

When faith and politics mix: Inspirational or divisive?

BY JANET LIVELY

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Politics of *faith*. People of *faith*. *Faith*-based initiatives.

“Faith” may be the latest buzzword for politicians and media commentators, but area religious leaders are not necessarily pleased with the way the word is being used. While their own definitions of faith vary significantly, some local clergy describe the current discussion of faith as empty at best, divisive at worst.

For the Rev. Gary Hogue, pastor at First Congregational Church of Traverse City, the generic use of the word faith is frustrating. The phrase “people of faith” means nothing in the semantic sense because all people have some kind of faith, if only faith in themselves, he said.

“Faith isn’t a purely subjective thing you do by yourself,” Hogue said. “It requires an object, something outside yourself. But many people think of faith as an all-internal, individual thing.”

The object of faith for Christians is God, as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Hogue said. So Christians should be called Christians or more accurately, identified as Catholics or Protestants or even by their specific denomination, he said.

Instead, Christians, Jews and Muslims are supposedly grouped together as the generic faithful. But “faith” in cur-

rent discourse has taken on connotations that are neither general nor inclusive, said Jim Valovick, instructor of philosophy and religion at Northwestern Michigan College in Traverse City.

“‘People of faith’ is almost like coded language for people with a conservative point of view,” Valovick said. “It’s the same with the word Christian today. Christianity is a very broad category, but politicians and the media are not talking about Russian Orthodoxy when they use the word Christian, not even Catholics. They mean really a point of view within some denominations. I think everyone understands the code.”

But the implication that only conservative Christians can be called people of faith is both offensive and dangerous, said Rabbi Chava Stacie Bahle of Congregation Ahavat Shalom in Traverse City.

“To have our faith inspire our social platform is one thing,” Bahle said. “But particularly when elected officials use their faith as an instrument to sever the population into the good people and the bad people, the faithful and the unfaithful, it strikes me as neither particularly holy nor particularly appropriate to the American political landscape.”

She added, “We’re a secular nation. While many of us are inspired by our faith to act in certain ways and to be active

in the cause of social justice, to say that if you disagree with me you are a heathen or not a person of faith or a poor patriot, that’s the worst possible use of the religious and the political.”

Exclusivity of belief is an anathema to the Jewish faith, Bahle said.

“There’s no impetus in our tradition to move toward agreement except on behavior,” she said. “Our tradition encourages thoughtful, loving disagreement and many opinions. But we know a person of faith by the way in which he or she behaves.”

Ultimately, it is the idea of exclusivity, not the general notion of faith, which divides people between and even within religions, said David Gabel, who recently retired as pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Traverse City.

“If you define faith as a person’s conviction that there exists a being beyond all of us, probably 90-some percent of people would say yes to that,” he said. “Faith also calls us to service in the community that’s beyond ourselves.”

This is why so many people belong to religious organizations, Gabel said. The real split comes between people who are “open” about matters of faith and those who are “closed.”

“Open, faith-filled people are accepting of people whose faith differs from theirs,” he said. “Closed faith-filled peo-

ple say you have to see faith the way we see it. ...If you think of faith as a spiritual journey, the question is do you journey to open or to closed?”

Despite the tone of current political talk, Gabel believes most Americans, including the leaders of his denomination, are more open than closed.

Not Terry Porter, pastor at Bible Baptist Church in Garfield Township. While respecting that adherents of other religious may have very strong faith, he insists that non-Christians won’t be rewarded in the end.

“I don’t believe that all roads lead to heaven,” Porter said.

“The Bible is clear about how you get to heaven: By faith in

Jesus Christ. ...Faith means believing that Jesus Christ died for my sins, not just believing in a man called Jesus Christ, but having faith that he died for my sins.”

To Porter, Christians should be able to articulate their specific faith and demonstrate it by the way they live their lives. Politicians who “throw around” the word faith, he said, do not impress him.

“There are some politicians who are just going to use faith to get the votes,” Porter said. “Whether they’re Republicans or Democrats, they’re all Christians when it comes time for an election.”

Janet Lively is a local freelance writer.

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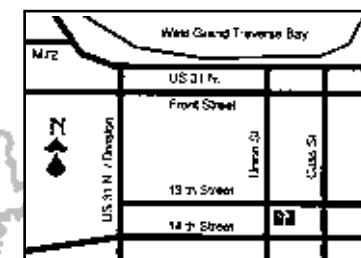
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