

Mainline 'quietly effective' The churches' political work behind the scenes: political work behind the scenes

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 4, 2001](#) issue

Last fall, mainline denomination lobbyists scored big in the game of Washington politics when Congress passed legislation to provide \$435 million in debt relief for developing countries—part of the international Jubilee campaign endorsed by the pope, evangelical celebrities and rock stars, plus lawmakers right and left. Working with fellow mainline lobbyists, Tom Hart, director of the Episcopal Church's Washington office, at a key point put together a news conference featuring such diverse people as Pat Robertson, fiery Democratic Congresswoman Maxine Waters of California and equally outspoken Republican Senator Jesse Helms, plus Bono, the lead singer of the Grammy-winning band U2, among others.

"Even without Bono there, we would have got it [passed]," Hart said, "but it helped; he knew his stuff." Other important strategies included securing a Republican sponsor of the bill early on and tying the bill symbolically to the new millennium, said Hart, who says he focuses on "winning" rather than on merely "having an impact" in Washington.

Yet a *New York Times* story touting the role of religious groups in achieving the debt-reduction package lacked any mention of mainline Protestants.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow, director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University, used this story as illustration at a conference on "The Public Role of Mainline Protestantism: Is 'the Quiet Voice' Loud Enough?" held near Capitol Hill March 15-17. The lack of news notice of the mainline over the last 20 years has been matched by academia's lack of interest, he said, noting the plethora of books on the Religious Right and the relative paucity of studies on the mainline.

To determine whether mainliners were slipping in social service and advocacy, Wuthnow assembled a team of a dozen researchers with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Findings will be published next year by the University of California Press. The recent conference, handled by the Aspen Institute, looked at mainline Protestant roles even as Congress and the White House were creating a new chapter in the story with the discussion of faith-based social initiatives.

The study's main conclusion, according to Wuthnow, is that "mainline churches have been doing a reasonably good job of working quietly, behind the scenes [and] out of the public eye." They also have a positive self-appraisal. One-third think the public influence of their denominations is stronger than a generation ago, and another third feel it has held constant—despite the shrinking of church membership in that time, said Wuthnow. "Only 24 percent say it is weaker."

About 22 million people belong to the six largest mainline denominations studied: United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, American Baptist and United Church of Christ. Wuthnow said they collectively take in more than \$11 billion a year; property is valued at \$63 billion; pensions funds are at \$32 billion. They have 75,000 congregations and 72,000 well-educated clergy. As such, they "command significant financial and institutional resources," which gives mainline Protestantism a potential beyond its size, Wuthnow said.

In addition, mainline churches at local and national levels are more likely than evangelical and Catholic churches to collaborate with varied religious and secular organizations. That characteristic greatly multiplies the mainline's service and social voice, said several speakers. "There is a distinct care for the common good in mainline churches which our culture desperately needs," said James P. Wind, president of the Alban Institute.

First things first, however, said sociologist Nancy Ammerman of Hartford Seminary. "Most churches do not exist primarily as social service agencies or policy advocates—in spite of the apparent wishes of some politicians, theologians and church bureaucrats," she said. All Christian churches, including mainline ones, put top priority on "the spiritual life and fellowship of the congregation itself."

The congregations most likely to say they support social change, service to the poor and needy, and cooperation with others to improve the community were neither white mainline nor evangelical churches, but African-American churches, with

Catholics not far behind, Ammerman said. But when it comes to actual involvement with other community organizations, she said, the mainline congregations stand out. Mainline Protestants are “roughly twice as active” in such things as cooking at a soup kitchen or joining a walk against hunger or AIDS.

In addition, 80 percent of mainline congregations have at least one outside organization that uses space in their buildings, either donated or rented at minimal cost. “On average, in fact, there are nearly four such organizations for every congregation,” she said.

According to Ammerman, the bigger budget a local mainline church has, the more “connections” it is likely to form. But merely “being part of the mainline tradition has the single biggest effect on the number of connections,” she said. One outstanding example: 41 percent of the mainline churches interviewed had some connection to Habitat for Humanity, compared to 33 percent of Catholic parishes and 11 percent of conservative Protestant churches.

But on issues of social justice, many mainline congregations “have turned inward,” said Wuthnow. “Members like the warm fuzzies they get worshipping with their friends; they could care less about national issues.”

Of all the issues in the study, addressing racial discrimination was the one in which the largely white mainline congregations “had had the least success,” he said.

That finding was ironic, he said, in light of the lip service the mainline churches pay to racial equality. Wuthnow said reasons for the failure were complex. But he suggested that a big factor was an attitude of doing something for nonwhite groups rather than partnering with minority churches, “working alongside them and learning from them.”

If many mainline congregations are dismayed by the denominational battles over the place of gays and lesbians in church life, one researcher offered a fresh view. Wendy Cadge, a graduate student at Princeton, said years of controversy over gay ordination and blessings of same-sex couples have provided a valuable service to and example for the wider public. “No American institution that I can think of has gone so long listening to opponents and proponents, and maintaining a range of perspectives,” Cadge said.

