



Faithful Progress

A Newsletter for Religiously Progressive Oklahomans

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What is the Oklahoma Faith Network?

The Oklahoma Faith Network is a statewide group of mainstream religious leaders united in support of liberty of conscience, religious freedom, civil liberties, and strong public education. We seek to promote the positive role of religion in public life through advocacy and community education.

Our primary areas of concern include:

Informing religious leaders about issues related to liberty of conscience and separation of church and state. Working to involve them in the political process at the state legislature.

Informing religious leaders about issues related to public education and working to

involve them in the political process at the state board of education.

Informing religious leaders about issues related to universal healthcare, social security, medicare, medicaid and nutritional assistance for the poor. Working to involve them in political processes on these issues.

Working with the media to ensure that the religious right is not the only representative of people of faith in the news.

Organizing and publicizing clergy statements on important political issues of the day.

Training people of faith to speak with an effective religious voice on issues facing our communities.



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Why Do We Need The Oklahoma Faith Network?

Oklahomans are a very religious people. Unfortunately, the religious voices most frequently featured in the news media and most actively involved in politics are voices that are on the extreme fringe.

The vast majority of the religious people in Okla-

homa are not connected to the tea party. Most Oklahomans want good public schools -- not a voucher to pay part of the tuition at a private school.

Most Oklahomans want affordable healthcare and are not opposed to the Obama administration's attempt to

secure health care for the uninsured.

Most Oklahomans support the government giving children free lunches at school and are not opposed to providing vouchers for food to impoverished families.

The vast majority of the religious people in Oklahoma are not opposed to paying their fair share in taxes to support efficient government services.

On all of these issues the voices of most Oklahomans has been drowned out by the voices of extremists.

The Rise of the Religious Right in Oklahoma (Part One)

By Dr. Bruce Prescott

Religion has had an important role in the history of Oklahoma from the beginning. This series will trace the emergence of the religious right that began with opposition to the ERA.

Congress voted to submit the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the states for ratification in March of 1972. That year 22 states ratified it.

Oklahoma led the way in defeating the amendment. It was the first state to refuse to ratify it.

Opposition to the amendment was led by Ann Patterson, an Episcopalian associated with Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum organization. Most of Patterson's support came from women involved in a Church of Christ women's organization headed by Beverly Findley.

The anti-ERA forces appalled women with warnings that their military husbands would be sleeping and showering in the barracks with women. They also frightened religious conservatives with allegations that the National Organization of Women wanted to abolish the tax exemption of all churches.



Pro-ERA forces had a more dialogical approach. Methodists in Oklahoma hosted debates and invited advocates for both sides to participate. The Oklahoma Conference of Churches, representing the position of most mainline denominations, offered open but muted support for the ERA.

Research indicated that only 17% of the Baptists, then under more moderate leadership than today, and a mere

5% of the Methodists in the state opposed the ERA. Together they comprised 37.6% of the population of the state at that time. Conservative Church of Christ members comprised 5.2% of the population, but even in that denomination 57% were in favor of the ERA.

In the end, it appears that the squeaky conservative wheels in all these denominations came away with the most grease on this issue. Their surprising success in stopping the ERA in Oklahoma energized political activity among conservatives and fundamentalists around the nation,

Ann Patterson and other Oklahomans went on to assist in organizing anti-ERA efforts in other states.

By 1982, the ERA was dead. Three states short of the 38 needed for ratification.

Next Issue: Part Two — Racism, the IRS, and the Rise of the Religious Right in Oklahoma.

Interfaith Support for Affordable Health-Care in Oklahoma

About six months before the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was signed into law by President Obama, the Oklahoma Conference of Churches sponsored a press conference at the state capitol. The press conference featured speakers representing 14 Christian denominations, Unitarian Universalists, the Baha'i faith and Islam.

Razi Hashmi, then executive director of the Oklahoma chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the son of a heart surgeon and a registered nurse, spoke on behalf of the

Islamic community in Oklahoma. "Living by the Golden Rule," he said, "it is a God-given right to have health care. With so many Muslims in medical professions nationwide, American Muslims understand the importance of health-care reform."

The foundation for Hashmi's statement rests on the value of life in the Islamic tradition. "The sacredness of life and the responsibility of taking care of all humanity are central tenets of my faith, Islam," he explained. "The Quran defines the sacredness of each



human life as 'to save one life is as if one has saved the lives of all humanity.' Every single life, in the eyes of God, is sacred."

Continued on page 4

Well-Educated Workforce is Key to Economic Prosperity

For the past several years, Oklahoma's lawmakers have been cutting taxes and reducing appropriations to education. At the same time, they have diverted public funds from local school districts to charter schools, online schools, and educational voucher programs.

