

Clinton spokesman learns ropes as church delegate: Mike McCurry

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When Mike McCurry was press secretary for President Bill Clinton, the toughest part of his job was staying one step ahead of the White House press corps. Now, he says, his toughest job is keeping up with the junior high school students in his Sunday school class at St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Kensington, Maryland.

"I was seen as pretty sure-footed talking about foreign policy and domestic policy at the White House," said McCurry. "People would be surprised how discombobulated I am as a Sunday school teacher." McCurry, a political veteran who fended off questions about Monica Lewinsky and Whitewater before he left public life in 1998, also took on a new type of politics as a delegate to the United Methodists' General Conference legislative [meeting in Pittsburgh](#).

The 11-day meeting was McCurry's first time as a delegate, but he says five years as his congregation's Sunday school superintendent have been as demanding—and often as political—as his four years as Clinton's spokesman. McCurry fit into the 12-hour work days demanded of the nearly 1,000 delegates, and the politicking and arm-twisting must have felt familiar. What caught him off guard, he said, was the piles of work given to delegates.

"I'm less surprised at the tempo, but I am surprised at the enormous amount of work," he said, taking a coffee break between legislative sessions. "We sift and filter everything." By "everything," he meant 1,500 different resolutions, budgets, arcane parliamentary motions, and debates on whether the word "since" in the church's gay policy signals a benign grammatical conjunction or an assertive proclamation.

It sounds a lot like Clinton's pondering of what the meaning of "is" is, but for both secular and sacred politics, McCurry knows that semantics are crucial. As for Clinton, McCurry said he saw a personal side of the president that the public rarely saw. Clinton was a man of enormous faith despite his public failings, he said. "That's why wrestling with his own conscience and his own sin is harder for him, because he

takes it so seriously,” he said. “Clinton was so transparent and enormous in some of his flaws that a lot of people identified with him in some ways.”

It was the type of transparency that many Methodists find painful as they wrestled—again—with deep divisions over homosexuality. McCurry said that though he favors more inclusion of gay and lesbian members, the church is not ready for major change. The issue, he said, needs to “simmer for a little while,” whatever his personal convictions.

“Sometimes you know when a good fight is going to produce more bitterness as opposed to more common ground,” he said. “I suspect where we are now is more of the former, and less of the latter.” Despite his public notoriety, McCurry comes off as a deeply spiritual man, who says he has prayed fervently for wisdom.

His passion, he said, lies in church evangelism, and he worries that Methodists have lost touch with the spirit of John Wesley, their circuit-riding spiritual founder. “The conference needs to be really focused on how the church continues to fulfill its primary mandate to make more disciples for Jesus Christ,” he told United Methodist News Service.

David Argo, a minister who headed the 18-member delegation from the Baltimore-Washington conference, called McCurry a “deeply committed Christian” who has used his communications savvy to help the church. “For someone who’s coming from a secular political context, his most important concern is making disciples for Jesus Christ,” said Argo, who was also McCurry’s pastor for three years. “He reminds us that of all we do at General Conference, the things that help us to fulfill that mission are the most important.”

McCurry, who now works as a communications consultant to corporations and nonprofit groups, said he knew as a “rookie” delegate that it was his place to sit back and listen to church elders who know better the ins and outs of the church. “Lord knows I can talk up a storm when I need to, but I think I really want to hold back and try to learn a little bit.” -Kevin Eckstrom, *Religion News Service*