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## **NEWS FOCUS - Are the Christian Churches key to beating voter apathy?**

Has the time finally come for the Christian Churches in Ireland to fully engage with the political process? And if they did get organised, what impact could they make on society? Asks John Hughes.

In the recent Stormont poll, only some 54 per cent of voters turned out. A key question which political parties and churches alike must pose is – how many of the 46 per cent which didn't vote are church-attending folk?

Long gone are the days when the DUP was led by the Moderator of the fundamentalist Free Presbyterian Church; where that denomination was dubbed the 'DUP at prayer'.

The current Assembly mandate faces the challenge of how it encourages more people to engage in the democratic process, otherwise the

next Assembly in five years' time could be elected by less than half of those registered to vote.

In this battle, the church vote must be motivated, and by church vote I mean the middle ground religious vote.

The DUP is now led by a practising Anglican. Gone are the days when a DUP leader would publicly slam the Church of Ireland's theology. The evangelical Christian vote in Northern Ireland is going through a rebranding.

Fundamentalists no longer dominate the DUP. Even at its height, the Free Church could only muster around 16,000 worshippers. Last month, more than 200,000 people voted DUP. It doesn't require a doctorate in mathematics to conclude that the DUP has successfully made huge inroads into mainstream and fringe Protestant denominations.

But is the DUP going mainstream, or is it a case that the DUP has re-engaged with the loyalist working class by mobilising the smaller Protestant denominations, such as Elim Pentecostal, Baptists, Brethren, Church of God, and Church of the Nazarene?

Perhaps one reason of the DUP's dominance in the pro-Union community is that party's decision to take clear stances on issues such as gay marriage, divorce, abortion and homosexuality, compared to the conscience agenda of the rival Ulster Unionists.

The present Assembly mandate needs to focus on the challenge that if it does not increase the number of voters coming out to the polls, the next Assembly could be elected by less than half the entitled voting population.

Likewise, the Christian Churches cannot shout from the sidelines if they refuse to become involved in the democratic process by encouraging flocks to vote in elections. There is no doubt that the secular society is making advances across the island.

Churches cannot moan from their pulpits and pews if the electorate vote in politicians and parties with a staunch pluralist agenda, while Church worshippers continually boycott the polling booths.

The challenge for both Church and State – especially in Northern Ireland – is to find out why the Churches are not pro-active in the political process.

I don't wish to reignite Church/State debate, but to start a debate on Faith and Politics. Perhaps one of the reasons Church-goers ignore the ballot box is because of the fundamentalist interpretation of the Biblical advice – Come ye out from amongst them?

If the Christian Churches are to have relevant voices across Ireland in the coming years, it must return to the core thought – What Would Jesus Do?

In this respect, the Churches need to adopt the example of the New Testament account of Christ in the Temple when he confronted the money changers. He didn't moan or mumble, but took positive action and physically threw the money changers out of the Temple.

This should be interpreted as Christians registering and voting, as well as joining political parties and becoming elected representatives. This middle ground religious vote is the potent factor in defeating electoral apathy.

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@JohnAHCoulter*

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