True Prophecy? A Critical Examination of the Sociopolitical Stance of the Mainline Protestant Churches

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OVER THE COURSE of the twentieth century, developing an effective social and political witness has become one of the most prominent and important missions of the mainline Protestant denominations in the United States. Each of the mainline churches—Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran, American Baptist—maintains an office in Washington, D.C. for the purposes of issues advocacy and public education, and each regularly passes official resolutions on a comprehensive range of social, economic, political, and cultural issues. With few exceptions, the positions taken by these churches squarely occupy the left edge of the political spectrum. The social statements of these churches reflect concern with both specific issues and, to varying degrees, a sense of deeply-rooted "structural" injustice in American society. Further, mainline church lobbyists in Washington tend to see themselves as called not so much to represent the views of their own members as to act as the voice of "the poor," standing in "prophetic" opposition to the established values of Washington.

This article is a critical analysis of both the content and effectiveness of this praxis in the context of American politics on the eve of the twenty-first century. To the extent that the article is critical of the mainline churches, it is intended as a friendly, internal critique from the standpoint of an Episcopalian confirmand who is broadly sympathetic to the social stance taken by the mainline denominations and strongly committed to the structural critique of social injustice often espoused by the churches' social statements and Washington representatives. It is my intent to employ both "hard-headed" political analysis and, to a lesser degree, theological criteria, to suggest that a fundamental rethinking of the current

forms of social witness employed by the mainline churches is in order in the present context. While I acknowledge at the outset that the problems identified here admit of no easy answers, recognizing the problems squarely is the first step to creative thinking about fresh approaches to how social witness missions might be reconceived at this historical moment. The conclusion of this article offers some of my own tentative thoughts on the matter.

The body of the article proceeds by way of a brief taxonomy of the social positions taken by the mainline churches, with quotations from recent church documents, followed by a brief summary analysis of two ways in which the mainline churches tried to intervene in the Washington budget and welfare debates of 1995–96. The article then turns to a review of assessments of the mainline witness that have appeared in the scholarly literature and popular press; it concludes with an exposition of possible steps toward a more effective mainline social witness.

What Do the Churches Say?

For reasons of space, this brief taxonomy is limited primarily to churches' statements regarding the economy and economic justice, with some attention also given to statements assessing the health of American democracy in general. To avoid repetition I bypass here discussion of the social statements of the Evangelical Lutheran and American Baptist churches, which are quite similar in thrust to those of the other four denominations reviewed below.

United Methodist Church (UMC)

The "Social Principles" of the United Methodist Church (SP), a twenty-page document that appears in both the UMC's *Book of Discipline* and its *Book of Resolutions*, calls for principles of economic life and distributive justice that differ significantly from the contemporary practice of American-style capitalist institutions. The first paragraph of the SP's section on "The Economic Community" merits examination in full:

> We claim all economic systems to be under the judgement of God no less than other facets of the created order. Therefore, we recognize the responsibility of governments to develop and implement sound fiscal and monetary policies that provide for the economic life of

> individuals and corporate entities, and that ensure full employment and adequate incomes with a minimum of inflation. We believe private and public economic enterprises are responsible for the social costs of doing business, such as employment and environmental pollution, and that they should be held accountable for these costs. We support measures that would reduce the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. We further support efforts to revise tax structures and eliminate governmental support programs that now benefit the wealthy at the expense of other persons.[1]

The rest of the section calls for limiting the rights of private property, upholding collective bargaining, the promotion of more meaningful work and leisure time, a move away from unrestrained consumerism, action against world poverty, as well as measures to assist migrant workers and to slow the rise of gambling. Most interestingly, the SP declares that "[w]e believe that persons come before profits. We deplore the selfish spirit which often pervades our economic life. We support policies which encourage the sharing of ideas in the workplace, cooperative and collective work arrangements. . . . We support policies which would reverse the increasing concentration of business and industry into monopolies."[2]

These statements could hardly be construed as a call to revolutionary socialism. But in its call for a less selfish, more cooperative economy the SP does outline an ethic that is obviously and blatantly contradicted by the everyday operations of contemporary corporate capitalism (as well as the other large-scale economic systems with which we have experience, such as state socialism). For instance, corporations simply are not responsible for social costs generated by pollution or large-scale layoffs; this idea is scarcely on the map in the United States. While some of the specific policies urged by the SP have got some political play in the United States during the post-war era—such as guaranteed full employment and heavily progressive taxation—these proposals are barely a blip on the radar of even the most liberal Democratic party activist today. Simply put, there seems to be an ongoing contradiction between the social teachings of the Methodist Church regarding the economy and the trajectory of our own economy—a contradiction that politically plausible reforms are extremely unlikely to address in the current historical moment.

Resolutions (as of 1992) passed by the UMC and still operative as church teaching include statements regarding rural decline, health care access, housing and homelessness, social policy, unemployment, worker

safety, the global debt crisis, and investment ethics. These resolutions expand upon and add specificity to the tenor of argument noted in the SP; for instance, the resolution on social policy, adopted in 1976, calls for both guaranteed full employment and guaranteed minimum incomes "sufficient for every family living in the United States based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics' lower [consumption] budget."[3] A 1996 resolution on "Putting Children and Their Families First" reiterated the UMC's support for guaranteed incomes, universal health care, universal affordable housing, and support services for the poor.[4]

Methodist statements to date specifically addressing the issue of democratic governance—why people "hate politics," voter anger, and so on—are not as well developed as those regarding the economy or statements regarding the political system found in other mainline churches. It should also be noted here that the UMC maintains the largest denominational office in Washington, in terms of both budget size and staff. The Methodist building, located directly across from the Supreme Court, is the home not only of the Methodist office but also of the offices of most other mainline denominations' Washington operations and of numerous other liberal and progressive organizations (such as the Washington Office on Latin America and *The Nation* magazine). Because of the size of its office, and its capacity to use its building to help form coalitions around issues, the Washington activity of the Methodist Church is one of the foremost expressions of the mainline churches' social witness today.[5]

Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA)

The General Assembly of the PCUSA meets annually, each year passing a number of resolutions related to public policy. The resolutions are disseminated to the public principally via *Church and Society,* PCUSA's journal for social justice issues.

Resolutions passed in 1996 by the Presbyterian Church also show a striking concern for economic injustice and poverty and call for drastic reform of the present economic structure. The 208th General Assembly calls for nothing less than a full-scale assault on poverty both at home and abroad, endorsing the provision of national health care, increases in the minimum wage and job-training programs, more investment in housing and education, an increase in U.S. international aid, and the development of a comprehensive plan to revive city life in the United States. The language of this resolution on "Eradicating Poverty and Improving the

Human Habitat" is not quite so radical as the Methodist SP statement; it does not contain an explicit challenge to the very ethos of capitalism.[6] It is nonetheless an unabashed call for the kind of massive public effort to end conditions of poverty which has rarely been articulated by American political leaders in recent years, with the exception of Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign in 1988. While this statement does not directly call for overhauling the current economic system, the crucial point is that PCUSA's proposals are still far more extensive than any reforms likely to be enacted in (minimally) the next ten to fifteen years. The severe difficulty in trying to enact just one piece of this puzzle, national health insurance, has already been amply demonstrated in Clinton's first term.

In addition to the statement on poverty, the 1996 General Assembly passed specific resolutions regarding child labor, childhood hunger, a labor dispute with the Kmart corporation in Greensboro, North Carolina, church burnings in the south, state-operated gaming, and a number of other issues. In regard to the state of the American polity, PCUSA also passed a very interesting resolution on "Theological Ethics and Political Participation." The resolution comes in response to a desire to address growing public disillusionment with the political process; the 1995 General Assembly had called for the drafting of a resolution addressing "reformed theological ethics and political participation, noting a large amount of negative campaigning, neglect of the worthiness of the political vocation, and issues of undue influence in the election process." What the PCUSA came up with in response to this charge seems to indicate that the level of political disillusionment within the church is considerably less than that found in the public at large; the problems in the political process are not seen as a "crisis" or a systemic problem, but rather as a sort of gridlock which revived political advocacy and engagement might help overcome.

The eleven specific points of the PCUSA resolution uphold "responsible participation in politics as an indispensable part of the calling of all Christians" and promote increased activity in the public arena on the part of Presbyterian churches and increased involvement in public dialogue; for instance, the resolution "urges pastors to interpret regularly to their congregations the biblical, historical, theological, and ethical ramifications of 'politics and faith.'" The only specific outreach called for is a request that local churches undertake to promote greater voter registration in their communities and a call for PCUSA's Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to upgrade its publications. Finally, the resolution "acknowledges human limitations, narrowness, and sin, which prevent

any one political stance from being labeled exclusively 'Christian'; and reaffirms our historical commitment to working for economic justice, peace and disarmament, racial and civil rights, and the promotion of social righteousness."[7] While the call for increased political engagement and self-education is laudable, this document speaks little to the deeper causes of political disillusionment and disengagement—that is, how it has come about that so many Americans now feel disgusted with and alienated from electoral politics. The diagnosis is that the churches are insufficiently involved in politics, and the prescription is more participation, more voter registration, and more attempts to enter the public dialogue with views shaped by Reformed faith.

