Democrats for Jesus: Faith-friendly candidates

by Jason Byassee in the October 30, 2007 issue

In Mississippi it might not be surprising to hear a political ad on the radio in which the candidate insists that “our children should be able to learn and pray in the best schools in the land” and goes on to ask voters to “prayerfully consider me as your next governor.” It is perhaps a bit of a surprise to hear the candidate refer explicitly to “the day I accepted Christ and was baptized.” But perhaps what is remarkable in this case, especially for people who hail from other parts of the country, is that the candidate is a Democrat, John Arthur Eaves. At times Eaves seems to be trying to unseat GOP governor Haley Barbour by out-Jesusing him.

In announcing his candidacy, Eaves opened his speech with prayer and then lamented how his opponents had been skewering the Golden Rule: “The one who has the gold makes the rules.” Eaves advocates voluntary prayer in schools and charges critics of the state’s public schools with failing to recognize that “we are our brother’s keeper.” He has blasted Barbour for vetoing a bill that would have cut the state’s grocery tax (at 7 percent, it is the highest in the nation) and raised the state’s tax on cigarettes (one of the nation’s lowest tobacco taxes). Eaves decries Barbour’s dependence on the “money changers”—meaning “big tobacco, big oil and big insurance.”

Eaves had been asked so often how he could be both a Democrat and a Christian that he decided to pen an op-ed piece titled “I Am a Democrat Because I Am a Christian.” In that essay, he presented his program of economic populism as a response to Jesus’ command to “care for the least of these.” He told *Fox News* in a recent interview that his support for higher teacher salaries, universal health care and tax reform stems directly from the work of Jesus: “He came to teach. He healed the sick—today we call that health care. He came to help the poor. Mississippi needs somebody who will focus on these.”

Eaves happens to be one of the Democratic candidates being advised by Common Good Strategies, a two-person consulting firm that is having an outsized effect on the national political scene by helping Democratic candidates talk about religious faith. The firm was founded by Mara Vanderslice, who served an ill-fated stint as director of religious outreach for John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign (her work was largely sidelined). Her partner is Eric Sapp, who brings a seminary degree as well as experience working for Ted Kennedy. Both are young (early 30s) evangelicals—left-leaning evangelicals, of course. Mike McCurry, who served as President Clinton's press secretary, praises the pair as "passionate, hip folks who're deeply faithful themselves, and who're helping bring the vocabulary of faith back into the public square."

And it works. CGS's candidates won all seven of the races in which they were involved in 2006. Senators from Ohio and Pennsylvania, governors of Michigan, Ohio and Kansas, a House member from North Carolina and an attorney general in Kansas were all elected. Obviously it was a good year to run with a D by one's name, but the outcome of those races was not a foregone conclusion at the outset.

So what do these consultants actually do for candidates? Vanderslice and Sapp stress that they mainly help candidates be themselves and speak publicly about the faith that is already in them. "Our candidates don't all sound the same," Sapp insists. Which is true. Bob Casey of Pennsylvania was a conservative Catholic and outspokenly pro-life before he ran for the Senate; Ted Strickland was a United Methodist minister and longtime advocate for the poor before he ran for governor of Ohio. But for Governor Jennifer Granholm of Michigan, a middle-of-the-road Democrat, it was something new to be talking about God on the stump, as she did during a campaign speech at Hope College in the conservative Christian region of the state. In the end, she performed much better among white evangelicals than Democrats tend to do, garnering some 35 percent of that vote. CGS would argue that faith was in her all along; it just needed to come out.

CGS conducts an extensive interview to find out what inspires a candidate and what made him or her get into politics in the first place. It tries to find out, as Vanderslice puts it, "What would they be willing to lose an election for?"

Vanderslice emerged from the Kerry campaign with some hard-won wisdom. Upon being hired to work on religious outreach, she was immediately attacked by right-wing Catholic groups, who charged that she was ultraliberal and anti-Catholic. Then

she had to sit and watch as the Kerry campaign did nothing to respond to the charges.

“I learned a great deal from 2004,” she said. What she learned first was how little interest the campaign had in religious outreach. She was a “junior staffer without buy-in from senior staff.” For the Kerry campaign, people of faith were treated as just another interest group. “Eighty percent of Americans are people of faith. This is something that can’t be treated like outreach to hunters, environmentalists or Greek Americans.” Party leaders didn’t understand the difference between Bill Hybels and Pat Robertson, she notes; they viewed all evangelicals with suspicion. “They wouldn’t even return *Christianity Today’s* phone calls!”

