FEATURE

Politics

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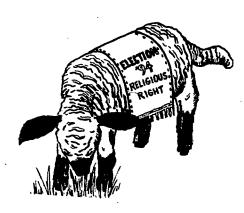
The religious right's rise has become the focus of numerous recent newspaper articles and television reports — such as public television's recently aired program, "Campaign '94: Religion and Politics" — and even an informal congressional discussion group headed by Rochester Congresswoman Louise Slaughter (Dem.-28th district).

But members of these groups do not see themselves as hobgoblins whose task it is to haunt the political powers-that-

"What we are is a group of concerned citizens who banded together to get a bigger voice in government, to talk to elected officials," explained Ted Snyder, leader of the Monroe County Chapter of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms. "We're trying to get Christians interested in politics, to get them to contact their elected officials."

Thus amid all the recent media scrutiny being thrust upon them, "We are trying to stay focused on our message, which is to get people involved in the process and to address the issues," Russell explained. "What we are trying to do is raise issues, get more members and raise more voices for family values."

In trying to get religiously oriented people involved in the political process, the religious right is simply following a pattern that has existed in this country since Europeans first began settling in



the Americas, according to Paul Boyer, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

"From the foundation of New England by the Puritans — a Bible commonwealth from the very beginning — the interweaving of what we might think of the sacred and the secular in our history is very complex," noted Boyer, author of the 1992 book, "When Time Shall Be No More: Professing Belief in Modern American Culture." "There have been repeated efforts by Protestant organizations to address issues."

Historically, religious groups have been involved in such movements as the effort to end slavery, temperance, civil rights, even restricting the immigration of Catholics, Boyer explained. Thus, current efforts are simply a continuation of a longstanding historical pattern, he said.

Catholics, likewise, have a history of lobbying on issues, noted Kathleen M. Gallagher, associate director of the New York State Catholic Conference.

"I believe very strongly in our right and responsibility as Christians to get involved in the public-policy process," Gallagher said.

And although the Catholic Church and the religious right do not necessarily agree on every issue, they do find common ground on such concerns as abortion and pornography, Gallagher said.

"It has been helpful to have people writing to politicians — and not just on Catholic Conference stationary," Gallagher said. "It's good to have these informal coalitions on some issues."

Indeed, the Christian Coalition, the Archdiocese of New York, and a number of religious and ethnic groups in New York City cooperated to achieve a major success last year, Russell said.

The New York City School Board was attempting to change the school curriculum to include homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle, Russell explained. The coalition of groups opposing this curriculum supported school-board candidates in the 1993 election who likewise opposed the change.

Russell said enough of those candidates won to prevent the new curriculum from implementation.

"I think that was a tremendous example of what we want to do all over the country," Russell continued. "We want to build coalitions of religious and other conservative groups to promote family values."

Despite charges that the religious right is bigoted, Russell observed, coalitions the religious right seeks to build actually cross religious and ethnic boundaries. The New York City effort, for example, included not only Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants, but also Jews, blacks and Hispanics.

Moreover, Russell charged, the religious right has itself been the target of bigoted attacks by the likes of U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, who referred to religious conservatives as "un-Christian."

"This from the highest office for a physician in the United States," Russell said. "These are insults, not disputes about where we stand."

Such attacks have actually helped to draw attention to the religious right, and have encouraged people to join groups affiliated with the movement, Russell claims.

Boyer noted that yet another factor in the religious right's rise is the sense of alienation felt by many people — a sense that the centers of power in politics and the media are promoting ideas and values with which they do not agree.

"It's related to highly charged emotional issues — such as abortion — and the broader sense of what is perceived as an erosion of normal values in American society," Boyer said.

"America is successful because of the Christian principles and values our founding fathers based it on," remarked Rev. Duane Motley, founder of New Yorkers for Constitutional Freedoms.

Those values need to be promoted today, Rev. Motley continued. And the way to do that is for Christians to take action.

"We encourage our people to get involved in a political party," Rev. Motley said. "We don't tell them which one, but we think they should get involved so they can be a force to do something."

Of course, as they do become involved, religious right groups face a potential problem encountered in the past by other such groups emphasizing a special focus, Boyer suggested.

"When any one ideologically based group takes control of a national or state party, in that process they alienate lots and lots of voters," Boyer said. He cited as examples cases like conservative Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964, and liberal Democrat George McGovern in 1972, both of whom won their parties' nominations, only to be overwhelmingly defeated in the general elections.

A recent example involving the religious right this year occurred in Minnesota when pro-life activist Allen Quist began his quest to win the Republican nomination for governor, Boyer noted. Quist won in the state convention, but lost in a Sept. 13 primary to the incumbent, Arne Carlson.

"The history of American politics is coalition building," Boyer commented. "Insofar as the religious right taking over state and local parties, they may be cutting their throats in general elections."

But Russell believes that the religious right will avoid that problem in the long run by building coalitions.

"We want to see a broad-based conservative movement," Russell said. "To gain credibility, we've got to make it happen with Latinos, Catholics, Jews and African-Americans. The religious conservative movement has to be a big tent."

And if members of the religious right have their way, the tent they are putting up may remain pitched on the political landscape for years to come.



The puzzle below contains the names (or at least one word of the name) of 20 advertisers in this week's Catholic Courier. Read this week's advertisements to complete the puzzle. Send or deliver your completed entry to *Puzzle*, c/o The Catholic Courier, 1150 Buffalo Rd., Rochester, NY 14624 or fax it to 716-328-8640.

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Winners will be notified by mail and their names will be published in next week's Catholic Courier. Prizes will be awarded by random drawing of correctly completed puzzles received by Tuesday, Nov. 8th. No purchase necessary to win. Only one entry per person, please. Employees of the Catholic Courier and their immediate families are not eligible.

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Winners from Oct. 27th were Kay Angeline, Scottsville; Agnes Howard, Rochester; Jane Predmore, Honeoye Falls; May Timpani, Rochester; Diane Dupree, Spencerport; Connie Tresohlavy, Hilton; and Mary Bojdak, Fairport.

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