Running on hope: Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer

by Amy Frykholm in the August 12, 2008 issue

In June, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, a professor in the justice and peace studies program at St. Thomas University in Minneapolis, ended his bid for the U.S. Senate after Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party picked Al Franken as its nominee. Nelson-Pallmeyer was endorsed by 35 percent of the delegates at the DFL state convention. A Lutheran with a degree from Union Theological Seminary in New York, he is author of more than a dozen books about religion and politics, including Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus (*Trinity Press International, 2001*) *and* School of Assassins: Guns, Greed and Globalization (*Orbis, 2001*).

How would you describe your career?

I heard someone describe me as a liberation theologian rooted in the nonviolence of Jesus. I would describe myself more as an activist academic who has dedicated his life to the relationship between faith and politics.

How did you come to run for the U.S. Senate?

Over the years people who have heard me speak have approached me and said, "You should run for public office." My response was always very quick: "No, I am not interested." I value the independence of my voice.

In fall 2005, at the annual School of the Americas Watch protest at the combat training school in Fort Benning, Georgia, a man whom I did not know said, "Jack, some of us have been talking and we think that you should challenge Martin Sabo." Sabo was a 28-year incumbent Democrat in Minnesota's fifth congressional district. I said, "Maybe." I had to pay attention to that maybe. I ended up running for Congress. Sabo dropped out of the race, and Keith Ellison got the DFL endorsement and was elected.

I became a candidate because I believe that the political arena is too important to leave to special interests and because I feel a profound sense of urgency. Our

country is like a car going 150 miles an hour headed for a cliff, and the best our leaders are offering is to slow the car down to 100 miles an hour. We have to stop the car, and we have to choose a different path.

But I also believe that this urgent time can be a hopeful time if we face problems with honesty and courage. That's what I was offering people in this race—a different kind of politics, rooted in honesty, hope and a call to action. I was very clear that this election was not about how bad someone else was. The election had to be about us: what we are willing to do, our vision of the future and how we are willing to work toward that future.

What were the positive outcomes of your campaign?

Although I did not get the party endorsement, my message clearly won. I find that very hopeful.

We have to help our country transition from the role of being the dominant military power to being a good global partner. Everything depends on that transition. Right now the country's leaders are trying to hold on to that dominant role. The result is that we are unraveling from within. Every effort to hold on to our dominance in the world through military means is accelerating the pace of our economic decline. This is what I was talking about in the race. I was talking about it in VFW halls around the state. Just ten years ago, people would have thrown me out. This time around they were nodding and saying, "He's right."

I would say, "Here's a choice. Either we can spend $10 trillion to import oil over the next ten years and fight an endless series of wars to access that oil or we can build a renewable-energy economy." Everywhere I went, people wanted that alternative option.

I viewed my role in the campaign as an educator. So when I would tell people that we were spending 88 times more on developing new weapons systems than on addressing climate change, they would be alarmed. When I would say, you've got $79 billion and you can spend it in two areas: building new weapons or developing renewable energy. Divide it up. What do you want to give to what? As a country last year we spent $75 billion on building new weapons and less than $4 billion on renewable energy. The people I talked to want to make different choices.

What were the challenges you faced in the campaign?

We started from far behind. We were outspent 16-1. We had less name recognition. We had to build a statewide organization from the ground up. The short time we had to work became shorter when the state organization decided to put the precinct caucus date a month earlier. That decision probably cost me.

We also had a very lazy press. After a debate early on, one writer said, “The clear winner was Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer” and wrote about how you could feel the crowd shift. But that was one sentence; the two-page article was mainly about my opponent Al Franken’s fund-raising. I got virtually no help, even when there was evidence that something was happening.

One of the frustrating things about this process is how little time and opportunity there is for content. In most settings you are given two to five minutes. In my case, the other candidate decided not to debate after a while because it wasn’t helping him.

But my message was: I am not asking you to elect Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer so I can go to Washington and fix things. I am asking you not to support but to join me. What we really need is a citizen movement that is strong enough to change the nature of politics and the direction of the country. It has to come from us; it can’t come from me. People understood that this was a partnership, that I wasn’t a typical politician making promises, saying, “Elect me and I am going to go do such-and-such for you.” What I wanted to do was break down the barrier that separates elected officials in Washington from the people who vote.

There is so much good work going on by so many people: people who are working to improve their neighborhoods or their schools or to end the war in Iraq. In the context of doing that good work, people realize that the decisions being made in Washington really aren’t helping. So what do they do? They write letters, make phone calls and occasionally set up a face-to-face meeting. When we do that, we discover that there is an invisible wall of money and influence that separates us from them.

How did you keep yourself sustained during the campaign?

I had a number of advantages. One is my family—my wife and three daughters were not just supportive, but really joined with me. I was testing what this kind of campaign would be like for an introvert. I was pleasantly surprised by how contagious hope is. The hope I was offering to others inspired them, and their hope in turn sustained me. The network of volunteers and the joy with which they did

what they did were extraordinary. In many campaigns you've got candidates who are overbearing and hostile, and campaign managers who are outraged and stomping on people. At my campaign office, you would see dozens of volunteers working hard and effectively—but what a joyful place!

My spirituality really did help. I was able to let go of any particular measure of success. If I had said that the only good outcome would be to win the DFL endorsement and anything else would be a failure, I would have been in trouble. And I don't think I would have come nearly as far as I did. My attitude was: this is the right thing to do, and I am going to do it with a spirit of hope and compassion that flows from my spirituality—and then trust the process.

My faith is very much influenced by a Jesus who lived in a real place: first-century Palestine, which I think had a lot of the same oppressive characteristics as our own day. I take very seriously his call for us to be peacemakers and his invitation to community. Jesus is a great model of a person who in the midst of a spiral of violence called people to something better.

My Christianity is also very influenced by the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh and especially his concept of mindfulness. When we are mindful, we will be lifted up by the joy and awe of life itself. But it also means that we will build compassion into all aspects of our lives, including the political arena. In my campaign I tried to start most days with the thought, "Wow, this is a really great opportunity, so let's treat it as such."

What will you do now?

I will be back teaching at St. Thomas in the fall, which is something I really love. I will be writing another book, which has the working title *Facing the Future with Honesty and Hope*. It's about addressing climate change and helping the nation transition from our current role in the world to something that I think will be much better.

If I am right that we have only a few years to make the transition that we must make, and that our political system is mired in way too much corporate power, way too many monied interests and way too many politicians unwilling to call for the vision, action and sacrifice that are required—and if what we need is a movement-based politics in which the citizens, the churches, the synagogues and the mosques are galvanizing a powerful enough alternative effort through which to forge a different future—then I think my voice can be an important one.