Swing state: Religious right and left in Ohio

by Carol Steele in the October 3, 2006 issue

A recent article in the *New Yorker* about the race for governor in Ohio declared that the November election would "test the power of the Christian right." It was not the first article to examine the Republican candidate, Ken Blackwell, and his ties to the religious right. As Ohio's secretary of state, Blackwell led the 2004 campaign against gay marriage in Ohio, helping put "Issue One," as the gay marriage amendment was called, on the same ballot as presidential contenders George W. Bush and John Kerry. Voter turnout surged, and Ohio, that ever-wavering swing state, swung for Bush. (Some say Blackwell's control of the election apparatus also played a part.)

Perhaps an even more interesting religion story unfolding on Ohio's campaign trail this fall involves not the religious right but the religious left. Blackwell's opponent, Ted Strickland, a United Methodist minister, may not represent the religious left in the way Blackwell stands for the religious right, but he understands well the issues and hopes of religious progressives.

And the activities of the religious right are being met this year by those of an organization called We Believe Ohio, a growing group of clergy—Jewish, Muslim and Christian—who have organized to project into the public arena "a strong, diverse, religious voice that speaks on behalf of the poor, the voiceless, and the unrepresented."

Strickland currently serves in the U.S. Congress, representing the state's Appalachian region, which is rural, poor, in desperate need of better education and health care, and full of hard-working people competing for too few jobs. When I walked into Strickland's office for a job interview, I noticed a small plaque, placed like a mezuzah just inside the door, which read: "What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?"

In Congress, Strickland has persuaded federal agencies to come through with job training for thousands of laid-off workers, pushed a reluctant state government to

put highway dollars into rural counties, helped write the Children's Health Insurance Program, filed briefs with the Ohio and U.S. Supreme Courts attesting to the decrepit state of schools in southern Ohio, and created a federal program to compensate atomic-weapons workers for the harm they suffered as a result of their labors during the cold war.

He listens to constituents talk about their trouble paying for prescription medications, about the loss of good-paying industrial jobs, and about the despair of being sick and uninsured. After a weekend in Ohio, he returns to Washington with his pocket full of scraps of paper on which he has written down each person's name, phone number and problem.

This kind of care is not unheard of in Congress, but his spirit of servant leadership is a bit out of the ordinary. A self-described "golden rule Democrat," Strickland says: "We are all part of the same human family with shared responsibilities, and . . . the government's relationship to its citizens is always best when it is rooted in servanthood."

Strickland's campaign for Ohio's top job centers on a collection of initiatives aimed at the "kitchen table" issues facing working people. He wants to reverse the drain of over 200,000 jobs in recent years, improve educational and career opportunities in the state that ranks 50th in its ability to attract and retain educated young people, and create access to affordable health care coverage for the 1.3 million Ohioans who have no insurance.

Both Strickland and Blackwell place job creation at the center of their platforms. How they propose to do that reveals their different approaches to government. Blackwell proposes to replace the state's income tax with a flat tax, eliminate the estate tax, relieve industry of the taxes it pays on the energy it uses (Ohio is fourth in the nation in industrial energy consumption), and repeal recent sales tax increases.

Strickland proposes to build on Ohio's robust energy production sector by investing heavily in alternative energy projects, concentrate economic development funds in regional projects and use state leverage to negotiate discounts on health insurance for Ohioans who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford market-rate individual insurance. He proposes to open the Ohio Knowledge Bank into which the state would deposit $500 for each family that starts an education savings plan and add $100 each year thereafter ($200 per year for lower-income families), with the

goal of providing every student accepted into a state college or university the opportunity to attend and succeed.

Strickland decided to run for Congress after being a pastor, director of a home for children, a professor of psychology and a counselor at a maximum-security prison. He says the thread that connects these endeavors is “a desire to lift up, support, and, in some way, to share the burden of others.”

“Share the burden of others” sounds like a phrase you might read in a press release from We Believe Ohio. The group, which does not endorse candidates, was founded by Tim Ahrens, a United Church of Christ pastor in Columbus. Ahrens opened the paper one morning to read about a rally hosted by the Republican-friendly Ohio Restoration Project at which one pastor declared, “We’re locking, loading and firing on Ohio!” The Ohio Restoration Project is leading voter registration drives and has enlisted the help of Patriot Pastors, who are charged with registering “value voters to be salt and light for America.”

Ahrens began e-mailing colleagues across the state to find out whether others were as disturbed as he was by the way people of faith were being portrayed—and were portraying themselves. Were there others, he wondered, whose faith moved them to advocate a broad social-justice agenda instead of focusing on a ban on gay marriage?

Supporters of We Believe Ohio have pledged to draw attention to social-justice issues, to urge 80 percent of congregations to vote on election day, to preach about God’s call to justice in their pulpits and to publish a book of sermons that focus on faith and social justice.

Though its impact remains to be seen, We Believe Ohio has garnered some attention through news reports and through opinion pieces placed in a statewide newspaper. At the very least, the group has shown that when it comes to public policy, there is more than a single religious point of view in Ohio and there are more than a few issues on which religious people will be weighing in. We Believe Ohio proclaims that there is a sector of religious voters for whom poverty, education and health care warrant at least as much conversation as gay marriage.

Any test of the Christian right’s power is also in some way a test for those—particularly people of faith—who are ill at ease with the right’s political platform, for whatever reason. In addition to differing with the right on certain

issues, less conservative Christians are at odds with the manner in which the religious right applies faith to public issues, and how it elevates a few issues over others that have strong biblical warrant (like feeding the poor, taking care of widows and orphans, and providing equal opportunity and equal access to education).

Until now, religious voters who don’t take their cues from Focus on the Family have struggled to define their relationship to politics. Though repelled by the strategies of the religious right, religious moderates and liberals have so far failed to present an alternative picture of “value voters.” Perhaps part of the problem has been a lack of inspiring candidates. Perhaps this year, in Ohio, the story will be different.

The author was a senior legislative assistant to Representative Ted Strickland from 1997 to 2001.