

# Healing and an Urgent Mandate: *Observations on the 2004 Election Results*

By **MONTE SAHLIN**

I admit it. I was really disappointed by the election results. I thought that all of the indicators in the last few days pointed to a Kerry victory and that was reinforced by some of the early results, such as Virginia and North Carolina being too close to call in the first wave of projections on TV news Tuesday night.

It took a lot of self-control Wednesday morning to chair the Newark Metro Initiative meeting, but being with this group of black, Hispanic and immigrant pastors ended up being a healing experience for me. They were all unhappy with the election outcome, but they were so practiced at being in the minority—having no real control over larger outcomes and a different view than the majority—that they showed me a way to deal with my dismay: They easily connected the Christian Right and its dominate role in the Republican Party with “the image to the beast” in Revelation 13.

The voting patterns clearly show the difference between urban and exurban America. If you look at a map of population density color-coded by Bush and Kerry majorities at the municipal level, the blue is concentrated in the central cities and inner suburbs, while the red is spread across the outer suburbs, small towns and rural areas. (The major exceptions are rural counties in the upper Midwest and the “black belt” of rural counties with an African American majority across the South.) The real “battleground states” are the suburbs of the major metropolitan areas.

The exit poll data are very revealing: The majority of voters under 30 went for Kerry, while slim majorities of those over 30 went for Bush. (Baby Boomers split 51% to 48% in favor of Bush, the most divided generation, as was revealed in the sub-theme of re-fighting the Vietnam war issues during the campaign.) Whites went 58% for Bush, while the majority of Asians, Blacks and Hispanics went for Kerry. Protestants went 59% for Bush, while the majority of Jewish voters and “Nones” went for Kerry; Catholics were split.

“What issued mattered the most to you?”

- 22% Moral values (80% of whom voted for Bush);
- 20% The economy/jobs (80% for Kerry);
- 19% Terrorism (86% for Bush);
- 15% Iraq (73% for Kerry);
- 8% Health care (77% for Kerry);
- 5% Taxes (57% for Bush);

- 4% Education (73% for Kerry).

We should have seen the train coming. Karl Rove said years ago that his analysis of Bush's popular-vote loss in 2000 was that 4 million Evangelical voters stayed home. In the exit polls, 23% of the voters were White, Evangelical or born-again Christians and 78% of them voted for Bush; 37% of the voters were Republicans and another 37% were Democrats, with 26% independents. The Democrats voted 89% for Kerry and the Republicans voted 93% for Bush, while the independents split.

The "marriage amendment" movement brought out the Evangelical vote and this was evidently the tipping point. The tragedy of this is that a lot of sincere, dedicated Christians were manipulated into supporting a political machine that in no way reflects real Biblical values. A "marriage amendment" may prevent Gay couples from attaining certain civil rights, but it will do nothing to change the "divorce culture" or evolving gender roles or the real reasons why marriages break down and the real threats to family life in America today. It is the classic wedge issue, carefully crafted by amoral manipulators like Karl Rove and Ralph Reed to achieve only political outcomes while tricking large numbers of sincere believers into thinking they've really accomplished something.

The Evangelical votes that gave Bush re-election are driven more than anything else by the extreme individualism of our culture today. The focus of Evangelical faith on individual salvation and individual sin both connect with the "free agent" value that is so fundamental to the Baby Boom generation and give it spiritual significance. That is why you hear Republicans talk so much about "liberty" and the "free market." They know those terms connect with individualistic values.

This election underlines how important it is for those involved in efforts to educate conservative Christians about what the Bible really teaches on social justice and poverty, to re-double our efforts. Anything we can do to (1) get Adventists and other Evangelicals more involved in the urban context, or more aware of it; (2) build inclusive, safe Christian fellowships that model communal values; (3) help the twenty-somethings get more involved in Christian social action; (4) educate about real Biblical social values – all of this is crucial to changing the situation. We need to effectively challenge the self-centered religion that pervades the Evangelical churches (and is increasingly popular among Adventists, especially Baby Boomers) and clearly show "the way" of Christ.

I think my pastor friends in Newark have it instinctively right; this is about fundamental values and it is a great spiritual divide. The Evangelical-Republican

coalition is recreating the flawed notions of medieval Christendom. Some of my best friends are caught up in that heresy, and the same is probably true for you. This is not a time to give up or run away! It takes long, slow, patient work to change attitudes, individually and on a wide scale.