

Transcript: Belief and Politics --Rethinking the Role of the Faith Community
 New Strategies for Southern Progress conference
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Speakers:

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 The Hon. David Price, U.S. Representative from North Carolina
 The Rev. James Evans, Auburn First Baptist Church and columnist for the
 Birmingham Post-Herald (AL)
 The Rev. Dr. Daphne Wiggins, Professor, Duke University; Assistant Pastor,
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 The Rev. Maria Teresa Palmer, Iglesia Unida De Christo; member, N.C. Board of
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MS. MELODY BARNES: Well, it's been foreshadowed and hinted at and alluded to and now we get to talk about religion for an hour and a half. My name is Melody Barnes. I am a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. I'm also the director of our faith and public progressive policy program at the Center. And I'd like to say just for a moment about that, that we started this program before religion became cool. And by that I mean before it was on the front pages of the Washington Post and LA Times and New York Times, we started having this conversation at the Center because we firmly and sincerely believe that having a conversation about faith and values is intrinsic to who we are as progressives. And we also believe that we have ceded too much ground for far too long on this issue, and it's important to bring it back into the center of our

conversation.

So I say to those people who believe that progressives can't or are uncomfortable with having a conversation about religion, that we're more than prepared to do that. So let's bring on the conversation. Let it begin.

I grew up in the South and I was raised in the Baptist church there. And in my hometown of Richmond, Virginia -- and I know some of you from Alabama and Mississippi say, oh, that's not really the South, but if you've ever been to Richmond and taken a drive down Monument Avenue, you know it is the South. And in my hometown, probably like in your hometowns and your cities, the church is a constant. It is a hub of the community. And it's not just the one hour or two hours or three hours that you may spend in the pews

on Sunday. It's also the place where your friends are. It's the place where you go to choir rehearsal, to see your girlfriend. It's a place where you go to the missionary meeting or the deacons meeting and the place where you get to know your community and to do the good work of your community.

And I would suspect for you, as it is for me, it's also the place where your social consciousness was born, in the scripture and in the sermons that you heard. And yet there are those who would argue that because religion is so important to Southerners that the national and southern progressive movements cannot peacefully coexist. The causes championed by the national progressive movement, even the term progressive, conflict with religious beliefs in the South. I don't believe that.

But today's panel will provide us with an opportunity to talk about that and to debate that, and certainly some of the issues that I think have been simmering just beneath the surface in the conversation that's taken place thus far at the conference.

This panel will focus on how Southern culture and religion can serve to buttress core progressive beliefs and values and policies. Congressman Price, Reverend Evans, Reverend Palmer and Reverend Wiggins and I will discuss the role of religion and faith, the role that it plays in motivating and sustaining our progressive battles and values.

We'll also explore whether progressive advocacy on religious issues clashes

with religious and cultural values prevalent in the South. And the way we're going to do this. We're not going to have, instead of having one presentation after another, I'm going to ask questions of the panel, and we're going to actually have a conversation around these issues. And then I'm going to provide hopefully a good chunk of time for you to ask questions of the panel as well so that we can all engage in the conversation and deal with some of the things that I think we've been anxious to talk about all day.

So I want to start off by quickly introducing the panel, and I'm going to move from my immediate right down to the end of the table.

Serving Baptist churches in Alabama for over 25 years, Reverend James Evans is currently a pastor of Auburn First Baptist Church. He's a graduate of Mobile College, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Beeson Divinity School. Reverend Evans also writes Faith Matters, a weekly religion column for the Birmingham Post Herald.

Congressman David Price proves that religion and politics do, in fact, mix. He's a graduate of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and holds a bachelor of divinity degree and a Ph.D. from Yale University. Congressman Price is about to celebrate 20 years of service in the House of Representatives where he represents the 4th District, right where we are today. And --

(Applause.)

And he also sits on the House Appropriations Committee.

An expert on the role of African American women and the role that they play in the church and author of the acclaimed book *Righteous Content*, Reverend Dr. Jackie Wiggins is the associate pastor/coordinator of congregational ministries at Union Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina. Formerly an assistant professor of congregational studies at Duke Divinity School, Dr. Wiggins has taught classes on the black church in America and social context of the black church. Dr. Wiggins is a graduate of Eastern College, Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Emory University.

And last but not least, we have Reverend Maria Theresa Palmer. She's the founding pastor of Iglesia Unidos Cristo in Orange County, an advocate for the Latino community, and a member of the North Carolina State Board of Education. Reverend Palmer is a graduate of Jacksonville State University in Alabama, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at the University of Louisville and the University of North Carolina where she completed her doctoral degree in education.

So I'd like you-all to welcome our panel and then we'll get started.

(Applause.)

MS. BARNES: Well, the first question that I'd like to pose to the members of the panel is this. And I just want to put this on the table so we can address it from the beginning.

The conventional wisdom is that progressives, quote, found religion last fall. And some argue that this is a ploy to find supporters in the South, not a decision that reflects our understanding of the importance of faith and values to Americans that live in this region.

Now, each of you is deeply rooted in the South, pastors of churches here, some of you were born and raised here, and you're also students of religion and deeply embedded in your faith communities.

Based on your understanding of history and your personal experiences, how do you respond to that assessment of the progressive movement and its relationship to the faith community? And I'd like to start with Congressman Price on that question, given your 20 years in Washington and the Congress and also your degree in divinity from Yale University and your understanding of religion and its importance in the country and the region.

REPRESENTATIVE PRICE:

Thank you. It is a good question to start with, and probably my main credential is neither of those that you mentioned, but the fact that it was only a few yards from here as a student that I had not only my first interfaith experience, but also my first engagement where my religion proved relevant to the social and political sphere.

I, and many like me in my generation, came to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill as the sit-ins swept across the South, and that

influenced for many of us not only the kind of education we received here and kind of the discussion that went on within the classroom, but even more importantly the kind of experience we had outside the classroom. In my case it was directly related to my religious background.

I was not a Baptist, I admit, but I was president of the Baptist student union here. And in that capacity, I became involved in this movement. And every religious group virtually on campus did. It was quite an experience, and it was thoroughly interfaced, and it was something that for many of us represented a very profound change in the way we thought about religion and thought about politics and thought about our place in society. A formative experience.

And, of course, what was going on in many cases was that a particularly Southern, a particularly Protestant often, brand of individualism including a religious perspective that focused on individual salvation almost to the exclusivity of everything else, a religious ethic that focused on upright personal behavior almost to the exclusion of everything else, that was being challenged and that was being transformed.

And I want to move quickly here, but I want to take just a minute to recall a story from my ethics professor in seminary. And why do I remember it 40 years later? I remember it because it related so profoundly to that experience. It was a gloss on the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. It was a thought experiment.

