

Roy Beck is the Washington editor of The Social Contract. This article is based on excerpts from his new book, Prophets and Politics: Handbook on the Washington Offices of U.S. Churches published in 1994 by the Institute on Religion and Democracy (193 pages, paperback, \$8.95 plus \$2.50 s&h). Copies may be ordered by calling The Social Contract Press, 800/352-4843.)

NATIONAL RELIGIOUS LOBBYING

Washington Offices That Help Promote High Immigration

By Roy Beck

National religious lobbyists have played a key role in providing political protection for Congress while, against the wishes of the voters, our representatives quadrupled immigrant and refugee admissions over the last three decades. In pronouncements made publicly and sent back to local congregations, church lobbyists have offered unwavering support for high immigration as the morally correct stance for the United States.

Who are these religious lobbyists?

They operate out of 17 lobbying offices on or near Capitol Hill (see table on facing page). They represent scores of denominations with a combined membership of more than 130 million Americans. Indeed, America's faith groups are well-situated to make their voices heard in Washington's corridors of political power, issuing moral critiques and admonitions on many govern-mental affairs.

The 17 lobbying offices are of three types:

* Twelve of the offices represent individual denominations. Most of them are among the largest of religious bodies, such as the Catholic, Southern Baptist and United Methodist denominations. But the Church of the Brethren, with only 150,000 adherents, also has its own office.

* Three lobbying operations serve several denominations of the same family of churches. One represents seven Baptist denominations. Another serves 26 of 30 regional groupings of the loose-knit Quaker community. A third lobbies for six Mennonite denominations and the Brethren in Christ Church.

* The final two offices are large ecumenical operations. The National Association of Evangelicals represents 47 denominations. The National Council of Churches is the Washington voice for 32 denominations.

The 17 little-understood operations are neither as powerful as their constituency numbers would suggest nor as inconsequential as their paucity of general news coverage would indicate.

On virtually any issue or political development of significance in Washington, one or more of the 17 can be expected to try to influence the outcome of legislation, court decisions and administrative actions. But the 17 rarely speak with a single moral voice or act in unison. Sometimes they directly oppose one another. More often, they differ on amendments, emphases or nuances.

A general rule of thumb: The 17 lobbying offices have little power when they are in sharp disagreement. But when most of the 17 speak on an issue position in unison -- or at least without any of them stating strong disagreement with each other -- it is difficult for any opponent to beat them. Civil rights in the mid-1960s was one such issue. The push to end the Vietnam War had become another such issue by the early 1970s. More recently, the consensus voice from these offices helped push the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and legislation providing for Americans with disabilities.

PROVIDING MORAL COVER FOR UNPOPULAR IMMIGRATION PRACTICES

Despite stereotypical criticism of Congress as unresponsive, it is rare to have an issue such as immigration about which Congress and the people take such starkly different positions. For nearly 20 years, polls have shown the majority of Americans wanting immigration reduced. But until two years ago, not one of the 535 U.S. senators and representatives had introduced or signed onto a bill to cut immigrant admissions; and the majority continued to vote for provisions that actually INCREASED the numbers.

On the surface, members of Congress would appear to be taking grave political risks by snubbing their constituents' will in favor of the assortment of forces favoring immigration. This risk is accentuated by the fact that most of the chief proponents and beneficiaries of high immigration seek it for less than high moral purposes. Among them are:

* industrialists seeking to keep wages down,

- * operators of actual sweat shops,
- * immigration lawyers seeking clientele to enhance their income,
- * self-appointed ethnic leaders who are able to use increased Census numbers to bolster their status and power, even though polls show their supposed ethnic constituency often favors reduced immigration,
- * land speculators and the developers who want and need immigration to drive the population growth that will run up the price of land they own, justify and enable further development, or bail them out of past investments where they overreached demand.
- * some types of federal, state and local government and "volunteer" agency employees whose jobs and prestige are connected to providing taxpayer-funded services to the foreign born.

Were it not for the national religious lobbies, Congress might be stuck with appearing to deny the public will in favor of a small group of Americans whose motivation is "ugly and full of self-interest," in the words of former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm.

Members of Congress, of course, do not tout their high-immigration positions as being for the benefit of sweat-shop, operators, environmental marauders or lawyers. Instead, they usually extol immigration as meeting high moral goals -- humanitarian goals that have been articulated and advocated most forcefully by the religious lobby.

