

Liberal faith leaders aim to be 'prophetic' D.C. strategy session in election aftermath: D.C. strategy session in election aftermath

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Religious leaders who mounted an unsuccessful bid to resurrect progressive values in the 2004 elections are saying they refuse to yield the “moral high ground” to conservative Christians. They may even cast new efforts in “prophetic” terms, rather than stick with “progressive” as a meaningful adjective.

More than two dozen Jewish and Christian progressive faith leaders ended a two-day strategy session in Washington, D.C., assessing an election aftermath in which voters citing “moral values” often backed President Bush—however flawed the exit poll questions might have been.

Convened by the liberal think tank Center for American Progress, the participants said they must refocus on the spiritual roots of their agenda, not allow “moral values” to be defined solely around gay marriage and abortion, and relate “values” to issues of health care, education and the environment.

In a signal of shifting strategy, participants said that they would shun the “progressive” label in favor of “prophetic,” which they said implies a greater degree of religious motivation. “Progressive’ sounds like it’s an ideological position with values attached,” said James A. Forbes Jr., pastor of New York’s Riverside Church, “but ‘prophetic’ carries with it that you’re willing to be [held] accountable by the God you claim to serve.”

Forbes said all the postelection introspection about the importance of values “is like cut flowers” that will soon wither unless it is rooted in solid foundations of theology and activist faith.

The December 8-9 session was a follow-up to a June meeting called by John Podesta, a former Clinton White House chief of staff and a Democratic strategist. Podesta reiterated his willingness to help progressives build on gains made in 2004. Without religious voices, the Democrats will be perpetual also-rans, he said. "People trying to sell progressive [ideals] and vision would be well served by listening to people in this room."

Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches and a former Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania, said "the good news about the bad news" from the election is that the party seems to be taking religious voices more seriously. He said progressives need to recapture the language of faith. "We sound like secularists when we need to sound like the prophetic religious leaders we are," Edgar said.

Others at the meeting included Jim Wallis, convener of the antipoverty group Call to Renewal; Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; civil rights leaders; and representatives of mainline Protestant churches and Catholic and Jewish social justice groups. *-Religion News Service*