Let's think about that Good Samaritan coming along the road and finding this poor fellow who'd been beaten up and left for dead, and the Good Samaritan, full of compassion and charity, reached out and ministered to this man. But let's think about what if this happened again the next day. What if, once again, the Good Samaritan was going down that road and once again there was this guy who had been beaten up, and he ministered to him and reached out to him -- in this kind of human examination. And let's assume then a third day it happened, and once again the Good Samaritan goes down the road and ministers to his neighbor.

How long do you think it would be, my ethics professor said, before that Good Samaritan figured out, gee, somebody ought to patrol this road. You get the point instantly, right? I mean -- and it was a lesson that we learned with great difficulty in the South and, of course, haven't totally learned yet. We all knew in those days people who were as loving and kind and generous as they could possibly be in their personal relationships, but who somehow acquiesced reinforced social practices, institutions that denied others their humanity. There was a profound disconnect.

We discovered the Hebrew prophets in those days. I grew up thinking a prophet was someone who foretold the future. We learned better. We learned that the Hebrew prophets were about that kind of message of social justice and righteousness flowing down like waters. It was a profound change among many in the

Southern church and among many who had had the kind of rearing that I had had.

Now, in those days the Protestant Church especially was often indicted for its passivity. Martin Luther King, in a Letter from a Birmingham Jail and many, many other sermons and writings, of course, did that very powerfully but many, many did it. The churches that simply retained that individualistic inward focus and never understood this other dimension or penetrated this other dimension of the faith.

Well, I think it's fair to say that that really isn't any longer our problem. Many of these churches, many of the very churches that were indicted then have indeed become political. But not exactly in the service of an agenda that we had in mind. That agenda though, interestingly, still so often has an individualistic focus.

The agenda of the conservative churches, not the churches but the religious right, often is still focused on proscribed behaviors and on whether government or how government can be used to either proscribe behaviors or to reward rectitude. And they sometimes in fact seem pretty insensitive to questions of any limits as to when the proscription of behavior ought to be proscribed in civil law.

So I would say that it's an ironic situation that we find ourselves in. For many of us in this region, our involvement in politics, not only the motivation to be involved wherever we are and however we can be, but

also the agenda we bring to politics has a lot to do, has everything to do with our faith background and the way we were reared and the way we matured in the faith, one would hope.

And so I believe that we have as strong a credentials as the politically active people anywhere in the country to take this on, to make this witness, to take on a broader agenda beyond individual behaviors. Although whatever the issue is that arises out of faith traditions, we ought to be prepared to discuss it and take it on. And in fact, we should feel compelled to do so because so often the kind of things that we aspire to in our community and our society do require the instruments of government and public policy.

They're not going to be -- they're not going to be achieved through the free enterprise of individual acts of charity alone. So what should that agenda look like? I hope we can talk about that today. What should that broad agenda in its fullest extent look like? And then of course, we also do need to talk about the ground rules. What -- how can we seek to be inclusive in the way we do this rather than exclusive, and in a pluralist society, to find common ground.

Our happy experience in the Civil Rights movement, and I think many other times, was that that common ground is there to be found. But we surely need to feel some push toward trying to -- one of the ground rules -- and by ground rules I don't mean the conditions imposed by secular society, although there are some of those. I mean ground rules imposed by our

religious traditions themselves.

After all, the establishment clause of the Constitution is not a secular imposition. The establishment clause of the Constitution came from people concerned, first of all, about religious liberty. Religious faithfulness. That's where it comes from historically. And the counsel of humility that comes most eloquently expressed in Lincoln's second inaugural about, you know, leaving ultimate judgment to God alone and not identifying your own power, your own probing of God's will. That admonition to religious humility, that's not a secular tradition. That comes from the deepest insight of our faith, which has to do with human sinfulness and God's transcendence. That's where the counsel of humility comes from.

So there are many riches to be mined here, I think, in terms of the way we apply our faith to politics and also the ground rules that we observe in doing so. So I look forward to this discussion.

MS. BARNES: Thank you. Dr. Wiggins, you are, as we were just recently discussing, not born in the South, but obviously you're here now pastoring to a large African American community. You've done extensive work around the black church and the role of African American women in the church.

Based on your experiences and your observations and your work with your congregation, would you have any thoughts with regard to the question?

REVEREND WIGGINS: I would

just like to add I guess two comments -- and I am a Northern transplant. I have no bones with saying I'm born and raised in New Jersey. Did my first two degrees in Pennsylvania. And then after I served as a chaplain of a school in Rhode Island. When I decided I was going to study religion, American religion more formally, and since I wanted to look at the black church, one of the things that struck me, I said, I need to go to a Ph.D. program in the South.

If they're going to talk about black -- and you want to understand religion, you have to go to, as they say, the Bible belt. And so I said, well, let me see. Now, I'm not sure, once I got to Emory, I was in the Bible belt. I think I felt it when I went to Fort Worth, Texas. But since Atlanta does have so many transplants like myself, in some ways the incubation -- incubator was not quite if I had landed somewhere in Arkansas or some other places I could name. But let me name a couple of our -- just a couple things come to my mind.

This link between religion and the South and a progressive agenda. I think that it would be too neat a story to say that people of faith in the South had had as much investment in a progressive agenda as they have had in conservative values. I know that we can point to the intersection of Catholic-Jew-Protestant-black church tradition, it all came together in the Civil Rights movement. And we use that as a benchmark of perhaps the heyday of when we feel really good about naming the name of God and being people of faith and being inclusive and everybody's supposedly

being courageous.

In that same period you had the emergence and increase of segregated Christian day schools. And those are people of faith too, who had a particular agenda of saying, we're not with this progressive movement, we're not going to have desegregated schools. There was redlining, there was attempts for you to not be able to be in the same corporate structure. There were still so much that I think defined the South, even when the signs were gone, to still say that -- that I think to say that in some ways the South is overwhelmingly identified with progressive agenda is really kind of a misreading of the whole terrain.

Now -- and some of you are much older than me, and if you're born-and-bred Southerners, you can go back and look in your own communities and say, what were the reactionaries that same people of faith that you know were saying, my faith influenced me to go in this direction versus in the direction of supporting an affirmative action program -- policy, looking at Head Start programs and all these other kind of things that we know we do want to associate with the progressive agenda.

So I put that out there to kind of perhaps -- again, I'm a Northerner looking in -- saying in some ways, maybe you know, ought not pat ourselves on the back too fast, too firmly.

The second thing I want to say is that it seems to me that if we're talking about what's happening today, currently we have historical memory,

a lapse of -- a lapse of historical memory such that the good work that was done is not being repeated in our pulpits. Its not being put in our Sunday school literature.

