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Clergy Group to Counter Conservatives

November 17, 2003, by LYNETTE CLEMETSON

WASHINGTON, Nov. 14 - In an effort to counter the influence of conservative Christian organizations, a coalition of moderate and liberal religious leaders is starting a political advocacy organization to mobilize voters in opposition to Bush administration policies.

The nonprofit organization, the Clergy Leadership Network, plans to formally announce its formation on Friday and will operate from an expressly religious, expressly partisan point of view. The group cannot, under Internal Revenue Service guidelines, endorse political candidates, and it will have no official ties to the Democratic Party.

But the driving purpose of the organization, according to its mission statement, is to bring about "sweeping changes - changes in our nation's political leadership and changes in failing public policies."

The Rev. Albert M. Pennybacker, of Lexington, Ky., chief executive officer for the organization and the chairman of its national committee, said: "The Christian Right has been very articulate, but they have been exclusive and very judgmental of anyone who doesn't agree with them. People may want to label us the Christian Left. But what we really are about is mainstream issues and truth, and if that makes us left then that shines even more light on the need for a shift in our society."

The organization seeks to counter groups like the Christian Coalition of America and newly influential groups like the Family Research Council and the Traditional Values Coalition.

There are other liberal religious-based advocacy groups in Washington, like the Interfaith Alliance, a nonprofit group that lobbies Congress on policy issues. But the Clergy Leadership Council will be the first national liberal religious group, its organizers say, whose primary focus is electoral politics and partisan political organizing.

Tony Perkins, a former Louisiana state representative who is president of the Family Research Council, said such an approach could be counterproductive when dealing with churches.

"Trying to take a purely political message into church communities has not been very successful for either ideological side," said Mr. Perkins, a Republican whose group usually supports Republican initiatives. "We've learned that if you come with a party message you may prevent some people, people who agree with you on some issues, from hearing your message."

The new group's roughly 25-member committee is predominantly composed of Protestant Christians. It includes prominent figures like the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, who was a leader in the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement, and the Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, former general secretary of the National Council of Churches. The founding group also includes Catholic and Jewish members, and organizers said they hoped to draw Muslim members as well.

"Clergy have to be careful not to rush in with solutions to big problems, but when they see gross injustice they have an obligation not to be silent," Mr. Coffin said. "The arrogance and self-righteousness of the present administration are very dangerous. And silence by members of the clergy, in the face of such arrogance, is tantamount to betrayal of the Gospel or the Torah or the Koran."

Several of the political group's founders are from Midwestern and Southern states, including Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia, which Mr. Pennybacker called "battleground areas" in which moderate and progressive Christians have been losing their "political voice" to Christian conservatives.

Like many other religious organizations with political agendas, the group is legally bound to focus on issues, not candidates. The group's tax status as a Section 527 political organization exempts it from rules that affect many other nonprofit religious organizations and political action committees. It can raise unlimited money from an unrestricted pool of donors, provided it discloses its expenditures and income to the Internal Revenue Service.

While it cannot donate money to candidates, it hopes to raise money for advertisements.

The group's list of issues includes the economy, health care and civil liberties, as well as foreign policy issues, and using faith, as stated in its organizational guidelines, as "the lens through which public life is viewed and consequently engaged." Many of the group's members were active in opposing the war in Iraq.

The group also hopes to have a voice in Washington during policy debates.

In the recent nearly 40-hour debate in the Senate over four of President Bush's judicial nominees, religious-based conservative groups offered running commentary to the news media, suggesting that the nominees were being blocked because of their religious faith. The Clergy Leadership Network, said the Rev. Brenda Bartella Peterson, the group's executive director, will seek to provide alternative opinions in such debates.

Jenny Backus, a Democratic consultant working with the new group, said: "There's been a concerted effort by Christian conservatives to question the faith of people who disagree with their positions in the same way that they question their patriotism. The Clergy Leadership Network will now be the amen corner for people of faith who express disagreement with the administration and the Christian Right."

The group's issue list includes no mention of hot-button topics like abortion and gay marriage, which have been crucial issues for conservative groups. "Our key issues are people without jobs, people who are hungry, people burying children killed in Iraq." Mr. Pennybacker said. "These are real issues that override flashy talk about sexual orientation."

John Green, a political scientist and director of the Bliss Institute, a research center for the study of grass-roots politics based at the University of Akron, said there were more practical reasons for an organization like the Clergy Leadership Network to avoid divisive issues.

"In many people's minds the words `conservative' and `liberal' are firmly linked with positions on lifestyle issues," Mr. Green said. "Within such a diverse coalition, these clergy undoubtedly have congregations with different views on gay rights and abortion. But they may be able to find common ground on issues like war and peace, social welfare and the need for jobs."

Ms. Peterson is the sole representative of the group working out of its newly leased office space near the Capitol, across from the Democratic National Committee building. The group's organizers acknowledge that they may have an uphill battle in gaining the kind of prominence in Washington that some conservative Christian groups now enjoy.

"We know it won't be easy," Ms. Peterson said. "But there is an imperative that we be heard."

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