

Foundations, other donors make NCC healthy if not wealthy: Social justice and environmental work supported

by [John Dart](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

Bob Edgar said he was hired seven years ago as the top executive of the financially bleeding National Council of Churches to do three things: Raise money, raise money and raise money.

Edgar, a United Methodist minister and a former member of Congress and seminary president, trimmed staff and programs initially, then began seeking funds from foundations and other secular donors, rather than only from the traditional religious sources. Now, he has heard belated cries of “foul” from the Christian right.

“Thank goodness the foundations did recognize our mission and ministry,” Edgar said in an interview. “Otherwise the council would be operating today on a \$3 million budget instead of a \$7.5 million one.”

Asked about the current ratio of church contributions to grants from secular foundations and individual donors, Edgar told the Century that the NCC receives from member denominations about the same amount it did in 1969—\$2 million—largely due to the ever-tightening national budgets of church bodies.

“Our royalties from publishers of [RSV and NRSV] Bibles and church school curriculum materials is between \$1 million and \$1.2 million,” he said. “So at least \$3.2 million comes from churches and royalties, and the rest we raise from foundations and almost 13,000 individuals.” The NCC had only about 500 private donors when Edgar took the top executive job in 2000.

Near the turn of this century officials at the New York-headquartered NCC were draining the organization’s financial reserves to cover the costs of operation and debts. But now, Edgar said, the reserves have been raised from \$2 million to \$10 million.

The inquiry to Edgar was made partly because the NCC's persistent critic, the Institute on Religion and Democracy, recently announced that the NCC "for the first time" in its history was receiving the majority of its operating income from nonchurch sources and liberal nonprofits.

Another reason for checking the NCC's financial situation is that the ecumenical umbrella organization of 35 denominations will have to find Edgar's replacement before the end of 2007. Edgar opted not to seek another term at this November's NCC General Assembly.

"Whoever the council elects as general secretary, whatever his or her passions are, I hope that fund-raising is part of that mix," Edgar said. "We've had a balanced budget the last five years and will for the sixth year in a row."

The IRD announced at a Washington news conference January 10 that its research showed the NCC had received \$2.9 million from foundations and nonchurch groups in fiscal 2004-2005. IRD vice president Alan Wisdom and co-researcher John Lomperis said they found that these donor groups "have very little demonstrated interest in religion beyond recruiting faith communities to support their favored social and political causes."

Edgar and NCC's Washington staffer Leslie Tune sat among reporters at the news conference and asked where the institute gets its money. James Tonkovich, IRD president, said of its approximately \$1 million in annual revenue about 60 percent comes from private donors and about 40 percent from mostly conservative foundations, among them the Lynne and Harry Bradley, Sarah Scaife, John M. Olin and W. H. Brady foundations.

The NCC leadership was accused of being beholden to "political left" groups and agendas. But Edgar said in the interview that "the priorities are set by delegates to our General Assembly."

The NCC has never taken a position on abortion because member denominations hold differing stances, and the council has avoided some other touchy issues as well. But many social justice and environmental stances have long been NCC concerns.

While not providing a rundown of the largest gifts from nonchurch sources, Edgar ticked off some gifts and their purposes. "One donor, a businessperson, gave \$150,000 to publish a curriculum on poverty," he said.

The Ford Foundation gave a grant for church study materials on peace and nonviolence, and the Tides Foundation gave money to aid the NCC's eco-justice program. The Marguerite Casey Foundation was among groups that helped fund the Let Justice Roll antipoverty campaign in which some 80 religious and community organizations managed to raise minimum wage rates in five states. "Our work on behalf of families, children and women has been supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation," he said.

The shift by the NCC to nonchurch donors has been paralleled in recent years at seminaries that once drew most of their money from mainline denominations. Edgar said that the council leadership during his tenure actually reduced the amounts asked from the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—partly because these churches were saddled with a disproportionate percentage of the financial support. Officials then pressed member denominations that had stopped contributing to make at least some annual gifts to the NCC.

Asked about his annual salary, Edgar said it has stayed the same—\$180,000—in the past six years. "I've raised the salaries of all seven associate general secretaries to make them commensurate with the cost of living in New York and Washington," he said.