I surveyed the religious lobbying offices, interviewing the chief executive of most of them. I found that support of for the present unprecedented level of immigration and for increasing it still further has become one of the half-dozen top priorities of the denominational lobbying offices in recent years.

Nearly all the religious lobbyists in one way or another have opposed efforts to limit immigration. That stance appears to have the highest priority among lobbyists for the American Baptists, Church of Brethren, Catholics, Episcopalians, Friends (Quakers), Reform Jews, ELCA Lutherans and Mennonites.

What gives their advocacy even more influence is the fact that NOT ONE denominational lobbying operation has taken a counter position. Nor have the numerous para-church organizations (which have no organic connection to denominations) lobbied against high immigration and in favor of the public's desire for reductions. Most religious left para-church groups are assertively in favor of high immigration. Most of the groups of the religious right have tended to stay out of the debate; although their constituents almost certainly share the general public's limitationist views, the leaders of the conservative economic views espoused by proponents of cheap-labor, high immigration policies.

Thus, when Congress hears the national voices claiming to represent Americans' deep and widespread religious commitments, it hears them singing a single tune that extols the moral imperative of continuing high immigration.

Yet, public opinion polls indicate that the people in the pews of the local congregations of most of the national religious leaders strongly desire reduced immigration. The polling has been broad and does not ascertain the views within individual faith groups. But it has provided a clear picture of Catholics and Protestants oppose current immigration policies as too high; there is little difference in the opinions of the two groups; they are significantly MORE apt to object to immigration than Americans who call themselves non-religious.

LOBBYISTS' ACCOUNTABILITY TO GRASS ROOTS MEMBERS

In a truly democratic society, the churches' offices would be most effective when they represented the informed Christian consciences of the people in the pews. Most churches' Washington offices proudly state that their work is the result of democratic process within their denominations.

In fact, most Washington offices are part of elaborate denominational structures in which authority eventually can be traced back to the members in their local congregations. But the accountability lines can get terribly tangled -- at least in the mind of somebody trying to follow them.

When one studies the accountability structures, it is immediately apparent that there is a kind of semi-democracy for most of the offices, not a form most people would be likely to recognize from the secular political world.

The Catholic office doesn't even claim to represent parish members in a democratic sense. It is the arm of the bishops who answer only to the pope.

All other Washington offices, though, do claim to operate in a democratic system that begins with the grassroots church members. But they're not talking about New England town meeting democracy, nor the kind in which citizens vote directly for their leaders at local, state and federal levels.

In the churches, the system is more akin to what it would be like if people voted for county officials and then those elected would join with officials of other counties to elect state legislators, who

would in turn combine with other states' legislators to choose the members of Congress, who would then elect a big committee, which would elect a smaller committee which would actually oversee a government department. The link between that department and the original voters would be tenuous, indeed. In most church systems, grassroots members vote only for the lowest level representatives. Most church democracy is more akin to the way officials were elected in the early days of our country when the common people were felt to be too poorly informed to directly elect national leaders. The Electoral College system for electing the president formerly worked roughly in this way.

To point this out is to point out reality and not necessarily to contend that the structures ought to work any other way. The system functions to prevent church teachings and witness from being whipsawed by shallow popular whims and emotions. Few of even the most ardent grassroots activists would suggest that the will of God in public affairs can be discerned solely through popular vote. But for any church member or congregation wishing to effect such discernment, beware; the system is a tough one to influence.

Naturally, any time a church lobbying office takes a position on a public issue, it is going to offend some of the denomination's members. It is not uncommon for lobbies to take a position that a large minority or even a narrow majority of grassroots members oppose. But it is rare for the church lobbyists to oppose such a large majority of church members on such a major issue as immigration. Part of the reason lobbyists are able to do so without being flooded with phone calls and letters may be that their advocacy has tended to be on smaller pieces of the immigration issue. Until the last year, no comprehensive restrictive immigration legislative proposal even existed, so the religious lobbyists have not had to make full and clear statements in favor of bringing in more than a million foreign workers and their families each year. Rather, they merely have opposed many smaller provisions that might have limited the numbers of legal and illegal admissions and they have supported efforts to increase one category or another of foreign entrants.

A second reason the religious lobbyists have been able to operate in such opposition to their constituents' interest is that most members in their local pews have no idea of what lobbying is done in their behalf in Washington.

