

Edgar Politicizes the Social Gospel

By Aimee Howd

Two former Democratic Party partisans have taken the leadership of the liberal National Council of Churches and may hope to make it into a left-wing political powerhouse.



Two former Democratic congressmen, Bob Edgar and Andrew Young, have assumed the top positions at the National Council of Churches, or NCC. The surprising news is not that they are men of the left but that they are aggressive political partisans. From the time the NCC was born in 1949, replacing the left-wing Federal Council of Churches after World War II, its leaders have been advocates of the social gospel. As it celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, the NCC is seeking to regain some of the momentum it has lost since liberalism's heyday in the 1960s. Money is a problem. Global relief

Cagey: Do Young, left, and Edgar plan to make the NCC into an influential leader in Democratic politics?

efforts through its mission unit, Church World Service and Witness, or CWS, bring in roughly 80 percent of its \$60 million annual budget. This goes to famine relief in Ethiopia, survival kits for cyclone victims in Mozambique and help for AIDS patients in Africa. The CWS has more than three times the budget and twice the staff of all the other NCC operations combined. Some contributors don't like the increasing amount that the NCC extracts from CWS donations for other purposes.

Certainly, the social and political positions NCC leaders have trumpeted through its Washington legislative office and a steady stream of political resolutions have wrought controversy within member denominations and criticism from others. "Their radicalization came in the 1960s," says Alan Wisdom, vice president of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, a religious watchdog group founded to combat the perceived liberalism of mainline churches. "The NCC became a harsh critic of U.S. policy in Vietnam and began to publish things critical of the United States but sympathetic to Marxist policies."

There were the laudatory statements about Fidel Castro's government in Cuba, the cheering of the revolution in China and the stunned statements of horror after Ronald Reagan was elected president. There were those public prayers against Republicans during the government shutdown of 1995. And there was the public letter signed by NCC leaders during President Clinton's impeachment calling for absolution of the president, a "return to the real needs of the people" and the raising of "voices of reconciliation, grace, mercy and redeeming love." This March, there was the advertisement Edgar placed in California newspapers decrying the effort of Proposition 22 to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

The NCC Website (www.ncc-usa.org) catalogs statements in support of affirmative action, gun control, opposition to welfare reform, more funding for government schools, stricter environmental regulation, racial justice, environmental justice, women's justice and so on, echoing the Democratic Party platform — loudly.

Lately, the NCC has been active in affirming the high quality of life that Cuba — with its great educational system and socialized health care — has to offer Elian Gonzalez if only the United States will let him go home to Castro. Rep. Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican, recently told reporters that the NCC has a history of underestimating the repression of communist regimes.

But while the NCC has been proud to promote liberal social goals under the auspices of advancing holy writ, the religious organization never before has sported a pair of leaders with such overtly political biographies and such partisan connections.

"It is interesting that Andrew Young and Bob Edgar were both

members of Congress, were both pastors when we took office," Edgar himself muses to *Insight*, "and that we both still balance political passions with the passions of the Old and New Testaments, and there's a blending of that in our public life."

An ordained United Methodist elder, Edgar was the first Democrat in 120 years to be elected to Congress from his highly Republican Pennsylvania district as a result of the reaction to Watergate in 1974. He joined in revisionist investigations of the assassinations of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy and fought what he called "pork-barrel" water projects as a crusading environmentalist. He held the seat for five terms until 1986 when he braved — and lost — a Senate run against moderate GOP incumbent Arlen Specter. Later, he served a stint as finance director for a presidential bid by Sen. Paul Simon of Illinois between gigs as a professor and an arms-control advocate for a think tank in Washington. Then, in 12 years as president of the Claremont School of Theology in California, he restored the once dying institution into a thriving ecumenical Methodist seminary.

Perhaps it was not his loyalty to the Democratic Party but his success at Claremont that caught the attention of the NCC's search committee last year. In November, he was elected unanimously to a five-year term as the NCC's general secretary, its highest staff position. In January, he began the transition to the New York headquarters.

