

Patience and Propositions, Politics, and Poverty

The Budget Pickle: Populist Pique and a Pungent Plebiscite – What is a Protestant to do?

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Adapted and updated from submission to Women of the ELCA – Southwest California Synod, May Newsletter : Theme of the Month - Patience

Our patience with politics and policy is being tested again by six propositions on the May 19th ballot. They comprise a package to address our state's urgent budget problem, placed on the ballot by a two-thirds vote of the Legislature in February. At a meeting of the Policy Council of the Lutheran Office of Public Policy in mid-March, no recommendations were made, but the option of endorsing or opposing measures was left open. In April, the Policy Council decided to oppose Proposition 1D, a 5-year partial diversion of Prop. 10 First Five tobacco tax funds to the General Fund. Check the LOPP website, www.loppca.org, for more analysis and support and opposition lists. There are no good ballot choices in this recession, with the precipitous plunge in tax revenue, and where perfect policy is not an option. Health and human services have already been cut in a number of areas, and continue to be at risk regardless of the election outcome. We have witnessed the good deeds done and the people served, especially children and youth, by the First Five Children and Families programs and the Mental Health Services Act (the subject of Prop. 1E, which would temporarily divert a portion of the wealth surtax approved by voters). These services have sometimes been in partnership with our congregations, child care centers, and social service agencies. Proposition 1C would permit borrowing against future lottery proceeds to help close the current deficit, and if defeated would poke a \$5 billion hole in the budget, further threatening the safety net, education, and environmental protection. ELCA policy speaks clearly against using lotteries for public revenue.

Our policy choices are constrained by a constitutional requirement that two-thirds of the Legislature vote to both pass a budget and raise taxes, a process that has brought us to a painful point of imminent fiscal peril. We have practiced a pattern of public finance which is patently unsustainable. We have imperiled both taxpayers and people in poverty (the poor pinched twice). What choices result in the least harm? Our politics have been poisoned by excessive partisanship and threats of punishment from the left and right ends of the spectrum. An example is a Southern California radio talk show, pitched by a billboard on Sepulveda Blvd. which purports that the show may cause nausea and loose stools. It has pilloried the only Lutheran member of the Legislature, a conservative Republican, not for voting for the budget (he did not), but for failing to support an unsuccessful motion (reported to have died for lack of a second) to dump their party caucus leader who negotiated the compromise with the Democrats and Governor that included temporary tax increases.

As people of God, we are empowered through the promises of Christ to be patiently and persistently present with each other in our differences on issues. As a public church, we are called to pursue a balance point between personal responsibility, merciful acts of charity to meet immediate needs, and public justice through public policy which protects human dignity and promotes well-being, through the provision of public safety net programs for people living in poverty and those with particular needs. We are called to be impatient with the poverty and lack of peace we see around us and across God's planet. But do not be in a rush to vote early. Study, reflect, and pray first. Plow through the voter pamphlet. Peruse the editorials. Please vote, and vote with care, on May 19th.

Are you online? Sign up for e-advocacy at www.loppca.org or www.elca.org/advocacy (and sign up for the California public policy office). You will also receive updated ballot proposition information.