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## American Churches' Clergy-Laity Split on War With Iraq Highlights a Frequent Pattern

By Richard N. Ostling  
The Associated Press

The nation's ranking Christian clergy have formed their strongest anti-war alliance in at least a generation, but the people in the pews don't necessarily agree with their leaders.

There is opposition to the war among leaders of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, almost all the leaders of white, mainline Protestant denominations, and the heads of black Protestant groups.

But with war imminent, polls indicate a majority of the faithful support President Bush.

In the past, says historian Martin E. Marty, clergy successfully prodded parishioners' opinions on major social issues like alcohol prohibition and civil rights. But when it comes to war, lay Christians have gone along with the prevailing public sentiment, regardless of what they hear in church.

"The mainstream Protestant laity has been roughly where the public is as long as I've known them," said Marty, 75, a former University of Chicago professor regarded as the dean of American church historians.

"Barring some special factor, the laity is indistinguishable from the larger culture."

The Gallup Poll said in early March that 63 percent of those who said they attend church almost weekly favored a U.S. military invasion to end Saddam Hussein's rule, compared with 59 percent of the general public in the survey. The margin of error was 3 percentage points. A Pew Research Center poll question last month produced similar results.

Clergy opposition to the Vietnam War eventually grew even more intense than the current anti-war push - but it developed gradually after the conflict began, Marty says.

The clergy have not been so visibly opposed to the outbreak of hostilities since the pre-Pearl Harbor days of 1941, he says.

"Religious leaders are called to be leaders," said the Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the anti-war chief executive of the Reformed Church in America. "If they know how to lead well, people will be influenced - not all, but certainly some."

The Rev. Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches and a peace activist, said religious leaders must say what they believe is right - even if some church members disagree.

"It's interesting to see how far apart we are from some of the laity," said Edgar, a clergyman in President Bush's United Methodist Church. "But that's not unlike the prophets and apostles of the Old and New Testaments" who were rejected by their own people.

In mainline Protestant denominations, the clergy-laity political divide first won wide notice in the late 1960s. By 1972, Dean Kelley's book "Why Conservative Churches Are Growing" warned that churches decline when they overemphasize politics and neglect spiritual substance.

Catholic clergy - sensitive to criticism that the faithful might follow the pope rather than the president - once sought to prove their patriotism and rarely questioned national policy.

But the U.S. bishops' made a statement against Vietnam policy in 1971, and that was a turning point. Since then, the hierarchy has made many pronouncements on foreign and domestic policy.

Judging from past conflicts, however, the current war debate won't be a make-or-break issue that will drive hawkish Christians from their denomination. Most simply accept they have a difference of opinion with their spiritual leaders.

Episcopalian Jim Oakes, a medical technology consultant in Washington, D.C., with a son in the Marine Corps, says his church's presiding bishop, Frank Griswold, can believe whatever he likes about war "as a private citizen."

But "I strongly object to his claiming to represent the body of the Episcopal Church, because he doesn't," Oakes said. "It's similar to a rock star making pronouncements on world peace. It's very interesting but what do they know?"

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