NETWORKING INCREASES INFLUENCE

The United Methodist Building -- a triangular building wedged strategically almost between the Supreme Court and the Capitol -- is "Ground Zero" for church lobbying.

Nine of the 17 faith group advocacy organizations are housed here in a building constructed in 1923 after the Methodists invented the concept of the Washington religious lobbying office in 1916. The nine are: the American Baptist Churches, Church of the Brethren, Episcopal Church, Mennonite Central Committee, National Council of Churches, Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church and Unitarian-Universalist Association.

James A. Reichley of the Brookings Institution says the building initially served as the "nerve center for Prohibition forces." Professor and author Allen D. Hertzke says the building is now the nerve center for peace and justice efforts of Protestant churches and spin-off groups associated with the most liberal political witness in Washington.

Much of the building originally was filled with apartments designed for retired Methodist ministers. Through the years, one apartment after another has been converted to activist use. Most of the offices have a no-frills, cluttered, musty and dim feel of spartan 1970s grassroots activism. The several dozen non-church organizations located here are one reason why an assessment of the church offices alone tends to underestimate their impact on Capitol Hill. The building directory lists such organizations as Churches for Middle East Peace, Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, Lawyers Committee on Human Rights, or the Washington Office on Haiti to name a few. A fair number of these non-church groups were started by one or more of the church offices to specialize in an issue already getting some denominational attention.

The denominational offices interact with the spin-off groups in various ways, including giving money, staff time, placing people on their boards of directors and using their published material. The groups raise a lot of money independently and tend to be far less encumbered by structures of accountability than the denominational offices. Severe critics consider the spin-offs to be little more than money-laundering and accountability-avoiding operations. Supporters see them as a creative way for churches to multiply their effectiveness and broaden constituencies. Because so many activists are housed under one roof, the Methodist Building is a breeding ground for coalitions that can spring up overnight to

react to specific legislation and events.

(Interestingly, among the occupants of the remaining apartments in the Methodist Building are the Georgia Baptist and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich; Methodist Sen. Howell Heflin (D-AL); and the parents of Democratic Vice President Al Gore.)

Most of the other religious lobbying offices are scattered around Capitol Hill, but the U.S. Catholic Conference -- arguably the most powerful religious lobbyist for high immigration -- is housed in a much more modern, spacious and remote site. On grounds near Catholic University a couple of miles north of the Capitol, the Catholic lobbyists work in a five-story, 170,000-square-foot structure. When the lobbyists look out their windows, the dome they see is that of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

The move toward having formal religious lobbying structures in Washington has been a slow one. The Catholics began in 1919, shortly after the Methodists. Faith groups often began their operations in part as a way to counteract the influence of other religious groups. The Baptist Joint Committee started in 1936 to check some of the growing power of the Catholics in Washington. The National Association of Evangelicals took up residence in 1942 to provide a counterforce to the more liberal mainline Protestants. The pacifist Friends operation began in 1943 in part to make sure something other than "Just War" religious influence was being exerted. As the Religious Right gained prominence in the 1970s, the liberal Episcopal Church leadership finally established an office on the Hill. The conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod opened shop in 1985 to make sure officials heard Lutheran voices other than the liberal ones from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The Southern Baptists decided in 1989 that the Baptist Joint Committee wasn't conservative enough and began its separate lobbying office.

CHURCH-STATE QUESTIONS

Most of the Washington religious office staffs get nervous when the word "lobby" is used to describe the way they promote public policy. They don't want to be confused with technical lobbyists who have to be registered as such. They say most of their work involves educating their grassroots members as well as the public. They also fear that the word "lobby" sounds pejorative to many church members and that lobbying is somehow an unseemly activity for church people. There also is fear of stirring up opposition from people outside the churches. For many people outside of faith groups, such religious activity on public policy violates church-state separation.

But even though lobbying may not occupy a sufficient percentage of time to raise questions about their tax status, most Washington church offices fit one of the Congressional Quarterly's definitions of a lobbyist: "...any organization or person that carries on activities which have as their ultimate aim to influence the decisions of Congress, of the state and local legislatures, or of government administrative agencies."

Lutheran advocate Robert E. VanDeusen taught members to stop using the language of "separation of church and state," saying it essentially is a negative concept. The concept properly ensures that the church and state remain separate entities, not infringed on by the other, he said. "But it does not deal with the corollary question of what positive relationship they shall bear to each other." VanDeusen encouraged Lutherans to emphasize the principle of protecting the autonomy and integrity of the church and its freedom to witness. In other words, the point of separation of church and state is to ensure religious freedom.