Oklahoma's public school system has taken a beating. Teachers and administrators are fed up with low pay, frozen wages, and hostile working conditions. Turnover is high and the quality of the education that our children are receiving is declining.

A recent report by the Economic Analysis and Research Network (EARN) indicates that the policies being implemented by state lawmakers and business leaders does not bode well for Oklahoma's people and the state's economy. The report holds that a well-educated workforce is key to state prosperity.

Peter Fisher, research director at the Iowa Policy Project and one of the authors of the report, said "Investing in education is also good for state budgets in the long run. Highly educated workers have higher incomes

and thus pay more in taxes and rely less on state assistance."

The report contends that economic strategies involving cutting taxes to lure employers and capture private investments from other states are shortsighted, because they promote a race to the bottom which undermines states' ability to invest in and attract an educated workforce.

The full report can be found online at: <http://www.epi.org/publication/states-education-productivity-growth-foundations/>

SOUND OFF !!!

Everybody knows at least one example of an injustice that is ongoing and systemic in our society. Most of us complain about such injustices to our family and friends. "Somebody needs to do something about this. This is wrong!" we say. Then, having vented our righteous indignation, we go merrily on our way. Meanwhile, nothing gets done to address the injustice, change the law or correct the system and people continue to suffer the consequences of our collective inaction.

Democracies fail when people fail to accept their responsibilities as citizens. Good citizenship extends well beyond casting informed ballots in general elections.

Our system of laws and our government will be as good and as just as we demand that it be. Conversely, if we ignore the injustices that we see around us and close our eyes to the systemic inequities permitted by our system of laws and government, then compassion will decline and empathy will erode until, eventually, everyone suffers injustice. When everyone suf-

fers alone, the pain of that suffering is compounded.

Few hesitate to call the authorities when they see someone robbed at gunpoint. Why do we hesitate to call our state's elected leaders when, up and down our streets, we see payday lenders who, with the stroke of a pen, are allowed to exploit our poorest and most destitute neighbors with interest rates on loans up to 400% per year?

Few hesitate to call the authorities when they see someone break into their neighbor's house to steal their goods. Why do we hesitate to call our congressional leaders when we see our neighbors lose their job due to an economic downturn caused by the underhanded dealings of a too-big-to-fail bank that is foreclosing on our neighbor's home?

Few would hesitate to call the authorities when they saw someone being assaulted and battered on the street. Why do we hesitate to call out elected leaders who assault the aged, jobless, or disabled for being poor and batter



away every viable plan to provide them with affordable health-care?

Our system of laws, our government, and our economic system are all under the control of democratically elected leaders. We have a responsibility to each other, to the world community, and to future generations to study issues of common concern diligently -- weighing evidence from as many perspectives as possible -- and prayerfully drawing conclusions about what is best for the common good of a culturally diverse and religiously pluralistic society. Then, we all need to summon the courage to speak our mind in the public square in a respectful and civil manner.

Dr. Bruce Prescott



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The Oklahoma Faith Network is a project of
Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists

Interfaith Support for Affordable Health-Care in Oklahoma

Like Razi, in one way or another, every speaker from every faith and denomination affirmed the sacredness of human life. Every speaker from every faith affirmed the need for all Oklahomans to apply the Golden Rule or to show compassion for all who cannot afford health insurance.

The faith community at that press conference represented a sizeable majority of the population of Oklahoma. Considerably more than the religious tea party extremists at the State Capitol who have blocked all attempts to comply with the Affordable Care Act — popularly known as Obamacare.

Ironically, many of those who are opposed to attempts to assure that healthcare is accessible, affordable,



accountable, and inclusive of all persons are Baptists and other conservative Christians.

Many Christians are puzzled at how followers of Jesus could be opposed to making health-care available to those who don't have it. Healing the sick was an integral part of Jesus ministry. We are also amazed to hear Christians indiscriminately suggesting that the poor, sick, elderly and dis-

abled are responsible for their own suffering. Jesus' healing ministry was often directed to correcting such ideas.

As a Baptist minister, and on behalf of many of the moderate and progressive Baptists in this state, I apologize for the heartlessness and indifference of the many Baptists and other Christians who appear to identify more with the priest and the Levite than with the Samaritan in the parable of the good Samaritan.

When we see someone who is sick, injured and beaten down by life in our society our first question should not be "Who sinned and made this person poor and uninsured?" Instead, our first question should be "What can I do to help?"

— Dr. Bruce Prescott