Episcopal Church

Official social statements of the Episcopal Church are passed every three years via the General Convention, which met most recently in 1997. Before considering the most recent resolutions, it might be worthwhile to note two obvious facts regarding the mainline churches' social and political witness that are especially evident in the Episcopal Church. First, there are deep divisions revolving around human sexuality in the denomination, divisions that have dominated the agenda of the most recent conventions and drawn more news attention than any other aspect of the church's public stance. Each of the mainline denominations has significant, organized resistance movements led by conservative laity and clergy which use the debate on sexuality as a lightning rod for urging a more conservative social outlook in general; these movements are coordinated in part by the moderately conservative (not religious right) Institute on Religion and Democracy in Washington. Second, within the Episcopal Church in particular, individual leadership from the top of the hierarchy has been a visible aspect of the denomination's social witness. Recently retired Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning was particularly energetic in promoting certain issue stances, most famously in the case of the Gulf War, when Browning twice visited the White House to call upon President Bush, an Episcopalian, to refrain from launching Desert Storm. As will be seen below, Browning was also quite vocal during the budget and welfare debates of 1995–96.

Like the 1994 Convention before it, the 1997 Convention actually saw considerably fewer new resolutions passed than in previous years; 1997 resolutions characteristically touched on a smörgåsbord of issues, includ-

ing welfare reform, outreach to migrant workers, fighting sexism, gun control, the abolition of nuclear weapons, obtaining a new trial for Philadelphia death-row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jumal, and the Guatemalan peace process. Regarding economic life, the church endorsed the concept of requiring employers to pay a "living wage" of $7.50 an hour plus health benefits—the minimum pay needed to lift a family out of poverty—in response to numerous "living wage" campaigns in American cities. The Convention also commissioned a thorough study of the theology of work in order better to flesh out how churches should respond to ongoing corporate downsizing. Earlier in 1997, the denomination's Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation Committee (JPIC) convened a summit on economic justice that attracted over 550 registered participants.[8]

While the ongoing JPIC Committee is charged with more sustained advocacy, the overall resolutions passed by the Convention suggest a piecemeal approach to social issues; there is no attempt made at a holistic analysis of the American economy and political system, as is present to some degree in the Methodist SP and much more clearly in the United Church of Christ's teachings on the economy (see below), itself an obvious echo of the Catholic Bishops' 1987 pastoral letter on the American economy.

Two additional points about the Episcopal approach are in order here. First, it is very difficult to see how passing yet another resolution that will be just one of several dozen coming out of any Convention is likely to affect significantly the policy at stake. A 1997 pre-Convention analysis by Rhode Island priest Rev. Jan Nunley notes that "it is never clear, even to those who sponsor them, what difference [social policy resolutions] make in the life of the church" and that for some Episcopalians, policy resolutions "are more like the window dressing of the General Convention—everybody looks at them, but very few of them are taken home, or taken seriously, once the final gavel is sounded." Second, the wide-ranging but piecemeal approach leaves significant leeway and discretion to the church's professional staff (that is, the Washington office), who are pledged to work full-time on carrying out the church's social witness, as to methods of proceeding and areas of particular emphasis. Rev. Brian Grieves of the Episcopal Church Center notes, however, that the denomination's Washington-based staff will not generally take up an issue until it has been addressed by a Convention resolution.[9]

United Church of Christ (UCC)

In terms of both the views of its congregants and the positions taken by the church, the UCC is probably the most progressive of the mainline denominations. In addition to resolutions in support of social and economic justice, the church has sponsored specific studies, such as a landmark 1987 investigation into "environmental racism," and has tried to develop comprehensive policy statements.[10] Of greatest interest for this article is the 1989 "Pronouncement on Christian Faith: Economic Life and Justice." The document is a searching examination of the benefits and pitfalls of modern market economies, taking as a starting point the assertion that "[t]here is a sickness in the soul that infects both the poor and the affluent in our nation and the world as a result of economic injustice. Among the poor are those who have internalized economic powerlessness and poverty, losing a sense of meaning and worth to their lives. Among the affluent are those who have been captured by the false values and priorities of materialism and who have also lost a sense of the meaning and purpose of life."[11]

The study goes on to articulate ten "marks of a just economy," arguing, for instance, that the purpose of the economy should be to "[celebrate and serve] the fundamental covenant purpose of human life, which is to love God and neighbor," and that "[a] just economy gives all persons access to the basic material necessities of life." The document then proposes a wide-ranging policy agenda that would fundamentally overhaul many of the basic institutions of the economy. The UCC calls for universal provision of jobs, decent housing, health care, and quality education; wider participation in ownership and increases in worker participation in workplace decisions; an expanded role for economic planning; a reduction in military spending; for government assistance in starting up and subsidizing "community-based enterprises" that would "[create] jobs by meeting local needs such as housing and recreation, and which are accountable to local residents and organizations"; increased investments in pollution prevention and environmental technologies; a restructuring of international debt; and the dramatic reform of both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.[12]

This is an exceedingly rich document and vision, easily on par with the much-noted 1987 pastoral letter of the Catholic bishops on the American economy as a comprehensive guide to how an alternative economy might take shape. As with the Methodist SP, the pronouncement is not framed as a frontal attack on capitalism per se and leaves considerable

room for differing views on the extent to which market relations and private property would characterize a "just economy." It does, however, clearly spell out what such a just economy might look like and provide some proximate first steps in such a direction. Also included is an extensive plan for the denomination and its local congregations to take action on behalf of the vision via personal lifestyle changes, critical examination of the UCC's internal economic practices (including its own investments), and public education. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to envision a more comprehensive document than the UCC report. There is still, however, an obvious gap as to strategy for implementation and little explicit awareness within the document that most of its proposals are flat-out politically impossible in the coming period. Indeed, public discussion of the economy in America has, if anything, moved even further away from the vision of the just economy laid out by the UCC since the document's publication.

Social Witness in Action: Two Recent Examples

Certainly the social witness of the mainline churches cannot be reduced to the published pronouncements briefly reviewed above. The Washington offices of these denominations are charged not only with dissemination of the pronouncements (for instance, the Methodist office sends a copy of its *Book of Resolutions* to all Methodist members of Congress each term), but also with focused advocacy on particular policy priorities and response to emergent "crises." In recent years, policy priorities have included (among many others) health care, NAFTA, child hunger, civil rights, and policy regarding Bosnia.[13] The offices also publish regular updates for the benefit of a small subscriber base consisting mainly of churches and a very modest number of lay activists, distribute "how-to" activist guides such as "How to Contact Your Member of Congress," and disseminate regular news releases on church views to the media. The publications of these church offices, while consistently motivated by strong social justice concerns, do not frame themselves as radical challenges to the powers that be. The churches profess values alternative to that of ruling Washington, but they nonetheless position themselves as part of the "Establishment"—that is, within the pale of acceptable opinion.

The praxis and paradox of the mainline churches' social stance can perhaps be best illustrated by reviewing two very public engagements with power initiated by the churches in the year leading up to the 1996

election. On November 18, 1995—just as the 1995–96 budget showdown between President Clinton and the Republican Congress began heating up—a delegation of over a dozen religious leaders sponsored by the National Council of Churches visited the White House to meet with the president. Denominations represented on the delegation included the UMC, UCC, Episcopal, PCUSA, Disciples of Christ, Christian Methodist, Moravian, Progressive Baptist, and the Armenian Church in America. According to the Episcopal News Service, Episcopal Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning initiated the idea of such a visit for the purposes of carrying directly to the president an NCC resolution calling on the rejection, "in the name of human decency," of any budget changes harmful to "children, the capacity of their parents to care for them, and the moral well-being of our nation as a whole." In addition to the NCC statement, Browning also released his own statement urging that "a hungry child is no recipe for a balanced budget. Neither is a family plunged into poverty. Neither is an immigrant who is denied essential services. Neither is a mother who cannot find employment."[14]

At the forty-five minute meeting, the religious leaders spoke with the president about their concerns, concluding with a laying of hands on the president as a prayer was spoken. Along with the church leaders, Clinton was clearly pleased with the visit, calling it a "fine way" to start a difficult day. Bishop Craig Anderson of General Theological Seminary (now president-elect of the NCC) noted that Clinton had "clearly read and digested what we had brought him" and was saying, '"I'm addressing in my stance what you are concerned about.'"[15] Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the NCC, stated that the "emotional moments" were "a recognition in the Oval Office that prayer changes things."[16]

What was the practical result of this meeting? Obviously, that is difficult to pinpoint, but the meeting surely did not hurt Clinton in his efforts to portray himself as holding the line in favor of basic decency against a Republican onslaught. Indeed, the public perception that Clinton was in the right on the budget crisis vaulted the president into a lead in the polls which he never relinquished in the subsequent election year. But did the policy change? From the standpoint of the churches' concern for the poor, the best that can be said is that it could have been worse—the budget plan eventually agreed to by Clinton did include substantial, disproportionate cuts in assistance to the poor, though not as much as the GOP had envisioned.[17] More fundamentally, the course of action finally adopted by Clinton did nothing whatsoever to improve the lot of the hungry children and impoverished families noted by Browning. And in fact, the

same president on whom the NCC delegation eagerly laid hands in the name of solidarity with the poor just nine months later signed the most punitive welfare bill in the nation's history.