Those persons who yet live in our communities who have the rich history of what it was like for their faith, many of them probably you, to say, my faith informed me to go stand in this camp versus the other camp, you don't tell those stories. And so we have another whole generation of people who just think that's past. And so the kind of media portrayal or political portrayal that, things are fine, that we really have a few cultural battles but everything as we come down to class divides versus some other types of divides and problems in this nation becomes pervasive.

So I think that the distortion is not told about when in fact progressives did tend to link up with the best of people of faith in those communities emerging, and that's a lapse on our part to perhaps not re-tell the story because once you in fact shift out of the primary community to being a religious community, being a political advocate or lobbyist, now that you have all these constraints about how, in fact, I think you articulate the message so that you can speak very broadly to a wider constituency than those you serve. So I'll just pause at that point to put those two points out.

MS. BARNES: I don't know if Reverend Palmer or Reverend Evans have any comments you want to make right now. I mean one thing -- okay. Reverend Palmer, go ahead.

REVEREND PALMER: Let me go so I can put in my disclaimer and then we can close the question with some intelligent words. A year ago -- last year's Easter, after the service, one of my parishioners asked me what the significance was that I was wearing one blue shoe and one black shoe. Was there some religious meaning? I said, no, it was the sunrise service and I was not awake. So I wanted to let you know, there's no political significance to my shirt and the fact that I'm not wearing my suit except that I'm principal of a school in Greensboro. And we had some discipline issues and I couldn't leave the school in time to go home and get nicely with this crowd. So I just wanted to let you know -- and today's spirit day so I had to wear my T-shirt. So that's why I came straight here. So I wanted to let you know that I'm not trying to make any kind of a political point. So that's the only thing.

I did want to say that I'm from way, way, way in the South, South America. I'm a nationalized -- naturalized citizen and I have lived in the United States longer than I have lived anywhere else in the world. I've lived in four different countries. But I came to the United States as an exchange student in 1978, and I'm still asked every year by people at every level of society, where is your home? And I say Chapel Hill, you know. Oh, where's that? In North Carolina. Oh, that Chapel Hill. So that is -- perhaps I bring a different perspective in that sense.

What made me integrate to the South

and feel part of the South was my becoming a Baptist in 1979. And I -- you could say converted. I'd rather say that I found a church home, a spiritual home. I'm now -- I'm an ordained pastor in the United Church of Christ. I'm a refuge of the right wing takeover of my denomination which gave me a home in an adopted country, I like to call it.

I was welcomed at the College Baptist Student Union. I found forward thinking, progressive, wonderful people who wanted to make a better world. Who had, I would say, an agenda, an agenda of bringing students and helping them see the connection between their faith and what they were learning in school to motivate them to become faithful laypeople and to make a positive impact in their communities. And I thought that was what religion should be. And I enthusiastically started attending Bible studies and really developed a deep appreciation for people of faith who took their faith seriously.

I joined a small country church that where people who didn't have a clue where I was from, what my funny accent was, we had something in common. We were trying to interpret, faithfully interpret the Scriptures. And I would say that that helped me become a Southerner in the best sense of the word. A person -- because they taught and preached those basic Baptist principles of pursuit of the believer and each person having free -- the freedom to be all he or she could be.

Now, of course, at one wonderful

college gathering at Ridgecrest, I answered the call to preach. That didn't set very well with the authorities that had organized that meeting. And they almost fired my campus minister because obviously, you know, he had misled me and maybe what I needed to find was a good Christian husband.

So what I'm saying -- they have always been wonderful people and they were all -- I found them all over Alabama, where I went to college, and Kentucky and in North Carolina. People who were pushing the edge but were providing the denomination leadership. And that is not there. And I hope, at least not in the largest organized denomination that was there 26 years ago when I arrived, and I don't -- I know that we're still studying how it happened, and what happened and what -- it was for me, it was like an earthquake.

When my husband and I went to seminary, we were preparing to do mission work and we were turned down. I never did graduate from Southern. I graduated from the University of Louisville. But I shifted from a religious vocational career to going back to teaching because we were told we were too liberal to be appointed by a mission board. We were told we couldn't do theology or politics in the mission field. I said, how do you not do theology? So that, you know -- so that has happened in my -- in my life and that is a very painful experience of many people like me.

And we have lost those leaders across the South who, with the

denominational blessing, perhaps sometimes pushing and risking their careers, to encourage people like me who were, you know, out there on the edge. They're another denomination, so they're in other careers. I have former friends from seminary selling insurance because -- because of that.

So I don't know -- the question was the link, you know, the progressive movement and faith communities. I know that there were a lot of people of faith who were against those progressive ideals, but there were also people who continued to work. On my first job in the United States was as a summer missionary providing help to migrant farm workers. And my father said to me, you mean there are people paying you to help people out there, you know? What is this about?

And I said, they feel called by their -- by their understanding of the Scripture to provide a ministry to the poor people in their state. And they have given money so that I can go and be in the fields. Of course, I didn't tell my dad, they want me just to save their souls, you know, but that's what I'm talking about. There was that -- that room, that wiggle room, for you to be an evangelist and an activist and a social worker. And now I feel that there are very few places, very few places.

The most encouraging thing that has happened to me lately is I was involved, thanks to the North Carolina Council of Churches, North Carolina Day at the National Cathedral. It was a wonderful, powerful experience. It was

Episcopalian Bishop said to me, one of the bishops who was there officiating said to me, I have a vision that in 30 or 40 years when the next Bishop is appointed to replace me, I think he wants to stay in the job for a long time -- said that when that person is installed that she will say I'm a fourth generation Hispanic Episcopalian from North Carolina.

MS. BARNES: Reverend Palmer --

REVEREND PALMER: I'm sorry.

MS. BARNES: I want you to hold on to some of that in terms of the next question I'm going to go to, but I'm going to let Reverend Evans respond to the first question as well.

REVEREND EVANS: Let me begin by saying how privileged I feel to be here in a room full of such bright people talking about such important things, and I appreciate the invitation so much to be a part of this. I'm not from as far south as Reverend Palmer, but I'm about as far South as you can get in the Old South.

And I've gone through the full cycle of that, having been raised and cultured with all of those Southern ideas and habits and ways of thinking, good and bad. And went through a period where I wanted to get rid of those things and get as far away from them as I could, and then finally coming full circle, back to embracing what I think is an appropriate and healthy and maybe even helpful Southern way that's both faithful and having some relevance in the world, I think.

So I understand the South. I'm a part of it. It's a part of me. The question was, have progressives found religion since last fall? And the answer is a resounding yes. They have found it the way a crash dummy finds a windshield on a car. And I understand the tone of the question is, are we going to posture and take religion as a way of regaining some foothold in politics?

And I have to confess to you that I've bumped into some of that. I have some friends who are seeking political office, who are -- who are seeking to keep political office, who have called me recently and said, listen, Jim, let me run these religious phrases by you and see if they sound sincere.