The Baptist Joint Committee is a top warrior at the capital in advocating the separation of church and state, vehemently opposing any church organization gaining the power to dictate governmental policy. But the agency also battles against all government efforts to restrict churches' ability to try to influence policy and individuals' right to express their faith through citizenship.

The Southern Baptists find ludicrous the suggestion that the Constitution restricts churches from participating in the political process: "All the restrictions are on government, not on individual Baptists or other Americans of religious faith ... There would have been no abolitionist and anti-slavery movement ... child labor reform ... civil rights movement without the moral imperative provided by people of religious conviction."

The Catholic bishops have pronounced: "The national debate is not enhanced by ignoring or ruling out the contributions of citizens because their convictions are grounded in religious belief. What we seek is not a religious interest group, but a community of conscience within the larger society, testing public life on these central values ... to lift up the moral and human dimensions of public issues for our own community and for the broader society."

COMPETING PRINCIPLES

The religious lobbies' advocacy of high immigration is influenced, above all else, by the preaching of RIGHTS by 17 Washington-based public policy pulpits. Part of this emphasis may result from the way many of the offices achieved their greatest stature by working on Civil Rights during the 1960s. Recently, they have given top priority to pushing Congress to expand rights and protections of rights for indigenous American peoples, convicted murderers, women, blacks, and ethnic, linguistic, religious and other minorities. RESPONSIBILITIES of the individual to the community get little attention from the religious lobbyists. Immigration issues tend to be considered within the context of rights: the rights of refugees, illegal aliens and other immigrants to move as they desire, to have free schooling, obtain welfare, etc.

Surprisingly, most of these pro-immigration religious lobbying offices represent denominations that long have held strong views in support of labor and environmental concerns. And the offices have given priority attention to the rising number of children in poverty due to the inability of their parents to earn enough to support them. Yet, these same offices have given little attention to causes of the two-decade decline in non-supervisory wages for Americans. The causes of wage depression are complicated, but a swelling labor force with the addition of hundreds of thousands of low-skilled foreign workers each year surely does not help lower-skilled American workers or their children. There is no sign that the supposed pro-labor religious offices have weighed these concerns in competition with their virtually unqualified support for the "right" of immigration.

Similarly, all denominations speak of the importance of good stewardship for God's creation, and some are assertively pro-environment in their advocacy. Several of the denominations even have national policies advocating U.S. population stabilization. But no Washington office has given priority attention to U.S. population growth, nor has any struggled with the role of immigration as THE primary component of population growth in the United States, which in turn is the primary ingredient driving additional environmental degradation in this country.

Since members in the pews have not forced the issue, Washington religious lobbying offices made immigration the de facto top priority, taking precedence over all labor, environmental and child poverty concerns.

LOBBYING THE LOBBYISTS

Members of churches and synagogues who would like their national leadership to reexamine its stance on immigration have two or three major options:

(1) They can work through the structure of their denomination, trying to influence the election of representatives and the approval of resolutions at local, regional and national levels. This is a long, slow, arduous task.

(2) They can communicate directly to the Washington lobbying offices, providing information and suggestions about a more balanced weighing of immigration concerns with competing ones about labor, children environment, the underclass and cities.

(3) They can register concerns about the lobbying office priorities with the religious officials to whom the lobbyists are accountable (though some offices are not accountable to a higher office). Listed below are the address and phone numbers for the national denominational offices responsible for the lobbying operations:

American Baptist Churches, P.O. Box 851, Valley Forge, PA 19482, (610) 768-2077.

Church of the Brethren, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120, (708) 742-5100.

Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017, (212) 922-5205.

Lutheran Church (ELCA), 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631 (312) 380-2700.

Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod), 1333 S. Kirkwood, St. Louis, MO 63122, (314) 965-9000.

Mennonite Central Committee, Box 500, Akron, PA 17501, (717) 859-1151.

National Association of Evangelicals, 450 Gunderson Dr., Carol Stream, IL 60188, (708) 665-0500.

National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10115, (212) 870-2511.

Presbyterian Church (USA), 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 50202, (502) 569-5000.

Southern Baptist Convention, 901 Commerce St., Suite 750, Nashville, TN 37203, (615) 244-2355.

United Church of Christ, 700 Prospect Avenue East, Cleveland, OH 44115, (216) 736-2100

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