

A Perspective from Pastor Phyles

It seems appropriate for me to use this forum to address something that many in our parish family and in the community at large are no doubt aware of and perhaps are also a bit curious about. For some months now, my name has appeared in the local media as someone who is involved with, and is now cochair of, the Granite Street Neighborhood Association. This group of neighbors has a number of concerns about the impact the municipal golf course, currently under construction at the edge of our neighborhood, will have on our health and well-being. I became involved with this group quite casually at first, but soon discovered that what the neighborhood was being told by the city administration, and what was actually planned, were two different things. As I attended more meetings and asked more questions, I could only conclude that something had to be done to prevent, or at least lessen, a quite deleterious and unacceptable impact the golf course would have on our neighborhood.

Almost before I knew it, I was serving as cochair of the association. In the course of reaching out to other neighborhoods in the city facing similar issues with the city administration, I have also been elected chair of a new community group, Peabody Citizens for Better Government. The purpose of this second group is to provide opportunities for the dissemination of information and the discussion of issues in the city, ranging from traffic and development to schools and the quality of life. This group will sponsor candidates' forums for ward and citywide offices and will work to effect some positive changes in the life of the city.

At this point I am pleased and privileged to be involved with fellow citizens who are committed, intelligent, energetic people focused on the good of the community. It has occurred to me, though, that some may wonder why I, as a pastor, would become so involved so quickly. We are, after all, Lutherans, who view the church as the right hand of God and the state as the left hand, and we are Americans, who hold fervently to the separation of church and state. The usual conclusion drawn from holding to both these positions is that the one should have nothing to do with the other. Therefore, why would a pastor (or, perhaps, any church member) become involved in community issues?

This conclusion, I think you would agree, is familiar and held by many. But I must respectfully disagree with it. To say that the state has nothing to do with the church is simply not so, and to hold that the church should have nothing to do with the state is to forfeit both our rights as citizens and a significant dimension of our ministry as Christians. If, by whatever device, the state has an impact on an individual church member's resources and/or energies, the church is soon affected as an institution. And if the church responds to our Lord's call to minister in his name, then the church (both as an institution and as individual church members) should exercise, when the opportunity presents itself, moral leadership and an advocacy role in the community.

We do not often think of this matter in these terms, but there are basically two kinds of service to the community. Using the parable of the Good Samaritan by analogy, there is social service, that is, binding up the wounds of the man lying by the side of the road or anyone else who is in need. We as Christians are entirely familiar and usually comfortable with this kind of ministry. On the other hand, there is also social action, that is, reviewing and rebuilding the road so that fewer or none end up lying by its side. We are less familiar with this form of ministry and, usually, less comfortable with it as well. Yet both are equally valid forms of ministry when they seek to serve our Lord and the community.

There are some extremely serious issues in Peabody that need to be addressed and municipal processes that are not always legal, ethical, or protective of the quality of life in

our community. I hope and pray that my involvement in forms of social action will be perceived as a witness to our Christian willingness to become involved in causes that work to effect positive change in the community. I recognize that, in the give-and-take of such endeavors, I may end up in situations with which I am not comfortable or saying something that I might regret. But, given the basic choice between keeping quiet or speaking up, I choose to speak out and be involved. I hope you will understand and even join with me in such forms of ministry and service.

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