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As the 2006 elections near, members of The Interfaith Alliance of Iowa and counterparts across the nation hope to encourage people of faith to participate in the political process in ways that benefit democracy.

The goals of the state organization are to protect religious freedom, ensure civil rights and educate and mobilize voters. Last week, it celebrated its 10th anniversary with a dinner at Drake University and a speech by the Rev. **C. Welton Gaddy**, a Baptist minister from Monroe, La., and national president of The Interfaith Alliance.

Though the anniversary was just cause for celebration, it comes at a time when religion and politics are entangling in ways that endanger both. A controversial new book, "American Theocracy," by political analyst Kevin Phillips, contends the GOP has become "the first religious party in U.S. history" and accuses it of ignoring science and rejecting separation of church and state.

Both the state and national alliances were founded in part as a counterweight to the notion that the Religious Right represents the views of all people of faith.

"There were a lot of people who said, 'Wait. You don't speak for me. That is not my faith belief. That is not the values that I bring with me from my faith tradition,'" said Connie Ryan Terrell, executive director of The Interfaith Alliance of Iowa. In Iowa, another catalyst was the Religious Right's perceived role in the outing and electoral defeat of a gay man who was a veteran Des Moines school board member.

But in an interview, Gaddy was quick to note that his organization doesn't object to the Religious Right's participation in the political process. In fact, he once advised one of its leaders, "This is a democracy for you as well. We need your voice. We need the interaction that you bring."

However, he sees the Religious Right as wanting not only to interact with politics, "but to preside over a shotgun wedding."

Gaddy offered a few bright-line principles for voters and candidates:

- While the Constitution specifies no religious test for public office, there are appropriate ways to ask a candidate about his or her religion. Ask: "What's your religious affiliation?" and "How will your particular religious commitments impact the way you make decisions and the way that you evaluate policies?"

"If you get an honest answer," Gaddy said, "then you know whether in that office religion and religious liberty are in trouble, or whether they can serve as the resources to enable that person to help a democracy fulfill its promise."

- It's appropriate for politicians to discuss their religious affiliation with prospective voters, he said. "But don't even begin to suggest they ought to vote for you because of that religious affiliation. That's not your credential for getting elected to office." Instead: "Invite people to judge your ability to serve them on the basis of your capacity to do good government."

- When a candidate for public office goes to a house of worship, "go there as someone respectful of worship. You ought never use - never use - a house of worship as a site for delivering a stump speech to get yourself elected."

In addition, "You should never campaign in such a manner to divide the religious community," he said. In state and national elections, that's happened with issues such as vouchers for public schools, gay and lesbian rights, stem-cell research and abortion.

The First Amendment contains a two-fold guarantee of religious liberty: that Americans have the right to practice any religion or no religion as they see fit and that no official religion will be established. Today, that formula allows citizens of the most religiously pluralistic nation in the world to interact with the democratic process without trying to force a theocracy, and it allows government "to do its job benefiting from religion in the land but not trying to take over any one religion in the land," Gaddy said.

That perspective holds promise for strengthening both.

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Learn more:

- Read excerpts from the interview with the Rev. **C. Welton Gaddy**, at desmoinesregister.com/opinion.

- The Interfaith Alliance of Iowa, (515) 279-8715, www.iowatia.org.

- The Interfaith Alliance, (202) 639-6370, www.interfaithalliance.org.

interfaithalliance.org.

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