable populations.

But paying attention is only the first step. We also need to take action by using the means and opportunities we have to help our communities, our neighbors, and our fellow creatures thrive. For many, if not most of us, that includes the ability to vote, to assist others in voting, and to use our vote to ensure justice for everyone, including the disenfranchised.

Living in a democracy is a precious gift, exceedingly rare when viewed from the perspective of world history. As Christians, we understand ourselves to be stewards of the gifts God has given us. With the gift of the right to participate in the political process – of which voting is one (but only one) form — comes the responsibility to exercise that gift on behalf of the common good.

You can learn how to grow as a steward of the gift of the right to vote with [resources from the WCC](#), [the Episcopal Church](#), [the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#), and [the United Church of Christ](#). (And please let us know if your denomination has voting resources we can share.)

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

May 31, 2018

Everyone concerned about hunger and poverty in our communities should keep an eye on Congress this June. The Farm Bill, which funds important nutrition programs, will continue to move through the legislative process. At stake is the well-being of children, seniors, people with disabilities, working families, veterans, and others struggling with hunger and poverty.

FoodShare is Wisconsin’s name for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly “food stamps”), which is funded through the Farm Bill. Over 700,000 people in Wisconsin rely on

In Wisconsin, you have the right to leave work to vote!



- * you must tell your employer at least a day in advance
- * you can take up to 3 hours of unpaid time
- * your employer can set the time for you to leave work

It's the Law.
WI State Statute 6.76



FoodShare to help them get the food they need to live healthy and productive lives. The House version of the Farm Bill, if passed, would make changes to the program that would result in 75,700 Wisconsinites, including nearly 23,500 children, losing their food assistance. Those children would probably lose their free or reduced school lunches as well.

The House failed to pass its version on May 18, but is expected to try again in the next few weeks. The Senate's version is expected to come out in early June, and is expected to be much less harsh. On May 16, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, together with the [Lutheran Office for Public Policy](#), [Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice](#), and [Feeding Wisconsin](#), held a webinar on the Farm Bill. If you missed it, you can [watch and listen to a recording](#) or [download the slides](#).

Jesus teaches his followers to ask for their daily bread, because food is one of our most basic human needs. And Jesus calls us to have compassion and share our bread with one another as a matter of justice. In our time and place, SNAP is a powerful and efficient way to meet our neighbors' most basic needs.

Please let your member of Congress know that SNAP works, that it makes a difference in the lives of the people in our communities – especially children – and that we must keep it strong and effective. You can send a message to your U.S. Representative from the WCC's [Legislative Action Center](#).

We'll keep monitoring the Farm Bill process. Watch for updates and alerts, and for a follow up webinar, in the coming weeks. **Your voice matters – and your voice is needed!**

Anything new under the sun?

4/27/18

On Earth Day last Sunday, I had the opportunity to join in an open house held at Beth Israel Center in Madison to celebrate the new 62 kW solar array on the top of their building. The array will provide roughly half of the electricity consumed by the congregation, and the congregation will be able to sell any excess power generated to their utility. There were toasts (with champagne and grape juice), a presentation on the project by the installer, and visits to the roof to see the panels up close.

It is well worth celebrating when a congregation commits time, effort, and resources to putting its values into action – in Beth Israel's case, tikkun olam, "repairing the world." But it's also worth celebrating that putting solar panels on a house of worship is not as much of a "new thing" as it once was. (See Interfaith Power & Light's [partial listing of solar power congregations](#))

Earth Day, having been celebrated for nearly a half-century, is itself no longer a "new thing." The struggle continues for a more viable way of living within the limits of creation's life-support systems, and in caring and respectful relations within the community of earth's creature.

What may feel new is the intensity of efforts at the state and federal level to roll back many of the environmental protections and initiatives that have been put in place, though bipartisan efforts, in the past several decades. (And by "environmental protections," we are talking about protecting human health and well-being from threats like water and air pollution – burdens that tend to fall most heavily on communities of color and persons living in poverty.)

But what is also new, and much more hopeful, is the growth in action at the local level, by county and municipal governments to assume leadership in finding ways to a healthier, more resilient and sustainable energy future. Businesses and utilities are continuing with plans to improve their energy efficiency and increase use of renewable energy sources, regardless of what state and federal governments are doing. Congregations and their members can learn about and support these efforts in their own communities, as well as explore what they can do in their own homes and houses of worship to practice creation care.

You can find a good overview of trends and opportunities in the Wisconsin Academy of Arts, Sciences and Letters report, "[Climate Forward: A New Road Map for Wisconsin's Climate and Energy Future](#)" and its [2017 update](#) (a project in which I've had the honor and pleasure of participating). And you can learn more about how your congregation might reduce its reliance on fossil fuels through the "[Wisconsin Faith and Solar Initiative](#)" of Wisconsin Green Muslims and [RENEW Wisconsin's Solar for Good](#) grant program.