How is this initiative to be evaluated? Predictably, the meeting drew criticism from conservative mainline religionists, such as Dianne Knippers of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, who called the meeting "a disturbing misuse of prayer for blatantly partisan purposes."[18] (Indeed, such a mainline delegation never darkened the door of the Bush and Reagan White Houses.) The rationale for a meeting, according to Browning and others, was not partisan support of Clinton so much as a sense that the church had a responsibility to go straight to the top with the urgency of its concerns—that the budget debate represented a "crisis" moment. This is a plausible rationale—and yet, even for those of us who strongly agree with the NCC's position, one has to wonder whether the meeting did more for Clinton than for poor children. The statements of Anderson and Campbell (and others) noted above regarding the meeting reflect a stance more of awe and genuflection toward power than prophetic critique of it—and as Anderson noted, Clinton did not change his own position one iota because of the meeting, but instead claimed that his stance was already on the same side as the churches'. It is not difficult to read this entire event as a classic case of the churches allowing their moral authority to be manipulated by political power, precisely in the fact of allowing a political leader too easily to identify his agenda with that of the churches.

Still, this understandable attempt to try to go straight to the top with the churches' concern was not the only strategy employed by mainline denominations during the election cycle. On Memorial Day weekend 1996, the mainline churches allied with Marian Wright Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund to spearhead "Stand for Children," a march and demonstration on the Washington Mall which drew approximately 200,000 participants. The various mainline denominations provided speakers, sent delegations with denominational banners, and produced the bulk of the event's publicity. The intent was clearly to make a moral statement, echoing the technique of '60s-era Washington demonstrations regarding civil rights and Vietnam, as well as perhaps the more recent Million Man March, to throw down the gauntlet and make a stand. The hope of the march, as Pennsylvania activist Rev. Paul Gehris put it, was "to give momentum to the movement. . . . Each political candidate is going to have to outdo the other in making clear their commitment to children or suffer the consequences."[19]

Yet the march caused hardly a stir in the nation's consciousness, much less influenced the views of actual policymakers: while print press coverage of the event was substantial (with the vast majority of stories mentioning the role of either the denominations or individual church groups in attendance), media attention quickly evaporated, and the presidential candidates and other Washington policymakers felt no need to respond to the concerns highlighted by the march. In fact (as noted above) within weeks, Congress went ahead and passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Restoration Act, signed into law by the president, a bill anathema to everything the Stand for Children exemplified.[20]

Nor did the "stand" itself prove very long in endurance as a barometer of the church's political stance: while the welfare bill was roundly condemned by religious leaders, few thought the bill was sufficient cause to break with support for an incumbent Democratic president.[21] Hence, while the march was certainly an understandable, even laudable initiative, it failed in even the minimal result of holding the line on children's well-being as impacted by public policy. The net result at the end of the summer was that the terms of public debate had again moved further to the right, and the mainline churches were placed in an even more defensive position in their advocacy for social justice.[22]

Assessing the Witness

Clearly, then, political effectiveness cannot be counted as a strong suit of the current social praxis of the mainline churches. But does the activity of these denominations influence the larger political discourse and make it better than it otherwise might be? Again, whatever qualifications are offered, the bottom-line answer is in the negative. Statements of the mainline churches are not regarded as newsworthy events; nor are the political views of church leaders and clerics to be found on a regular basis in the pages of *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* or as a regular presence on Ted Koppel's "Nightline." To provide just one brief but telling example, save for one mention near the end of a long article in *The Christian Century*, print press coverage of the Presbyterian General Assembly in July 1996 entirely ignored a one-hundred-page report issued by the church on the subject of global ecological sustainability and sustainable development; virtually every story about the assembly began and ended with coverage of the debate over the ordination of gay ministers.[23]

What, then, are we to make of this social witness? In this section a

range of possible assessments are briefly reviewed and evaluated. I focus here only on "internal" assessments offered by observers writing from within the mainline church community; I do not take up the judgments of self-identified members of the religious right or of fervent secularists openly hostile to these churches.

Critiques from the Center and Right

As previously noted, a persistent countervoice to the liberal views of the mainline churches has been that of the Institute on Religion and Democracy in Washington. In their view, mainline church leadership has simply been swallowed up into politically liberal secularism and has placed disproportionate emphasis on issue lobbying as an expression of the church's social witness. As the IRD founding statement (written by Richard John Neuhaus) notes, "The first political task of the Church is to be the Church. . . . By humbling all secular claims to sovereignty, the Church makes its most important political contribution by being, fully and unapologetically, the Church."[24] The IRD has made a living for itself by blasting away at the social positions taken by the mainline's Washington lobby and not infrequently publishing unflattering profiles of mainline leaders (especially when such leaders have had contact with Marxist or socialist groups in the past that can be exposed!). The stance of the IRD on social and economic issues, according to President Diane Knippers, is to warn "against churches looking always to government programs as the solution to deep social ills while the churches neglect their own resources for addressing the problems."[25]

The general tenor of the IRD's critique is supported by a number of scholars, many of whom correlate the decline in the mainline churches' membership and influence with the perceived leftward movement in the churches' political pronouncements and activities. This perspective has been most thoroughly developed by Allen Hertzke, author of *Representing God in Washington.* In that book and subsequent work, Hertzke paints a picture of a mainline lobby that is almost a caricature of the "knee-jerk liberal," utterly predictable in its positions, secular in outlook, and generally marginal in political impact. For instance, Hertzke criticizes the unabashed support for the Sandinistas offered by the mainline churches in the 1980s and what he regards as a failure to develop a nuanced view that could do justice to the complexity of the issues surrounding the Gulf War. More broadly, Hertzke repeats reporter Roy Howard Beck's finding

that foreign policy statements of the National Council of Churches during the Cold War "were far more likely to condemn right wing abuses [regarding human rights] than left wing ones."[26]

In terms of domestic policy, Hertzke concedes that some good work and advocacy has been done on hunger by mainline lobbyists but marshals a number of quotations and other evidence to suggest the rather unflattering light in which the mainline lobby is viewed on Capitol Hill. For instance, a liberal congressional aide told Hertzke that

> [t]he whole Methodist building, beyond church-state issues, has a credibility problem. They are out of the mainstream of Congress. Often their information has to be processed to make it moderate enough so that we aren't laughed at.[27]

Another legislative director in Congress adds, more extensively, that

> [t]he Lutheran Council, the National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, etc., have become the butt of jokes. They are totally secularized people who could [*sic*] give a damn about religion. They are shadows of a religious past, echoes without authority. Secular liberals would agree with everything they stand for, but the nagging question [remains]: why are they religious at all? Why bother? Does this policy flow out of a profound, transcendental sense—or as a hasty addition to liberal politics? I have friends, liberal Jews, they think of them as jokes—what is this religion? With the Catholics you have a real sense of debate. But in the mainline churches there is no sense of debate. They are thoughtless, predictable fools.[28]

(A somewhat kinder but not contradictory assessment was offered by a veteran moderate-liberal member of Congress from the South in an interview conducted in July 1997. Asked what impact the mainline lobby had in shaping his own legislative views, the member replied "minimal—and I am one who would be inclined to listen if they put forth something arresting." While agreeing that religious lobby groups have made a contribution on niche issues such as hunger, the member noted that in political terms, "[i]f you were looking at the church groups as a place to make an impact I think you'd be frustrated.")[29]