I think it's real important, before we do that, that we understand what it is that is being presented from the right as religion. Before we embrace it and adopt it as a tactic or a method, we may want to take a good look at it and see if there's really any substance to it.

The religious right, as we're experiencing it now, is the result of what I believe is several just key moments in history. The first being the 1925 Scopes Trial, where they won the trial, but they lost the cultural battle, and were so embarrassed by what happened that fundamentalism literally went underground.

I think the next historical touched on that's important is the implementation of the New Deal, which was in one sense a failure of charity. Not because there was a lack of compassion, you know, by those who were doing charity. It was just that the problems

were too big for them. It was too big for the churches. It was too big for these charitable groups and private foundations to take care of. And government had to step in and literally save a whole generation of people. But the church sensed that as failure, not being able to carry their load, and I think they went even further underground.

And the next one is the Civil Rights movement. The Civil Rights movement is that moment when white evangelicals were confronted with the fact that they were wrong. I don't know what Dr. King thought about his work, the success of it, before he died, but he did accomplish one of the things that he set out to do. By means of nonviolent and noncooperation, he did reveal to us just how ugly and evil segregation was, and we got it.

Now, we may not have achieved the other part of his dream, which is that we would repent from it, but at least we see it and we know that it's wrong. And those who fail to speak -- who fail to speak against it and those who spoke for it in that tradition know they were wrong. Know they were wrong.

And in the last one -- and you shouldn't laugh at this because I'm deadly serious -- the last one is the election of Jimmy Carter. Oh, go ahead and laugh. Because what Carter did was pull evangelicals out of their hole back into the political process. The language that he used at being born again, very sincere. I believe Jimmy Carter. I believe everything he says. When he talks about his faith,

it's genuine, it's warm, it's the real thing.

And those evangelicals who were hiding in their holes because they had been beaten by science and beaten and defeated by economics and beaten and defeated by Civil Rights saw in him a chance to reassert themselves. And they came out in droves and they elected him. Hungry for some decency -- you know the story. But they didn't understand Jimmy Carter. They didn't understand the kind of Baptist and politician he was. He turned out to be one of them liberals.

But it was too late. They were alive. They were back in the light. They were active. And people like Jerry Falwell and people like James Dobson saw that -- and people like Paul Wyatt saw that, saw the potential and galvanized that group into a political force that elected Ronald Reagan and has had a series of political successes right down to the most recent.

But what they're doing is not trying to advance their faith. They're trying to reclaim the ground they've lost. They're going back after every battle that they lost historically and trying to win it. Evolution is back in so many states. Civil Rights has gone, but I want to tell you something. This battle over gay marriage is a way for white Christians to say, by golly, I'm right about this and I know I'm right.

So before we jump on this bandwagon and adopt their methods and techniques and to cloak the things we do politically in the garb of faith, we might want to think about where

all this is really coming from and give some thought to what we really want to do as a people of faith.

MS. BARNES: Thank you. We've talked a little bit about kind of the macro issues here and also religion and the way that it ties in to what's going on as a policy and political matter. But I want -- and I want to go back to that. And the last question that I ask before we go to Q and A, but I want to take a second to talk now about drilling down to the grass roots level and what's going on on the ground, and the role of religion and the role progressives can play within the faith community to do important work on the ground.

And I think probably many people here have experienced that churches and temples and mosques play an incredibly important role in changing the communities in which they're located and affecting the lives of the people who live in those communities. And we often hear about the megachurches, churches of 5,000, 6,000, 7,000 people, but we also know there are churches of 75, 100, 200 people that make incredible differences as well. And they're providing child care and they're providing credit unions and after-school care and a whole range of services for people in their communities.

And I want to talk some about what those houses of worship are doing and how and should we as progressives engage in that? I mean how can we work together to try and improve the lives of people in their communities? And I know some of

you are already engaged in that kind of work. I know Reverend Palmer as an advocator and educator, you're doing that. And certainly Dr. Wiggins, in the work that you do, your church and congregational services as well, that you're engaged in thinking about that kind of work. And I would like to start with you all in thinking about how we should find this intersection between the faith community and the progressive movement and in making real difference at home on the ground.

REVEREND WIGGINS: Let me give you a little bit of a context of where I minister. Some of these comments will flow out of that. The term megachurch was used. In Durham, my church is considered a megachurch. Now, having said that, I think that there's a diversity of churches falling under that rubric. It's a pretty relevant rubric even though we're just using sizes. One of those indicators we know there were congregations of 3,000 and 4,000 back in 1920.

So when we talk about megachurch, I think the first thing to be clear, you can talk about the service delivering is that they're on a continuum. You know, some of the popular ones you can name, you know, Crenshaw Christian Center, World Changers, Trinity United Church of Christ, you know, you can put the Union Brentwood Baptist in Texas. I know there are people in this room could do the list much better than I can. Perhaps some of you are in churches that have numerically 3,000 or more people. Some people use 3,000 as kind of a benchmark, some more than

that.

But all of those churches are not the same in the internal culture and the theology that is put forth even in the services that are delivered. So a couple of things I want to throw out about thinking about megachurches is first, again, there is a diversity of them. Size is one of the characteristics. But also I want you to think about there is also the multiplicity of affiliative groups and initiatives. So if we're going to talk about a megachurch, we're just not talking about people in the church that go to the same church like they used to do back in 1930. We're talking about there's been a radical shift in how they deliver services and being intentional about putting people in small groups, about providing people, sometimes called it a shopping mall offerings, both educational classes as well as things that would help running their economics groups.

You know, you have megachurches that, as you know, have full gyms. You know, I was down in one in Charlotte. You know, they've got a state-of-the-art facility down there. You might want to go to Waccamore (ph sp), go down there and get a membership and go there and it's open to the community. So it's providing a service to the community. Was there a Y? Did they need that new gym? Who knows. But the point is there is one there now. So the multiplicity of affiliative groups and initiatives which have -- again, provide for both the internal community but also have benefits to the larger citizenry as well.

Another characteristic of a megachurch is that normally they're multistaffed. It's kind of hard to have 3,000 folks and one person trying to do all the work. And that might be from five to 25 or more on a staff. I can come back to that. But that's an important piece to think about when you think about, how do you get a progressive political agenda on the agenda of a church? If you have a multistaff. Who has the -- who's the gatekeeper, who makes the decision about what literature circulates in that church? What gets up on a bulletin board? What gets into a sermon? Can you have a class about gay rights or not? Can you have a class that really says, okay, we're hearing all this language about put the family first. We're going to talk about what we mean by putting the family first, or at least even critique the literature that other people or other languages are happening in the political arena.

