



The Polis
Center

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into perspective.*

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COLLEAGUES :

Despite a national history that rid the government of official priests and a constitution that—depending on your perspective—either accommodates religion or prohibits its establishment, Americans remain confused about the ways religion relates to government and the way politics intersects with religion.

That confusion is evident every time state or federal governments convene. This month, when the Indiana legislature gathers, some religious groups

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CLERGY NOTES

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

In its 2001 session, which began January 8, the Indiana General Assembly was not expected to entertain legislation that touches directly on big social and moral questions such as abortion, the death penalty, or gay rights. Instead, most of the legislators' attention will be focused on passing a state budget and a redistricting plan. (Redistricting is mandatory after the results of the U.S. Census are in.)

This year's session is a "long" one—so named because of the extra time it usually takes to pass a budget. Long sessions convene in odd-numbered years and last through April, while even-year "short" sessions usually end in March.

Though budget and redistricting issues will crowd out most other debate, lobbying organizations will be hard at work trying to establish political momentum for the 2002 session. The *Indianapolis Star* recently reported that organizations spent more than \$15 million on lobbying activities in the last session, and that figure is expected to keep rising.

Much of that money is spent on behalf of secular concerns, but some of it is spent amplifying the voice of religious institutions and people of faith.

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POLITICAL ACTIVISM

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Consider the Indiana Family Institute. Established in 1990, it reflects the political mobilization of America's "religious right" in recent years. IFI is associated with, but not fiscally tied to, the Colorado-based organization Focus on the Family. It is one of 35 state organizations modeled after a plan conceived by James Dobson, Focus on the Family's founder. Dobson's plan calls for a network of state organizations with a strong prophetic Christian voice in the arenas of politics and culture.

About 10,000 people receive the organization's monthly newsletter. Micah Clark, IFI's director of public policy, said he is tracking several issues and pieces of legislation. One is a bill that would make possession of child pornography a felony in Indiana. It passed the Indiana Senate by a nearly unanimous vote in the last session but was not taken up by the House. Clark will push for quick action on that bill. His long-term legislative concerns include extending the state's waiting period for divorce from 60 to at least 150 days; creating a special "Respect Life" license plate that will generate revenue for adoption agencies and crisis pregnancy centers; and enacting a "conscience clause" that protects pharmacists who refuse to dispense drugs used in abortion procedures.

Clark attempts to influence public policy by lobbying legislators directly, but that is only one aspect of IFI's work. It also encourages like-minded citizens to become politically engaged themselves, and its method for doing so is a model of grassroots democracy in action.

Working in cooperation with congregations, IFI helps them establish "community impact committees." These committees monitor legislation, report on its progress to the pastor and congregation, and flex their political muscle by sponsoring letter-writing campaigns.

IFI's role is to supply the committees with information through its monthly newsletter, various position papers, special electronic and paper updates, and informal conversations. "A lot of them have taken on a life of their own," Clark said, "and they meet on a regular basis, like a Sunday school class. They see us as a watchdog group—their eyes and ears on

issues they're concerned about. For example, there was a recent proposal that would have taxed churches. It didn't go anywhere, but it was something we were concerned about."

About three dozen churches in Indiana, including several of the largest churches in Indianapolis, have a committee working with IFI in this manner.

Lobbying along with IFI for the religious right is Advance America, the lobbying organization of local Christian attorney Eric Miller. Other organizations, such as Indiana Catholic Conference, are less easily classified. Says Desmond Ryan, ICC's executive director, "We coalesce with individuals or groups that we agree with on a specific issue. On the abortion issue, we work with some of the right-wing or conservative groups. On liberal issues, we work with the Council of Churches, which is a relatively liberal body that has a mainline Protestant frame of reference. We also work with the Jewish Community Relations Council. They disagree with us on abortion and school aid, but they would be with us on some of the liberal issues." (See the related interview for more on the Indiana Catholic Conference.)

In addition to these explicitly religious organizations, there are secular organizations involved in issues of concern to clergy. The Indiana Civil Liberties Union is the best example. Its recent suit to block a monument bearing the Ten Commandments from being placed on the Statehouse lawn sparked much public debate and provoked responses from clergy on both sides of the issue. The ICLU receives support—and opposition—from clergy on other issues as well. For example, ICLU and the Indiana Catholic Conference are two of the loudest voices in the legislature calling for an end to the death penalty in Indiana.

"The clergy can have a profound role, because I do think the moral implications of the death penalty have to be driven home," says ICLU Executive Director John Krull, who speaks to several congregations each year about the organization's activities. "There are all sorts of areas where clergy could have a leadership role. We can certainly use them."

—Ted Slutz

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DESMOND RYAN

Desmond Ryan is executive director of the Indiana Catholic Conference, the political voice of Indiana's five Roman Catholic dioceses. The Conference's board consists of Ryan and two people from each diocese—the bishop plus one layperson. Throughout the summer and fall each year, Ryan works with the leadership and laity of the Catholic Church in Indiana to determine which legislative issues ICC will concentrate on in the Indiana General Assembly's next session. In late fall, he presents a list of priorities (there are usually six or seven of them) to the ICC board for approval. Then, from the start of the session in early January to its conclusion in March or April, he spends much of his time at the Statehouse, lobbying legislators on behalf of ICC's agenda.

