

Responsive Philanthropy

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Funding Fair Voices of Faith

By the Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy

On Sept. 21, 2001, nearly 3,000 people converged on the Denver Islamic Center mosque. Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Hindus and others encircled the building, holding hands. They came not to vent their anger about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon but to stand with Muslim Americans in their community in the face of racism, racial profiling and religious discrimination. More than 40 local religious groups participated in an interfaith vigil, according to the Rev. Bill Kirton, pastor of Denver's Cameron United Methodist Church and president of The Interfaith Alliance of Colorado, which organized the event. "During comments and prayers by various clergy, the Rev. Okomoto of the Denver Buddhist Temple said: 'I was born in a concentration camp for Japanese Americans during World War II. We don't want American Muslims to feel the same racism we had then,'" the *Denver Post* reported.

In Colorado Springs, just a two-hour drive from Denver, stands the national headquarters of Dr. James Dobson's media empire, Focus on the Family. Clothing their

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Faith, Fairness and Philanthropy

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As part of a nationwide effort to raise awareness about the problem of hate violence, representatives from the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh faiths lead a public interfaith service at the National Cathedral in Washington on the anniversary of the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard. (Photo courtesy of The Interfaith Alliance.)



message in the vestments of faith and family values, Dobson and other leaders of the well-funded political right for the past 20 years have advanced public policies that threaten freedom and tear at the fabric of our democracy. In opposing stem cell research, they block promising medical advances that could spare millions of American families from the tragedies of Alzheimer's disease, diabetes and heart disease. In rejecting effective family planning and HIV-prevention efforts, they put countless vulnerable Americans and their families at risk. Leaders of the political right promote discrimination based on religion, sexual orientation and gender identity. At issue is not their intentions but the impact of their actions and the extraordinary dominance of their views in the public's perception of faith-based voices in American politics.

Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, the American Family Association and others have effectively marginalized centrist and progressive religious Americans. Like those who encircled the

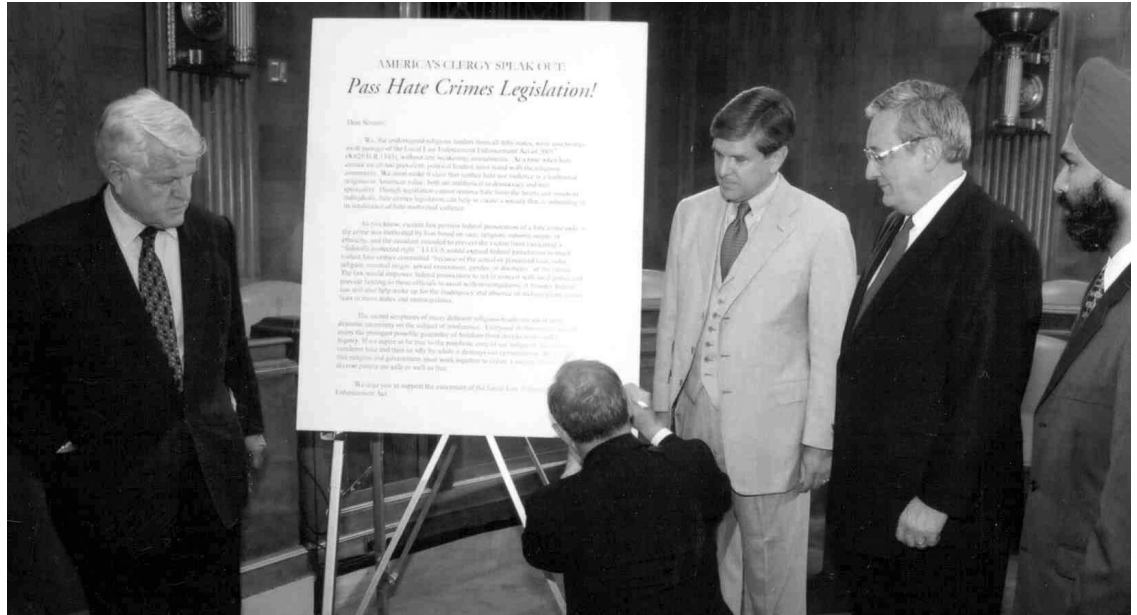
Denver mosque, the majority of Americans, in fact, are people of faith and good will whose views are frequently at odds with those of the far right. But Focus on the Family and other such groups have had phenomenal success in creating a public misperception that they and they alone speak for all people of faith. Sensible progressive, moderate and conservative people of faith do not begrudge the far right's legitimate participation in the political process. Rather, we believe that all voices should be heard. We are struggling to catch up, working to achieve greater balance and create more diversity among the voices of faith in public discourse and the formulation of public policy.

Over the last few years, we have seen repeated rightward lurches on the national public policy stage. Even prior to the advent of Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition, dating back to the formation of Ed McAteer's Religious Roundtable and the rise of the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these rightward shifts have been fueled by skilled organizing, strategic mobilizing and, yes, tremendous fundraising on the part of the religious right.

