

Stated Clerk J Herbert Nelson Post Election Message: "When Incivility Becomes the Norm"

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To: Sara Dwyer, ASC



Advocacy as Discipleship

From the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness

Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministries

Raising A Prophetic Voice through the Social Justice Policy of Presbyterians since 1946

"When Incivility Becomes the Norm"

A statement by Rev. Dr. J Herbert Nelson II, Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) General Assembly

This statement is a response to the violence on America's streets after the election of Mr. Donald Trump as President-Elect of the United States of America.

I read several post-election statements and heard news accounts of violence, riots, and protests while in Central America visiting Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission partners. The news images were shocking to both our partners and me. We struggled to understand the results of the election, particularly given Mr. Trump's stance on immigration, which was the theme of my visit. However, I was not as startled as my Central American friends. Serving as director of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C., for six years prior to becoming Stated Clerk prepared me to understand the outcomes we face in electoral politics. Although I have shared parts of this writing before with congregations and audiences, there seemed to always be a sense of skepticism among the hearers. I proclaim the message once again, because the apparent shock for many has left people raising the question, "What happened?"

I wish to affirm in this moment that many in our congregations and communities hold legitimate fear about their safety and the protection of their human rights. We hold close our Muslim, Hispanic, African American, immigrant, and LGBTQ neighbors, and those from other marginalized groups. We hold close the women who give us life and the poor for whom daily bread is not promised. The rash of hateful harassment [\[1\]](#) reported in the wake of the election insists upon the urgency of the call to be one who "... executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 10:18-20, NRSV). This writing is not a denial of the results of the election. President-Elect Trump is our newly elected leader. However, it is my hope that the post-election anger, pain, and frustration demonstrated on the streets will lay the foundation for a transformed political system in the years to come. Through coalition building and community organizing, we have an opportunity to create a vision of shared prosperity, safety, dignity, and justice that is truly inclusive and compelling to a broad base.

I insist, though, that no matter how robust the infusion of energy into the struggle for justice, it will never be worth the pain, suffering, and yes, death, which will be wrought by the promised policies of the incoming administration. My integrity as a spiritual leader commands me to face the reality that some of our communities are under grave threat. In my recent travels to El Salvador, I spoke with many who expressed fear for their family members' safety in the U.S.; that the violence they fled El Salvador to escape would be brought upon them tenfold if they were deported back to their country of origin. People with preexisting conditions are troubled over what a sudden loss of healthcare would do to their wellbeing. Same-gender parents are rushing to finish their adoptions and secure their rights as a family. Survivors of sexual assault are contending with a culture that would elect to our highest office a known abuser. In this dark night, the doors of the Church are open as refuge, resource, and organizing home.

As Christians, we cannot accept a nation that normalizes violence, exclusion, and racism in our political rhetoric and public policy. We know God has called us to co-create a world where a dignified life is available to all, and anything less offers no

suitable worship. In the coming months and years, "... From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded" (Lk. 12:48 NRSV). We will be asked to open our church basements to late-night meetings, our sanctuaries to [provide Sanctuary to those facing deportation](#), and to [intervene in public harassment](#).

Just as the doors of the Church are open, so too are the doors to the movement for justice. We invite you to join us in our steadfast commitment to stand with the marginalized and our humble desire to contribute to strategy and vision that will help create the kingdom of God.

On the pages below are some of the ways General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have voted to affirm our commitment for a fair electoral process.

1. We must advocate for campaign finance reform.

In 2010, the 'Citizens United' Supreme Court Case concluded that corporations are considered as individuals, having the same rights in the electoral process.^[2] Although corporations cannot vote, they are allowed to contribute unlimited funding into the political process through super PAC's (political action committees, groups "able to accept unlimited political donations"). No wonder we are witnessing so many wealthy people with political influence advocating for laws that cause damage to whole communities of people. These same laws swell the pockets of corporate wealth. Once politicians are elected, their votes are guided toward paying back the corporations or wealthy individual donors through their votes. Former Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons wrote a response regarding the Citizen's United Case.

"I am concerned about the pressures this decision puts on individual candidates and office holders and on the integrity of the election system as a whole," Parsons said, noting that the decision undoes decades of federal campaign finance legislation and "historic Presbyterian wisdom about the dangers of corruption by special interests."

Parsons' statement outlined recent General Assembly statements on campaign finance and electoral form, concluding "this decision is likely to reshape the political process in profound ways, and to reduce the voice of citizens, churches and other groups without unlimited money."^[3]

In this most recent election, both presidential candidates were tied to financial contributions that impacted their political positions on issues from Palestine/Israel to immigration; wage scales to environmental issues; engaging war to peacemaking; and more. Politics is controlled by big money contributions on every side. The Prophet Jeremiah was willing to speak boldly before a powerful institution of his day. He challenged the temple priest who beat him and locked him in the temple storehouse for refusing to retreat from his committed discipline of telling the truth about God's righteousness. He spoke, "I feel a fire shut up in my bones" (Jer. 20:9, NRSV). We Presbyterians who have a history of declaring God's Word must possess this same faithfulness in the current day.

