On politics and power

While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me." (Acts 1:4)

By J. Herbert Nelson
Director
Office of Public Witness
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness is committed to partnering with congregations, sessions, and other governing bodies committed to engaging in effective advocacy work. I have visited 44 presbyteries in the past two years to deliver this message and explain the work of the OPW. During this period, Presbyterians expressed in open forums and private conversations their deep frustration with the vitriolic rhetoric emanating from Washington politicians of all political parties. It is clear that there is little hope for the Washington political establishment to rehabilitate itself. The simple reason is that “negative advertising wins campaigns.” It is incumbent upon persons in local communities to call for civility through challenging three basic assumptions: 1) politicians are more powerful than local communities; 2) partisan politics is a permanent determinant of political power that cannot be challenged; 3) politics is too divisive for our congregations to discuss.

Local communities elect politicians. There is still power in community-based action. The challenge is cultivating diverse, active, and informed participants in the political process. Organizing broad-based coalitions that represent all citizens is an essential key to restoring government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Faith communities must lead these efforts with a moral, ethical, and spiritual constancy that does not push people away who may be politically curious but strangers to religion. Our efforts must be grounded in a community concept, because of the central theme of community in our theology. Houses of worship must be strong enough to engage powers and principalities in this present age through honest and open sharing. We are therefore initiating the Respectful Dialogue Initiative (RDI) in 2013 to initially train Presbyterians to conduct meaningful community-based dialogues that lead to contextual and transformational change for communities as a whole. Our process of discussion and discernment must represent an “upper room” model (Acts 1:1–14) of recognizing the urgency of the moment while being guided by the Holy Spirit. Tarrying with the Holy Spirit is vitally important in this process, because it is Holy Spirit that gives us the strength to discern God’s truth amid disagreements.

In the meantime, let your voice be heard through voting in early voting or on Election Day.