At the present moment, buoyed by successes in the most recent national election, the powerful political right exerts unprecedented influence over all branches of government. President Bush is relaunching his "faith-based initiative" to redistribute billions of dollars for social services like drug rehabilitation and pregnancy counseling to faith-based organizations. Encouraged by successful attacks on the constitutionally mandated separation of religion and government, members of Congress, led by Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., seek to change the tax code to allow houses of worship to endorse political candidates.

Deeply troubling is the conviction of some on the political right, who act as though only their voices should be heard—that their views alone should dictate public policy for all Americans. This is a critical difference between some of the key leaders of the religious right and the majority of faithful Americans. For the far right, only those who share their views are deemed fully worthy of religious liberty and freedom from discrimination. By contrast, most Americans of faith and good will support such liberty for all—including the far right,

Religious leaders present Sens. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and Gordon Smith, R-Ore., with a letter signed by more than 500 clergy supporting the senators' efforts to pass the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act—a bipartisan bill to strengthen federal hate crimes laws and make them equally tough on all forms of bias-motivated criminal violence. (Photo courtesy of The Interfaith Alliance.)



Reasonable moderate, progressive and conservative people of faith are slowly advancing a healthy vision of family values that encompasses true compassion, civility, mutual respect for human dignity and support for equal rights.

even though the far right so often opposes that very same liberty for others.

Fortunately, fair voices of faith are emerging, reminding America of the healthy meaning of faith and family values, promoting the positive and healing role of religion in public life and defending religious freedom for all. These voices call Americans to remember that faith can inspire fairness and inclusion.

Reasonable moderate, progressive and conservative people of faith are slowly advancing a healthy vision of family values that encompasses true compassion, civility, mutual respect for human dignity and support for equal rights. Sister Maureen Fiedler's "Interfaith Voices," a public radio show carried on a handful of stations across the country, promotes religious tolerance and interfaith understanding. The Rev. Carlton Veazey of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice is mobilizing people of faith to defend a woman's right to choose. Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, is leading seminars on conflict resolution through his M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence in Memphis, Tenn. The Rev. Bob Edgar is leading the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA and the multiple denominations it represents in protests demanding a peaceful resolution of the United States' conflict with Iraq. Countless imams, rabbis and ministers are working with the National Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice to demand fair treatment of low-wage workers like janitors and restaurant employees.

These and other progressive faith-based groups represent the best hope of fulfilling the dreams of those who assembled on March 7, 1965, in the parking lot of Brown Chapel AME

Church to march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala. Who can forget the images of that day? After crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the marchers were met with tear gas and billy clubs in response to their demand for basic civil rights. This image and their courage helped to spark the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. People of faith, united behind a vision of justice, are limited only by a lack of resources available to do their vital work.

Veazey notes, "To counter the religious right, we need the kind of funding that they enjoy. The majority of people in this country are pro-choice, but you would not know it by the publicity that the religious right receives." Similarly, Sister Fiedler comments, "If progressive foundations are really interested in dealing with the religious right, we have to do it on many fronts. These people have a virtual media empire. The public listens to them and the public needs to hear other voices."

To date, too few progressive, secular activists have drawn on the strengths of religious values and people of faith to achieve social justice. But partnership with people of faith to achieve public policy ends need not mean adopting a divisive agenda or violating the separation of church and state. Progressive, faith-based organizations, The Interfaith Alliance included, seek not to establish "one true faith" for our nation, nor to exclude the values and views of those who do not identify with a faith tradition. Rather, we seek the benefits that pluralism affords—the opportunity to express our diverse viewpoints in the vital public policy debates of our times.

The recent emergence of beneficial partnerships between progressive faith-based organiza-

tions signals great promise for the future. Organizations concerned with equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans, including the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, have built cooperative partnerships with religious leaders, even as their denominations still struggle internally over full inclusion of gay and lesbian congregants and clergy. Funders, in particular the Gill Foundation, have provided indispensable support to these partnerships, significantly strengthening them organizationally and increasing their effectiveness.

The soil in which such partnerships can grow is far more fertile than many surmise. For example, even among evangelical Christians, polling research shows strong support for outlawing job discrimination based on sexual orientation. Such discrimination remains legal in 37 states and under federal law, but the tide is turning toward equality. An impressive endorsement for basic equal rights for all people has been found even among those who sincerely believe homosexuality to be a sin—demonstrating that even traditionally conservative people of faith understand that believing your neighbors are morally right is not a prerequisite to insisting that they be treated with civility and fairness. Hard evidence gives birth to real hope that the majority of people of all faiths are more fair-minded than the most vocal and visible far-right leaders would like to admit.[†]

While some funders and nonprofits are building bridges among people of faith on matters of civil rights and sexual orientation, other groups are making a positive difference on a wide range of other issues. The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, which seeks to engage the reform Jewish community in progressive political activism, has worked side-by-side with secular activists on a host of issues, including campaign finance reform and expanded protections against hate crimes. According to Sherry Levy-Reiner, the Religious Action Center's director of development, they have received generous support from the Righteous Persons Foundation and several small family foundations.

