

Progressive Christians rally for justice causes: Ecumenical Advocacy Days for Global Peace with Justice

News in the [April 6, 2004](#) issue

Christian liberal activists have endured of late what might be called the political equivalent of the dark night of the soul. Their conservative co-religionists have cornered momentum, membership and media attention.

Liberals—or progressives, as they prefer to be called—have lost their White House access and much of their ability to exert influence on the issues they hold dear, including Middle East and global trade policies. Moreover, many of their denominations are bogged down in sexuality issues that drain resources from external concerns.

What better time to rally frustrated activists? What better place to do it than “Rome,” as James E. Winkler, the United Methodist Church’s chief social action official, disparagingly referred to Washington under President George W. Bush.

Winkler’s equating of Bush administration policies with the New Testament’s archetype of arrogant imperialism buoyed the more than 500 progressive activists who gathered in Arlington, Virginia, for Ecumenical Advocacy Days for Global Peace with Justice. Organizers said the four-day conference, which ended March 8, was the largest such ecumenical meeting focused on international concerns in recent years. Fittingly, perhaps, the conference hotel overlooked the Pentagon.

“We really need some encouragement so people don’t feel so alone,” said Leon Spencer, an Episcopal priest who directs the Washington Office on Africa, an interchurch agency that works on Africa-related issues. “We’re something of a minority.”

Bush policies on Iraq; the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; Colombia, Cuba and Latin America in general; North Korea; free trade and international debt relief; nuclear

weapons; AIDS and poverty in Africa; the war on terrorism; and similar issues came in for much criticism during conference talks, panels and workshops.

But Spencer, who co-organized the event, insisted that the conference was nonpartisan. "We're much more issue-focused than we are on individuals. This is not just the Democratic Party in church," he said. The gathering attracted both veteran activists and newcomers to progressive causes. Mainline Protestants dominated, but Catholics, Quakers, Mennonites, Orthodox and other Christians were also in attendance.

Stephanie Arnold of Vestavia Hills United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, called herself a "beginner" whose eyes have been opened. "I haven't been in a group before with so many people willing to question the government," said the 25-year-old associate pastor in her first church post. "It's a challenge to my assumptions."

Martin Zimmann, co-pastor with his wife at St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church in Dundee, Michigan, said he hoped to gain strategies for drawing his congregation into progressive issues. "Mainline Protestants have fallen asleep to the fact that the gospel is about justice," he said. "We're challenged by the Religious Right, which is so much more involved in political issues."

The conference offered more than exhortation. The program was laden with practical advice for influencing policy. Denominational and ecumenical agency professionals offered issue briefings and tips on approaching members of Congress and the news media. Capitol Hill staffers provided advice on the legislative process and political campaigns.

The meeting ended with activists descending on Capitol Hill to lobby senators, representatives or, as was often the case, their legislative aides. Corrine Whitlatch, director of Churches for Middle East Peace, cautioned about hopes for changing legislators' positions in an election year. "The point is to show we care, and that they have constituents who care as we do," she said. Political action, she emphasized, is a slow and often circuitous process.

Samuel Kobia, the Kenyan Methodist minister who serves as general secretary of the World Council of Churches and who addressed the conference's opening night, noted: "Working for peace and justice in the United States has never been easy. In 2004, working for peace and justice in the United States is exhausting." *-Ira Rifkin,*