But that staffing issue oftentimes is something that I think, from a political management, you have to think about how do you negotiate that? Because I think traditionally people have to say, you just go to the senior pastor. You get the senior pastor, it's a done deal. And that's not necessarily true in a megachurch context.

The issue of -- and there's other things. I'll just throw out the cross-generational aspect, commuter church. You know, the congregations of megachurches tend not -- nobody's walking to church. You can't walk to World Changers. Cascade United Methodist Church would be

considered a megachurch, even in a traditional mainline denomination. It has 142 acres. It's getting ready to move to a new campus. And that's what they're calling it, a campus. You know, so -- now, I would not, again, put Cascade in the same place where I would put a Potters House, the (inaudible) Church, but it does affect how you do ministry.

The direct services, as you know, many churches provide have been soup kitchens, there has been clothing, there have been literacy programs. We still have afternoon tutorial program. We have seniors ministry. We let the building be used for community groups like the NAACP to be met. The Durham Canon meets at our church. There's a whole host of different things that the church does. I think that's a good work. It will continue to be done.

One of the questions about direct services that is impacting the church today is what to do with the grants and faith-based initiatives. How do progressives get in on that conversation and help the churches understand how they can make the best of that? There is a lot of fear about the government saying, you know, we have money available. We know the money's always been available, and certain groups have always gotten the money. But African American churches are saying, okay, well, here's a pool, do we tap into that pool?

And one of the things we have to negotiate as we think about the church becoming a provider for the government is the oversight and what

of its inroads and control issues that raises for the church. A church that sees itself as prophetic is going to be leery of taking money from a constituency that it needs to be able to critique and assess and analyze. And I think that there needs to be more conversation so that you can have greater arranging of services and help local clergy whether they're in a megachurch or in a smaller church. Because I grew up in a church like 400 or 500, and I even served on congregations that had probably 75 folks. But I do know the dynamics of being in small churches and everybody knows your name and we missed you on Sunday.

But even then again, there are some services that can be delivered, but we need to help I think congregations talk about how you might utilize that money, if in fact that's a good thing to do and how the money is used in a way that causes systemic change. One of the things I see churches having done is we do a lot of direct service. We're not having the larger question about the structural problems that keep causing the flow in. As I said, you might have a shelter for women who are being battered. Let's add a conversation about stopping the violence in the community so we don't have to keep putting Band-Aids on battered women and keep finding places for them to grow. And I think that's where a progressive agenda can link up with the church to help people move beyond, you know, we're going to provide a house where we can put that woman and her three children. But we need to talk about what is breeding violence, which means might get us to the gun issue, but it might

also get us to some gang violence and some other things as well.

So I think that a bridge needs to be built between those who are doing the work on the ground and how to help people extrapolate that to larger policy issues. That for me is not that people in the congregation don't want the government to change -- and I'm going to come back to that later -- but I do think -- let me put it this way.

One of the things I see in my church is, there's both the assumption that the pastor is the only one who articulates the vision and yet there's all these people who are doing work that the pastor doesn't know what they're doing. And as a social pastor -- I've been here almost two years now -- I'm continuing to finding out people who are going to board meetings, they don't run that by the pastor. They're going to the school board meeting. They're going to a meeting that's talking about lead paint. They're going to a meeting that's talking about how we're not going to have any more liquor stores put up in this neighborhood. They're not running that by the pastor.

And I think what's interesting to me is that it points to me in fact there are people who are in congregations who are moving in their faith with things that matter to people who have progressive politics, but that the public face is that all these faithful people are only about, you know, who's sleeping with who, and, you know, who drank what last night. You know, and so there's this disconnect between actually the people who populate whether it's a

megachurch or a smaller sized church.

And the work that we do does not come up to the public purview as it does the leadership of the pastor.

And that's not to say -- please, do not get me saying that charismatic leaders in African American churches are not still very powerful strong allies that you want. You clearly want that because a whole lot can change on the drop of a dime. If a pastor stands up and says, this is the direction we're going in, there's a whole lot of people who would just fall in line. But I'm saying that there are people who are already in that line without their pastor saying anything about it.

MS. BARNES: And I want to pick up on something that you said, Dr. Wiggins, to go to the last question. You were talking about this perception of what the religious community looks like and what people are concerned about. And I think this issue's been simmering through the conversation and bubbling up from time to time throughout the conference.

But there are people who would argue that, you know, religion in a broad progressive agenda are at odds with one another in the South and that when progressives say they're for separation of church and state, they're really code words for antireligion. You certainly hear the rhetoric out there, they're trying to take our religion away from us. And then there are the privacy issues around abortion and around gay rights and same sex marriage that are not just perceived as wedge issues that divide people in the South but that drive

progressives out of the South.

And I want to ask the question, is the national progressive agenda too hot to handle in the South or is it just being too narrowly defined by other people?

Or is something being imposed on the progressive agenda in terms of what it's about that isn't accurate, that it should be defined as a set of expansive rights issues in addition to a range of other progressive issues that we care about. And in fact, might I be having a Pollyanna moment when I embrace Hodding Carter's definition of progressivism last night when he talked about the expansion of rights, and whether or not that view is in fact true to the progressive agenda in the South and can we hold on to that and still build within the religious community in the South?

REVEREND PALMER: I think maybe some of you born-and-bred Southerners can say something to this, but I think the perception by many people in -- and my husband's the only one in his family who went to college. And when we go back to Alabama to visit, we visit with folks who are working in trailer plants. And we have many friends that would say, anything liberal is Yankees ideas, you know, coming down.

And they don't -- they do think that people of faith need to vote with a certain party because those are good moral values. So I know that my answer would be, yes, some of the progressive agenda is too hot, but let me qualify that. I would say that because I think of the language that's used and the way that it is marketed or sold or discussed, because it's not

discussed in terms of what I think should be the progressive agenda in the South. I mean my church was having a fight about the issue of same sex unions. Nobody knew anybody that had ever even attended or been near, you know -- but -- and I bet it's the same way in many African American congregations, why are we fighting about this? It's an imposed discussion.

What should -- what does my congregation care about immigration reform? About the minimum wage? About the living wage? About training -- about the Community Colleges and the fact that they are -- we don't have money or classes available. And we are not discussing those things. So if -- and I flinched yesterday when I heard the introduction to the whole discussion. And I don't know if any of you did, when -- I don't remember if it was Hodding Carter or somebody else who said -- in the same breath talked about, you know, 50 years ago or 30 years ago gays were in the closet, women in the kitchen, blacks on the back of the bus and Sunday was the Lord's day. And I went, oh, oh, you know, like we have come a long ways. Now Sundays are not the Lord's day. And I thought, you just -- you just go and say that in my brother-in-law's church and you've just lost the whole church. You just lost everybody's attention. And so you cannot go and say, you know, we've come a long ways because now religion is in its proper place.