2. Advocate for Reinstatement of the Full Voting Rights Act

"Our mutual responsibilities for love of self and neighbor, peace and justice (right relationship), affirmed repeatedly by covenant [communities organizing themselves], from Exodus to the Pauline and pastoral letters, to reflect the ... greatest commandment to 'love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and neighbor as thyself.'"^[4]

The U.S. Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act in 2013. In a 5-4 decision, the Court ruled that the conditions over the past fifty years had changed and it must be proven that a half-century of advances still placed us in a similar position as in 1965.^[5] The court left it up to the Congress to make the case and sign the full bill into law. The Congress has not made any significant attempt to reinstate the Voting Rights Act. This decision gave states the latitude to engage in racial exclusion through gerrymandering, and to establish voter ID laws (including photo ID's) in order to vote. The same Supreme Court that gave corporations the ability to be viewed as individuals in the political sphere determined that historical protections for persons historically disenfranchised from voting were no longer needed. These types of laws are established in some states where there have been very few (if any) cases of voter fraud in years. These laws make it more difficult for persons who have struggled with the court system (formally incarcerated and those who have experienced police intimidation and abuse) to register due to fear and feelings of intimidation. With the high number of African Americans being killed in police shootings in the United States, and educational and economic disenfranchisement, one can make the case that historically disenfranchised communities still live under a veil of discrimination.

We should have learned a lesson from the voting debacle in Florida during the 2000 presidential election. Hanging chads and voting machine errors in Florida were at the center of the George W. Bush and Al Gore race for the White House. The Supreme Court decided the winner of the election. The outcome was questioned largely because of malfunctioning voting machines and practices that made voting more difficult at polls located in underserved communities. It would seem that this lesson learned in a flawed election would be enough evidence to enforce better precinct oversight, rather than placing more burdens on voters through picture identification laws, especially when voter fraud is not an issue.

3. Advocate for the Full Emancipation of Felons Who Have Served their Sentences

Professor, writer, and civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander and others have documented the laws that prohibit persons from voting. She documents the impact of mass incarceration and felony charges as an impediment to voting among both

current and former inmates. Race is a central theme in her writing due to the long sentences issued to African Americans (particularly males) for drug charges during the war on drugs. Many of the charges in the 1980s primarily gave African American men felony charges and stripped them of their right to vote, even after serving their time and being released from prison. These men and women should not be punished for the rest of their lives after serving the required sentences by the court. Today, some of these same drug charges would not even warrant a felony conviction.

Alexander tells this story to illustrate the injustice:

Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our electoral democracy. Cotton's family tree tells the story of several generations of black men who were born in the United States but who were denied the most basic freedom that democracy promises—the freedom to vote for those who will make the rules and laws that govern one's life. Cotton's great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States, has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole.^[6] Irrespective of our class standing in the United States, we are reminded in biblical scripture of our mutual responsibilities for love of self and neighbor, peace and justice (right relationship), affirmed repeatedly by covenant communities, from Exodus to the Pauline and pastoral letters, which reflect the double or greatest commandment to “love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and neighbor as thyself.”^[7]

Multinational corporations and wealthy donors paid for this election, as they have over many years. We will remain in a debilitated condition after every election until we raise the consciousness of our communities across this country regarding the electoral process. It is not enough to weep and expect pastoral letters from Church leaders when our candidate is not elected. We must vigorously put feet on our prayers and reclaim democracy in the United States. Simply put, commit to capturing the energy from the streets and transforming it into a long-term strategy to change the system, so that liberty and justice for all will have a new meaning in our lifetime.

[1] “Over 200 Incidents of Hateful Harassment and Intimidation Since Election Day” <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/11/over-200-incidents-hateful-harassment-and-intimidation-election-day>.

[2] How Citizens United Has Changed Politics in 5 Years

The controversial Supreme Court ruling has remade how campaigns are run in the U.S.

By [Gabrielle Levy](#) | Political Reporter Jan. 21, 2015, at 12:26 p.m. <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/01/21/5-years-later-citizens-united-has-remade-us-politics>.

[3] PC(USA) stated clerk issues statement on Supreme Court's election finance decision

Parsons: Unlimited spending by corporations ‘challenges democratic ethos’

FEBRUARY 3, 2010 <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2010/2/3/pcusa-stated-clerk-issues-statement-supreme-courts/>.

[4] *Lift Every Voice: Democracy, Voting Rights and Electoral Reform*. The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2008, p. 3.

[5] Ibid. How Citizens United Has Changed Politics in 5 Years.

[6] Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. <http://newjimcrow.com/about/excerpt-from-the-introduction>.

[7] *Lift Every Voice: Democracy, Voting Rights and Electoral Reform*. p. 4/Lk. 10:27.

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