# Summer 2005/*Social Policy Magazine*

## [Wedges, Dividers and Majorities](http://www.socialpolicy.org/summer-2005/128-wedges-dividers-and-majorities). By Mike Miller, Editor-at-Large

Here’s a story I heard in a big city in the Midwest.  There’s a “faith-based” organization that includes Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Unitarian congregations whose members are Black, “white ethnic,” white “Anglo” middle-class, Latino, Arab and maybe I’m missing some.  They turn out thousands of people for “public accountability” sessions with local politicians, bureaucrats and corporate executives.  Just getting these groups together in the same organization in a racially and ethnically polarized city is quite an achievement.

I was talking with one of the organization’s active white leaders, who’s also a political science professor at a major Midwestern university, who told me this story.  Before the national election there had been a local candidate accountability session in one of the low-income black neighborhoods where the organization has a base.  A black minister of a smaller, poor, black Evangelical congregation rose and said, “This is a make-or-break issue with me.  Before I hear about anything else, I want to know where you stand on gay marriage.”  The professor asked, “What should the Democrats do?”

**The Religious Right and Communities of Color**

The religious right has been cultivating racial minority Evangelical, Pentecostal and Holiness leaders for years now.  With clergy and lay activists, the white religious right has defined some common theology; developed personal relationships of trust; provided individual and institutional financial and other kinds of assistance; engaged leaders in workshops and seminars; established “partnerships” between white middle-class churches and inner-city ones; and more.  There is a web of relationships incorporating the sub-culture of the religious right; it has its own publications, TV and radio stations; seminaries, bible institutes, and other institutions of higher education; and on-and-on.  While English is our common language, the sub-culture has its own language with code words that allow a listener to distinguish members from non-members.

Along come the Democrats at election time.  The Kerry campaign made an early antagonist of the Congressional Black Caucus by not fully including it in campaign strategizing.  In most of the big cities of the Midwest that have been governed by Democrats for most (if not all) of most black people’s post-Great Depression history, it is Democrats – in recent years many of them black – who presided and continue to preside over the city’s social and economic problems.  Most Democrats don’t involve store-front church and block-level people-of-color leadership in an ongoing way in their deliberations.  Patronage is the mechanism that incorporates many middle-level minority leaders into the Democratic Party – but it doesn’t work with more principled leaders who have big churches or the small ones who aren’t yet on the horizon of the politicians.  Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, Asians and other people of color often struggle against white leadership in unions in which they are common members.

**How Everyday People Learn**

People in these neighborhoods don’t typically read *The Nation* or *New York* *Times*.  They tend to get their information about politics from TV, respected local leaders with whom they have personal relationships, and conversations at local gathering places – like barber and beauty shops, bus stops, work and churches.  They sift this information through their own personal, direct experiences and come to conclusions about how they will vote.  The religious right understands this.  The black minister whose question about gay marriage is the taking off point for this discussion probably knows white-middle-class evangelical ministers; he’s probably gone to a Bible institute, college or seminary that is endowed with white evangelical funds; he may have some mostly-white tutors from a suburban middle-class evangelical church coming to his church to volunteer in an after-school program for inner-city kids; he gets donations from these churches for his church food pantry and clothes closet; his way may have been paid to a national gathering of a theologically conservative men’s organization called Promise Keepers; the people with whom he’s talking in the course of these relationships make points like these:

- black public schools are a failure because of the bureaucracy and/or the teachers union; what you need are vouchers or charter schools so that you and your parents can have a voice in your kids’ education;

- you’re worried about gangs, teen-pregnancy, kids dropping out; what the country needs is a strong religious morality that’s part of our kids’ education and you’re not going to get that with secular humanists running the government and the schools.

At the same time, he’s hearing from black separatists and nationalists that “you can’t trust the white man, so we need to develop our own economy and our own institutions.”  While their point is different from the white religious right, the two can easily co-exist and even be mutually supportive.

Our minister is also hearing from leaders of most of the “community-based nonprofits” in his neighborhood, and from black politicians, that, “we have to run our own organizations.” So-called “community control” means to him that blacks are or should be running the public and nonprofit organizations in his community, and making policy for them.  Never mind the fact that legislation, courts and state or federal public bureaucracies define the parameters of what the “community controlled” organizations can do, and funds from state and federal government, corporations and foundations – all “white run” – provide the resources. There is a strata of professionals, particularly in the black community but in other communities of color and low-income communities as well, who benefit from the present organization of things.  Saul Alinsky called it “welfare colonialism.”  Other radicals have called it “neo-imperialism.”

Inroads are being made in people-of-color communities by the new conservatives.  If not understood and undercut now, the result will be confusion, withdrawal and more support for conservatives from constituencies that can’t serve their interests by withdrawing from public life and won’t solve their major problems by voting for conservatives.

**“White” Responses**

There are three major responses from whites who care about racial and economic justice.  They aren’t sufficient to meet the challenge.

The first response has been to walk away from deeper relationships with blacks and other people of color, but act “in their interests.”  (That’s the response that is most characteristic of white “progressives” in the Democratic Party).  For candidates and big issue campaigns (initiatives, legislation), so the reasoning goes, form election-time coalitions with people of color organizations because they know that without state and national legislation and appropriations, the big problems of their communities can’t be solved.  Return to people of color constituencies when you need their votes or bodies or money, but don’t engage with them in a continuing conversation about policy, strategy and tactics, and don’t develop other multi-ethnic/racial vehicles for relationships of mutual trust and respect, because in the present era of race relations, it can’t be done.