The upshot, for Hertzke, is that the political role of the mainline churches has been badly distorted by an uncritical acceptance of liberal and liberationist politics and by an inability to bring a deep sense of religious meaning and theological import to bear on the public consciousness. Hertzke suggests that radical measures are called for to correct the situation—namely, a moratorium on all political advocacy by the mainline churches and a reorientation of the churches' mission toward the

revitalization of local congregations. Clearly, Hertzke sees some punitive measures as being in order: "A moratorium might help religious elites to see how insufferably, sanctimonious and smug their 'peace&justice' argot can sound."[30] But his larger point is more serious: following Tocqueville, Hertzke concludes that the indirect positive influence of a vibrant Christianity is the best contribution the church can make to democracy: "What we need to ponder is this: maybe the church's cultural role is more vital than its modest political impact. If so, perhaps focusing on being church is the greatest political contribution it can make."[31]

Liberal and Left Critiques

A quite different appraisal of the churches' position can be found in the voices of liberal and leftist critics. While obviously these critics agree with most of the stands taken by the mainline denominations, there is frustration at the inadequacy of existing forms of action and advocacy, given the pressing "crisis" faced by both the nation and the world at large on a number of fronts. I consider the views of two such critics here: Charles Bayer, a longtime pastor in a UCC congregation in Ohio with eclectic social views, and Gary Dorrien, an Episcopalian priest and college professor in Michigan who has written widely about the social gospel tradition in the United States from a more avowedly leftist standpoint.

The title of Bayer's most recent book, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Mainline Church,* is useful in connoting Bayer's reading of the current situation facing the church. Bayer believes that if the mainline is to survive and flourish it must recognize that it is no longer living within a friendly culture that it can directly influence; rather, it must make a countercultural stand against both secularism and the religious right and place renewed emphasis on being church: "The rebirth of the mainline church will come when it realizes it is now sideline, and has a very different function to perform in a society it once controlled. Smaller congregations of highly literate—biblically and theologically—joyful, turned-on serving people who know what they believe, and who are teaching their children the songs of Zion, will be prepared for a day whose outline and shape are not yet clear."[32]

Clearly, there is some harmony between this perspective and both Hertzke's view (noted above) and that of prominent Christian theologian Stanley Hauerwas,[33] but unlike both Bayer does not wish to give up on the mainline commitment to direct advocacy of social justice in the larger

society. Indeed, he thinks the actual praxis of most churches is far too oriented toward charity (for example, soup kitchens) as opposed to social justice commitments. On the other hand, Bayer also states that "there may have developed an unreflective relationship between liberal politics and social justice issues," calls for engagement with Republicans, and chastises the churches for being too secular and insufficiently biblically oriented:

> Unless those who constitute its membership, clergy and lay, are theologically well grounded and biblically literate, the church will have little to say anyone needs to hear. If it succumbs to finding success in its own version of fundamentalism, it will have become just another sectarian sport, out of touch with the world to which it ministers. If it succumbs to secularism, it will have lost the gospel. The greatest danger facing the mainline church is that as its institutional strength continues to ebb, leaders both at the denominational and the congregational levels will attempt to save it by mimicking either an easy secularism or a strident evangelicalism.[34]

Bayer goes on to propose that the essence of the church's social justice work must be rooted in local congregations; the separation between evangelism and social witness should be broken down and seen as all of one piece. Local churches should be built on the presupposition of making real demands of their members, in order to build community strength, and should be directly involved in the pursuit of social justice goals (not just charity). As an example, Bayer cites the case of a UCC congregation that helped establish a low-income housing project for the elderly and then ministered to the community needs of the residents, addressing both mundane and spiritual concerns; Bayer also suggests that local churches could help stimulate the development of more cooperative housing arrangements in general.[35] Beyond his specific proposals, what is most striking about Bayer's approach is his view that the real social witness of the church must come through interventions into everyday life at the grassroots level by churches themselves. Compared to this central task, all the policy statements and Washington lobbyists are far less urgent.

Gary Dorrien also sees real limitations on what the present form of mainline social witness can accomplish. Dorrien is deeply convinced of the moral and theological urgency of developing a coherent alternative to capitalist economics and has written widely regarding various social democratic and socialist proposals as well as emerging paradigms in ecological economics.[36] Dorrien endorses an approach of cultivating cooperative economic enterprises at the local level as a bottom-up strategy for

change. Within this framework, Dorrien has some striking observations to make about mainline religion and social witness. Drawing on important recent studies by Dean Hoge, Wade Roof, Robert Wuthnow, and others, Dorrien depicts mainline Protestantism as a "culture religion," thoroughly enmeshed in secular American culture and with only minimal capacity to push its membership beyond the assumed norms of the broader culture:

> The studies repeatedly show that mainline churchgoers generally lack a deep or coherent faith, they expect to be catered to, they do not expect to be asked to do anything, they feel little commitment to each other as participants in something greater than themselves, and they consider social mission activities optional. . . . 72 percent of adult mainline church members report that they have never met with others to promote social change; 52 percent have never given any time to helping the poor, hungry, and sick; and 78 percent have never engaged in any activity that promotes social justice.[37]

Nor can this fundamental reality be changed simply by more exhortation or pushing for a more radical stance, according to Dorrien: "The liberal churches cannot become more intentional, countercultural, or religious without alienating the critical mass of their existing membership base."[38]

Dorrien's critique of mainline social witness, given this view, turns out to be strikingly close to Bayer's call for stronger local churches involved in local communities.

> Church agencies produce reams of policy statements and reports that are targeted toward selected segments of the church but that reflect little community input and have little impact on local congregations. . . . Having inherited a self-image as the religious foundation of American culture, the mainline churches have presumed the right to an insider strategy. . . . The problem with this strategy is symptomatic of the problem with liberal Christianity. Instead of focusing their energies on developing strong religious communities that are truly religious and genuinely communities, the mainline churches have sought to minimize their differences with the dominant secular culture in order to salvage some influence within it.[39]

The fundamental objection to this "insider legislative orientation" for Dorrien is that it is "devitalizing to the churches as distinctively religious communities. It produces a highly compromised politics and a watered-down theology."[40]

Dorrien admits that moving away from an insider strategy also means giving up the idea that the mainline churches could again play a

guiding role in shaping the development of national political culture. Like Bayer, Hertzke, and Hauerwas, Dorrien thinks it is time for the church to pull back and rebuild itself as a vital community. Yet Dorrien also strongly hopes that the mainline will be able to recover an authentic, effective public voice—although to do so it must drop its pretensions to insider privilege. Dorrien clearly does not expect the church soon to adopt outright his own commitment to promoting fundamental structural change and genuine alternatives to corporate capitalism, but he does express hope that a recovered mainline public voice might at least challenge the dominant ethos by highlighting those elements of Christian social teaching which are at odds with gross inequality and a culture of acquisitiveness.[41]

Positive Appraisals

To be sure, there are some observers who see virtue in the often quixotic political position of mainline social advocacy in Washington. Daniel Hofrenning, in *In Washington But Not of It*, states that the activity of the mainline church in Washington should be understood as "prophetic" activity, to be judged by a different standard than the normal criteria of political effectiveness. Both liberal and conservative religious activists, Hofrenning suggests, operate by fundamentally different criteria from those of secular activists:

> . . . [P]rophetic lobbyists engage in radical as opposed to mainstream politics. Like biblical prophets, they begin with a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. In response to their discontent, religious lobbyists seek fundamental change on a wide range of public policies. This effort contrasts with the work of most nonreligious lobbyists, who seek small changes in a narrow range of policies. Unlike their secular counterparts, religious lobbyists aspire to reorder the very priorities of government and alter the terms of the political debate. Like the long tradition of prophets before them, religious lobbyists see something profoundly wrong with society.[42]

In reference to Hertzke's work, we have already seen the virtual contempt with which at least some Congressional insiders hold the mainline lobby. Hofrenning provides a sense of how these lobbyists see themselves in relationship to the mainstream Washington culture. Hofrenning quotes a United Church of Christ staffer who says, "When I introduce myself informally, I sometimes call myself a poor people's advocate. I say that because I think the constituency that I am trying to give voice to and work with is the poor."[43] Hofrenning notes that three-quarters of reli-

gious lobbyists in Washington ranked "articulating their message over and above the importance of winning or losing on specific pieces of legislation."[44] Moreover, there is value in sticking by one's guns even when working against a stacked deck, according to Presbyterian lobbyist Mary Jane Patterson, speaking in 1988:

> To be effective is to be faithful. In the language of the streets, this means stick-to-itiveness. When I first came here, I had health care in my portfolio. The Presbyterian Church believes in health care for all Americans. Presidential administrations and Congress have dropped their support of health care. But now it will come again in the 101st or 102nd Congress. Whether it's four years from now or forty, we are going to get health care for all Americans. So it would seem to me that faithfulness means that you stick with your principle.[45]

Hofrenning clearly believes there is value in having a lobbying arm in Washington motivated by a view of the common good and long-term goals rather than short-term politicking on behalf of particular interests, apart from whether or not the churches actually influence policy much of the time. To be sure, on occasions the churches do play a leading role in influencing policy, but from the point of view of Hofrenning and many of the lobbyists themselves, that is not the central point. The central point is to stay faithful to the church's social vision, even when there are few allies in Washington to be found.

