Protestant left has 'potential' impact, says scholar: Organizing online a "clever strategy"

News in the issue

The Protestant left "has the potential to become a key constituency of the Democratic Party," says a political scientist studying the growing number of faith-related progressive groups in the U.S.

Though socially liberal Protestants have been outpaced by conservative religious movements since the 1980s, Laura R. Olson of Clemson University told an annual conference of sociologists of religion before this month's mid-term elections that "times always change."

Despite their difficulties of coordination and mobilization, which might force "religio-political progressives to remain as they are now—working behind the scenes," Olson said history shows that new opportunities arise with cultural and political shifts.

"I submit that the religious left has more potential energy now than it has since the Vietnam War era," she said October 21 in Portland, Oregon, in a presentation to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, which met with the Religious Research Association.

According to Olson, the 2004 reelection of President George W. Bush gave rise to "elite-level progressive Protestant mobilization as measured by the sheer number of new religious left organizations that have been founded and the volume of ink that has been spilled in new books challenging the religious right."

Olson, who is researching a book on the subject, listed nearly 60 organizations—old and new, national and regional—that she said make up the Protestant and ecumenical left.

Among the movement's weaknesses, she said, are its broad political agenda "so that no one priority can ever get the focus it needs," and the knowledge that most

mainline congregations are too diverse politically to provide unified support.

"Organizing progressive Protestants online, however, seems to be a particularly clever strategy," especially since many potential recruits are well educated and technologically savvy, Olson said. *–John Dart*