

The Virginian-Pilot

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OUR OPINIONS

A new covenant for social change

A new political party plans to adopt its first platform on Saturday in Norfolk, but its objective is not to compete with Republicans or Democrats.

The party is faith-based, but its agenda is not prayer in schools, or overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

The party believes in managing sprawl, not because that is environmentally smart, but because it is economically unjust.

Empower Hampton Roads does not see itself as a political party, but more as an extension of church social ministry.

But its organizing resembles a carefully constructed political campaign.

Empower springs from crisis ministries in 28 churches on the Peninsula and the Southside. The churches have made a covenant to mobilize behind social issues orphaned by the region's decision-makers.

For many of these traditional leaders, health care, child care, affordable housing, public transit, mental illness — take your pick — are abstractions with little personal relevance.

But the reality is apparent every day in the soup kitchens, food pantries, emergency shelters and outreach programs these churches operate as a last resort for those living at the margins of life in their communities. No longer content with almsgiving alone, the churches have added to the seven corporal works of mercy an eighth — political advocacy. Empower's ambition is to begin changing the rules that bring the suffering to the doors of its churches.

Some of the churches are in tough

inner-city neighborhoods; others sit in the affluent middle-class suburbs. They are from seven denominations and six cities. For all their differences, they share a common frustration with fragmented housing, education, zoning, taxing, transportation, and economic development policies that isolate the poor, making it harder for them to be independent.

Political action groups come and go in Hampton Roads as fast as spring daffodils. So, chances are that this is just one more group of well-intentioned citizens who discover how hard it is to change the status quo, give up and disband.

But maybe not, because Empower is organizing, recruiting and training in a way that suggests it intends to be around for a while. In the past, two years its network has grown to 28 churches. It has taught 600 people how to find allies, research issues, persuade leaders and influence outcomes.

During the Lenten season, each church discussed, debated and picked three social problems undermining the health of its community. These were distilled into a top 10 list for Saturday's platform-building meeting at Bank Street Memorial Baptist Church at 7036 Chesapeake Blvd. in Norfolk. Some 200 voters from the 28 congregations will pick three issues to which the Empower network will commit itself for the next several years.

In a region whose politics are dominated by economic self-interest, Empower Hampton Roads has the potential to serve as a regional social conscience. That would be a welcome addition to our politics.

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