While it sometimes seems that in striving for a better future for ourselves and those who come after us we are daily confronted with just "more of the same," our faith directs us in hope to see new possibilities in every situation: for our God assures us, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert." (Isaiah 43;19)

Let us join in what God is already doing in our world to bring healing, reconciliation, justice, and hope to the earth and all that dwell therein!

After voting – what?

March 27, 2018

Are elections all there is to democracy? Is citizenship all about voting? In even-numbered years in this country, it sometimes seems that way.

News media, politicians and civic groups are making sure we don't forget that 2018 is an election year. On Tuesday of next week, April 3, Wisconsin voters will have a chance to vote on a Supreme Court Justice, as well as candidates for local government offices. Then there is the partisan primary on August 14, and the general election on November 6, with candidates for Governor, state Attorney General, Congress, and the Legislature on the ballot.

Elections are important, and it's vital that we responsibly exercise the right to vote. The outcomes of elections are more than political theatre; they have very real consequences for the thriving of our communities, the well being of our neighbors, and the health of creation.

That is why the Wisconsin Council of Churches website includes a [page of voter resources](#). It can help you find out how to register to vote, when and where to vote, and what's on the ballot. There you can also find perspectives on the values at stake in our public choices, and ideas for nonpartisan ways your congregations can support its members in making informed and faithful voting decisions.

But if it all begins and ends with elections, I don't believe we have a real democracy at all – just a periodic referendum on who gets to run the show. We all have to do more.

It can, for starters, be just one more thing – which is why some (as in this [video](#)) speak of "voting plus one." After voting, commit to taking one more action to influence public policy – the decisions we make together about the conduct of our common life. It can be learning more about an issue and then contacting a legislator, writing a letter to the editor, circulating a petition, joining a civic group, asking a question at a candidate forum or town hall, testifying at a public hearing, or any number of other ways to let your voice be heard.

The Council offers help with the "plus one" as well. You can:

- Sign up for occasional [E-advocacy email alerts](#) to be notified of important issues before Congress or the Wisconsin Legislature on which your voice is needed;
- Help build the political will for serious action on childhood in ten years by [endorsing](#) the goal to cut childhood poverty in Wisconsin in half in ten years – and get others in your family, friends, church, and community to do the same;
- Contact public officials using our [Legislative Alert Center](#) about any matter of concern to you and your community;

- Lead a study group in your congregation or community on [hunger](#), [child poverty](#), [immigration](#), [racial equity](#), [interfaith relations](#), or [civil dialogue](#).

When you leave the voting booth, commit yourself to one more act of public witness to God's will for a more just, peaceful, and thriving world. (And if you can't vote due to youth, citizenship status, or anything else, you can still choose to take one of the above actions.) Your voice matters – and it is needed!

Hunger and Dignity

March 7, 2018

“Those who despise their neighbors are sinners, but happy are those who are kind to the poor.” Proverbs 14:21

At the national Anti-Hunger Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., which I attended with 1500 persons from across the country a little over a week ago, no policy proposal generated as much consternation as the President's proposal for “America's Harvest Box.”

At a plenary luncheon, an official from the U.S. Department of Agriculture pitched the idea of converting half of the food assistance received by some participants in SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, called FoodShare in Wisconsin) to a pre-selected, pre-packaged box of shelf-stable food. It would include dry, shelf stable foods like dry milk, cereals, pasta, peanut butter, beans and canned fruit and vegetables.

This idea was not well-received. The audience was made up of persons from food banks, meal programs, anti-poverty organizations, and local and state government. These are people who work every day to help struggling individuals and families get the food they need. They believe in the human dignity of those they serve. They knew that the boxes, although purportedly providing more healthy food at less cost, would be inefficient, wasteful, inadequate – and insulting.

On visits to the offices of every U.S. Senator and Representative for Wisconsin, I accompanied staff from Feeding Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Community Action Program Association as they patiently explained why the “Harvest Box” is a bad idea.



Assembling and delivering the boxes would be a logistical nightmare for food banks and other groups administering the program. If the foods included did not meet recipients' dietary needs or cultural preferences, they might simply be discarded. Fewer SNAP dollars would be spent in neighborhood grocery stores to benefit the local economy.

The deepest problem with this proposal, though, is the way it reverses years of hard-won progress in making anti-hunger programs more respectful of people's dignity, individuality, and autonomy.

The current system uses an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, similar to a debit card. The card enables SNAP participants to shop for food the way anyone else can, without the stigma associated with using special paper coupons (as in the old “food stamps”). They have the freedom to choose the food that is most appropriate for their family. Even food pantries are moving toward “client choice” and away from handing families a pre-selected food package.