As might be expected, many of the most important church lobbyists also hold a sympathetic view of their own activities. For instance, Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, points to the role of the NCC's members in promoting sanctions and divestment against South Africa in the mid-1980s as a striking example of what is possible in public policy advocacy by the church. "Everyone," states Campbell, "from the Congress to the people in South Africa to President Nelson Mandela, will say that the churches in the U.S. helped to bring down apartheid. So it seems to me worth the time it takes to wrestle with the difficult issues because when the churches come to a common mind, they are a force to be dealt with." Campbell, speaking in November 1995 (just before the aforementioned NCC delegation visited the White House), went on to argue that "[w]e have come very close to that point regarding bills in Congress that affect the poor. Our churches across the board would say there has to be a bias towards the poor, and however that manifests itself in public policy, it can't mean eliminating all the programs that have assisted the poor without examining how those

people are going to be cared for."[46] By this understanding, there will often be moments in which diverse religious voices in politics effectively cancel each other out, but when not only the mainline churches but also African-American and smaller denominations, as well as Roman Catholics, can be brought together as a coalition there is the potential for political effectiveness, not just faithfulness. As we have already seen, Campbell's theory has not been well supported by the events of 1996, in which punitive welfare legislation was passed despite considerable—and, apart from the religious right, quite unified—church activism on this issue.

Also important to note is Campbell's description of the relationship of the NCC with President Clinton as one based on "dialogue." While the church continues to disagree with the president on many issues, Campbell suggests she has been very cautious in what the NCC says to the president, since Clinton is likely actually to study documents given him:

> Because I know President Clinton reads statements from the NCC, I am extremely careful about what goes to him. We are very circumspect about how much we say. We've had intense communication on Cuba, for instance. The government has granted us a license to deliver food and medicine to Cuba and has recently expanded that license to include churches that are part of the NCC. That doesn't mean we don't continue to disagree with the administration on the issue of the embargo and the containment of children at Guantanamo. But there's a dialogue between ourselves and this administration. There is a feeling that suddenly the NCC is perhaps too close to the administration. But the fact of the matter is simply that now we have the possibility for dialogue.[47]

Clearly, Campbell sees this "dialogue" as evidence that the mainline churches are still capable of exercising meaningful influence over policy and of making the president's policies a little better than they might otherwise be. However, as spelled out in the concluding section below, it is far from obvious that this conception of social witness is adequate or appropriate as a model for Christian engagement with power in contemporary America.

Assessing the Assessments: Toward a Fresh Vision

Hearing the voices of Campbell and other Washington lobbyists for the mainline churches serves as a useful corrective in the context of this critical examination of the mainline social witness: Whatever else one says, there is little doubt that the persons who undertake such work are sincere

in their motivations, even inspired. The good faith of such religious lobbyists is not at issue.

In laying out my own judgment of these various assessments, however, it would be most useful to begin with the positive appraisals first, and to explain why I am not convinced by the views forwarded by Hofrenning and Campbell. First, contrary to Hofrenning, faithful social witness does not consist simply in maintaining the purity of one's own stance even as conditions in the nation and the world continue to worsen. The tangible outcomes in society are important (even foremost from a liberationist perspective), and if one strategy is not working, then others should be tried. The alternative is to slip into a self-righteous frame of mind in which one is constantly proposing reforms and policies that one knows have no chance of being enacted, casting a hex on the rest of the Washington system that doesn't listen, and going to bed that night thinking one's work is done.

The problem is that the next morning the poor have not been fed—and, I might add, the church has not become any stronger. Obviously there are no easy ways for church action to reverse these real-life outcomes. But reading the signs of the times—recognizing what doesn't work—is a useful first step.

Second, like most progressives and liberals, church activists such as Campbell have been slow to recognize the fundamental fact that traditional forms of activism, including legislative lobbying, direct appeals to leaders, and marches in the street, have little capacity to alter the long-run negative outcomes of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation which the churches rightly decry. While modest legislative victories are sometimes possible, the larger problems *are* structural—that is, inherent in the nature of our polity and economy.[48] Yet politics in Washington is not and never will be primarily about structural issues—it is about moving the ball, painstakingly, a few yards one direction or another in a day-by-day struggle. And as church leaders and other liberals have learned from President Clinton's first five years, having your party in the White House does not mean that you might not lose some yardage, and it is absolutely not a guarantee or even good indicator of passing, say, comprehensive antipoverty measures. Hofrenning and the lobbyists he interviewed are correct to say that the social values of the mainline churches are at odds, fundamentally, with the culture of Washington; they are misguided, in my judgment, in continuing to assume that the best way to forward those values is in continuing to focus social witness activity in Washington.

On the other hand, if lack of political efficacy points to the need to consider alternative strategies, for the church to adopt a "win at all costs" attitude regarding its agenda in which, like corporate or labor union PACs, it trades support for politicians in exchange for policy benefits—much as the mainline seemed to be trying to doing with President Clinton on the welfare and budget issues in 1995–96— is clearly unacceptable theologically and bound to damage further the church's reputation and influence. One need only recall Luther's critique of the Catholic practice of selling indulgences to find a rough theological precedent for rejecting any appearance of trading off the church's moral authority and integrity for worldly advantage. Indeed, regarding Campbell's statement on "dialogue" with the president and the entire episode of the churches' intervention in the welfare debate of 1996, as Dorrien and others have stressed, trying to maintain a small measure of influence within the current American political system is more likely to compromise the mainline church's substantive social vision than to change policy substantially.

What, then, is an alternative strategy for promoting—without diluting—the social witness of the mainstream church, that might feasibly result in both real-world gains and in getting at "structural" problems, while strengthening the church (as a community of character and faith) itself? Incorporating insights from some of the critical assessments of the mainline reviewed above with my own perspective, I here lay out seven elements of a possible alternative approach to the church's engagement with political power in contemporary America.

In my view, the first step should simply be *greater self-consciousness about where the social values of the mainline church stand in relationship to American culture and politics at the present time.* To wit, they *are* fundamentally at odds. The notion of even covenantal personal relationships, to say nothing of the covenantal economy called for in the Methodist SP, goes against the grain of American culture; the notion of an equalitarian distribution of economic goods as measure of respect for all persons' createdness in God's image is totally at odds with the fundamental trajectory of a globalizing market economy. The Christianization of America—that is, the merger of the values of the church and the values of the larger society—is not a live option; either the former values will be forfeited, or they will be nurtured as a self-conscious alternative to the dominant paradigm of culture and politics.

If the church is truly serious about its stated social mission, it must understand that mission as distinctly at odds with the basic structure and tendencies of American life. It is intellectually dishonest and spiritually

deadening to proclaim, for instance, the need for an economy that supports human needs, and then act as if fighting over a few million or at best billion dollars in the federal budget—not unimportant money, but still at best a drop in the bucket—is the best way to attain such an economy.

Second, as suggested above, I do agree with Dorrien, Hertzke, and Bayer that *greater emphasis on "being the church" by pulling people into communities of commitment at the congregational level is of fundamental importance.* Bayer suggests that requiring more commitment from members will lead to a more holistic, vibrant faith and produce more people willing to take the church's message into practical social justice application (beyond soup kitchen charity). Similarly, UCC official C. Kirk Hadaway and Hartford Seminary Professor David Roozen contend, counter to the views of both those who blame liberal politics for mainline decline and Dorrien's pessimistic view of the capacity of the mainline to transcend "culture religion" without losing members, that it is strength of community and identity, and not ideological outlook, which distinguish growing from declining churches.[49] This finding suggests that there is plenty of room within the American religious landscape for vibrant, engaged social justice churches that are both internal communities of character and engaged in reconstructing the larger community, both as a church and in cooperation with secular organizations.

