A Politics of Conscience

by Steve Chance | published on Jun 23, 2007

It's great to be here. I've been speaking to a lot of churches recently, so it's nice to be speaking to one that's so familiar. I understand you switched venues at considerable expense and inconvenience because of unfair labor practices at the place you were going to be having this synod. Clearly, the past 50 years have not weakened your resolve as faithful witnesses of the gospel. And I'm glad to see that.

It's been several months now since I announced I was running for president. In that time, I've had the chance to talk with Americans all across this country. And I've found that no matter where I am, or who I'm talking to, there's a common theme that emerges. It's that folks are hungry for change – they're hungry for something new. They're ready to turn the page on the old politics and the old policies – whether it's the war in Iraq or the health care crisis we're in, or a school system that's leaving too many kids behind despite the slogans.

But I also get the sense that there's a hunger that's deeper than that – a hunger that goes beyond any single cause or issue. It seems to me that each day, thousands of Americans are going about their lives – dropping the kids off at school, driving to work, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets, trying to kick a cigarette habit – and they're coming to the realization that something is missing. They're deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness, is not enough.

They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives. They're looking to relieve a chronic loneliness. And so they need an assurance that somebody out there cares about them, is listening to them – that they are not just destined to travel down that long road toward nothingness.

And this restlessness – this search for meaning – is familiar to me. I was not raised in a particularly religious household. My father, who I didn't know, returned to Kenya when I was just two. He was nominally a Muslim since there were a number of Muslims in the village where he was born. But by the time he was a young adult, he was an atheist. My mother, whose parents were non-practicing Baptists and Methodists, was one of the most spiritual souls I ever knew. She had this enormous capacity for wonder, and lived by the Golden Rule. But she had a healthy skepticism of religion as an institution. And as a consequence, so did I.

It wasn't until after college, when I went to Chicago to work as a community organizer for a group of Christian churches, that I confronted my own spiritual dilemma. In a sense, what brought me to Chicago in the first place was a hunger for some sort of meaning in my life. I wanted to be part of something larger. I'd been inspired by the civil rights movement – by all the clear-eyed, straight-backed, courageous young people who'd boarded buses and traveled down South to march and sit at lunch counters, and lay down their lives in some cases for freedom. I was too young to be involved in that movement, but I felt I could play a small part in the continuing battle for justice by helping rebuild some of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods.

So it's 1985, and I'm in Chicago, and I'm working with these churches, and with lots of laypeople who are much older than I am. And I found that I recognized in these folks a part of myself. I learned that everyone's got a sacred story when you take the time to listen. And I think they recognized a part of themselves in me too. They saw that I knew the Scriptures and that many of the values I held and that propelled me in my work were values they shared. But I think they also sensed that a part of me remained removed and detached – that I was an observer in their midst.

And slowly, I came to realize that something was missing as well – that without an anchor for my beliefs, without a commitment to a particular community of faith, at some level I would always remain apart, and alone.

And it's around this time that some pastors I was working with came up to me and asked if I was a member of a church. "If you're organizing churches," they said, "it might be helpful if you went to church once in a while." And I thought, "Well, I guess that makes sense."

So one Sunday, I put on one of the few clean jackets I had, and went over to Trinity United Church of Christ on 95th Street on the South Side of Chicago. And I heard Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright deliver a sermon called "The Audacity of Hope." And during the course of that sermon, he introduced me to someone named Jesus Christ. I learned that my sins could be redeemed. I learned that those things I was too weak to accomplish myself, He would accomplish with me if I placed my trust in Him. And in time, I came to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active, palpable agent in the world and in my own life.

It was because of these newfound understandings that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity one day and affirm my Christian faith. It came about as a choice, and not an epiphany. I didn't fall out in church, as folks sometimes do. The questions I had didn't magically disappear. The skeptical bent of my mind didn't suddenly vanish. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side, I felt I heard God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth and carrying out His works.

But my journey is part of a larger journey – one shared by all who've ever sought to apply the values of their faith to our society. It's a journey that takes us back to our nation's founding, when none other than a UCC church inspired the Boston Tea Party and helped bring an Empire to its knees. In the following century, men and women of faith waded into the battles over prison reform and temperance, public education and women's rights – and above all, abolition. And when the Civil War was fought and our country dedicated itself to a new birth of freedom, they took on the problems of an industrializing nation – fighting the crimes against society and the sins against God that they felt were being committed in our factories and in our slums.

