

Church group would do most for 'the least'

2/2/97

If the thought of a special-interest group's "legislative seminar" brings to mind a pack of tassel-loafered corporate lobbyists scheming for tax breaks and planning the next big shrimp-fest for the impressionable freeloaders over on Jones Street, well, that might be close to the mark.

But the General Assembly's return to Raleigh also activates other kinds of interest groups — those that view politics as a way to advance not just their own well-being, but society's. They might even have a few cogent ideas as to how to go about doing that. The North Carolina Council of Churches, which held its annual legislative seminar on Thursday, is sold on the importance of state policies reflecting concern for "the least of these." That means the poor, the disadvantaged and the vulnerable.

Meeting at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Cary, several dozen participants from across the state surveyed the legislative landscape with respect to work and welfare, health care, support for children and families, criminal justice, protection of the environment and other public issues.

It's safe to say that neither the welfare reform bill signed by President Clinton nor Governor Hunt's Work First program had many fans among these folks. In fact, efforts to cushion the impact of cuts in welfare payments, withdrawal of food stamps and mandatory work requirements are at the top of the council's agenda. No surprise there: The idea that the poor are chiefly responsible for their own condition, and that the proper way to fight poverty is simply to force them to get off their duffs, hardly squares with Biblical admonitions of solicitude for the have-nots. People naturally bear a measure of accountability for their personal behavior, but too many adverse social and economic forces are in the mix for everyone who is out of work or unable to provide full self-support to carry the blame alone.

But what makes the council — representing the so-called mainline church

bodies, Protestant and Catholic, but not including the more conservative Southern Baptist or Pentecostal denominations — so sure it's on the right track?

Therein lies another of its distinctive features. While not shy about applying its reading of Scripture to public affairs, the council is suitably mindful of the human capacity for error, especially in matters no more susceptible to proof than these.



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The Rev. Collins Kilburn of Raleigh, longtime executive director of the council, touched on that subject during a talk Thursday on the intersection of religion and politics. He stressed the importance of avoiding what he called "dogmatic self-righteous-

ness and certitude" — a pitfall that routinely seems to ensnare those who enter the arena from the right.

"The corrective is within our tradition," Kilburn said. "All of us are sinful and fallible, and can be mistaken even in our most idealistic convictions. We can't know with certainty how God would have us act in a given political situation."

However, he said, Christians should not be intimidated: "The appropriate Christian stance is to be zealous about what we think God's will for society is." That mandate for zeal, tempered with wariness of fanaticism, is one of the council's political/philosophical cornerstones.

There are several others, set forth in a position statement adopted by the group last year and elaborated upon by Kilburn. First is that Christians have a duty to become vigorously involved in political causes and activities because so many public issues have a moral aspect — the distribution of resources, crime and punishment, war and peace. For mainline church members, Kilburn said, the typical sins are not fanaticism, but "indifference, despair and abdication."

Advocacy for those on society's margins is an imperative, the council believes. "Welfare mothers, welfare children, refugees," Kilburn said. "Take their side, champion their cause. People faithful to the Bible will be strongly faithful to this theme." A society that slashes support for poor people so that the affluent can save on their tax bills is not what the Council of Churches has in mind.

In a similar vein, the council believes (as Kilburn put it) that Christians should work to ensure that the fruits of the earth are shared and distributed justly. The ideal is not to achieve absolute equality of wealth, he said, but to reduce the degree of disparities. With an Old Testament flourish, he framed the issue this way: "Woe for those who enjoy living in opulence while others languish."

A further premise is that government is a good and necessary institution. "Many problems in society need to be addressed by the whole society," Kilburn said, and government is the only instrument that can do that. "The churches are already strapped in meeting social needs. They do meet many of these needs, but that doesn't eliminate the need for a basic social safety net." He added: "Christians aren't for big government or little government. They're for government that's big enough to meet the task."

Finally, the council sees a duty to support family-strengthening policies, especially as they pertain to children. It regards personal responsibility as "an important value to be encouraged in all people." However, that emphasis should not be used to judge and punish the disadvantaged, and "it should not outweigh an emphasis on social responsibility."

The Council of Churches will bring its point of view to bear this year through the usual legislative channels, lobbying on issues of special concern. Heaven only knows how much influence it could wield, and how much good it could do, if members of its constituent churches took its principles of political involvement enthusiastically to heart.