

In search of common ground: Rachel Laser of 'Third Way'

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 25, 2008](#) issue

Rachel Laser is senior policy adviser at Third Way, a “nonpartisan strategy center for progressives” based in Washington, D.C., that seeks to locate middle ground between progressives and conservatives on issues of security, economics and culture. Laser also directs Third Way’s Culture Project, which recently released the statement “Let Us Reason Together: A Fresh Look at Shared Cultural Values Between Evangelicals and Progressives.”

How did you come to work with Third Way?

Before coming to Third Way, I worked at the National Women’s Law Center, where I was senior legal counsel in the area of reproductive rights. I felt that we were losing positive energy because our way of talking about abortion was not connecting to people. A journalist once asked me, “What terminology do you use—do you say baby or do you say fetus?” In the pro-choice community, using the word *baby* was perceived as heading down a slippery slope toward criminalizing abortion. But that position neglects the moral complexity of the issue. At Third Way we’ve decided we can better connect with more Americans and ultimately preserve the legality of abortion by acknowledging and not denying the moral complexity of the issue. That’s what drew me to Third Way.

How have you been able to make progress on abortion?

We’ve tried to convince people who are pro-life that you simply cannot make a dent in the number of abortions without addressing the prevention side of the equation. We are definitely in favor of supporting pregnant women and new families, and that is a crucial part of our agenda. But you can’t really pass the laugh test if you don’t work on unintended pregnancies. The numbers are clear: of the 6 million pregnancies every year, half of those are unintended and half of those result in abortions. So when the number of unintended pregnancies is reduced, the number of abortions will be drastically reduced.

I've been able to work with both pro-life and pro-choice members of Congress, and a version of our "Reducing the Need for Abortion" bill went into the appropriations bill and was signed into law. The bill makes it clear that increasing access to birth control is part of an agenda to reduce the number of abortions. That has enabled us to get supporters who couldn't or wouldn't support a birth-control-only bill. Bart Stupak, who is the cochair of the Democratic pro-life caucus, is one of the sponsors. Joel Hunter, pastor of a megachurch in Florida, has been another key supporter.

What has it been like to communicate with people who come from different backgrounds and bring different commitments?

At my first dinner with Joel Hunter and his wife, Becky, I felt like I was on a first date where you have to confess something—like "I've been married before." I didn't want to leave them without making it really clear that I was pro-choice and that I was Jewish. I wanted us to have an open relationship from the start. The beauty of it was that even though we were coming from such different places and different religions and ultimately had different viewpoints on the legality of abortion, we left that dinner feeling that we had really connected. We not only found common ground; we felt personally comfortable with each other. Neither of us felt that the other had an ulterior, unspoken agenda.

I kept telling them that I was very aware that they were not going to agree with Third Way on a lot of our positions, but that's the point: we can show the world that there is much progress to be made if we can get together in these uninhabited territories left behind by the culture wars. We all agree that we can reduce the need for abortion without using jail or bans. We've found ways that we can all agree are productive and effective. And that's very concrete.

What other issues are you tackling?

In "Come Let Us Reason Together" we talk about stem cells, the human embryo, homosexuality, fatherhood, the state of the family, and the problem of sexual predators on the Internet. On all of these issues, we have found places where we could begin to talk. In the other coalitions that evangelicals and progressives have been able to form—such as on Darfur, poverty or the environment—culture issues are the 900-pound gorilla in the room. We are saying that even on the culture issues we can make a surprising amount of progress together. Commenting on our work, Joel Hunter said, "Wisdom is focusing on the good you can do in front of you. Many

times in life we are tempted not to solve problems but to give lectures. Our moralism stands in the way of morality.”

What are the chief hurdles you encounter in pursuing this agenda?

The extreme left and the extreme right. Evangelicals who are interested in our work are told by others on the right, “You are not truly a conservative.” Progressives hear that they are “caving in to the other side.” Passion has tended to reside on the extremes. We would like to see a passion for progress develop. We can be passionate not only about our commitments, but about enacting real change.

Has it been difficult for you personally to come to this point of view?

I was always a bit of a renegade in that I wanted to pursue honesty and truth no matter what. I do not want to sacrifice taking a hard and honest look at the way things really are and what we can do about it for the sake of winning an argument.