Edgar replaced Joan Brown Campbell, who departed her second consecutive term as general secretary a year early and left him an unwieldy administrative structure, no cash reserves, \$4 million in debt and some very skittish groups among its 35 Protestant and Orthodox member communions and denominations. Under pressure from church members, the United Methodist Church — one of the seven mainline churches that together give more than 90 percent of the NCC's budget — actually froze funding temporarily.

Edgar called on his connections in the Democratic Party and the left-wing "peace" and "justice" communities. In no time at all the NCC had paid off that \$4 million deficit, and he now is overseeing a major restructuring of the management and financial practices of the NCC, as mandated at the February meeting of his executive board.

The meeting set a budget of rough-

ly \$71 million for 2000. Almost \$63 million must go to CWS, about \$2 million to the general secretariat and \$6 million to the "Mission Cluster," which includes education and advocacy projects. That's an increase of 18 percent in CWS funding and a cut of 41 percent in funding for other units. The precise structure of the NCC and its more powerful foreign-missions daughter, CWS, will be discussed at the executive board's May meeting — at which CWS may cut the NCC's apron strings.

Edgar says he is optimistic about the NCC's future. "Any organization that's 50 years old needs to be retooled periodically," he tells *Insight*. A new position of general manager has been created to aid the general secretary and nearly 30 positions have been eliminated, Edgar says.

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, who heads the member denomina-

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tion Reformed Church of America and led the NCC board's transition-management team, published editorials last year saying that the immediate financial crisis of the NCC was "only a symptom of a deeper crisis" of eroded trust in the organization on the part of "the leaders and constituency of many of its member communions." He tells *Insight* that while the short-term crisis has been averted, the long-term questions remain. "The question the general secretary must ask is not how well can you keep this institution together but rather what is the ecumenical future to which God is calling the church?"

Alongside Edgar as he hears this question, of course, is that other former Democratic Party congressman Andrew Jackson Young, who took office as president last fall for a two-year term. His term in Congress as the first African-American legislator elected from Georgia since Reconstruction overlapped Edgar's. He has been involved with the NCC almost since its inception. After his ordina-

tion in the United Church of Christ in 1955 at the age of 23, he worked internationally on behalf of revolutionary movements in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. In a recent interview Young commented, "I believe I was later able to bring a new perspective to a lot of our nation's policies. I saw that our government was ruled by our fears of communism rather than wisdom and understanding about the world in which we live."

Young's three terms in Congress began in 1972, but he increased his profile when President Carter appointed him ambassador to the United Nations, where eventually he had to resign for making statements contrary to U.S. policies and interests. He went on to become mayor of Atlanta, successfully drawing scores of businesses to the city and continuing his crusade against poverty as the true root of crime. Young served as cochairman of the Atlanta Olympic Committee in 1996 and now is chairman of the Atlanta-based consulting firm, GoodWorks International.

As the NCC's president-elect, Young defended China's human-rights record and Castro's Cuban dictatorship. Whatever the future holds for his two-year term as NCC president — an unpaid position but similar to a corporation's chairman of the board — he certainly knows how to lead a movement. Is he trying to lead it into the Democratic Party?

So all things considered, does the NCC have the potential to become the Democratic Party's answer to the Republican religious right? Edgar can't resist a chuckle as he ponders the question. "Let me say, uh, that we are not a partisan organization.... I think that one thing that has happened since the 80s high point of the religious right is that when [the average reader] sees the word Christian in the newspaper they don't automatically think religious right.... We're going to try to continue to improve on our effectiveness in getting our faith-based messages across to elected officials and to constituents in local churches. My hope is that when our organization manages to heal financial difficulties and reenergize its leadership that it can make a difference, and we'll know in the next two years if that's possible."

But trying is not the same as succeeding. "The NCC is not very effective in advancing its political agenda," says Wisdom. "At this point, it is so well-known as being on the far left and not representative of the constituency they claim." ●