

Lutheran coalition leader lobbies for poor, environment

By: Nancy Crotti April 23, 2013 0

Former State Sen. John Hottinger will never forget one particular hearing on welfare reform. Held near the Capitol at Christ Lutheran Church, the hearing drew a couple hundred Southeast Asian immigrants whom the bill under discussion would affect.

A bipartisan group of legislators ultimately voted to pass a Minnesota adjunct to the federal Welfare Reform Act, making Minnesota one of the first to fill in the gaps left by the federal law. Hottinger credits the Rev. Mark Peters, executive director of the Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota (LCPPM), with helping persuade legislators to change venues so they could hear the voices of the poor.

"Mark Peters was the catalyst for that project," says Hottinger, a St. Paul DFLer who served from 1990 to 2006, including a stint chairing the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. "The church was pretty much filled with people who lived in poverty.

"In my 16 years in the Legislature, it was the best example [I saw] of moving out from the intimidating Capitol to the welcoming church," Hottinger says. "[He brought] voices that were important, were frequently unheard, and were impacted by the policy discussion. He has ideas on how to find people he wants most to help and how to incorporate them into the debate."

The welfare hearing is just one example of how the coalition of Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) congregations and synods from across Minnesota bring their faith-based mission to bear in the Capitol. For 25 years, the coalition has sought to "engage all people of faith in the promotion of public policy that supports peace, justice



The Rev. Mark Peters, executive director of the Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota, has traveled the state to meet with congregations so he can convey their concerns to legislators. (Staff photo: Peter Bartz-Gallagher)

and care for all of God's creation," according to its mission statement.

Peters' career was nearly derailed by having to study biblical Greek and failing to hear the issues he cared about discussed at seminary. Then James Addington, the first executive director of LCPPM, spoke to students about using public policy to address the traditional biblical concerns of caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger as well as for the environment.

"He talked about the Lutheran Church's world hunger program and their involvement in ways I had never heard of — about addressing hunger [and] caring for creation," Peters says. "I remember coming home from the brown-bag lunch that day. I sat across the kitchen table from my wife and said, 'Now I know what I want to be when I grow up.'"

Peters interned with Addington at the coalition in 1991 and 1992 and took over as executive director in 1995. He has traveled the state numerous times to meet with congregations so he can convey their concerns to legislators. The nonpartisan coalition's policy committee, assembled from those congregations, determines its agenda for each legislative session. Peters also draws on his experience as pastor of his first congregation in tiny Lake Lillian, near Willmar, for direction.

J. Drake Hamilton, science policy director of Fresh Energy, a nonprofit that advocates for clean energy in Minnesota, believes the coalition does a good job of keeping that perspective in mind. Hamilton first crossed paths with Peters in 2004, when each was lobbying to reduce mercury pollution.

"We started working together in about 2005 on large public forums all around Minnesota, involved ELCA congregations and schools, talking about climate change and clean energy solutions," Hamilton says.

Their cooperation waned in 2007 after legislators passed the Next Generation Energy Act. Five years later, they reunited to participate in forums across the state on clean energy, climate and health with polar explorer Will Steger. The groups have found widespread interest in the topic, bringing faith leaders and congregants from all over Minnesota to speak to legislators and testify before committees, according to Hamilton.

"I think it's invaluable to helping Minnesota to moving onto a clean energy path," she says.

The coalition is also working on legislation to help homeless youth. When he goes to the Capitol to discuss that issue and others that interest the coalition, Peters makes sure to wear his clerical collar.

"It stands out from the leather briefcases and the expensive suits," he says. "I like to joke that the Lutherans are really dense in Minnesota. You can't throw a rock without hitting one."

An energetic approach

About 800,000 Lutherans belong to the ELCA in Minnesota. Nevertheless, Peters is amazed at how often legislators — not just Lutherans — seek the coalition’s counsel on legislation. He also marvels at the commitment of the approximately 40 interns who have passed through the coalition’s doors since he took over as director, recalling his service with Addington.

“The church speaking in a public way about [the issues] was crucial to just outcomes for people in our society,” Peters says. “That’s why I pay special attention to building leadership in young adults in this work, in making the connection of faith between public service and public witness. They do it as volunteers who are intrinsically motivated to apply their faith, to live it out. It’s an incarnational way of witnessing to one’s faith.”

The interns’ enthusiasm helps to keep Peters going, especially through difficult times such as the state government shutdown and the ongoing, heightened partisan debate at the state and national levels. He admits to sometimes returning to the office from the Capitol feeling “stomped down by gridlock.”

“It’s their witness and ...it’s just this sense that by all pulling together. We’re going to make a difference here. And that energy pulls all of us,” Peters says. “There are days when I exude that energy and there are days when I have to fight cynicism.”

Energy usually wins.

“If there’s a day or any consistent time that I don’t want to get up and come into the office, then it’s time to do something else,” he says. “When I wake up in the morning, I’m champing at the bit to come into the office. It’s about relationships and it’s about being buoyed by those who really seek to make a difference.”

The Peters File

Name: The Rev. Mark Peters

Job: Executive director, Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota

Age: 52

Grew up: Madison, Wis.

Lives in: St. Paul

Education: B.S., political science and education, University of Wisconsin at Madison; master of divinity and master of

theology, Luther Seminary, St. Paul.

Family: Married to Janeen Peters; sons Noah, 12, and Alek, 8.

Hobbies: Hunting, fishing, archery, whitewater canoeing, singing, collecting vinyl records.

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