

Influential dozen seek to help Democrats bridge 'God gap'

Reframing America's debate over moral values: Reframing America's debate over moral values

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At a meeting of the House Democrats' Faith Working Group, a perplexed member of Congress turned to his colleagues for pastoral guidance. How could he counter a local preacher who argued that all Jesus' moral teachings were about the world to come, not the here and now?

Representative David Price (D., N.C.) stood amid the sympathetic sighs and "you can't convert everyone" comments to offer a new spin on an old parable:

Walking down a road, the Good Samaritan encounters and cares for a stranger who has been beaten and robbed, Price said. The next day, on the same road, another person is beaten and robbed. So it goes for another week—more robberies, more victims.

"How long is it going to take before the Samaritan says, 'Hey, maybe we ought to patrol this road,'" Price said. In other words, he argued, there are some problems that individuals can't solve on their own. They require the resources of a morally responsible government.

As Democrats seek to reframe America's debate over moral values and close their lamented "God gap" with religious communities, conversations such as these are taking place throughout party circles.

Gone are the days when "faith outreach" meant visiting African-American churches two weeks before an election, party leaders say. Instead, Democrats are

seeking—and getting—regular meetings with megachurch pastors such as T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen and Rick Warren.

Rather than cede red states to Republicans, the party is buying airtime on Christian radio stations, with the message that Democrats are indeed a party with deep moral convictions.

No longer leaning on 1960s-era preachers to guide progressive politics, Democrats are also turning to young voices like strategist Mara Vanderslice, 31, and writer Amy Sullivan, 33, who offer new perspectives and fresh ideas.

After interviews with dozens of politicians, strategists, the think-tank set and a Noah's ark-full of faith leaders, Religion News Service has identified the 12 most influential voices in helping Democrats reach people of faith. Those on the list are writing the party's new testament, whispering in the ears of the powerful, and playing matchmaker between religious and political pacesetters.

They are:

—**The Theologian:** Shaun Casey, an ethicist at Washington's Wesley Theological Seminary, who provides a moral and historical framework for progressive faith-based politics.

—**The House Trinity:** Representatives James Clyburn, Rosa DeLauro and David Price, who lead the effort on Capitol Hill to frame legislative debates in moral terms.

—**The Preacher:** Leah Daughtry, chief of staff at the Democratic National Committee, who champions faith outreach at party headquarters.

—**The Model:** Tim Kaine, governor of Virginia, who showed Democrats how a faith-infused campaign can turn a red state blue.

—**The Insider:** Mike McCurry, former White House press secretary, who coaxes Washington Democrats into sharing their spiritual sides.

—**The "Blessed" One:** Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois, who challenges his party to make room for religion in the public square.

—**The Prophet:** Rabbi David Saperstein, head of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, who is Washington's most articulate voice in progressive politics.

—**The Matchmaker:** Burns Strider, a staffer who shepherds the House Democratic Faith Working Group and corrals Congress into meetings with the religious community.

—**The Agitator:** Amy Sullivan, an independent but opinionated journalist who pens passionate pleas for Democrats to “get religion.”

—**The Strategist:** Mara Vanderslice of the consulting firm Common Good Strategies, who works the campaign trail, helping candidates to build relationships with diverse religious communities.

In some ways, these 12 “apostles” reflect the diversity on which Democrats pride themselves. They include a former Churches of Christ minister, a Pentecostal preacher, two Catholics, a Methodist Sunday school teacher, an Episcopalian, a progressive evangelical and a rabbi.

Some at Democratic Party headquarters are taking an under-the-radar approach to faith outreach and are reluctant to divulge all the party’s plans and advisers.

“Our focus is not in putting someone behind a pulpit,” said Leslie Brown, the DNC’s “Faith in Action” coordinator. But after conducting polls, meeting with state party chairs and undertaking an “internal education,” Democrats are building a “message-driven machine,” Brown said.

“We want to talk about things in ways we can relate to the faith community,” said Clyburn (D., S.C.), who heads the Faith Working Group. “I don’t talk about the environment just as keeping things green, I talk about it in terms of stewardship.”

But while recent polls suggest that some evangelicals may be growing disillusioned with Republicans, many are still reluctant to pull the lever for Democratic candidates, said Richard Cizik, vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals.

“Simply using ‘faith language’ won’t redound to the benefit of any candidate, Republican or Democrat, without some authenticity there,” Cizik said. “When evangelicals think about the reputation of the Republican Party, which isn’t too good right now, at least it does have a record of reaching out to those voters, and it does have a record on Capitol Hill of at least trying to carry water for their issues.”

Still, there are issues such as the environment, poverty, war and health care on which Democratic positions dovetail with those of many religious Americans, party leaders say. "It's not always pretty," Casey says of Democrats' fledgling efforts to reach these voters. "But the good news is everybody realizes the party has to do a better job." -*Daniel Burke, Religion News Service*