



2016

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Recommended Citation

Valente, Judith, "Illinois Wesleyan Chaplain Says Religion In Presidential Race Poses Risks" (2016). *Interviews for WGLT*. 28.

http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/28

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Illinois Wesleyan Chaplain Says Religion In Presidential Race Poses Risks

By [JUDITH VALENTE](#)



Illinois Wesleyan University Chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger.

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It's not a public policy issue like immigration, trade or national defense, but religion is playing a prominent role in the presidential race. It's likely to become even more of an issue now that Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas won the Iowa caucuses largely through support from fellow evangelical Christians and is seeking their support in upcoming primary contests. Illinois Wesleyan University chaplain Elyse Nelson Winger says the religion factor in presidential politics is probably here to stay. She is concerned, however, that the line between church and state, personal faith and public office is becoming increasingly blurred.

"When Cruz invites people to pray, I think he is misusing his public role as a senator and candidate for elected office. Indeed it can even be coercive to use one's public voice to call on people to behave in a particular religious way," Nelson Winger says.

In a far ranging interview with WGLT's Judy Valente, Nelson Winger talks about the growing number of Americans who say they are no longer affiliated with an organized religion, the so-called "nones," and the effect they might have on the election. She also addresses what she sees as the danger of turning a democracy into a theocracy and whether the strong showing of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders in the Iowa caucuses signals that the country might be ready for a Jewish president. Nelson Winger also offers a spiritual framework which people of faith might consider before entering the voting booth.

According to a 2014 Pew Research Center Survey, 53 percent of Americans said a belief in God is necessary to be a moral person. A majority also said they would rather vote for an adulterer than an atheist. A candidate's religious affiliation was far more important to those who described themselves as evangelical Christians than other groups, such as Catholics, the survey showed.