

On the faith-based campaign trail: Bush shores up support

by [John Dart](#) in the [Jun 29, 2004](#) issue

As presidential campaigns swung into their final five months, President Bush worked at cementing his strong support from evangelicals and shoring up ties to Catholics by visiting and honoring Pope John Paul II at the Vatican. White House incumbents always have a newsmaking advantage, but in early June Bush cornered the headlines—even before the death of former President Ronald Reagan gave Republicans an added week of attention.

Presumed Democratic nominee John Kerry of Massachusetts, said by a colleague to have the most “Catholic” voting record in the U.S. Senate, still had not named his choice for running mate, and he postponed campaigning in the memorial week for Reagan.

One GOP political move drew fire. It was learned that the Bush-Cheney campaign sought to identify 1,600 “friendly congregations” in Pennsylvania. Liberal groups called the move a direct breach of church-state separation. In an e-mail message, dated June 1 and reported by the *New York Times*, an official of the Bush campaign in Pennsylvania asked clergy and others to identify congregations where “voters friendly to President Bush might gather on a regular basis.” The e-mail said the campaign was seeking volunteers to distribute information to other supporters.

A Bush spokesman said the effort was legitimate, but critics said such tactics normally take place through third parties such as religious coalitions or pastors. C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance, termed the appeal “an astonishing abuse of religion.” Contending that churches distributing campaign literature might risk their tax-exempt status, Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State declared, “The last thing this country needs is a church-based political machine.”

The theme struck recently by the Bush administration, however, was that religious clashes between Republicans and Democrats are not over First Amendment issues

but over clashing societal mores.

Meeting in the White House on May 26 with nine writers and executives of conservative religious publications, President Bush described himself as an agent for change. “The job of a president is to help cultures change,” Bush told the invitees. “Governments cannot change culture alone. I want you to know I understand that. But I can be a voice of cultural change.”

Bush, an evangelical United Methodist, said he did not want to be confused with a preacher. “One of the prayers I ask is that God’s light shine through me as best as possible, no matter how opaque the window.” The president said repeatedly in the wide-ranging interview that Americans have the right to worship how they wish or not at all.

At a gathering June 1 at the Washington Hilton that touted Bush’s White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, the director of that office, Jim Towey, said the impasse in Congress over federal funding of religious social-service groups is an ideological battle. “It’s a culture war that really gets to the heart of the questions about what is the role of faith in the public square,” Towey said. When faith is driven out of that square, he said, “you almost wind up creating a godless orthodoxy.”

At the meeting Bush himself reiterated to a crowd of over 1,500 his tenet that religious-related social service groups “do a better job than government can do.” His 40-minute speech was peppered with anecdotal evidence of how people ranging from addicts to refugees were helped by faith-based bodies. At the same time, it was announced that Bush had signed three more executive orders (now totaling ten) to assist faith-based organizations in applying for grants from three federal agencies—a tactic criticized by liberal groups as religious favoritism and an end-run around Congress.

Before Bush flew to meet June 4 with the pope, the president had videotaped a message to the Hispanic Prayer Breakfast in Washington, counting its participants among “the armies of compassion.” He vowed to “continue my commitment to the faith-based initiative so you can continue to receive federal support for your works of compassion.”

At the Vatican, Bush was told that John Paul II’s opposition to the U.S.-led invasion in Iraq remained “unequivocal.” But the pope praised the appointment of a new

president and interim government in Iraq as “an encouraging step” toward restoration of sovereignty. The pope also praised Bush for his stand against abortion and his opposition to same-sex marriages.

Political strategists interpreted the election-year private audience as a bid for Catholic votes, which was enhanced when the president presented the pontiff with America’s Medal of Freedom. But following the 15-minute meeting, in a short televised address, John Paul called the abuse of Iraqis by U.S. servicemen and women “deplorable,” and he urged Washington to seek closer relations with Europe.

Bush’s presumed November opponent scored relatively few points in the meantime. But a friendly report, released June 2 on John Kerry’s Senate voting patterns, described him as frequently in line with official Catholic legislative priorities, according to Democratic Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois.

The report gave Kerry an overall score of 60.9 percent, the highest of all 24 Catholics in the Senate. On domestic policy Kerry scored 95 percent, along with 50 percent on international policy but just 11 percent on “pro-life” issues such as abortion, the death penalty and contraception. Durbin and Ted Kennedy ranked just slightly behind Kerry.

The question of whether Kerry should be denied communion because of his backing of abortion rights seems to have faded. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, who heads a task force on how to deal with dissenting politicians, said May 27 in his strongest statement yet that denying the Eucharist is a “slippery slope” unwelcome in his archdiocese. “I’m not going to do it,” he told Catholic journalists. “We should have no confrontation at the altar.”