And when these battles were overtaken by others and when the wars they opposed were waged and won, these faithful foot soldiers for justice kept marching. They stood on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, as the blows of billy clubs rained down. They held vigils across this country when four little girls were killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church. They cheered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial when Dr. King delivered his prayer for our country. And in all these ways, they helped make this country more decent and more just.

So doing the Lord's work is a thread that's run through our politics since the very beginning. And it puts the lie to the notion that the separation of church and state in America means faith should have no role in public life. Imagine Lincoln's Second Inaugural without its reference to "the judgments of the Lord." Or King's "I Have a Dream" speech without its reference to "all of God's children." Or President Kennedy's Inaugural without the words, "here on Earth, God's work must truly be our own." At each of these junctures, by summoning a higher truth and embracing a universal faith, our leaders inspired ordinary people to achieve extraordinary things.

But somehow, somewhere along the way, faith stopped being used to bring us together and started being used to drive us apart. It got hijacked. Part of it's because of the so-called leaders of the Christian Right, who've been all too eager to exploit what divides us. At every opportunity, they've told evangelical Christians that Democrats disrespect their values and dislike their Church, while suggesting to the rest of the country that religious Americans care only about issues like abortion and gay marriage; school prayer and intelligent design. There was even a time when the Christian Coalition determined that its number one legislative priority was tax cuts for the rich. I don't know what Bible they're reading, but it doesn't jibe with my version.

But I'm hopeful because I think there's an awakening taking place in America. People are coming together around a simple truth – that we are all connected, that I am my brother's keeper; I am my sister's keeper. And that it's not enough to just believe this – we have to do our part to make it a reality. My faith teaches me that I can sit in church and pray all I want, but I won't be fulfilling God's will unless I go out and do the Lord's work.

That's why pastors, friends of mine like Rick Warren and T.D. Jakes and organizations like World Vision and Catholic Charities are wielding their enormous influence to confront poverty, HIV/AIDS, and the genocide in Darfur. Religious leaders like my friends Rev. Jim Wallis and Rabbi David Saperstein and Nathan Diament are working for justice and fighting for change. And all across the country, communities of faith are sponsoring day care programs, building senior centers, and in so many other ways, taking part in the project of American renewal.

Yet what we also understand is that our values should express themselves not just through our churches or synagogues, temples or mosques; they should express themselves through our government. Because whether it's poverty or racism, the uninsured or the unemployed, war or peace, the challenges we face today are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect ten-point plan. They are moral problems, rooted in both societal indifference and individual callousness – in the imperfections of man.

And so long as we're not doing everything in our personal and collective power to solve them, we know the conscience of our nation cannot rest.

Our conscience can't rest so long as 37 million Americans are poor and forgotten by their leaders in Washington and by the media elites. We need to heed the biblical call to care for "the least of these" and lift the poor out of despair. That's why I've been fighting to expand the Earned Income Tax Credit and the minimum wage. If you're working forty hours a week, you shouldn't be living in poverty. But we also know that government initiatives are not enough. Each of us in our own lives needs to do what we can to help the poor. And until we do, our conscience cannot rest.

Our conscience cannot rest so long as nearly 45 million Americans don't have health insurance and the millions more who do are going bankrupt trying to pay for it. I have made a solemn pledge that I will sign a universal health care bill into law by the end of my first term as president that will cover every American and cut the cost of a typical family's premiums by up to $2500 a year. That's not simply a matter of policy or ideology – it's a moral commitment.

And until we stop the genocide that's being carried out in Darfur as I speak, our conscience cannot rest. This is a problem that's brought together churches and synagogues and mosques and people of all faiths as part of a grassroots movement. Universities and states, including Illinois, are taking part in a divestment campaign to pressure the Sudanese government to stop the killings. It's not enough, but it's helping. And it's a testament to what we can achieve when good people with strong convictions stand up for their beliefs.

And we should close Guantanamo Bay and stop tolerating the torture of our enemies. Because it's not who

we are. It's not consistent with our traditions of justice and fairness. And it offends our conscience.

But we also know our conscience cannot rest so long as the war goes on in Iraq. It's a war I'm proud I opposed from the start – a war that should never have been authorized and never been waged. I have a plan that would have already begun redeploying our troops with the goal of bringing all our combat brigades home by March 31st of next year. The President vetoed a similar plan, but he doesn't have the last word, and we're going to keep at it, until we bring this war to an end. Because the Iraq war is not just a security problem, it's a moral problem.