The “Harvest Box,” like legislation that would restrict the food that people can buy with their FoodShare benefits (such as AB 530, which recently passed the state Assembly) is not only [impractical and unnecessarily complicated](#); it is a way of telling people “You can't be trusted” and “We know what's best for you.” It is not surprising that one congressional staffer called it the “shame box.”

Neither the research, nor the economics nor our faith justifies this as good policy. Let's not treat our fellow human beings – made, like ourselves, in God's image – with suspicion or contempt simply because they find themselves in difficult

circumstances. It is not only as individuals and in our daily interactions, but also through our common life – how we implement law and public policy – that we are called to show kindness to our neighbors.

Are you moved to take action? Our [legislative alert center](#) has options, including helpful language for [contacting your elected representatives about SNAP](#).

Faithful Witness in the Public Square

January 25, 2018

Faithful witness on matters of public policy is an important part of work of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. As people of faith, we are called to use our individual and collective voices on behalf of justice for the most vulnerable, the common good, and the care of creation. So it may seem odd that in December the Council opposed a measure that would have (seemingly) increased the freedom of churches and other religious organizations to get involved in politics.

Along with many other religious and non-profit organizations, we spoke against repeal of the “Johnson Amendment,” a law that for decades has barred tax-exempt organizations from endorsing or opposing candidates for public office, and from contributing to their campaigns.

The President and some members of Congress have strongly supported the repeal, which was included in some versions of the 2017 tax bill. The Council signed petitions to Congress opposing the repeal and sent action alerts to the members of our [advocacy network](#) urging them to do the same. We sent a letter to Wisconsin’s Senators and Representatives that was also signed by the [Jewish Community Relations Council of the Milwaukee Jewish Federation](#), [Madison-area Urban Ministry](#), [Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice](#), the [Wisconsin Jewish Conference](#), and [WISDOM](#).

We made the point that people of faith, and their congregations, already have the liberty to bring their faith-based concerns into the public square. We can discuss social issues such as hunger, poverty, immigration, health care, environmental protection, gun violence, and racism. We can (within fairly broad limits) support or oppose particular pieces of legislation at the state and federal level. We can encourage and help people exercise their right to vote, and host strictly bipartisan candidate forums.

But for churches to support or oppose a particular candidate or party raises a whole host of problems. Party loyalties and candidate personalities could overshadow the moral issues at stake in public policies. Furthermore, if churches and other organizations can contribute to political campaigns and still keep their nonprofit status, they could become new channels for unaccountable and unregulated “dark money.”

It can be difficult enough for many churchgoers to be comfortable with talking about “politics” in church without the headaches that repealing the ban would create. The Johnson Amendment provides a bright line so that we can clearly distinguish between partisan politicking and faithful, civil conversations about public issues. Fortunately, repeal of the Johnson Amendment was not included in the final tax bill. It could still be introduced as separate legislation, so we should keep alert.

Our laws – the decisions we collectively make through elected representatives – express our beliefs about who we are and what we owe to one another, other creatures, and future generations. As we look ahead to the next election, I invite you to make use of the Advocacy resources on our website to help your congregation faithfully reflect on the issues that will be – or should be — on the agenda of our state and nation.

The Reformation Continues!

November 2, 2017

The months leading up to this week's celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation have provided a lot of food for thought about the meaning and impact of this epoch-making event.

For me of the most important outcomes of the Reformation is what has been called "the affirmation of ordinary life": the idea that Christians in their everyday lives in their families, at work, and in their communities serve God most faithfully by serving and safeguarding the well-being of their neighbors.



One way that we do that is as citizens – not simply by being law-abiding or by voting regularly, but by speaking out on social and political issues of our day that impact the common good, the rights of our most vulnerable neighbors, and the integrity of the whole creation. The public policy ministry of the Wisconsin Council of Churches is rooted in the affirmation of this dimension of our "ordinary lives." It is part of carrying out our mission for "the healing and reconciliation of the world."

The Reformation created (or simply exposed) deep fractures in Western Christendom, which even now are only beginning to heal. And beyond the variety of Christian denominations in this post-Reformation world, the religious diversity of our communities – including those who do not affiliate with any particular religious tradition – continues to grow.

This pluralism is challenging, but also enriching, and invigorating. One of the most hopeful signs of our times is when people of different religious, political, and philosophical perspectives work together for a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world. In my role as Public Policy Coordinator for the Wisconsin Council of Churches, I have been privileged to participate in many such collaborations – in interfaith advocacy days at the State Capitol; joint initiatives on immigration, health and poverty; and coalitions around hunger, climate change, housing, the state budget, and other issues.

So it seems to me that in the ecumenical and interfaith advocacy work of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, one product of the Reformation meets another. Faith active in loving service of the neighbor's good overcomes divisions and creates diverse alliances for the common good. And as people of good will work together to heal their communities and restore creation – the Reformation continues!

Learn more about the Council's advocacy work [here](#)

