

# REFLECTIONS

October 2008

## "Vision and Priorities for a Troubled Nation"

Faith and Life Reflections are a monthly resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, and social and ethical issues. Comments may be returned to the writer, or to the editor, Mark A. Staples, email [Mstaples@Ltsp.edu](mailto:Mstaples@Ltsp.edu).

This article is written by Mark Staples.

### Focus of our Reflection

This month's focus addresses issues and priorities for the presidential candidates' consideration, along the campaign trail and thereafter, as raised in a letter to the candidates by Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson; Jill A. Schumann, president and CEO, Lutheran Services in America; Ralston H. Deffenbaugh, president, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service; and the Rev. John Nunes, president, Lutheran World Relief.



The crisis comes in the aftermath of yet another series of catastrophic storms that have decimated portions of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas.

And I don't know about you, but, once again, the rancorous political contest all too often seems reduced to a kind of "American Idol" competition that seems to gloss over or sidestep too many complex issues the nation faces at this time. Granted, solutions to such challenges do not lend themselves to sound-bite solutions.

At times, resolving complex issues may be accomplished in more than one way and defy the "quick fix." Clarifying the complexities of the issues before us demands much of those who speak and listen to each other. And the choice before us on November 4 is critically important to the future of our nation.

### Introductory thoughts

At this writing, our nation is embroiled in a financial crisis that is historic. On the heels of a presidential address, the nation's highest elected officials continue to debate the merits and pratfalls of an historic \$700 billion bailout that supporters hope will restore confidence and the flow of credit to American businesses and consumers, and stave off what has been described by some as a "potentially catastrophic situation" that could impact both Wall Street and Main Street. The process involves significant disagreement across both sides of the political aisle about how to proceed. Angry emails flooded congressional offices on the very idea of using taxpayer monies for a bailout if it "rewards" bank executives with payouts that appear to "reward" their performance failures. Economic experts of merit stood on both sides of the issue.

At such a time, it may be helpful to consider a letter sent to the candidates by Bishop Hanson, Jill Schumann, Ralston Deffenbaugh and John Nunes. A link to the online version is below. The letter is thought-provoking and visionary, and appeals for consideration of issues too numerous to detail here. But we can list their categories: Economic Insecurity and Poverty, Global Warming and Energy Policy, Fair and Humane Immigration and Refugee Policy, International Poverty, Development and Disease, and Conflict Resolution and Peace Building.

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In each of these categories, the quartet proposes a series of action steps worthy of consideration. Look at them and discuss them! Now is the time! In addition, take note of how far-reaching the Lutheran network is in positively impacting the lives of refugees and immigrants, international relief and development, health and social service. Lutheran congregations are partners in these endeavors and hopefully not silent ones! For example, did you know that nearly 300 social ministry organizations connected with the Lutheran church deliver \$9.5 billion in services to more than 6 million people every year? That translates to one in 50 people in the United States and the Caribbean. These collective endeavors are all part of our Biblical mandate echoed in the writings of Martin Luther to “serve our neighbor.” And many other traditions have similar ministries.

## Discussion questions

In order to reflect upon the discussion points below, you will need to have in front of you copies of the Presiding Bishop’s Lutheran Letter to the Candidates. You can find it at <http://archive.elca.org/bishop/messages/candidatesletter.html>. If you meet in an adult forum or reflection group, you may choose to discuss the issues the letter raises in one extended session. Or, it may help to divide up the five main categories and treat them in separate sessions, using the questions outlined below or others you choose.

1. Do you agree in general with the priorities listed in the letter? (Economic Insecurity and Poverty, Global Warming and Energy Policy, Fair and Humane Immigration and Refugee Policy,

International Poverty, Development and Disease, Conflict Resolution and Peace Building) Do you disagree with any of them? What was left out?

2. Each category lists “action steps” or policy considerations. Discuss them together. Are they on the right track for you? Why or why not?
3. Take a look at your immediate community and neighborhood. Do you feel impacted by any or all of the categories mentioned? Which ones and how?
4. Do you have a certified Lutheran Social Ministry Organization (SMO) in your region or locale? Other faith-connected SMOs? What services are provided? How do you relate to it? We often speak of “separation of church and state.” Did you know that many SMOs receive government funding to support their missions of healing and caring? Do you think this is appropriate? Why or why not?
5. Discuss the tone and rhetoric of the current U.S. presidential campaign. Do you feel these issues are being appropriately addressed along the campaign trail?
6. What do you think is the role of congregations like yours in the political campaign environment and in the midst of political turmoil?



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