Thirdly, following Hertzke, I agree *there would be value in rolling back the scale of the church's public pronouncements on public policy matters,* but for a quite different reason. I do think the mainline churches should stay on the record as being for national health care, full employment, and so forth. But a mature political understanding of where these values stand in relationship to the current system should lead the churches to avoid trying to salvage a small piece of influence within the current debate and praxis of Washington politics, often at the cost of compromising integrity (as seen in the Clinton visit episode discussed earlier) and confusing the public and churchpeople alike of what the central task for the church should be (constituting and reconstructing communities of character). To be sure, there will be moments of crisis—the Gulf War and, arguably the welfare debate—in which the church should speak its mind in Washington, and forcefully. But the potential effectiveness of such intervention is muted when the call to save children is just one of a dozen or hundred issues on the docket, and it's all too easy for both the media and official Washington to say, "There they go again" and leave with a shrug.

Simply put, the mainline churches should avoid becoming entangled

in the sausage-making process that is day-to-day legislative politics in Washington. Instead they should accept that process for what it is—a power struggle generally conducted by conventions totally foreign to the churches' own social principles—and seek to pick its spots on what moments demand speech. The occasion of a great national decision or the perpetration of unconscionable "evil" would be two such moments—and arguably, the civil rights movement, Gulf War, health care, South Africa, and Central America issues all might have fit these two criteria. Most of the resolutions passed each year by the mainline bodies would not. This approach, while not perfect, would allow the church to speak with real authority on select occasions and thus make maximal use of its moral resources to influence the public consciousness—while at the same time making it unambiguously clear that the primary social witness mission of the church is located in the local congregations and their efforts to build communities of character both within the church and in the wider community.

Fourth, *when the church does speak, it should be more aggressive about getting its views heard in the national media.* As I have indicated, I think official church statements about particular policies should be much smaller in number and aimed at particular crises: policies of the state that are simply unacceptable from the standpoint of Christian teaching, are likely to be destructive to the larger community, and that require immediate reversal. Such stands should be delivered with real force, aggressively and in as many outlets as possible, and repeatedly if need be. Simply writing up the stand in a newsletter only a few thousand people will ever see does not cut it.

The language of such stands should include a thorough theological analysis of the issue and an explanation of why Christian dogmatics demands that the church takes the position it takes; hence the pronouncements should be fundamentally different in tone and language from the statements one might expect from, say, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities or the Children's Defense Fund (two liberal antipoverty groups with which the mainline church is closely allied). While part of the statement may be "in translation," that is, delivered in reference to secular values, there should be no ambiguity that the statement is rooted in a thorough analysis of the issue's theological dimensions. The mainline church must never again allow its statements to be dismissed, as they often are today, as mere secular cant, having nothing to do with a deep religious worldview and no different in essence from the worldview one might find in *The Nation* magazine (for instance). Further, while it should

be taken as given that the day-to-day operations of the American system will violate the church's social principles, taking selected stands *as a church* might both raise consciousness quickly about a particular evil-in-the-making and at the same time reflect this broader understanding that the workings of the state and the values of the church are fundamentally at odds.

By way of illustration of what I have in mind, in regard to the welfare bill of 1996, a strong case could be made that the plan to remove millions of persons from public assistance with no viable income-earning alternative in place represented a moral evil of great magnitude. Instead of pleading to particular politicians to listen to their view and toss in a few million or more billion dollars for the poor—with the likely effect of allowing politicians to drape the moral authority of the church on themselves, to their own advantage—the churches' position should have been an unambiguous "NO! You must not do this, this is evil!" The model should not be Joan Campbell's insistence that the church can "dialogue" with President Clinton—that is, bargain away the integrity of the church's social position by offering friendly political interaction in exchange for a few crumbs of policy improvement. Rather, the model ought to be conceived in the same spirit (albeit vastly more pleasant circumstances) as the Barmen Declaration of 1934 and the Kairos Document in South Africa (1986): not in the sense of offering a total repudiation of the values and organizing principles of the American system itself, but in the sense of offering a firm but not totalistic critique of how the present-day American political system has distorted its founding values beyond recognition, violating biblical and Christian principles in the process.

A strong "No!" that made no illusions about the capacity of the church directly to influence policy might have had, ironically, a stronger, lasting effect on the immediate political climate than investing tremendous resources into organizing quickly-forgotten marches, and might conceivably have inspired more spontaneous opposition to the plan in the short-term. More importantly, a strong "No!" would permit the church to maintain the integrity of its social principles while clearly pointing to and publicizing the irreconcilable gap between the present structure and trends of the American political economy and the egalitarian social values of Christian faith. To borrow from the theology developed by Christopher Morse in *Not Every Spirit*, the functional role of religious intervention in present-day politics ought to be in expressing *refusal*, not in perpetuating an often arrogant and in any case fundamentally mistaken view that the policy positions taken by the church can

impact real-world outcomes in the present moment. The most that the mainline church might do in national politics of the 1990s and beyond is to deconstruct the present regime. To do so as fruitfully as possible requires real strategic thinking, picking one's spots, and delivering the declamation as forcefully and repeatedly as possible.

Fifth, on a more purely political level, whereas I believe *there is little capacity for great improvements in federal policy in the current political culture, there is in fact greater "room to move" in local and state politics in which alternative policies more reflective of the mainline churches' social position might be pursued with some hope of success.* There is growing political momentum behind the idea of decentralization of government functions, pushed largely by the Gingrich Congress. While any particular proposal runs the risk of serious negative effects, it is also clear that the shift to the state and local level as a more important arena for policy-making (as in the implementation of the 1996 welfare bill) is unlikely to reverse itself. To be sure, many state governments are as hostile to the mainline social agenda as the federal government, and the recent revitalization of conservative activism (including in no small part the Christian Coalition) at the local and state level may make the terrain even tougher in the immediate future. But historically, state and local policy has also consistently been a source of innovation and experimentation, from energy policy to transportation to support for alternative economic structures, such as public support in financing worker-buyouts of firms and targeted economic investments with state pension fund money.

From the standpoint of a concern to address the structural elements of social injustice, the possibility of focusing on state and local policy to support alternative economic enterprises is quite promising. In recent years, with only modest policy support, cooperative economic enterprises and other neighborhood organizations have sprouted up in unprecedented numbers nationwide. There are now over 2,500 majority-owned worker firms (including fifty-five with over one thousand employees each), 2,200 Community Development Corporations, 106 community land trusts, 600 community supported agriculture operations, and a total of 47,000 cooperatives, ranging from credit unions to food coops. Most of these organizational forms were virtually unknown twenty-five years ago; today each of the above fields is growing rapidly, in part as a response to ongoing social and economic pain which the federal government has been unable to address. While the mainline church has always been sympathetic to such endeavors, it has not often seen them as a central strategy for social witness and advocacy. But, in the

view of a number of analysts, it is not utopian or absurd to believe that such efforts could continue to grow and to provide a living witness to alternative ways of conducting economic life.[50]

Moreover, local churches can and already often do play an important role in local community development, via church-sponsored housing projects, support for community development corporations, or direct church-owned businesses. Such a strategy fits in neatly with the assessments of Hertzke, Bayer, and Dorrien which all point, in one way or another, to a renewed emphasis on "being the church" and strengthening congregational life. To be sure, the religious content and genuine building of a faith community must be the first work of any congregation; but to suggest that the most meaningful social witness one can participate in is to engage the local community and help build a different reality in your own community, and not wait for Washington to do it, could open up an entirely different sensibility not only in inner-city mainline churches but in wealthier and suburban congregations.

The increased attention to local and state action I suggest combines realism about the actual political situation of the nation in relation to the equalitarian values mainline churches uphold, maintenance of faithfulness to those values, and an understanding that the church must take a long-term view. The long-term view I suggest is simply that if the "sickness" of the American society and economy that mainline churches often identify is ever to change, it must do so at the level of local, on-the-ground reality, and it will only do so slowly, over a long period of time. While policy in Washington is still important, there is little reason to believe it could ever be the fundamental lever for addressing the sickness unless the building blocks of a different culture and polity were already in place. What happens in Washington is ultimately an outgrowth of what goes on in the larger culture.

While I do not think that the churches should aim to reproduce their Washington public policy offices in all fifty states, they should pay more attention to efforts at the state and local level to develop innovative policy alternatives—perhaps, as discussed below, by providing institutional support to local groups and individuals pursuing such alternatives. Equally important, the mainline churches should also seek to use more of their own economic resources to play an important role in collaborative efforts to foster grassroots community-building initiatives.[51] The mainline church cannot by itself accomplish the work of focusing increased attention and organization on state and local politics on behalf of its social principles: that is the work of the broader "progressive" move-

ment. What the church might do is take the lead in using its resources to act as an "incubator" for the emerging economic alternative movement, which might, possibly, grow and acquire a momentum of its own.