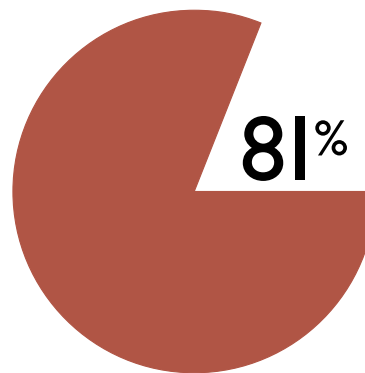
Local congregations and interfaith coalitions involved in issues of economic justice are enjoying both a strong partnership with labor unions and growing opportunities for funding. Foundations

with ties to religious denominations, such as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, are prioritizing support for efforts such as the living-wage campaign in Los Angeles, an initiative to secure better wages for hotel workers, which is supported by Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice. One attention-getting strategy of the campaign is for ministers to eat at hotel restaurants and then stand up and deliver a sermon about the lack of decent wages and health care among the workers.

Jeannie Appleman supports such programs through her work with the Interfaith Funders network, which has, as one of its aims, "advancing the field of faith-based organizing to leverage as much funding as possible to faith-based organizations." She notes, "More and more, faith-based organizations and their networks are capturing more mainstream money than they have before. But is there sufficient money in this field? Not at all."

Likewise, national faith-based efforts to end systematic intolerance and eradicate racism are facing challenges in obtaining and maintaining financial support. The National Conference for Community and Justice (formerly the National Conference of Christians and Jews) developed a "Faith Leaders' Initiative" to respond to then President Clinton's call to find new ways to fight racism. Although it received attention from the media and funders initially, attempts to further its work have been challenging. According to Danielle Glosser, the conference's director of public policy, "At this time in our history, with everyone turning to our faith leaders for counsel, these leaders need to be equipped to address the depth and breadth of issues that would be helpful to them. We've produced great

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A sizeable and diverse constituency of the faithful: 81 percent of American adults identify with a religion, according to the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2001 by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

[†]A March 2000 *Newsweek* poll found that approximately 75 percent of white Evangelical Protestants favor equal rights for gay people in terms of in job opportunities—while almost exactly the same percentage believe that homosexuality is a sin. Other polls also have repeatedly shown strong support, even among traditionally conservative people of faith, for outlawing job discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Fair-minded people of faith already have the will, the courage and the expertise to help make real America's promise ... but funding for this work pales beside funding for pursuits of a much narrower vision for the nation.

materials, but we're not receiving enough support to further our work."

In the same vein, The Interfaith Alliance Foundation, which works to promote the positive and healing role of religion in public life, received strong support from the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation after Sept. 11, 2001, to initiate a series of congregational partnerships among Christian, Jewish and Muslim women and youth to promote interfaith understanding and coordinated social action. However, we face daily the challenge to obtain ongoing, core support from other foundations for our efforts to engage people of faith and good will nationwide in civic participation.

People of faith committed to advancing the values of compassion, civility and mutual respect for human dignity have the potential to be enormously influential in shaping the next significant public policy debates in our nation. Minority religious groups, from the Muslim Public Affairs Council to the Sikh Mediawatch and Resource Task Force, are growing in strength and ensuring that religious participation in public life is truly representative of all beliefs. Interfaith partnerships, from Denver to Washington and across the country, are beginning to take root as a means to seek justice for all. What remains to be seen, though, is whether the future holds the kind of financial support essential to broadening and sustaining this movement toward a healthy democracy in which faith and fairness appropriately complement each other.

Fair-minded people of faith already have the will, the courage and the expertise to help make real America's promise—to enable this nation to

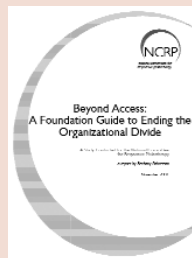
live up to our historically cherished values of religious liberty, freedom from discrimination, social justice and economic opportunity for all. But funding for this work pales beside funding for pursuits of a much narrower vision for the nation. Now more than ever, the voices of fairness and freedom in the public debate need support. With great anticipation, we look to sensible, forward-thinking philanthropists who will match their resources with our resolve. ☺

The Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy serves as president of The Interfaith Alliance (TIA) and The Interfaith Alliance Foundation (TIAF) and as pastor at Northminster (Baptist) Church in Monroe, La. An author and media commentator, Dr. Gaddy is recognized as a national leader among progressive and moderate Baptists. Dr. Gaddy served in several leadership roles in the Southern Baptist Convention prior to its takeover by fundamentalists. Founded in 1994, The Interfaith Alliance (www.interfaithalliance.org) is a non-partisan, clergy-led grassroots organization dedicated to promoting the positive and healing role of religion in the life of the nation and challenging those who manipulate religion to promote a narrow, divisive agenda. With more than 150,000 members drawn from over 65 faith traditions, local alliances in 38 states and a national network of religious leaders, TIA promotes compassion, civility and mutual respect for human dignity in our increasingly diverse society. Suzie Armstrong, deputy executive director for finance and development at TIA and TIAF, contributed to this article, as did Sloan Wiesen, communications director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and editor of Responsive Philanthropy.

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