

# Edgar: Outsider and 'salvager'

by [Jean Caffey Lyles](#) in the [December 1, 1999](#) issue

Robert Edgar, whose four-year term as general secretary of the National Council of Churches begins January 1, will commute between New York and Southern California for two months while he wraps up his responsibilities at the School of Theology at Claremont. He is expected to be virtually full time at the council by March.

Introduced to the NCC's executive board, Edgar described himself as "a salvager, an optimist, a futurist, and committed to collaboration." (More blunt observers have called him a "fixer"—not necessarily in a pejorative sense, but as a sort of ecumenical mechanic who could get the NCC's stalled engine going again.)

The search committee had a choice to make between an "insider" and an "outsider," and they clearly chose the latter. Edgar said the fact that he has not been part of the workings of the NCC "could be both a blessing and a problem."

Edgar has crossed paths before with the new president, Andy Young. They served in the U.S. Congress at the same time, where, according to both, they "learned to speak under the five-minute rule."

Edgar does not hesitate to cite his achievements. He told the NCC's news bureau, "When I came to Claremont, it was just a hiccup away from going out of business." After his 12 years of leadership, "People see it as a model of how to salvage institutions in financial distress."

Before he arrived at the seminary, the school had suffered two embezzlements—one \$13,000, and the other \$350,000 taken by a former UMC conference treasurer. Foundation funds of \$7.1 million had shrunk to \$3.7 million. Under Edgar's leadership, the total rose to \$22 million.

In a telephone interview, a Claremont staff member who works closely with Edgar said his election "bodes well for the council" and called him "creative, forthright, open and energetic. He's capable of making a decision, but he will listen to other people. He invites dialogue." The source added that Edgar's vision and creativity are so developed that "he will come up with ten to two dozen creative ideas every day.

There needs to be a practical person around who will sift through those ideas and say what's possible and how much risk can be afforded."

A staff member of a United Methodist agency whose personnel committee was chaired by Edgar noted that he was not a warm-and-fuzzy type and was able to spearhead the firing of the agency's field staff without flinching.

Edgar in 1974 was the first Democrat in more than 120 years to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in a heavily Republican district in Pennsylvania. He served six terms, stepping down in 1987. His professional history also includes a stint as finance director for former Illinois Senator Paul Simon's 1988 presidential campaign, heading a Washington think tank dealing with arms control, teaching at Swarthmore College, serving as a campus minister and a United Methodist parish pastor, and founding the first shelter for homeless women and children in Philadelphia.