

Inside stories: Mike McCurry on church, politics and civil debate

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As President Clinton's press secretary from 1995 to 1998, Mike McCurry was a familiar face on the nation's TV screens. Before serving in that post—what he calls a “dream job”—he was a spokesman at the Department of State and director of communications for the Democratic National Committee. He is now a partner at Public Strategies Washington, Inc., a communications consulting firm, and is chairman of Grassroots Enterprise, a software provider. A member of St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Kensington, Maryland, where he teaches Sunday school, McCurry was a delegate from the Baltimore-Washington annual conference to the United Methodists' 2004 general conference. He also serves on the board of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.

What did you learn about church politics as a delegate to the United Methodist general conference last year? How are they similar to and different from national politics?

I was a little distressed to see that some of the same “red state–blue state” divisions that characterize national politics have seeped into the culture of the church. The United Methodist Church is so big and broad that it reflects some of the same divisions and tensions that exist in the national body politic. There was a difference, however: at the end of the day, we reminded ourselves that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. That created at least some sense of unity amidst our divisions. I think the church has a long way to go before it repairs some of the deep divisions that exist. At least in the church people try to respect those with whom they disagree. There is more listening at a church conference than at a political convention.

You have said you worry that Methodists “have lost touch with the spirit of John Wesley.” How so?

There are many John Wesleys. I appreciate the Wesley who was a radical reformer and who had no problem speaking truth to the powerful. I don't think Wesley would let Methodists sit in their comfortable pews and ignore the condition of the poor and dispossessed. There was a unity to his evangelism and witness to the poor. He also knew that a pureness of heart could overcome division. I don't think he would tolerate those who disguise their interest in schism or in winning the contests for power in the church.

What have you learned as a Sunday school teacher and leader in a local church?

The local church is one of the few places left where you can gather under one roof with people who think entirely differently from you about issues of the day, and still feel good about who they are as people. I have good friends in my church who are way over on the other side of the political spectrum, but I never feel that those differences cloud our worship or service.

Teaching seventh- and eighth-grade Bible class is the single hardest thing I have ever done. Live television briefings with an angry press corps are a piece of cake in comparison. But when you really get a Sunday school lesson to work, the payoff is a lot more rewarding.

Has it ever seemed that your faith was in conflict with your duties as a public servant or as a consultant?

Sad to say, there have been times that I have not drawn deeply enough on my faith in responding to situations in the workplace. It's easy to get angry or dispirited in politics or, what is worse, cynical. The language of politics is also very raw, and I catch myself slipping into vulgarity far too easily. The hardest thing in my work is to find honest, genuine ways to express faith, profess it and live it.

Did you ever struggle as a Christian during President Clinton's personal difficulties?

Of course. Especially after he came to us and said he had misled us. It took some time and some prayer to find the right way to deal with it. I also had a struggle dealing with the real hurt that I saw Mrs. Clinton suffer.

Do you think Democrats are not aggressive enough in their criticisms of President Bush?

No. I think there is too much aggressive criticism in politics. There needs to be more inspiration. I think we Democrats won't have much chance to win national elections until we can offer a more vibrant and compelling vision of what America can and should be. We are good at saying what we are against but less successful in defining what we are for.

What might the Kerry campaign have done differently?

We should have recognized that a vast universe of new communities was springing up in the far outskirts of suburbia and that people were coming together in those communities in new ways. We concentrated on the traditional sources of strength for the Democratic Party and missed the opportunity to engage some of these transplanted voters in their new homes. In that sense, we are not unlike the old mainline denominations that have failed to see and understand the emerging megachurches in these very same communities.

Those fast-growing "exurb" areas now tend to be heavily Republican. As a political strategist, how do you think they can be reached?

They are Republican because the Democrats did not show up and suit up. I think many of these areas were off our radar because we did not send organizers out there to talk to community leaders and invite them in. Many of these "exurb" voters went Republican only because they didn't know that Democrats cared about them, too.

Is there a "values gap" between the two parties?

The two parties apply their values to critical issues in different ways. I certainly would not cede "values" to the Republicans, although I would have to say that they have found a better vocabulary to express their values. We Democrats have a rich moral vocabulary of our own, and we are rediscovering it.

On what issues should Christians be taking a public stand?

What are we doing to take care of the sick, the poor, the lonely, the imprisoned? What are we doing to make peace, not war? What are we doing to help ensure that the last shall be first? I don't remember Jesus teaching much of anything about

homosexuals, but I do remember him calling us always to think about those with the least. Maybe one thing we should do is to remind one another that “Christian teaching” is much broader than the way it is being defined in some of our debates.

Given the prominence of attack ads, the erosion of privacy, the reduction of issues to sound bites, what would you say to a young person considering a career in politics?

Right now I would steer young people away from elective politics and campaigns, and toward other forms of public service. I would also work harder to develop programs that help our young people learn about politics the way it could be and should be. (I chair the board of a great nonprofit organization, the Junior Statesmen, that actually helps high school kids learn how to conduct themselves with integrity in politics.)

We can't go on being as divided and as bitter as we are today. Things will change for the better, and I predict that will happen sooner rather than later. Then it will be safe to encourage kids to enter politics again.

Is it possible to build a religious left with anything like the muscle of the religious right?

I think it is vital that we do so. Not so that we can stare each other down from across the sanctuary, but so that we can have a good, honest debate about what faith calls us to do in the public realm. It's been a one-sided debate in recent years, with groups like the Christian Coalition claiming to have a franchise on faith-based political truth. I think an empowered religious left can help people think harder about what God calls us to do as members of a civil community. If we have that dialogue in a genuine and gentle way, I think we will all be better off for it.

Should a religious left or even an evangelical liberal movement conduct itself differently than the religious right?

We should be more inclusive and tolerant, and we should have a better sense of humor. Our strength will be a diversity that the religious right can only dream about. But we can't be as ponderous, and we have to have some fun along the way. I hope the religious left will never lose mischief as a tool. I think it is God's secret weapon.

Could you comment on the "culture of life" conversation that has been much in the news of late?

Because of the late Pope John Paul II's use of the term, the "culture of life" has a distinctively Catholic and theologically conservative flavor. There are many things necessary to sustain life. In the recent case of Terri Schiavo, a compassionate government that funded her care through government programs was indispensable in keeping her alive for many years. Yet many of those proclaiming a desire to fight for her life failed to fight for the programs that kept her alive, in fact were and are in favor of cutting those programs to the bone. What kind of culture is that? There are lots of things to argue about, but there are definitely two sides to the debate—and that is what we are going to establish.