Vanderslice did have one stroke of luck in 2004. A party leader in Michigan uttered words that any political consultant likes to hear: “Do whatever you want; we’ll pay for it.” She created a phone bank to reach Catholic voters on Kerry’s behalf. Kerry won the Catholic vote in Michigan, and did better among regular churchgoers there than he did in other swing states. That effort provided Vanderslice with some data showing that outreach to religious voters works.

It was enough to get the fledgling CGS hired for seven campaigns in 2006—a year when the stars were aligned for Democrats. “We couldn’t have found a better time to start what we did,” Sapp said.

Sapp and Vanderslice met each other in 2005 through the Faith Working Group in the House of Representatives—another effort to shore up faith-talk on the left. Sapp had encountered Democrats’ allergy to faith when he met some of their operatives for whom his seminary degree meant he was “not one of us.” At the same time, his evangelical friends were saying he was the first Christian Democrat that they had ever met. He realized that a strong political identification of Christianity with the Republican Party “hurts our witness” as Christians—and he set about to change things.

Sapp compares the growth of interest in faith-based politics among Democrats to glacial movement—slow yet unstoppable. And it’s not actually new: “We’re not changing who we are [as Democrats] but reclaiming our prophetic heritage.” In the process, Sapp believes, CGS and its allies can “reshape the political landscape.”

Vanderslice, like Sapp, has always planned big. She grew up in Christian right country—Colorado Springs—and had an evangelical conversion experience in

college. She worked for Sojourners, whose Jim Wallis has also been behind much of the resurgence of religiosity on the left, and then joined the Jubilee 2000 campaign to combat AIDS in Africa. President Bush had made the headline-grabbing promise of $15 billion in aid, but the promised money never seemed to arrive.

So what did she do? Naturally she moved to Iowa to help try to unseat the president, working first for the Dean campaign. There she encountered the entrenched secularism of Democratic Party leaders. “People would say to me, ‘Democrats are secular, as opposed to the religious right, and that’s why we get such big crowds.’”

Vanderslice’s intermediate political goal is for Christians to be a perennial swing vote. Her long-term goal? To help elect a president in 2008, move into a “real” office for faith-based initiatives and “bring politics to bear to help solve problems—like helping to end AIDS in Africa.” These two young people do not think small.

Part of CGS’s work is setting up listening meetings with local pastors, at least to indicate the candidates’ interest in faith communities. According to an *Atlantic Monthly* profile of the firm, many evangelical pastors respond to such meetings by asking, “Where have you all been?” CGS compiles lists of pastors for such meetings and for future networking. It also recruits pastors to write op-ed pieces. Its purchase of Christian radio time might seem an obvious strategy (radio time is “much cheaper than television,” Sapp notes), but it wasn’t being done. Democratic candidates were not even introducing themselves to the sorts of voters who listen to Christian radio. In short, CGS aims to create what Vanderslice describes as “a conversation around religion and values, which is not the same thing as a constituency.”

McCurry, who has worked hard behind the scenes to network people of faith among Democrats, describes the goal this way: “It’s not about crafting a global strategy for campaigning. It’s a precise rifle shot aimed at folks who didn’t know Democrats care.”

CGS also lays out some ground rules for candidates, such as: do not talk about separation of church and state. Instead, the firm urges candidates to speak of how their faith affects their stance on nitty-gritty policy issues.

In his race for the U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania, Casey railed against a staple of the Reagan revolution: “The central question should not be, ‘Are you better off than you were four years ago?’ It should be, ‘How can we—all of us, especially the weak and vulnerable—be better off in the years ahead?” Vanderslice notes that that line

comes directly from the Catholic bishops' document *Faithful Citizenship*: *A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility* (remember when Catholic bishops were only quoted to bash Democrats like Kerry?).

In winning the governorship in Kansas, Kathleen Sebelius countered the stock image of westerners as cowboys roughing out a solo existence by talking about another strand of western tradition—that of quilting, barn-raising and people working together toward a common good. According to Vanderslice, staffers celebrated the victory with references to Thomas Frank's liberal lament, *What's the Matter with Kansas*?: "Now it's what's *right* with Kansas!"

