

# The Christian Coalition Conference

by Karen Lynn Krugh

*In August she reported from Denver. This past month we find Karen Lynn Krugh reporting from the Christian Coalition conference in Washington.*

For two days in September, over 2,000 members of the Christian Coalition descended on Washington, D.C. for their third annual conference. Far from being a gathering solely of Pat Robertson devotees, the group counts Catholics, mainline and Evangelical Protestants, Jews and others among its members and supporters. Catholic League President Bill Donohue and I attended the conference for a first-hand look at the organization's goals and agenda.

Pat Robertson set the tone for the conference early on when he responded to the organization – and himself – being labeled “the religious right” by the media. “Who am I to the right of?” Robertson asked. “Well, I’ll tell you,” he continued. “I am to the right of the *Washington Post* and I am to the right of the ACLU.”

“Ninety-million Americans are functionally illiterate,” he told his audience, and while many attribute the ills of our nation to the breakup of the American family, Robertson pointed out the derision by the media of family values following the Republican National Convention last year. Robertson discussed the radical feminists’ contribution to the backslide of family values, noting their analogies of childbearing to a concentration camp and marriage to slavery. He heralded the pro-life stance, school choice for parents, prayer in schools, reduced taxes for families, and limits to punitive damages.

The “breakout” sessions during the two days helped participants focus on specific issues. Of particular interest to the Catholic League was the session “Catholics and Evangelicals: Building a Winning Coalition,” which was moderated by Marlene Elwell. Speakers included Father Michael Scanlan, of the Franciscan University of Steubenville, and Keith Fournier, of the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), an organization established primarily to fight the ACLU.

We were a bit surprised when a head count in the room revealed the audience to be 50/50 Catholic and Evangelical. This particular session was intended to bring together factions formerly at odds in order to strengthen the efforts of the whole body. Despite the lack of balance (both speakers and the moderator were Catholics) and the title (which seemed to beg the question, “are there any other Protestants besides Evangelicals?”), I believe some progress was made. And while it was clear during the question and answer period that some old confusion and suspicions remain on both sides, it was nonetheless a positive beginning.

The Christian Coalition is non-partisan. They will not endorse candidates nor solicit funds for campaigns. They will, however, organize people on a grassroots, town-by-town and state-by-state, level in order to alert people to the views and voting records of state and local officials. The goal is to elect as many pro-family, pro-life and pro-liberty officials as possible.

Among the speakers at the conference was Mary Cummins, widow, mother and grandmother, who successfully fought former New York City School Chancellor Fernandez when he tried to introduce his “rainbow curriculum.” The fact that this 70-year-old grandmother could literally fight city hall and win – in what the couple next to me referred to as “that den of iniquity” – was a source of encouragement for all. The message was not only that one person can indeed accomplish a great

deal, but that no battle, no goal is out of reach. Similar success was visible in the efforts of another speaker, Dr. Richard Neill, a Fort Worth dentist, who single-handedly persuaded more than 195 advertisers to pull their sponsorship of the Phil Donahue show.

The success of the Christian Coalition is inspiring. Since its inception in 1989, it has achieved many of its goals, including the distribution of nonpartisan voter guides and a nonpartisan voter registration campaign. Congressional lobbying and the election of pro-family candidates at every level across the country have also occupied much of its time. It is considered to be one of the most effective grassroots organizations in America, having grown from four people in 1989 to almost one-half million members today.

As Catholics and as Christians, we can take heart. Battles have been fought and won. And while many battles lie ahead, we can continue to win and grow stronger as a nation of faith by working together and focusing on what we have in common and not on what divides us.

Rabbi Daniel Lapin, the senior rabbi of the Pacific Jewish Center in Venice, California, eloquently addressed the question "Why Jewish Conservatives are Working with Christians." As he began his speech, he looked out and said, "Who is asking this question?" Lapin responded, "My great-great grandfather." And how did he answer his great-great grandfather? "We are all a people of faith," he told him. And it was quite clear that his audience understood why indeed we should all be working together.

Robertson took the occasion of the conference to issue a clear warning. "We will oppose any government policy or official which sets out to destroy this nation." Paraphrasing George Bush, he concluded, "Read Our Lips: If you advocate the agenda of the radical left, you will not be re-elected."

For Catholics – most of whom are strangers to political activism – such words are both threatening and challenging. We must come to embrace the idea that we really can effect change in the communities in which we live and work if we only have the will. Working together with others who share many of our deeply held beliefs and values is a big step in that direction.