Ryan, who was a political science and sociology professor before coming to ICC, became the organizations' director in the mid-1980s. Through the Information Action Network he helped create at ICC, his organization has a direct link to about 5,000 Catholics throughout the state. Ryan keeps them informed—by letter and through a phone chain—of legislation relevant to them. "The purpose is that they act in unison," he said. "Because we believe that everyone should be involved in the issues, we can at least inform them of the Church's position and encourage them to act. Our hope is that they will agree with our position and affect public policy." Here, Ryan talks about the ICC and how congregations can make their own voices heard in the political arena.

Clergy Notes: How did the Indiana Catholic Conference come into existence?

Ryan: In 1966, the bishops of Indiana decided that they needed to speak in unison on public policy issues, so they formed the Indiana Catholic Conference. Our focus is primarily public policy in Indiana, but we link up with the U.S. Catholic Conference, which is the public policy organization for all the bishops in the United States. There are about 33 state Catholic conferences similar to ours.

CN: How do you determine the Church's official position on political issues?

Ryan: There is usually great uniformity on the issues. Wherever you go within the official Catholic Church, you will get the same position. The death penalty is an evolving position within the Catholic Church, and a lot of Catholics aren't with

us yet. But the Church leadership is pretty much on the same page. There is a whole body of literature we work out of—Vatican documents, justice statements—which are the background for how we form our positions on issues in Indiana. There's a whole literature of social justice issues basic to the Catholic tradition, and we apply them here.

CN: How effective is the ICC as a lobbying organization?

Ryan: Effectiveness is very hard to measure. If you were to measure our effectiveness by our presence, then we're very effective, because we are always there and people are aware of us. If you measure our effectiveness by whether we pass or block numerous bills every session, that's a different issue. That comes up occasionally. People ask, 'Is it worth funding the organization? How many bills did we pass this year?' If the bishops evaluated us that way, they'd probably put us out of business. It's not easy to pass a bill funding non-public education in Indiana, or eliminating the death penalty, or stopping abortion. These are not easy issues, but we're always there. If we get a hearing on them, that's a victory.

CN: Drawing on your knowledge of the process, what advice can you give to clergy who want their congregations to be more politically active?

Ryan: If a pastor felt it was important that his or her parishioners be involved in public policy, then that pastor should have some way of helping his or her people understand the relationship between the church and the public policy arena. It takes a little education; separation is easier than participation. A pastor should emphasize that people have a right, indeed a duty, to speak. All people do. Once you've gotten that message out, the next step might be to urge parishioners to know who speaks for them or represents them in the Indiana legislature. So a study group might say, 'Here's our district. Who are our state senator and our state representative?' If you really wanted to personalize it, then you would invite (the politicians) to come to a public program in your congregation. Once you've done that, then you educate people on how to write a letter, make a phone call, follow an issue or two. The best way to do it is to get into some kind of an issue and start a dialogue.

COLLEAGUES

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and leaders will stake a claim in public education, standard medical care, property taxes, and a variety of other social issues. A few congregations and clergy will take an active role in lobbying the legislature; others will actively discourage political participation; most will remain silent.

What role, if any, do you see for yourself as a religious leader in a political society? According to a recent survey, most Indianapolis citizens believe religious leaders should play a more active role in influencing public life although most doubt the current influence of clergy. The twin expectations of serving the spiritual needs of congregants while at the same time serving the "outside" world is only one aspect of the confusing interaction between religion and public life.

How do you and your congregation consider the relationship of religion and politics and how that intersection shapes your life together? There are others who would like to learn from you. Let me know if you'd be interested in talking with one another. Let's keep in touch.



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RESOURCES

Advance America

101 W. Ohio St., Suite 660
Indianapolis, IN 46244-2827
(317) 684-3300
www.advanceamerica.com

Indiana Catholic Conference

1400 N. Meridian St.
P.O. Box 1410
Indianapolis, IN 46206-1410
(317) 236-1455
www.indianacc.org

Indiana Civil Liberties Union

1031 E. Washington St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
(317) 635-4056
www.iclu.org

Indiana Family Institute

9135 N. Meridian St., Suite C5
Indianapolis, IN 46260
(317) 582-0300
www.hoosierfamily.org

Jewish Community Relations Council

1100 W. 42nd St., Suite 240
Indianapolis, IN 46208
(317) 926-2935
www.indyjrc.org

An excellent resource for information on politicians at the local, state, and federal level is Project Vote Smart (www.vote-smart.org.) It tracks political candidates' voting records and also offers biographical and contact information.

The Indiana General Assembly Web site (www.ai.org/legislative) is an important site for information on Indiana politics.

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