We have made -- so I think we have -- we have -- the conversation has become hot because we don't know

how to talk to people who take their faith so seriously. And it's the main thing that they think they will have to account for at the end of their lives.

MS. BARNES: Congressman Price? Reverend Evans?

REPRESENTATIVE PRICE: Just one quick point about the faith-based initiatives that are just discussed now because I think it is relevant to this. It's been somewhat jarring to me to hear how people in my party and people of progressive persuasion have reacted to the idea that religious congregations and organizations ought to be more involved in the provision of social and community services.

Many people reacted extremely negatively and I would say in a somewhat knee-jerk fashion to that, ah, they're talking about mixing church and state, they're talking about transgressing the boundaries. And that seemed to be the focal point.

Now, admittedly, considering the source of the initiative, that reaction is perhaps understandable. But I tell you what I thought of when I heard about this. I thought, what's new about this? Because I remember when the United Church of Christ in this community and St. Joseph's AME Church over in Durham went after HUD 202 money and set up elderly rental housing on their -- on or near their church property. I remember working with volunteers from numerous congregations in delivering Meals on Wheels funded by the Older Americans Act. I remember helping engineer a partnership between

community development infrastructure funding and Habitat for Humanity working with congregations around the community to build housing.

I mean you get the point. This has gone on a long time. George Bush did not invent this idea. Now, how have we done it? We've done it with certain ground rules. By and large the religious congregations have formed 501(c)(3) organizations. It's a little complicated. They've gotten very good at it. And they apply for the funds in ways that observe the basic constitutional principles that you don't fund sectarian activity directly, you don't discriminate in whom you serve or whom you hire to deliver the service, et cetera. There are some ground rules, but there's nothing new about the notion of faith based initiatives. And in fact, I think our first reaction should have been, where have you been? Good idea. Good idea. Let's do this and let's do it right.

Now, the president, of course, we know didn't do it right. And for that reason the whole thing is mired in the courts. It's been partly -- the Congress has been partly by-passed with an Executive order. But the president set out to loosen that restriction on sectarian activity funding. He set out to remove completely the restriction on discrimination in hiring. And so there's some real problems with it that need to be worked out. But I guess all I'm saying is that the notion that the faith communities should be actively engaged in this whole range of things in the community is a good one, and our reactions should not just

be a kind of knee-jerk negative reaction.

On the contrary, I think there's a more welcoming way that at the same time says, let's do this right. Because, after all, the establishment clause of the Constitution is there for some very good reasons. Some reasons rooted in our religious experience. It's not the imposition of a secular society. So let's do this right, but above all, let's do it.

MS. BARNES: Reverend Evans.

REV. EVANS: On the first part of this question, whether or not the progressive agenda is too hot to handle in the South, I've actually seen a glimmer of hope here. In Fob James' last campaign for governor -- at least I hope it was his last campaign -- the topic of evolution came up. In his course of describing how he felt about it, he impersonated a monkey on the stage when he was speaking. Even people in Alabama have limits, and we decided not to reelect him. And at the same time that that was happening, Don Siegelmann, his opponent, was running on a New Southern Governor, a New South Governor platform of a lottery. And he thought that when we elected him, we elected him for the lottery. And we just really elected him because he wasn't Fob James. The margin that he won that election by is almost the exact same margin that he lost his lottery initiative by.

And I say that to say there is a fluid middle voting group in Alabama, but I think may be true somewhat

nationally, but the hard religious right is a pretty fixed group, fairly predictable, and we can sort of gauge their size. Now, I don't have any hard statistics on this but, of course, you realize 45 percent of all statistics are made up on the spot.

But folks have been tracking -- folks have been tracking Judge Moore -- do you know who Judge Moore is when I say that? Folks have been tracking Judge Moore for some time. Now, he scores consistently about 25 percent. He has about 25 percent, which means he would have to build some sort of coalition to get elected to anything. He would have to pull from those other sources. That's what happens in Alabama.

You've got this 25 percent core that's going to vote predictably hard right, but then you've got this fluid middle. They're not the undecided, they're the yet-to-be-decided. And those folks can be persuaded, and they can learn, and they can do some progressive things.

Let me give you an example, Siegelmann's lottery. When we were -- when we were at work trying to oppose gambling, oppose the lottery -- and I heard what Mac said today and I would love to see his studies. I'd like to show him some studies that I'm aware of. Thank God only half of the poor are affected by the lottery because I hate to think we victimize all of them.

(Applause.)

While we're opposing the lottery, the conservatives opposed it because it's

bad. It's just bad. Gambling's a sin. It's bad. It's unclean. It's impure. It's bad. Don't do it. Well, the moderate progressives were opposed to it because it's bad for the poor. It's just an unfair hidden tax. It's just another way of taking advantage of the least of us.

Over the course of the campaign what we noticed is that those on the right began to use our language. They began to say, it's bad because it's bad for the poor. Uh, oh. And they weren't doing it just because they wanted to win. I think they were doing it because they thought it was right.

That tells me that that fluid middle can be reached and persuaded and taught and brought in to some progressive causes. And I think maybe that's a glimmer of hope, but in these days you go with what you can get.

REVEREND PALMER: Can I respond to that? Can I say that that persuasion needs to come from leadership. And there are two problems. One is that not only are you hesitant to speak when the money comes from the government or from some agency that doesn't want to hear it. For many of our pastors, they're hesitant to speak because they're being paid by middle-class folks who expect them to provide service for their kids and the neighborhood and pastoral care and hospital visitation, and your plate is full. And when you start being a prophetic voice, why am I paying her salary or his salary?

And I had people from my congregation -- from my support committee provided by my denomination resign from my support committee when I accepted my nomination to the State Board of Education. I said, there's nothing more important than education to the immigrant community, I will take this opportunity to serve and represent that. And they said then you won't be able to do the work of the church that you've been hired to do.

So I think there have to be structures provided to the leadership that can speak to those. And the second problem we have is that our theologians on the left write for each other. They write for journals, you know, from Emory to Duke, to -- I mean when we had Southern and Southeastern and some reputable middle scholarship in the middle that hadn't been co-opted by the right, those professors went and they did the Winter Bible Study in the churches. And they really did engage people in theology and thinking, what are we doing for the least of these. They impacted my life and they impacted many people.

Where are those professors? Where are they teaching? And why aren't we training our laypeople to speak knowledgeably to those issues?

MS. BARNES: Well, speaking of engaging, we'd like to engage with the audience now and take some questions from the audience for the panel. So who has a question? Start here.

