

# Liberal clergy group redesigns itself: Clergy and Laity Network

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A struggling effort to organize progressive clergy around election-year issues as a political lobbying group in 2004 has undergone a new year's transformation with a new name, a new tax status and a renewed commitment to rally liberal religious voters in the 2006 midterm elections.

The Clergy Leadership Network, formed in November 2003 with hopes of providing an alternative voice to religious conservatives, is now called the "Clergy and Laity Network." It hired Sarah Labowitz, a recent college graduate, as its Washington coordinator.

The new CLN is no longer a "527" political advocacy group. It is now incorporated like most nonprofit groups with limited ability to conduct issue advocacy and education efforts.

Joan Brown Campbell, former general secretary of the National Council of Churches, said the new focus will be on "grass-roots social impact organizing. We connect with people of faith where they live, as voters and active citizens."

When it debuted in 2003 as a clergy-only group, the CLN attracted veteran liberal luminaries such as Jesse Jackson, William Sloane Coffin and Rabbi Arthur Waskow and was chaired by ex-NCC official Albert Pennybacker of Lexington, Kentucky. But other than a *New York Times* article heralding its formation, the group never caught fire and found itself outpaced by established conservative groups.

In addition, the Dallas-based Leadership Network, an evangelical church think tank, last year threatened legal action against CLN if it did not change its name. The Texas group said the name caused "confusion and adverse reaction" among its clients.

Last summer, CLN's first director, Brenda Bartella Peterson, left the group to serve as religious outreach director for the Democratic National Committee. She resigned

under pressure a week later after she was criticized for supporting the removal of “under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance. -*Religion News Service*