

Campaigning religiously: Political strategist Burns Strider

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

A veteran of Democratic Party politics and a former aide to representatives Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.) and James Clyburn (D., S.C.), Burns Strider was senior adviser and director of faith-based outreach for Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign. After the Clinton campaign ended, he founded the Eleison Group, a communications firm that specializes in strategic planning for politicians and faith communities.

How is this election year different from 2004 when it comes to the role of religion?

On the political side, there is a Democratic Party seeking conversations with and working in the faith community. In the evangelical community, there are new leaders and younger people wanting to have a conversation that goes beyond the two or three hot-button issues that have been the focus. They want to talk about a number of values that impact their families and their communities. A more holistic conversation is going on.

How did you get involved in religious outreach for the Democrats?

I am a Mississippian and an evangelical. Growing up I was very active in the church and very active in politics. My father was an elected official. I knew the date of every church homecoming and who served the best fried chicken. After spending a couple of years in the mission field with the Southern Baptists in Hong Kong, I came to Washington and got involved as a staffer. Eventually, I went to work for Nancy Pelosi.

Pelosi and I talked often about faith. She is a dedicated Catholic and I am a Southern Baptist, and we had a lot of fun discussing our differences.

After the 2004 presidential election, there was talk about the so-called values voters and how they may have swung the election. We had a very serious discussion about that in Pelosi's office and in the House Democratic Caucus.

That discussion led to the creation of the House Democratic Faith Working Group, which I staffed. We would invite a faith leader or a clergy member to talk to us—with no cameras, no press. We were not after a headline. We were after a conversation. We learned that there was a myriad of issues that we could work together on: issues ranging from climate change to Darfur to poverty to building stronger families. The Democratic members of Congress came out better informed, and the clergy would go home better understanding that there are strong people of faith in the Democratic caucus who wanted to work with them. There was no change in principles, but common ground was found.

I spent six months as Hillary Clinton's faith outreach director, working all over the nation, generating and creating listening sessions and meetings. I believe very strongly in the relational aspect of this effort and helping make the faith and values program an integral part of a campaign.

How did that effort fare?

Democrats from all corners of the country were hungry for this conversation. They wanted to get it right. The challenge was that we were doing something that doesn't readily fit into a textbook. This is not database-driven work, with polls and focus groups.

Another challenge working for Senator Clinton was changing perceptions. I found a vast gulf between perception and reality. The person I got to know is a faithful Methodist who had spent her time in Little Rock at First Methodist Church teaching Sunday school and holding church picnics on the lawn of the governor's mansion. You do not want to get into a discussion about John Wesley with her and think you are going to know more. Two things about her faith are derived from Wesley—she has a profound social justice, activist side and a profound calling to understand her relationship with Christ. But that was not the public perception of her.

How do you see the McCain and Obama campaigns working on outreach to religious groups?

The challenges for the two candidates are different. McCain, as a Republican, has a faith-community base—evangelicals primarily, and that's a big chunk of the faith community. His job is to keep it. On the Democratic side, the job is to push into that base.

Research showed that in 2004 if a handful of voters per precinct had moved to the other side, the outcome would have been different. The question is how far into the evangelical swing-vote community Democrats can push. My take is that a significant number will be reached, because Obama is serious about doing it and is doing a good job.

What would be your advice to the Obama campaign on religious outreach?

Keep on having the conversation with people of faith. Be real. Be authentic. The American people want to know who a candidate truly is. In religious outreach, we are always talking about authenticity. Are we being real? People don't have to agree on everything, but they need to know who the candidate is. And remember to keep increasing the concentric circles of people with whom you are conversing—keep drawing the circles wider.