

Democrats' new faith outreach director quits: Public positions under fire

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After less than two weeks on the job, the Democratic Party's first-ever director of religious outreach resigned suddenly after her public positions came under fire.

Brenda Bartella Peterson said on August 4 it was "no longer possible for me to do my job effectively" after the New York-based Catholic League issued three blistering press releases attacking her positions.

"As of today I am resigning my position as the director of religious outreach because it is no longer possible for me to do my job effectively," Peterson said in a statement to Religion News Service. "I continue to believe, as do leading faith leaders across this country, that John Kerry should be the next president of the United States and that John Kerry's values of opportunity, family and responsibility are America's values."

Peterson, who was hired by the Democratic National Committee on July 23, is an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who was once pastor of a church in Kentucky. In recent months she has been the director of the Clergy Leadership Network, a fledgling platform for liberal clergy opposing President Bush. The network has struggled, however, to gain funds and national attention.

Calls to the Democratic National Committee (DNC), which had tried to ignore the controversy generated by the conservative Catholic League, were not returned. After releasing her statement of resignation, Peterson declined further comment.

(Albert Pennybacker of Lexington, Kentucky, chairman of the Clergy Leadership Network, told the Century that he was "startled" to hear that Peterson had quit the new post. Pennybacker, a former National Council of Churches official, served on the platform committee for the Democratic Party. Referring to Catholic League

criticisms, he said that he blamed “this kind of typically extreme right attack” for discouraging “moderate, progressive and liberal” voices from being heard.)

The Catholic League blasted Peterson for having signed on to a “friend of the court” brief with the U.S. Supreme Court along with 31 other clergy to support removing “under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance. The league also criticized left-leaning positions on taxes and gay marriage taken by the Clergy Leadership Network.

“And this is the person the Democrats want to dispatch to meet the heads of religious organizations? Are they out of their minds? Would they hire a gay basher to reach out to homosexuals?” asked the league’s president, Bill Donohue, in a press release August 2.

A couple of months earlier, Donohue attacked another person hired to do religious outreach for the Kerry campaign. Donohue disparaged Mara Vanderslice as a “far left-wing activist who has spoken at rallies held by the notoriously anti-Catholic group ACT UP.”

Peterson had been hired by the DNC to help mobilize people of faith for Kerry and help shape public policy issues such as poverty, health care and the environment in religious and moral terms. One of her first duties was to hold a “People of Faith for Kerry” lunch during the Democratic convention.

“We plan to go all over the nation,” she told the PBS show *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* that same week. “We plan to have a religious Web page on the DNC site and to let people of faith be heard. To let them know that their voice can say, ‘We think the federal budget is a moral document. We think that there are issues in this campaign that have a theological underpinning.’”

(Peter Laarman, executive director of Progressive Christians Uniting, based in Pomona, California, told the Century he “was sorry to hear” that Peterson resigned under pressure. “People are chewed up and spit out in bigtime national politics,” said Laarman, former senior pastor at Judson Church in New York City. “Expectations are so high for the Kerry campaign to be competitive in the religious arena, and the other party feels it owns that territory,” he said.

(Progressive Christians Uniting, originally formed by theologian John Cobb and Episcopal priest George Regas under another name, plans to craft a consensus declaration on the Internet with up to 1,000 “drafters” September 13-15. Laarman said organizers hope to give voice to progressive Christians “rejecting the gospel of

violence and exclusion and making it clear that the time for waging wars in Christ's name has long since passed.") -*Religion News Service*