

Can 'spiritual progressives' gain momentum? Developing a grassroots network: Developing a grassroots network

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

After wandering in the political desert for years, the religious left is taking tentative steps toward the Promised Land, according to organizers of a recent “Spiritual Activism” conference in Washington.

“We’re talking about first, baby steps here,” said Rabbi Michael Lerner, head of the Network of Spiritual Progressives and editor of the progressive Jewish magazine *Tikkun*.

For the first time since the Vietnam War, asserted Lerner, the “spiritual” or “religious” left is building a viable political coalition. The goal is not to tip elections toward Democrats in 2006, or even 2008, according to Lerner, but to develop a grassroots network that all politicians must reckon with for years to come.

About 1,200 people from 39 states attended the May 17-20 gathering, according to conference organizers. Attendees were armed with a “spiritual covenant” and talking points with which to engage elected representatives in the nation’s capital.

They heard speeches by liberal evangelicals such as Tony Campolo and Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners social justice movement. And they met in small workshops to talk about topics such as global warming, “moving the movable middle” and “using feminine principles to change the world.”

Lerner, author of *The Left Hand of God*, published this year, said he learned from experience that “it doesn’t matter to whisper in the ears of the powerful.” During the 1990s, the rabbi said, both Bill and Hillary Clinton regularly employed his rhetoric in political speeches. But without an army of activists to lobby lawmakers, words

seldom translated into deeds, according to the rabbi. “It was meaningless,” he said.

Now Lerner puts his faith in men like Dart Westphal, 52, the president of a nonprofit housing corporation in the Bronx. One morning, Westphal sat in the office of his member of Congress, Representative Eliot Engel, and discussed with Engel’s legislative aide some items in the spiritual covenant.

Lerner wrote the covenant and has said it was partly inspired by the Republicans’ 1994 “Contract with America.” But instead of the GOP’s conservative platform, Lerner’s covenant includes liberal measures, such as adding a “social responsibility” clause to government contracts.

Westphal, an active Lutheran, liked the liberal ideals in the covenant but did have a bone to pick with the Spiritual Activism conference itself: it was not religious enough. “The problem is that it’s interfaith,” he said. “It’s hard to sing hymns without offending people from other faiths.”

That may signal an obstacle to building a cohesive religious left, said Mark J. Rozell, professor of public policy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

Whereas religious conservatives often argue that there is one correct view on policy issues, religious liberals often view policy from a variety of perspectives, Rozell said. “The religious right is thus much more unified than its counterparts on the religious left,” Rozell said.

For example, Wallis’s Sojourners group is releasing its own “Covenant for America” at a conference in July.

Nevertheless, Pat Casey, 60, who came to the conference from Madison, Wisconsin, said the religious left is united on one front—a desire to counter the political influence of the religious right.

Casey, who owns a small communications firm, said attending a rally in Washington is unusual for him. But he said he was concerned that religious conservatives have “hijacked the Bible.” He was happy to lend his voice to any protest song, whether it be “Give Peace a Chance” or “This Little Light of Mine.”

“Something’s happening here,” Casey said. “People from all different traditions are saying, ‘Look, we’ve been quiet for too long and it’s time to speak out.’”