MR. PETE MCDOWELL: My name

is Pete McDowell. I'm with Chapel Hill, and I wanted to follow up on Maria's point which was, it's always really puzzled me that we have this culture war supposedly, and which is in the South partly a religious war. But it's no war because there's only one voice. The religious right speaks and I don't see any religious left. The religious -- the religious left, I'll put it this way, a religious left that engages them.

I don't think I've ever heard a debate based on what the Bible says about the kind of issues we've been talking about all afternoon. It's not there, you know. And it seems to me that when you think about the progressive movement, one of the -- in the South, as progressives in the South, we have to understand that we're not just talking about politicians. Politicians don't talk about issues by and large anymore. They basically dodge issues. What we have to -- you know, and there's a notion that I like, that if we change society, elections will follow.

We have to engage the culture and religion in the South as right wing religion and that has to be part of a progressive program to redefine and to challenge these bizarre notions of what the Bible and Christianity and all that is about. And I'd just like you-all to talk about that a little bit more.

REVEREND WIGGINS: Let me take a stab at that. One of the things that kind of came to my mind -- and I agree with you that the dialogue is not happening at the public level. When I taught at the divinity school, I found -- I'm not disparaging one school over others since I know

professors at so many schools across the nation -- but I find in many places the way in which clergy are being trained at best holds at bay their being political, and that that's part of -- or being -- we'll use the word prophetic. That works a little bit better in a divinity school. Teaching them to be prophetic. They're not teaching them to be prophetic.

And that comes across on what people read, it comes across in the lectures. When I taught the course on social context of the black church, they had to do a simple project of, say, find an issue relevant to the African American community. It can be where you live -- and I also taught this course where it didn't have to be specific to the African Americans, you know, wherever you were doing your field at. And learn to read the landscape. Talk to the people in the church, find two or three people in the community who are working on this project. Come up with a bibliography. How to articulate the issue, posit some analysis.

And people said, why should we do that? They said why -- like why -- why think about the issues in the community? I'm going to go and preach to them. I'm going to teach them Bible. I said, but you're going to be talking to people who are living outside of the church. They come to hear what the Bible has to say to the lives they live hopefully six other days of the week they're out there, even Sunday they're still living their lives.

I lift it up because I do think there's a problem in, you know, the training of people who are leading our religious

congregations in the South and elsewhere. But I also think that people who have some sensitivity to a progressive agenda have held it private to a fault. One of the things -- when I was listening -- it was interesting listening to the Governor this morning. He said kind of how he doesn't go, you know, you might want to think about not going to certain places because it would kind of be too glaringly that you stand for X versus Y.

In the South people are being taught to be proud to be religious. And that is clearly one of the messages I know come across megachurches, you know. And it's not just so you can walk up to somebody and say, do you know Jesus, and not flinch when they say, get back, you know. But it's so that in your workplace, you know, people wearing emblems, people are carrying totes with their Bible in them. People have got just a whole market out there that says, I'm proud of my faith.

If you come talking to them about something that's impacting society and you kind of casually mention, oh, yeah, I'm a member of the Methodist church. And then you go on in the lingo of what they see as established government or a particular party, you're not making the connection.

You know, one of the things that startled me -- I was a member of my church before I came on staff at the church. And I realized I got reactions from people for, number one, I guess engaging in the worship. You know, I lift the hand and wave it, you know, and all that. I was personable. I

would talk about issues, and I also still acted like I knew the Baptist tradition that they were part of. And yet they were clear I had some knowledge about some issues that they never had to consider. And so for some reason I'm just kind of an anomaly, you know, a black Ph.D. in our church who kind of fits in, you know. There were some others there, but I guess, you know, they weren't in leadership or in the limelight.

One of the challenges I have in that context is how not to give in to the seducing religion of privatizing faith. So when I have to give a sermon, I have to push myself to say, even if this text speaks about how you treat your mate, let's say, I can use that as a segue to also talk about perhaps gender discrimination, to talk about policy that impacts how you are in fact being husband, being wife. Have the -- provide some larger message that will help people say that who I am is not just about my own formation. I am being formed by the policies, the context, in which I live in. And I try to be responsible in doing that and I realize it is a challenge. There are times when my sermons don't get the Amens, you know, the ones who get the Amens because they went on to Calvary so fast, you know, they were just all with them. You know, I'm still -- I'm still trying to say, you know, here's a question, here's a challenge, here's something that you need to consider.

I did it -- I did a sermon about risky living. Well, let me give what, the real risk is not whether or not you drink tomorrow night, but risk is, can you in fact talk to the people you just walked

by, you're scared of the boys on the corner? Are you going to let the world tell you that somehow they're not you? You know, so I know -- I'm just trying to let you get this sense of why you say this discourse is not happening at a more public level. There are some places -- and I know there's pastors and people in this church who wear a couple of different -- in this group -- wear a couple different hats who do do that.

But it is a challenge because, you know, as you're saying, you're not trying to be captive to the dollar and the person who pays you. But you realize that, in fact, the people who you pastor are not just influenced by you. The megachurches, the really national ones, they're on TV. You have to not only counter and hope that the vision that you are articulating which might be progressive and angry and social gospel and angry in the best traditions of Christian Scripture, but that you've got to counter Joyce Meyer this morning. You've got to counter Paula White. You've got to counter Rod Parsley. You've got to counter, you know, so many other people because they came to church after watching six hours of TV. And so you wanted to talk about context, and they've heard six hours that made it seem as if we live our lives in some vacuum. And they drove in. So they passed all the problems that you want to tell them are problems, you know, and they heard an articulation of something that is not where they live at.

So like you said, I don't have to get one person yet to say, I really know a same sex couple who wants to get

united. But they are hearing the message about why we should be scared about it.

MS. BARNES: Why don't we -- so we can take some more questions. Woman in the gray jacket and white blouse.

MS. ANNETTE HOLLOWELL: My name is Annette Hollowell. I'm from the William Winters Institute at the University of Mississippi. We work with a lot of different churches across the state and a lot of different communities. And not megachurches, a lot smaller churches. And one thing that always comes up and that we always end up talking about is that Sunday is sometimes the most segregated day of the week. And I was just kind of curious, and I wanted to hear your thoughts as far as the role of the church in racial reconciliation.

REVEREND PALMER: I have to tell you, it is such hard work. Such, such hard work. Planning a service that is inclusive takes four, five, six times as long as speaking to your own people in the language that you're familiar with. And it can be very painful. The first service that I planned with an Anglo church, about half my congregation showed up. And I thought, oh, what bad luck, something must have happened, maybe, you know, a soccer game I didn't know about was on TV. Bad planning, you know.

So the second time that happened, I went and visited all the different people. I said, you know, I'm really discouraged and disappointed. We

had planned this. And they said, well, you shouldn't tell us the gringos are coming. You should just -- I said what do you mean? Well, you know, because then you know you have to dress a certain way, and you know that you're not going to understand them and, you know, you don't know if somebody from Immigration's going to show up. You don't know if somebody that is your boss is going to show up and they're going to ask questions about you.

