

Edgar urges move to key 'middle' values: Follow Jesus' lead in working for peace and justice

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Bob Edgar, who steered the National Council of Churches out of financial disarray after becoming general secretary in January of 2000, has been known as a United Methodist minister who could beat the odds.

Edgar began his string of six congressional terms in 1974 as the first Democrat in 120 years to be elected in a heavily Republican district in Pennsylvania. And in the decade prior to his NCC job, he revived the sagging fortunes of the Claremont School of Theology as president of that California seminary.

Now, in a book published this month, *Middle Church* (Simon & Schuster), he claims to espouse the values of “mainstream people of all faiths” that are misrepresented by the religious right. “Fear, fundamentalism and the Fox Broadcasting Company must not be allowed to set the agenda for our nation,” he wrote in the preface, employing a line he has used in speeches.

But “middle” church? Edgar admits he might strike readers as a liberal, a description routinely attached to the National Council of Churches in the past. But his book names the central goals for the great majority of faithful people as achieving peace, ending poverty and saving the environment—issues that also resonate outside NCC circles. “Climate change is the moral issue of our day,” Edgar wrote.

Edgar says he holds conventionally liberal views on abortion rights, homosexuality and stem cell research, but they are barely mentioned in *Middle Church*. Skeptics would note that the NCC generally avoids those topics because liberal stances would draw objections by theologically conservative churches among the council’s 35 members.

It's a matter of priorities, he says. Abortion, homosexuality and stem cell research are "the holy trinity of the religious right," but he figured that if Moses and the Gospel writers did not make those issues central, he wouldn't either. The three issues would not even be mentioned in an "executive summary" of scripture, he wrote, whereas "poverty and peace . . . come up in the Bible more than 2,000 times."

But do mainline churches led by progressive and moderate churchgoers stand much of a chance in today's polarized climate to build a strong "middle church"? "If mainline churches want to get smaller," Edgar replied in an interview, "all they need to do is continue what they are doing at national conventions. United Methodists in 2004, during the middle of the war in Iraq, spent two whole weeks talking about homosexuality.

"Not that those issues aren't important, but they were not what Jesus was concerned about," he said. "He paid attention to the poor, the lepers and the prostitutes."

Citing surveys showing that the public is disenchanted with conservative leadership in the U.S., the onetime congressman said there "really needs to be a revolutionary move back to the middle. Those of us in the middle or on the left need to be courageous."