

## **PUBLIC PULPITS**

### **Methodists and Mainline Churches in the Moral Argument of Public Life**

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God goes to Washington from the religious mainline, not only the right, and inspires varied voices of the faithful across partisan lines, as they argue over how Americans ought to live out their faith in public to save their souls and their society. Drawn from a decade's fieldwork and interviewing in church offices on Capitol Hill, with religious lobbyists in the corridors of Congress and activists in the corridors of denominational conferences across the country, this intimate inquiry is filled with the firsthand social experience and moral insight of national church leaders, and their parachurch allies and adversaries, inside the Beltway and beyond. It shows how changing religious and political institutions think through us, and reshape the ways we make moral sense--in principle and practice, story and metaphor, prayer and law--of good character, community, and the good of government. It weighs the promise of mainline Protestant efforts to enlarge civic conscience and cast clearer light on the commonweal for Americans wrestling with their faith in God, and their hope in the future, amid diverging fortunes and diminished dreams of progress for all of a people of plenty. It probes politically contested construal of their prayers for peace and justice, in a world grown smaller than ever before, touched by terror, and left less safe and sure.

*Public Pulpits* begins by charting the back-and-forth course of arguments over going to war in Iraq, and doing good at home through faith-based initiatives, pressed by the mainline churches in critical give and take with the Administration of President George W. Bush. It shows how such arguments draw on diverse public theologies that contend over the meaning of civil religion in America, even as they derive the coherence of their disagreement from deeper continuities of cultural conflict in our morally ambiguous polity as a liberal democracy that is also a civic republic.

Reaching into the heart of denominational strife in United Methodism, the book analyzes the "prophetic witness" of the General Board of Church and Society at moral and ecclesial odds with the Evangelical crusade for "scriptural renewal" led by the Good News Movement. Then it uncovers how the Institute on Religion and Democracy combined a fluent religious lobby with a potent political-action committee to catalyze an alliance of Evangelical renewal groups and Neo-Conservative political forces to combat the mainline churches in culture wars rooted in cold-war infighting waged among radical labor factions, the AFL-CIO, and both major political parties.

The study expands its focus to explore struggles across the mainline churches in Washington to balance "witnessing and winning" by unifying multi-issue moral advocacy and education with political mobilization and community organizing. It traces their collaboration in the powerful rise and painful fall of Interfaith Impact for Justice and Peace, and their determined yet frustrating campaign for universal healthcare reform. It exposes the dynamics of their cooperation and clashing with the National Council of Churches in its efforts to come to the aid of the Clinton White House and counter-punch the religious right in the 1990s, then remake the religious center in a shifting ecology of key issues, Presidential policies, and values-voter politics since 2000.