And the distrust that is there and people still come to church to be loved and nurtured and told that, you know, you're at home, and it's like a sanctuary. And if you are asking them to take that risk, you have to provide so much support and so much -- especially if it's the group that is always -- that is at the bottom. The group that has to smile and act nice when they go to work.

And, frankly, at some point after the attacks of September 11, there was an outpouring of compassion and support, and people and my church, you know, we prayed and we went to the arena with other congregations. And then my folks started getting fired and losing their jobs. And of 67 families, about 30 had a member of the family lose a job because of mismatched Social Security numbers, because people got scared of hiring a foreigner.

How do you tell them, we're going to go worship with a congregation where they know somebody that they were cleaning the house for that just let them go because they're scared about -- you know, somebody finding out

they have a, quote, unquote, illegal person. It's really asking a lot.

So in the case of the Hispanic community, and I do want to mention this in North Carolina, 18 percent -- and this is not made up -- according to the US Census 18 percent of our children under age five, born in North Carolina, in the 2000 census, zero to five years old, 18 percent were growing up in an Hispanic home, speaking Spanish. One in five almost.

They are growing up -- if they are in faith communities, they're mostly in segregated faith communities, scared to be integrated.

To me, one of the prophetic roles of the church is to speak in a loud voice to the Anglo congregations and the African American congregations and say, it is your Christian or Jewish or whatever your faith, your -- it is -- your faith requires that you see these people as your brothers and sisters and you help them find a spiritual home. So that is something I want to throw out there, but it is so -- it is such hard work.

And it's painful when you have lots of good, sweet Anglo pastors who say, Maria, we want to partner with your church and we want to be inclusive, and we have decided it's taco night and we want you to be there. It's very hard.

REVEREND EVANS: I would like to add one thing to that. I was in a meeting recently where this conversation came up, not about race, but about gays. And the statement that you just made, kept being made, how hard it is, how hard this is -- and

it was me who kept making it. And there was a Holocaust survivor who stood up in the back and said, I have seen what happens, when Christian pastors are afraid is no excuse.

(Applause.)

MS. DEBBIE WARREN: Debbie Warren from Charlotte, North Carolina. I'm one of the regional aids in Interfaith Network. I graduated from Southern Seminary before the fundamentalists took over, was ordained in 1982. I want to tell a good story about grass roots work in the faith community. At Reign (ph) in Charlotte -- Charlotte is a city that has a very low rating as far as social capital is concerned, and the interaction of different races, cultures and socioeconomic groups. But at Reign (ph) over 2,600 people from 20 different denominations in faith traditions have come together around the issues of HIV and AIDS, which you know are very, very difficult issues.

And I think one of the things that's been so helpful is that people have had an opportunity to be in real relationships, not just a surface, one-time relationship of the service. But they have been real relationships where they went into people's homes and they were able to observe firsthand the impact of poverty or mental health issues or addiction issues or gay issues. And a lot of these preconceptions and misperceptions were laid aside. And we organized because we wanted to care, support people, educate people.

But out of all our learning all these

years, it goes down deeper. And now people advocate on the different issues. They have a greater understanding, they have greater impact, and they advocate on the issues that are seen where they see the people they're working with treated so differently from other people.

It's been a remarkable experience and really speaks to what a grass roots community can do.

And one of the things, since I am a Baptist preacher and I do have the floor, I don't believe -- since I have such wonderful great leaders in the room who are so compassionate, I don't believe we in the South are taking seriously the impact of HIV and AIDS on our communities, both rural, where it's growing the fastest, and urban. The South now is the epicenter for the epidemic in our country. But our focus is on AIDS in other countries. So this is an issue we really have to take seriously. Thank you.

MS. BARNES: I can take one more question. Thank you so much for your comments. I'll take the young woman in the blue sweatshirt.

(Inaudible) : Student here at UNC. And we're here and we're talking about religion in the South. And I notice everybody's coming from a Christian background. I just wonder if there's -- you know, are there other strong voices in dealing with these issues? And we talk about the religious right being really strong and impacting. What about other faiths influencing this?

MS. BARNES: Do people want to speak to people they work in partnership with or coalition with or -- Congressman Price?

REPRESENTATIVE PRICE: I think in many communities and certainly as we're starting discussions at a new level of intensity in the Congress and in other political circles, I think it's very important that it be an interfaith dialogue. And I think in many, probably most instances it is. That's not to say there aren't some challenges in getting the kind of communication going that needs to happen, but there are, after all, powerful precedents for this. Civil Rights movement, other things that we've worked on together, and it's not just, by the way, a matter of interfaith discussion. It's also a matter of understanding. Often we find common ground with people whose moral values don't have conventional or religious views at all. After all, most of us have had that experience.

Now, what you sometimes get -- and I've had this ongoing I guess rather good-natured discussion with a Republican colleague who identifies very strongly with the religious right. We've had a series of joint appearances. We kind of know now what each other are going to say so there aren't too many surprises left. But I think it's ^25ban ^ been a good discussion. I think we both continue to engage in it, on NPR mainly and some other forums, just because we think it is something that needs to happen.

One of the things that he says, others on the religious right also say, is that

they bridle at the notion that they should be asked to articulate their values and their aspirations in more universal terms. They resist that. That's somehow asking them to compromise, to leave their religious faith and terminology at the door of politics.

And this fellow once used the term, you're asking me to go to some kind of least common denominator. And I must say, I just thought of this at the spur of the moment at the time, but I think it was a pretty good response. I said, that sure would come as news, wouldn't it, to Martin Luther King or to Frederick Douglass. I mean their strategy in opposing slavery and opposing segregation -- their strategy was precisely to go to the founding documents of this country and there to find common ground. And you're telling me that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, government by the consent of the governed, you're telling me that's watered down? You're telling me that's kind of bland, least common denominator stuff? Give me a break. These are the core values that we have returned to time and time again. And we didn't -- by the way, we didn't realize them all at once. Of course we didn't. We were and are a deeply flawed nation in realizing these values and discovering what democracy is all about. It's a work in progress.

But we have done that on the basis that -- on a basis that has brought us together. Now these values have strong religious pedigrees, when you look at where they came from and how we came to espouse them. But they are common ground. And

there's nothing to apologize for in seeking common ground. In fact, there's every reason to seek common ground.

And so religious people, people who come from a faith background, ought to embrace this, and I believe it, so of course, it should be an interfaith dialogue and beyond conventional faith terminology.

MS. BARNES: Well, thank you very much. I think that's a perfect place to close. I want to thank the members of the panel and also the audience for engaging and --

(Applause.)

(A break was taken.)