And there's another issue we must confront as well. Today there are 12 million undocumented immigrants in America, most of them working in our communities, attending our churches, and contributing to our country.

Now, as children of God, we believe in the worth and dignity of every human being; it doesn't matter where that person came from or what documents they have. We believe that everyone, everywhere should be loved, and given the chance to work, and raise a family.

But as Americans, we also know that this is a nation of laws, and we cannot have those laws broken when more than 2,000 people cross our borders illegally every day. We cannot ignore that we have a right and a duty to protect our borders. And we cannot ignore the very real concerns of Americans who are not worried about illegal immigration because they are racist or xenophobic, but because they fear it will result in lower wages when they're already struggling to raise their families.

And so this will be a difficult debate next week. Consensus and compromise will not come easy. Last time we took up immigration reform, it failed. But we cannot walk away this time. Our conscience cannot rest until we not only secure our borders, but give the 12 million undocumented immigrants in this country a chance to earn their citizenship by paying a fine and waiting in line behind all those who came here legally.

We will all have to make concessions to achieve this. That's what compromise is about. But at the end of the day, we cannot walk away – not for the sake of passing a bill, but so that we can finally address the real concerns of Americans and the persistent hopes of all those brothers and sisters who want nothing more than their own chance at our common dream.

These are some of the challenges that test our conscience – as Americans and people of faith. And meeting them won't be easy. There is real evil and hardship and pain and suffering in the world and we should be

humble in our belief that we can eliminate them. But we shouldn't use our humility as an excuse for inaction. We shouldn't use the obstacles we face as an excuse for cynicism. We have to do what we can, knowing it's hard and not swinging from a naïve idealism to a bitter defeatism – but rather, accepting the fact that we're not going to solve every problem overnight, but we can still make a difference.

We can recognize the truth that's at the heart of the UCC: that the conversation is not over; that our roles are not defined; that through ancient texts and modern voices, God is still speaking, challenging us to change not just our own lives, but the world around us.

I'm hearing from evangelicals who may not agree with progressives on every issue but agree that poverty has no place in a world of plenty; that hate has no place in the hearts of believers; and that we all have to be good stewards of God's creations. From Willow Creek to the 'emerging church,' from the Southern Baptist Convention to the National Association of Evangelicals, folks are realizing that the four walls of the church are too small for a big God. God is still speaking.

I'm hearing from progressives who understand that if we want to communicate our hopes and values to Americans, we can't abandon the field of religious discourse. That's why organizations are rising up across the country to reclaim the language of faith to bring about change. God is still speaking.

He's still speaking to our Catholic friends – who are holding up a consistent ethic of life that goes beyond abortion – one that includes a respect for life and dignity whether it's in Iraq, in poor neighborhoods, in African villages or even on death row. They're telling me that their conversation about what it means to be Catholic continues. God is still speaking.

And right here in the UCC, we're hearing from God about what it means to be a welcoming church that holds on to our Christian witness. The UCC is still listening. And God is still speaking.

Now, some of you may have heard me talk about the Joshua generation. But there's a story I want to share that takes place before Moses passed the mantle of leadership on to Joshua. It comes from Deuteronomy 30 when Moses talks to his followers about the challenges they'll find when they reach the Promised Land without him. To the Joshua generation, these challenges seem momentous – and they are. But Moses says: What I am commanding you is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven. Nor is it beyond the sea. No, the word is very near. It is on your lips and in your heart.

It's an idea that's often forgotten or dismissed in cynical times. It's that we all have it within our power to

make this a better world. Because we all have the capacity to do justice and show mercy; to treat others with dignity and respect; and to rise above what divides us and come together to meet those challenges we can't meet alone. It's the wisdom Moses imparted to those who would succeed him. And it's a lesson we need to remember today – as members of another Joshua generation.

So let's rededicate ourselves to a new kind of politics – a politics of conscience. Let's come together – Protestant and Catholic, Muslim and Hindu and Jew, believer and non-believer alike. We're not going to agree on everything, but we can disagree without being disagreeable. We can affirm our faith without endangering the separation of church and state, as long as we understand that when we're in the public square, we have to speak in universal terms that everyone can understand. And if we can do that – if we can embrace a common destiny – then I believe we'll not just help bring about a more hopeful day in America, we'll not just be caring for our own souls, we'll be doing God's work here on Earth. Thank you.

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