“I disagree with those who see the issue as a sign of mainline churches’ weakness or who believe that the churches are spending an unnecessary amount of time on the subject,” she said. With the commitment to stay in dialogue, the churches have “granted legitimacy to all sides of the debate.” While conceding that the disagreements have led to membership losses, the denominations so far have avoided major splits, she said.

After listening to Cadge’s presentation, Mark Tammen, an official at Presbyterian headquarters, said it would be “gratifying” to find that outsiders indeed have benefited from local and national church wrangling. “My view is still rather myopic; I dread every summer,” he said, referring to the regular June General Assembly battles over homosexuality. “I feel not pride and joy, just weariness.”

A decade or two ago, it was activist mainline clergy who took risks on national issues with political ramifications—the civil rights and nuclear freeze movements, and the move to make churches sanctuaries for refugees. “In recent years, mainline clergy have been less visible on the national political stage,” said Laura R. Olson of Clemson University. Many pastors surveyed by Olson avoid the political realm themselves in order “to keep people in the pews and money in the coffers,” particularly in the face of strong competition from other churches.

Yet the overwhelming majority of 62 pastors she interviewed approved of the behind-the-scenes work of Washington lobbyists for mainline denominations. “They undertake political work that clergy cannot or will not do,” observed Olson, though she suggested that local churches and seminarians need to be kept aware of the value of these often-understaffed Washington offices. Mainline denominations spend about a fifth of a penny on these offices for every dollar they spend elsewhere, said Wuthnow.

As for strategy, the building of broad coalitions of religiously liberal and conservative groups on social issues is more important than trying to mobilize thousands of constituents on the community level, according to several lobbyists. And keeping a coalition together is time-demanding.

“I felt like I was on the phone 24 hours a day because people kept getting suspicious of one another,” said Melissa Rogers, who as legal counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee last year helped to shepherd the coalition that promoted the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act through Congress. “When God is

involved, compromise is very difficult,” added Hart, director of the Episcopal Church’s Office of Government Relations.

On most issues, however, the mainline lobbyists are “forced to be small players in large, secular coalitions where religious imagery is not useful,” according to Pat Conover, legislative director for the United Church of Christ. “A lot of the time we are simply adding our penny.” However, UCLA sociologist John H. Evans added: “I credit liberal Protestants for keeping certain issues alive when no one seemed to care, despite losing battle after battle.”

Mainline churches nevertheless have been effective, some say, working with national organizations, such as the Children’s Defense Fund and the Center for Corporate Responsibility, the latter dealing with shareholder resolutions and stock management programs that put integrity and justice above profit. Largely unnoticed, mainline representatives also have introduced ideas of “eco-justice” in the larger environmental movement, researchers said.

Unlike Catholic and many evangelical spokespersons in Washington, mainline denominations cannot always speak with a unified voice because of internal liberal-conservative divisions. Differences on church-state separation, for instance, showed up in the conference’s panel discussion on the faith-based and community initiatives proposed by the Bush administration. At the end, panel moderator Julie Segal, a civil liberties specialist, urged the nearly 70 conference participants: “Please speak out. The voice of mainline churches have not been heard as much as others.”

Ironically, the plea recalled the suggestion by Wuthnow that either the mainline had developed a form of “moral laryngitis” or, more likely, was speaking out in ways that didn’t catch news attention. In a similar vein, *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne, cochair of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, said in a conference-opening talk, “As a Catholic, I want the mainline in the public square more than they are.”

Countering the appeals for more mainline visibility is research indicating that the mainline has reservations about clergy running for office, clergy initiating political movements and clergy appearing on TV talk shows—tactics developed by the Religious Right.

During the conference’s closing session, a participant suggested that a national movement with local chapters akin to Call to Renewal, led by evangelical social

activist Jim Wallis, might make news without raising questions of who is speaking for the mainline churches.

Coincidentally, though unmentioned during the mainline conference, organizers of a new coalition announced its founding meeting set for April 4-6 in Washington, featuring Senator Edward Kennedy plus Christian and Jewish clergy. Called the Progressive Religious Partnership, the group envisions social justice networks in six to ten cities with organizing help from People for the American Way. It began nearly two years ago when retired Episcopal rector George Regas of Pasadena, California, asked fellow clergy to “bring back a strong prophetic voice to the public square,” according to a news release.

In a light moment at the mainline conference, David Devlin-Foltz of the Aspen Institute identified mainliners as “the extremists in the defense of the ‘mushy middle’” and “mullahs of moderation.” For all the mainline leaders’ need to admit their diversity and take centrist stances at times, Tom Hart of the Episcopal Church advised them at least to “play to your strength” when advocating ethical reform. “Some arguments come out sounding like those of a clinical psychologist,” he said. “Don’t be afraid to use your ‘faith-based’ language.”