

## *MAKING HISTORY TODAY* FAITH AND PUBLIC SERVICE

Presbyterian Historical Society of the Southwest  
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In recent weeks I've been struggling with what I consider to be an important issue. How does faith inform persons who offer their services in what they consider the greater good of the public square? Whether elected or appointed, I think of those who understood their faith as informing or shaping how they went about their work as public servants. They see power not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to achieve something good for all.

Traditionally, Presbyterians have considered public service as a noble vocation, and their faith was an important factor in their activity. Abraham Lincoln, for example, worshiped regularly at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church while serving as President (although he never joined a church, as far as we know). In his speeches he referred to the providence of God. Woodrow Wilson's father was a Presbyterian minister and one of the founders of the PCUS in 1861. Dwight Eisenhower considered himself Presbyterian and worshiped at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.

In more recent years Leon Jaworski, an attorney and a member of First Presbyterian Church in Houston, served as prosecuting counsel at the Nuremberg trials in Germany following World War II and later as special counsel in the Watergate scandal. In his book that reflects on his work on the war trials in Germany, *After Fifteen Years*, Jaworski refers to a sermon he heard his pastor, Dr. Charles L. King, preached in Houston that made a significant impression on him.

Bill Murray, an elder at University Presbyterian Church in Austin, served on the Texas Railroad Commission, transforming how that body did its work. Barbara Jordan, while not a Presbyterian, served in the Texas State Senate and in the U.S. Congress as

well as on the faculty of the LBJ School of Public Affairs and whose work was undoubtedly shaped, at least in part, by her upbringing in a Missionary Baptist Church in Houston where her father was pastor.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit with Max Sherman. Max, a graduate of Baylor University and the University of Texas Law School, grew up in the Baptist Church in the Texas Panhandle. He and his wife, Alice Gene who was an excellent organist, eventually became members of First Presbyterian Church in Amarillo. Max served in the Texas State Senate from 1971-1977. He then served as president of West Texas A&M University in Canyon for six years. From 1983-1997 he was dean of the LBJ School of Public Affairs.

However, Sherman's notion of public service went beyond elected office. In 1977 the Truman Foundation was established to encourage and train persons for public service. Max has served as a member of that Foundation for 25 years and, with the death of Madeleine Albright, has succeeded her as president of it.

Max and Alice Gene have been active members of University Presbyterian Church since 1983. He also served as a member of the Board of Trustees of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary for 18 years. Clearly, Max and Gene Alison's faith has informed and influenced their work in the public arena.

As grateful as we are for those who feel called to serve in the public interest, what does it mean to have one's public life shaped, informed, influenced by one's faith? I must confess that I have struggled with this question because it is answered differently by different persons in the public arena. I have been helped by words by the late Shirley Guthrie, for many years professor of theology at Columbia Seminary, in his book *Christian Doctrine*. In a section on the Holy Spirit he addresses this issue:

Scripture tells us not to "believe every spirit" but to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). How can we do that? Both a negative and positive answer can be given. The negative answer is that the Holy Spirit is not to be confused with any feeling, thought, or desire within us, or with any liberal or conservative movement in the church or in the

world outside the church.... For (and this is the positive answer to the question) the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the God we know from the pages of the Old and New Testaments – the God of Israel, the God who was uniquely present and at work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and continues to be present and at work in the risen Jesus and the community gathered to bear witness to him. The Holy Spirit may – and will! – say and do unanticipated things that are new to all of us (conservatives and liberals alike), but they will always be new and surprising things that are the will and work of *this* God. (pp. 297-8)

What that means, as I understand it, is that persons of good will, both conservative and liberal, can disagree on particular issues and still believe their call to serve the public good is genuine, authentic, and real. They need not demonize the other or question the other's desire to contribute to the common good.

Living in a time when many are increasingly strident in their views and uncivil in their language, perhaps we can look to examples of those who have gone before us who gave themselves in public service for the greater good of all, and whose labors were shaped by a bedrock foundation of faith. Even in disagreement, for the most part, they still managed to work together.

The Presbyterian Historical Society of the Southwest looks to lift up and honor those saints – conservatives and liberals – who genuinely, and perhaps sacrificially, seek to improve the lives of all God's children.