

Getting religion: Democrats connect with faith activists

by [John Dart](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

Democratic Party leaders and progressive religious activists are persevering in their separate but complementary efforts to shape a connection between faith and politics. This is happening despite some embarrassing missteps last summer by party officials, and despite the November postelection letdown for those religious leaders who were denied access to the White House for another four years.

“It’s a miracle that we stayed together after the election,” said Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, referring to an ongoing “movement” among like-minded faith activists.

Edgar, a United Methodist minister and former congressman, said that every Thursday a telephone conference call takes place involving about 40 progressive religious figures, including Jim Wallis of the Call to Renewal movement, James Forbes of New York’s Riverside Church, Welton Gaddy of the Interfaith Alliance and David Saperstein, a Reform rabbi in Washington, D.C. The discussions, which began around Labor Day, are hosted by the Washington-based Center for American Progress (CAP), founded in 2003 by John Podesta, who was chief of staff at the Clinton White House. The sessions are coordinated by CAP senior fellow Melody Barnes, a former counsel to Senator Edward Kennedy.

Barnes predicted on February 24 that in six months the group will be a free-standing “prophetic faith movement,” according to one participant, Peter Laarman, executive director of the southern California-based Progressive Christians Uniting.

A “next steps commission” was named to raise money for a staff, said Laarman, formerly senior pastor at Judson Church in New York City. “I think it has a pretty good chance of doing a good job with some degree of sophisticated organization.”

All groups represented in the movement “will be doing their own thing, but with a common core of values,” said Edgar, citing the work of NCC-related

FaithfulAmerica.org to “try to replace fear, fundamentalism and Fox television with peace, poverty and Planet Earth.”

Meanwhile, top Democratic officials and lawmakers have spent much of the winter vowing to communicate better with religious people. New York senator Hillary Clinton, among others, has suggested that the party should not write off pro-life Democrats and should support faith-based initiatives that uphold constitutional principles. Elected officials with religious convictions should “live out their faith in the public square,” she said in January.

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi of California announced February 4 that Representative James Clyburn (D., S.C.), the son of a minister, will head a 25-member Faith Working Group that will identify faith-related concerns for the Democratic members.

The group has been meeting with clergy and other denominational representatives to seek their input, according to a memo from Burns Strider, an aide to Pelosi. “More than 30 faith organizations are working with House Democrats on educating people about the negative impact of the Republican proposal to privatize Social Security,” said Strider.

Religion was given considerable lip service by candidates seeking election as chair of the Democratic National Committee. The eventual winner, Howard Dean, said that Democrats are “definitely going to do religious outreach.” Some observers have been skeptical, recalling that Dean, former governor of Vermont, cited the Old Testament book of Job as his favorite New Testament text during his presidential primary bid in 2004.

Perhaps more significant stumbles took place at the party level last summer, when many Democrats were urging candidate John Kerry and the party to become more conversant with faith issues and constituencies. Kerry, unwilling to talk much about his Catholic faith, addressed a range of moral-political issues such as health care, environmental protection, and disparities between rich and poor. Meanwhile, President Bush, GOP leaders and the Religious Right were framing the “faith and values” debate around the fight against gay marriage, abortions and terrorism.

The Democrats twice added religious advisers, then suddenly pulled back on each of them. In June, not long after Kerry’s team appointed Mara Vanderslice, a socially liberal evangelical, as director for religious outreach, party officials told her not to

talk to the press. In August the DNC's newly named senior adviser for religious outreach, Brenda Bartella Peterson, a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister, was asked to resign after only eight days on the job.

Both steps were taken after William Donohue, head of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, fired off news releases pointing to issues in the two appointees' pasts. "Why are Kerry and the DNC imploding on religion?" Donohue asked. "Because too many of the elites running the show are devout secularists who put a premium on freedom *from* religion."

The charges were called smear tactics by many in moderate-to-liberal religious circles. Vanderslice, then 29, had been active in a campus socialist group for some months at Earlham College before she became a Christian through the InterVarsity Fellowship chapter. "I was later in the Jubilee campaign for debt relief, in which Act Up [a gay group] was a member, and it was thus claimed I was anti-Catholic," she said in an interview.

Peterson, who had been executive director of the now-defunct Clergy Leadership Network, a political lobbying group, was interviewed in mid-2004 for the DNC job, and was hired in time for the Democratic national convention. Donohue attacked her for being one of 33 signers of a brief to the U.S. Supreme Court that defended the challenge to the Pledge of Allegiance's "under God" phrase. She resigned August 4, saying it was "no longer possible for me to do my job effectively." After the election she disclosed that it was a forced departure.

"Quite honestly, I did not think to tell the DNC about that brief, which was signed by mainstream religious leaders," she said to the Century. "I did tell them that I had [performed] civil unions for same-sex couples when I served a church in Kentucky. They took at least two weeks to run that all the way up the Kerry campaign before I was hired."

Church-state separation expert James Dunn of Wake Forest University Divinity School, who knew Peterson when she worked for the Clergy Leadership Network, said it was likely that the DNC did not want to have its religious adviser get hit with a second wave of attacks over stances on homosexual issues.

Finally, in mid-September, Mike McCurry, former press secretary for President Clinton and an active United Methodist, joined the Kerry team, and Alexia Kelley, who had worked for nine years for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops'

antipoverty programs, was named to succeed Peterson in the DNC religious outreach. McCurry handled most subsequent faith-related questions from the news media, but Kelley also responded to queries and gave interviews.

“I had particular focus on Catholics because of my background,” said Kelley, who now works for a nonprofit environmental organization in Washington. “I felt there was great receptivity to the work we were doing with the party, and that continues today,” she said.

Mara Vanderslice agreed. She and Kelley worked together for two months after the election, making recommendations to the DNC. “What happened to me and Brenda Peterson was very unfortunate,” said Vanderslice. “Everyone in the religious community was very upset when they pulled my access to the press.

“But there has been a sea change since last summer.” There is “enthusiasm not just about speaking the language of faith but about a robust outreach,” she said, adding that she hopes Dean will hire a staff to do religious outreach for the DNC.

Both Vanderslice and Kelley insisted the Democrats now “get it” regarding religious values, a reference perhaps to the title of Wallis’s best-selling book, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*. The book has given Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine, new opportunities to give television interviews and to sit down with the Democratic caucus in the U.S. Senate.

Edgar, for his part, said he believes the news media have mistakenly focused on the right-versus-left, conservative-versus-liberal conflicts. “I want the media to think about three segments, particularly the middle,” he said. “I mean the middle who normally do what their doctor, president and maybe minister tells them to do.

“In the 2004 elections, that middle group split, but they leaned slightly to the right,” he said. “That’s the group we think needs to hear a clear message on poverty, environment and justice. When I was in Congress in the mid-1970s, the Religious Right began to organize and the political left was on automatic pilot.”

Well into the 1990s, “the religious left was either asleep or focused on branding its own ideas,” Edgar said. Starting with antiwar protests and delegations to Iraq in the fall of 2002, interfaith collaborations have hung together not just on war and peace issues but also on many justice concerns. “As the movement builds this time,” he predicted, “we lower our individual egos and find the common threads.”