In Ohio, Strickland brought listeners to tears, Sapp told *Atlantic Monthly*, with remarks like these: "The next time some politician, including me, starts preaching to you, . . . look us in the eye and ask us point-blank: Do your values include doing everything in your power to make sure that my hard work translates into a decent living for my family, that we have access to affordable health care?"

Economics was a primary focus in the campaigns in which CGS was involved. The campaigns' theme was "poverty is a moral issue," as Vanderslice summarizes it. Candidates stressed that the biggest pressures on the family come not from gays or liberals but from the economic squeeze of the middle class. "For so long you only heard from Democrats when they were on the defensive over abortion or homosexuality," Vanderslice says. "Now the religious right was on the defensive."

But there was damage control to be done on those hot-button issues. Vanderslice explains the situation this way: "The religious community is for civil rights and unions and protection, but there's a fear in some churches that they will be mandated to marry gays." So CGS counsels candidates to distinguish between the Christian covenant of marriage, which is within the purview of churches, and potential civil contracts for gay couples. Vanderslice points to John Edwards as one presidential candidate making that distinction. (Edwards has come under fire from gay activists on just this point.)

On abortion, CGS encourages candidates to speak about the need to reduce the number of abortions rather than to trumpet "choice." Sapp is particularly adamant that Democrats should take the offensive on this issue: "It's in Republicans' interest not to overturn *Roe v*. *Wade*, so they've done nothing on this in 25 years, and there are four times more abortions now than when Reagan was elected. Evangelical

voters are tired of being duped."

When I expressed doubt that Democrats would actually get behind an abortion-reduction plan, given their fear of alienating their pro-choice base, Sapp told me that I would be proven wrong. One sign that he might be right is the fact that a $647 million "Reducing the Need for Abortions Initiative" was passed as part of a House spending bill (it is yet to be considered in the Senate). The bill's goal is to provide financial incentives and a social safety net wide enough to "help women choose life," Sapp says.

Vanderslice points out that most voters think it is wrong that one-quarter of pregnancies end in abortion, but most do not want criminalization of women who have them. The effort to provide child care, to streamline adoption processes, to help pregnant women through school, to offer contraceptives and sex education can open new possibilities. "What if no woman ever has to choose?" Vanderslice asks. Candidate Eaves speaks of himself as "the most pro-life candidate there is," since his support of life doesn't stop at birth.

Cynics might say that CGS's work is simply an exercise in political opportunism: *of course* Democrats are talking about faith—anyone who doesn't is going to get pounded at the polls. It's not that simple, says Vanderslice. Talk about religious faith "has to be authentic." CGS is "absolutely not about Jesusing-up the party." Rather, it is about giving candidates permission to talk about the things most dear to them—the faith commitments that, in many cases, drew them into public life in the first place—and which party operatives for years insisted that they not talk about.

CGS is hardly the only actor in the field. Each of the three leading Democratic presidential campaigns has hired an outreach coordinator to faith-based groups. Democratic governors won in Virginia in 2005 and Colorado in 2006 largely by showing themselves comfortable in their Catholic skin—and did so without the help of CGS. Hillary Clinton has spoken frequently of the various senatorial prayer groups she has attended, often with archenemies from across the political aisle. Barack Obama has given several major addresses on reinvigorating the intersection between faith and public life. The Faith Working Group, in which Sapp and Vanderslice first met, now chaired by South Carolina representative James Clyburn, has sought to listen to a variety of faith perspectives on policy matters, including the abortion-reduction initiative. Activists in these efforts hope to build a long-lasting network.

When I asked Vanderslice what she is most proud of, she pointed to the increased access to leading policy makers now enjoyed by faith-based activists working on issues like poverty and justice. McCurry described the various prongs of this movement as a new recognition in the Democratic Party that “we were missing how enormously important faith is for how public opinion is shaped.” He paused before laughing and adding: “Duh!”

An irony of the current presidential campaign is that Democratic candidates seem more comfortable dealing with issues of faith than the Republicans are. The pattern is evident also in Mississippi. Barbour is the conservative candidate, but he doesn’t seem to be at ease in speaking about Jesus; Eaves brings up his faith at every opportunity.

Eaves has an uphill battle. It’s no small task to unseat a governor with a 59 percent approval rating. Eaves himself has used a biblical analogy for his campaign: he says it’s like David going up against Goliath. Referring to that analogy, an Eaves spokesperson commented: “If you read the story correctly, Goliath never had a chance.”