Sixth, *such support of "alternatives" might take many forms—not the least of which are ideas.* While the statements of the mainline church *as church* ought, without sacrificing content, to become more limited in view of a more mature understanding of the present political situation and the fundamental opposition between Christian social teaching and American politics, the role of "religious critics"[52] ought to be greatly expanded, and the church ought to provide institutional support for such critics. These critics would apply a biblical and theological worldview to politics and seek to enter public dialogue as aggressively as possible—but with the understanding that they are speaking for themselves, not as statements of the church per se. In particular, the church should provide strong support to critics who highlight "alternatives" to the present system, from studies of local-level grassroots movements to larger-scale analyses of what a coherent alternative to American capitalism might look like. While it should be understood that the church could never, institutionally, offer an endorsement of any specific holistic vision of an alternative, it ought to be willing to lend its distinctive voice and its best thinkers to the cause of developing and debating such alternatives. Present-day examples of this kind of critic include such well-known figures as Cornel West and Jim Wallis but also lesser-known figures whose voices need amplification, such as Ulrich Duckrow, author of *Alternatives to Global Capitalism: Drawn from Biblical History, Designed for Political Action,* and scholar/activist Ched Myers, author of two important studies of the Gospel of Mark.[53] Such critics should be well-versed in Christian theology and the Bible, and be able to deliver theological analyses of particular political issues and situations; but, in order to enter dialogue with secular thinkers, such critics will often have to be able to "translate" their arguments into what Ronald Thiemann has identified as the common values of democratic discourse in America—that is, liberty, equality, and so on.[53]

The emergence of a fresh generation of "religious critics" also might represent the leading edge of whatever "pedagogical" efforts at political education for its own members the church provides. While my sense is that denomination-sanctioned programs of "political education" to try to rally more of the mainline churches' (largely moderate and conservative) membership behind the churches' social principles, to be carried out by local clergy, are likely to fall flat at best and invite hostile rejection at worst, a local congregation may be more likely to engage and gain value

from a book or series of books by independent writers applying theological concern to political matters.

Seventh, and finally, *in addition to providing institutional support (including support for more independent media outlets reflective of a theological perspective) for religious critics, the church might also continue to have a role in supporting the development of concrete policy alternatives and empirical studies of particular phenomena.* The 1987 United Church of Christ study on environmental racism is a landmark example of the latter approach. As already emphasized, church support for the development of concrete alternatives in policy and economic organization would be most fruitfully targeted at the state and local level. The church, again, should be wary of promoting any particular plan of action—the goal should not be to reproduce the current mainline of advocacy at the state and local level. However, the church might express general support for the development and enunciation of alternative lines of action at the state or local level, and even help fund such efforts. Such funding would be on the understanding that the finished product, the proposed alternative policy—that is, the teacher pension fund of Alabama should invest in local businesses that hire local workers, or the state should give start-up aid to new cooperatives—should be able to stand on its own merits as a contribution to the public discourse without being seen as official church teaching.

To give a concrete example of the point, a new state-level proposal might make very specific and technical recommendations that are essentially beyond theological judgment: The author of the finished proposal would not be able to say, "This is what the church thinks should be done" about removing toxic waste, for example, but would be able to say, "This is my proposal for what should be done, and I'd like to thank the Episcopal Church, who helped fund this project because they recognize that alternative approaches to this problem are needed." Unlike the "religious critic," this church-supported "technical critic" would be under no obligation to develop a biblical or theological argument on behalf of his or her perspective; rather, it is understood that the "technical critic's" work is a search for nuts-and-bolts policy instruments consistent with the overall frame set by the church's social teaching.

These general suggestions leave some questions unanswered, of course. It may be helpful here to clarify a bit what I have and have not said: I have not called for the churches to pull out of Washington entirely; indeed, in certain areas where church lobbies have developed real expertise and influence, such as on world hunger and church–state issues, a continuing Washington lobbying role would be appropriate even within

the context of the "alternative" strategy I have outlined above. I have not stated that the church must endorse any political-economic system, although I have emphasized that the church should come to a more mature, realistic view of the intrinsic conflict between its own stated social principles and our capitalist political economy. Nor have I, with Stanley Hauerwas, suggested that the church should shy away from direct engagment with America's culture and economic system—even though I am convinced of Hauerwas's point that the mainline can no longer arrogate to itself a Constantinian view of working hand-in-hand with power. Most fundamentally, I have not issued a theological challenge to the substance of the mainline churches' social teachings; I believe the teachings themselves are, by and large, theologically defensible. The thrust of my argument, rather, is that a failure to appreciate fully the deep contradiction between these teachings and the operative principles of American democratic capitalism, as presently constituted, has led to a mis-stewardship of the church's social witness resources and overall moral authority in public life.

In any case, the seven recommendations made here are best viewed as a stimulus to further discussion and debate within the mainline church on how best to carry forward its social witness into the next century, not as definitive conclusions, although they are indeed deliberately framed as a challenge to the *status quo:* What is more important than the conclusions one draws is simply accepting that a fundamental reevaluation of the mainline's current praxis is in order.[55]

Certainly any such reevaluation must face squarely the fact that the mainline church cannot act as a major social force with American society and that the old dream of "Christianizing" America is out of the question. Yet at the same time, the mainline church does, potentially, have something important to contribute to American political culture and even to the revitalization and reconstruction of communities of character within both the church and the larger society. While the specific recommendations I have offered toward this end are certainly subject to revision, the overall sociopolitical task for the mainline church is, as I see it, quite clear: on the one hand to distinguish unambiguously between the values of the church and the values of the larger society; and on the other hand to seek to nourish an alternative social vision more consistent with those values. As Walter Brueggemann puts it in his rich description of "prophetic ministry," the church's sociopolitical calling must always be both "to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness" and "to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward

which the community of faith may move." For the church and its members to carry out such a task faithfully, with the utmost sense of responsibility and stewardship, of course implies no guarantee that any of us will live to see an earthly liberation from the injustices we witness every day. But as Brueggemann again reminds us, such faithfulness would permit us "to live in fervent anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give."[56]

Notes

1. "Social Principles," *The Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 44.
2. Ibid., 45.
3. "National Incomes Policy," *The Book of Resolutions*, 432.
4. "Platforms 1996," *Christian Social Action* (Washington, D.C.: United Methodist Church, September 1996), 30.
5. Roy Howard Beck, *Prophets and Politics: Handbook on the Washington Offices of U.S. Churches* (Washington, D.C.: Institute on Religion and Democracy, 1994), 22–25, 43.
6. "Eradicating Poverty and Improving the Human Habitat," *Church and Society* 87:1 (September–October 1996), 55–58.
7. "Theological Ethics and Political Participation," *Church and Society* 87:1 (September–October 1996), 95–97.
8. Jan Nunley, "Fair Wages, Workplace Parity Addressed by General Convention," and "Social Justice Issues Are Universal," *Episcopal News Service*, July 26, 1997, downloaded from http://www.dfms.org/ens/gc1028r.htm and http://www.dfms.org/ens/gc1025r.htm; *Episcopal News Service* bulletin March 7, 1997.
9. Jan Nunley, "Social Policy Resolutions Ask Church to Demonstrate Its Justice Concerns," *Episcopal News Service*, July 26, 1997; http://www.dfms.org/ens/gc9.html.
10. Charles Lee, *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States: A National Report on the Racial and Socio-economic Characteristics of Communities with Hazardous Waste Sites* (New York: United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987).
11. "United Church of Christ Pronouncement on Christian Faith: Economic Life and Justice," reprinted in Rebecca Blank, *Do Justice: Linking Christian Faith and Modern Economic Life* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1992), 151.
12. Ibid., 170–78.
13. Beck, *Prophets and Politics*, 170–71.
14. "Delegation of Church Leaders Visits White House in Midst of Budget Debate," *The Episcopal News Service*, December 12, 1995, 14–16.
15. Ibid., 15.

