Holy work in a divided nation

Loving our enemies means arguing with each other about what matters most.

From the Editors in the December 7, 2016 issue

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Rarely has a presidential election exposed such deep divisions. Supporters of Hillary Clinton awoke the day after the election feeling like exiles in their own land. Many of them—especially blacks, women, Jews, Latinos, Muslims, immigrants, LGBTQ persons, victims of sexual assault, and people with disabilities—were genuinely fearful of life under a Donald Trump administration. Meanwhile, many Trump supporters felt that their time of exile had come to an end and that at last they lived in a country led by someone who knew and cared about them. Red state–blue state battles have been with us for decades, but this election felt different, with the two sides living in alternate universes, belonging to different tribes, speaking different languages.

This failure of intertribal communication was part of the election story. Trump's victory caught most media by surprise. How could Trump win (it was thought) after having alienated so many constituencies and been judged unqualified by the major opinion makers and the leaders of his own party? The Clinton campaign seems to

have succumbed to the same faulty assumption—as, for example, when it decided that it could win Wisconsin without directly campaigning there.

The explanations for the election results are less relevant now than are strategies for moving forward with wisdom and courage. In this polarized nation, churches are one of the few places where Trump and Clinton voters not only inhabit the same space but have reason to communicate with one another. They sing in choir together, serve on committees together, feed the hungry together, take communion together. Congregations are also places where people have a divine mandate to take each other seriously enough to argue about the things that matter.

With the election itself over, congregations are in a position to launch conversations on issues—on how to make health care affordable, create a fair immigration system, understand Islam, or protect voting rights, for example. In doing so, they can do something to foster respect for each other's stories and skills in civil conversation—things the nation sorely needs.

We are under no illusion that such conversations invariably change minds, lead to compromise, or resolve political gridlock. These conversations will make some differences all the starker. They will surely press many Christians to explain why they stand in solidarity with those whose life and dignity is under threat.

The Gospel for the Sunday after Election Day was from Luke 21, about times of upheaval. Jesus calls his followers to see such times as opportunities—opportunities to testify to the kingdom of God.

A version of this article appears in the December 7 print edition under the title "In a divided nation."