

Can Democrats get religion? Left and center in Grand Rapids: Left and center in Grand Rapids

by [William Katerberg](#) in the [December 27, 2005](#) issue

Conventional wisdom has it that the Democrats don't know how to talk about faith. Religion is a Republican and conservative thing, not something that liberals and progressives feel comfortable discussing. Democrats like Jimmy Carter are exceptions that prove the rule.

The Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C., wants this to change. The center, founded by John Podesta, chief of staff in the Clinton White House, is a progressive think tank that wants to counter the well-funded network of conservative think tanks that support the Republican Party, such as the Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute. It is officially nonpartisan, but Democrats are the likely beneficiaries of whatever success it has in rallying the center-left in American politics.

As part of its "Faith and Progressive Policy" initiative, the center has held discussions on moral values and politics (in Denver), faith and science (Kansas City), and the relationship between religious institutions, charities and local and state government (San Francisco). In November the center brought its faith-and-policy effort to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the topic was the economy, social services and ideals of civic life and community.

Grand Rapids is ripe for such a conversation. It is a city of churches—scores of Christian Reformed and Reformed congregations, large Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, and diverse African-American and Hispanic faith communities. Politically, Michigan is a swing state, with Grand Rapids usually going Democratic and the West Michigan region going Republican. West Michigan has suffered from "rust belt" economic decline, with unionized factory workers losing their jobs to foreign competition and high-tech manufacturing methods. Globalization has hit the

region hard for three decades, most recently with the restructuring and possible bankruptcy of Delphi Corporation, an auto parts supplier.

Marco Grimaldo, director of the center's Faith and Progressive Policy initiative, moderated the discussion, and Grand Rapids' mayor, George Heartwell, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, gave the opening remarks. The panel members were Lisa Mitchell from the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism; Beverly Drake of the Area Community Services Employment and Training Council; Jose Reyna, assistant to the city manager; and Norman Christopher, director of sustainability at Grand Valley State University.

Heartwell urged civic engagement and caring for cities as communities. He pointed to the need for vision, action and hope—hope that “lives as if” the vision is real. The panelists focused on practical issues: helping someone find a job or a home, maintaining city services and sustaining jobs.

The most striking aspect of the evening was how little discussion there was of faith. The focus on practical matters reflected the makeup of the panel and the audience. It also fit the center's goal of generating “new progressive ideas and policy proposals,” and it typifies the policy-wonk instincts of Democratic activists. But it also reflects a weakness of the center-left—its tendency to neglect or assume a social vision, and its difficulty in communicating that vision in a way that attracts people motivated by their faith commitments.

In an effort to be ecumenical and nonpartisan, the panel and audience members avoided discussing their religious and political identities. They stressed instead the need to find common ground among Christians who share a faith but are divided along political lines, and among people of various faith traditions (or no faith tradition). These are worthy goals. But if the mission of the center and the policy goals of Christians on the center-left of the political spectrum are to be achieved, more partisanship may be required. The Republican Party and the Christian right have been succeeding with a more explicit kind of religious politics.

One member of the audience observed that Democrats often talk about how their policies stem from the Judeo-Christian imperative to “love your neighbor,” but many Christians, especially conservative ones, do not trust appeals to Christian morality that come from people who don't also speak about their love for God. A lowest-common-denominator religiosity may not seem authentic to them as either faith or

politics. Can Democrats and progressives address this dilemma without alienating “more secular” people or undermining public discourse and a common public sphere?

In responding, Drake pointed to the cooperation between her African-American church and a white congregation; they have avoided “blue” and “red” issues and instead focused on building a Habitat for Humanity house. This event became the basis for an ongoing relationship.

Mitchell too stressed common ground. “If we want to label people red and blue, we’re not going to get anywhere.” The goal is “to bring people together and not label ourselves in one way or another.” People who feel a need to talk more about the place of religious motivations in politics and public life should “come around the table” and address it. About her Roman Catholic background, she said: “We’re really strong on Catholic social teaching, and that’s building a just community, and we try to do that with respecting the dignity of every person, however they believe. . . . We just need to address the issue and bring people together and not have people come in the room saying [they’re] already divided.”

At the end of the evening, Grimaldo challenged the panelists to describe “a vision for the future.” Most of them again underscored the need to promote harmony and find common ground. As leaders in social services, city government and the academic community, they daily try to set aside differences of race, faith and partisan politics. None is an elected official. The problem is that political solutions cannot be kept separate from partisan politics. The panelists and audience members who spoke advocated policies and programs that put them on the center-left of the political spectrum. The event was sponsored by a center whose goal is to rally that center-left. Can leaders on the center-left also rally citizens motivated by their specific faith commitments? Is it possible to have pointed religious dialogue and debate in civic life and politics and yet retain and value “secular” public discourse?

The victorious gubernatorial campaign of Democrat Timothy Kaine in Virginia in November demonstrated that Democratic leaders can indeed “get religion” and do so authentically. Kaine spoke extensively and personally about his Roman Catholic faith, and tied it to his stance on capital punishment and abortion. He even advertised on Christian radio. The success of the Democratic Party and center-left social programs and policies may depend on leaders like Kaine, who was able to reach out to Virginia’s religious communities without alienating secular Virginians. But the discussion in Grand Rapids suggests how hard that is for many Democrats to

do.