16. As quoted in Mark Tooley, "Religious Left Defends Welfare State," *Faith and Freedom* (Washington: Institute on Religion and Democracy, Winter 1995–96), 14–15.
17. An assessment of the record of the 104th Congress regarding budget cuts passed in the last two years notes: "Although entitlement programs for people with low incomes absorbed 93 percent of the entitlement reductions, they accounted for only 37 percent of total expenditures for entitlement programs other than Social Security and only 23 percent of all entitlement spending. . . . Slightly more than one-third of the reductions in nondefense programs that are not entitlements—34 percent—came from non-entitlement programs for people with low incomes. These low-income programs accounted, however, for only 21 percent of overall funding for nondefense discretionary programs at the start of Congress. . . ." Robert Greenstein et al., "Bearing Most of the Burden," *Center for Budget and Policy Priorities*, Washington, D.C., December 1996.
18. Ibid., 18.
19. "Rallying Support For Children's Movement, Families: Organizers of Successful Demonstration in Washington Vow to Take Their Effort to the Grass-Roots Level," *Los Angeles Times*, June 8, 1996, p. 4.
20. While the march clearly did not affect outcomes in the policy arena, to its credit, "Stand for Children" has continued as an important vehicle for generating activism and public awareness since June 1996. On "Stand for Children" day in June 1997, some 550 local communities held public events to promote "children's issues," and the organization has been an innovator in attempting to use the internet to attract activists (see www.stand.org for more details). The long-term effect of these subsequent initiatives, as distinct from the 1996 march itself, remains to be seen.
21. At the time of the Democratic Convention in late August, NCC head Campbell stated an intention to hold Clinton accountable for the welfare bill. "We're not going to let it [the welfare issue] alone. . . . We are going to keep after him" ("Clinton's Welfare Reform Shakes Advocates," *The Union Times* [Albany], August 24, 1996, p. B11). However, repeated Nexis searches for religious leaders critical of Clinton's welfare stance between September and November 1996 found only one leader cited in media nationwide: Jim Wallis (for example, Wallis, "At Election Time Poor People Don't Exist," *All Things Considered* commentary on National Public Radio, October 28, 1996). Indeed, the most widely perceived voice of the religious "left" and center during the election was the Interfaith Alliance, a two-year-old, anti–religious right coalition supported by the mainline churches and on whose board Campbell sits, which distributed five million "voter guides" in an organizing effort universally interpreted as being to Clinton's electoral benefit ("Religious Groups Emulating Christian Coalition in Bid to Counteract It," *The Washington Post*, October 28, 1996, p. A7). On the other hand, it should be noted that the main-

line churches are also participating in Wallis's "A Call to Renewal," a movement/organization that intends to remain rigorously nonpartisan and challenge Democrats and Republicans alike.

22. Through the first half of 1997, the mainline churches have stayed active on the welfare question by focusing on the problem of moving welfare recipients to work, as is required under the new law; the National Council of Churches and other groups held a series of meetings with Vice-President Gore leading to the creation of a "Welfare-to-Work Coalition to Sustain Success," the aim of which is primarily to convince large corporations to hire former welfare recipients. While NCC staffers have acknowledged that this approach is clearly inadequate—Mary Anderson Cooper of NCC warns that "voluntarism alone—or even as a major factor—cannot replace the responsibility of government to provide for the common good"—the churches apparently have accepted the fundamental point that "putting welfare recipients to work so that they can support themselves without further governmental assistance" (as Cooper puts it) is a worthy policy goal. Unfortunately, this assumption raises two serious problems, one practical and one of principle. First, adding large numbers of people to the job rolls would require a full-employment economy, an outcome that is literally impossible given the current monetary policies of the United States; second, the churches now seem to be accepting the conventional analysis that poor single mothers who raise children do no real work and hence should be made to work forty hours a week at low-income jobs (and, it follows, that this would be the best way to improve the quality of life for poor children, families, and communities). What about all the church resolutions advocating guaranteed minimum incomes, or the notion that work (such as child-raising) that the market does not remunerate ought to be valued and honored? Again, although the churches *are* lobbying to improve the outcome of the new welfare regime, it is difficult not to conclude that this is a case in which the churches have allowed their practical stance to be shaped more by a shifting political environment—one that assumes welfare recipients are not contributing to society and must be made to do so—than by a clear sense of firm, unyielding commitment to their own best principles, even when this requires noncooperation with governmental bodies. See Mary Anderson Cooper, "Welfare to Work: Perspective I," *Mark-Up* 26:4 (NCC Washington Office Newsletter), May–June 1997.

23. Based on results of Nexis search for references to "Presbyterian General Assembly" published in July 1996; "Presbyterian Conflicts," *The Christian Century*, July 17, 1996, 709ff. Regarding the statement on sustainable development, the *Christian Century* article notes that "the delegates failed to allot any money to implement the paper's policies in the life of the church and the nation. They voted down a proposal to spend $133,286 over four years for a

full-time staff position but did approve spending $22,550 for printing and distributing the document."

24. Quoted in Beck, *Prophets and Politics*, 175.
25. "IRD Celebrates Its Past, Looks to Future Ministries," *The Presbyterian Layman*, November–December 1996, p. 16. This is a publication of the Presbyterian Lay Committee, which represents traditionalist/conservative views within PCUSA.
26. Allen Hertzke, "An Assessment of Mainline Churches Since 1945," in *The Role of Religion in the Making of Public Policy*, ed. James Wood and Derek Davis (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University, 1991), 65.
27. Allen Hertzke, *Representing God in Washington* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), 76.
28. Ibid., 77.
29. Interview with Thad Williamson, 31 July 1997; quotes used on condition of anonymity.
30. Hertzke, "An Assessment of Mainline Churches Since 1945," 73.
31. Ibid.
32. Charles Bayer, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Mainline Church* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996), 119.
33. I do not have space within this article to delve into Hauerwas's well-known viewpoint, perhaps most usefully summarized in the series of topical essays presented in Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living In Between* (Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1988); see also the critical evaluation of Hauerwas in Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 351–61.
34. Bayer, *Babylonian Captivity*, 123–24.
35. Ibid., 124–29.
36. See Gary Dorrien, *The Democratic Socialist Vision* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1986) and *Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).
37. Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 365. Cited data from Lilly Foundation and Search Institute study, *Effective Christian Education*, 1990. Related studies include Dean Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Wade Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).
38. Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 367.
39. Ibid., 366.
40. Ibid., 367.
41. Ibid., 373–76.

42. Hofrenning, *In Washington But Not of It* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 9.
43. Ibid., 97.
44. Ibid., 117.
45. Ibid., 118.
46. "Ecumenical Climb: An Interview with Joan Brown Campbell," *The Christian Century* 112:32 (November 8, 1995), 1048ff.
47. Ibid.
48. I am all too aware of the need to argue for and demonstrate this assertion in detail, but I cannot appropriately do so here. Briefly to cite three pieces of evidence that bear on the claim: (1)There is little evidence that organized political activity over the course of the twentieth century, apart from the shocks of war and Depression, have been able to alter long trends in the distribution of income (which has become more inegalitarian in any case since the mid-70s) (Gar Alperovitz, "Building A Living Democracy," in *Who Is My Neighbor?*[Washington: Sojourners Neighborhood Community, 1994]); (2) despite some clear gains, most observers believe that the speed of ecological destruction is continuing to outpace the capacity of reform laws to keep up (*Index of Environmental Trends* [Washington: National Center for Economic Alternatives, 1995]); (3) since the end of the postwar economic boom (1973), wages have stagnated and poverty has increased sharply in the United States, both as percentage of the population and in absolute terms (*Statistical Abstract of the United States* [Washington: Government Printing Office, 1995]). Related to this, of course, is the well-documented growth in public discontent with "politics" and a growing public concern for a loss of "community." For a succinct, powerful argument that the cause of social justice in America faces deep structural problems from one who has spent a lifetime advocating liberal policies, see John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Culture of Contentment* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
49. C. Kirk Hadaway and David A. Roozen, *Rerouting the Protestant Mainstream* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995). See especially chap. 4, "Mainstream Church Growth," 73–89.
50. See, for instance, Gar Alperovitz, "The Reconstruction of Community Meaning: The Insight of Martin Buber and the Emerging American Crisis," *Tikkun* 11:3 (May–June 1996): 13–16, 79. For a less dramatic endorsement of this thesis, see also Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
51. For a more extended discussion of the possibilities, see Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1994), 204–9.
52. The term *religious critic* is borrowed from William Dean, *The Religious Critic in American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). My subsequent usage of the term *religious critic* is not intended to conform with Dean's, although there is clearly overlap.

53. I do not at all mean to suggest that such "religious critics" need all be radical critics of capitalism or even "liberal"; while I do not think the mainline church would have interest in providing support to thinkers openly hostile to their own social principles, certainly a wide range of thought and discussion is to be encouraged.
54. Ronald Thiemann, *A Dilemma for Democracy* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1996). For all my other critiques of the present American political culture, I have no problem with these "values" as "values," once it is understood that the meaning and content of these formative democratic values is open to widely different definitions; even if a religious critic for some reason found these democratic values and the common democratic language distasteful, it should be understood that, like it or not, these are the basic philosophical tools and traditions the entire culture is working under—throwing out three hundred years of tradition and discourse is not a valid option. Religious critics should be equipped and eager to enter into the debate about such fundamental value definitions (for example, what does "democracy" really mean?).
55. While the argumentation laid out here has relied more on a political reading of the times than on explicitly theological analysis, I would expect that any extended debate and discussion of this topic will require strong doses of both elements.
56. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

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