This strategy reflects the reality that the big issues of full employment in good jobs at decent pay; universal health care; quality schools; affordable, decent, safe and sanitary housing; and adequate public transportation can’t be resolved without multi-ethnic/racial/etc. coalitions that work at the national level.  This strategy’s main drawback is that it won’t get you where you want to go.  A “multi-multi-multi” (class, race, gender, age, etc) leadership has to define the issues, solutions and strategies if the broad-based power is going to be built to fight for victories in the big arenas of power.  One group can’t say to another, “we’ve got the program for you.”  It won’t work.  And it isn’t small “d” democratic.

A second response says whites should organize the white community against racism since that’s where the problem of racism lies.  There’s now a major anti-racism education thrust and an organizing approach called “leading with race.”  White activists participate in intensive educational experiences in which they acknowledge their privilege and work to free themselves of their racism.  Organizing in white communities has to explicitly address race “up front.”

This strategy is also grounded in some basic truths.  Whites do need to acknowledge their racism.  Anti-racism education is essential if whites are to understand how the power of racist appeals has been used to get them to act against their own best interests and values. Furthermore, whites probably have to be the initial organizers in overwhelmingly white constituencies – though there are examples of black, Asian and Latino organizers working in white” communities that make clear there’s no iron rule.

The problem is that if these whites-organized-by-whites aren’t soon in relationships with racial and ethnic minorities, they may end up using their organizations to maintain white privilege.  Or, if the organization is explicitly “anti-racist” at the front end, it simply won’t be able to become a majority organization in its constituency.  You can’t successfully organize one powerless group of people – poor and/or working class whites – around another powerless people’s principal issue.  Anti-racism education is a point along the road to mutual respect, but as a practical matter it can’t be where you start.  You can’t organize whites against white racism any more than you can organize blacks around issues facing Native Americans on reservations or issues facing Latinos who want bi-lingual education for their kids, or Koreans in Japan who suffer horrible discrimination.

The third response has been to organize whites, blacks, and other minorities in common organizations, develop relations of mutual respect and trust, but agree to disagree on such issues as abortion, gay marriage, school vouchers, gun control, immigrant rights, affirmative action and other “divisive” or potentially divisive issues that could tear the organization apart if one or the other side prevailed in an internal vote.  Work together on the things on which everyone can agree; through this work, relationships of trust and mutual respect will develop; as people experience “The Other” as real human beings, stereotypes and prejudice will diminish because of the cognitive dissonance between actual experience with people and historic prejudices against them.

The reason to carefully choose non-divisive issues in the beginning of an organizing process is to persuade everyone to work together under the same tent.   Successful organizations can be built, and have been built, on the premise “agree to disagree on the divisive issues.”  Relationships of mutual confidence, respect and trust can be forged in these organizations.

However, these organizations won’t be able to build the power needed to address the big issues identified above if the people in them don’t at some point examine the wedge issues openly and earnestly.

**What Next?**

There are thus elements of truth and untruth in each of the major responses now extant in U.S. liberal, progressive, labor, identity, interest and community organizing circles, but so are there fundamental shortcomings in the face of relentless efforts on the part of conservatives to divide and conquer us.

A “multi-multi-multi” leadership must define shared values and the big issues, solutions and strategies to build broad-based power to fight effectively in the big arenas of power.  In the course of work in a common organization, trusting relationships develop.  People tell each other their stories of hope and pain.  Then it is time to explore those things that are divisive.  When a clergyman says that “gay marriage” is his litmus test issue he is ignoring a lot of Scripture.  But clergy and others who aren’t in a relationship with him forfeit the opportunity to make the point.  Relationships, acknowledged, shared deep values, and common exploration of theology are pre-requisites to get into the difficult conversation.

These concerns aren’t, of course, limited to black Pentecostals.  They apply to Catholics and others for whom the “social issues” are important.

We may find ways to work on at least aspects of the wedge issues – teen-pregnancy counseling, funding for AIDS clinics, equal benefits for gay couples might be examples.  Or we may discover that the supposed wedge issues are not so “wedgy” after all after a reflective, open, earnest, honest, difficult, conversation.  The Bible, our black minister might conclude, has a lot more to say about economic and political justice and other aspects of personal morality than it does about homosexuals and their sexuality.  Although the wedge issues may remain important to some members of the organization, their litmus test character may diminish or disappear.  In the course of the conversation, we can expose to ourselves and to others the truth – which is that conservatism typically tosses the crumbs of a few symbolic issues to poor, oppressed and marginalized people to fight over, while making sure that the big issues get decided upon (or not decided upon) in ways that comfort the comfortable.

We can’t know at the beginning of the exploration of wedge issues what the outcome of those conversations will be.  There is risk involved because a conversation could blow up.  But if the conversations aren’t started, we can be sure that, at every election, those who benefit from “divide and conquer” will figure out how to develop and use wedges to break our relationships apart, or at least keep them sufficiently superficial so they don’t hurt the election chances of right-wing politicians or disturb the agenda of corporate multinationals and the wealthy who are now defining much of the character of the world in which we live.

Further, we should take a commitment to a “consistent life ethic” seriously.  People who hold this perspective oppose capital punishment and war – either as pacifists or as people who demand a strong “just war” case.  They also oppose abortion and euthanasia.  They are serious people with whom progressives have lots in common.  They should not be dismissed.

We need to talk about this.  We need to work toward resolving it.  George W. Bush won’t again run for President, but these issues will be exploited again.  If “progressives” of all ages, genders, races and ethnicities, and other identities can’t shape the Democratic Party so that it really becomes a party of the people and a majority party, it will in part be because these issues aren’t resolved.  If we don’t begin to talk about these things, who will?  If not now, when?

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