

Larry Witham has been a reporter at The Washington Times since 1982, specializing in religion and in social issues. He is the author of three books on contemporary events in religion, the latest a novel, *The Negev Project* (Meridian Books, 1994).

The Religious Lobbies

A Book Review by Larry Witham

Had President Clinton owned a copy of this new handbook on churches and politics, he might have revised the guest lists for his six or so White House sessions with clergy.

Near the end of *Prophets and Politics*, a comprehensive guide to Washington lobbying by 15 Christian denominations and ecumenical groups, author Roy Howard Beck shows table tops with 40 place settings.

If U.S. population share was the president's concern, he'd be dining mostly with Roman Catholics (58 million) and evangelicals (47 million), with fewer seats for mainline Protestants (33 million), Orthodox, Jews and others.

This "meal" is one of countless ways Beck's handbook illustrates the interface of churches with Congress and the White House. The term "handbook" is key here, for it is more a user-friendly reference with charts, lists, street maps and subheadings, than a monograph on history and policy.

"The church office representing them in Washington is probably the last thing most [people] would think about when deciding to join a church," Beck writes. But for some 130 million Americans, the 15 offices are their Washington voices, and the book is a gateway for them to understand those distant operations. It also is a call for church members to get involved, once the system is understood.

"Perhaps the greatest value of this handbook is the immediate analysis available from seeing the 15 offices lined up together on spectrums or divided into categories based on their styles of action, size, theological underpinnings and accountability," the author says.

This is clearly the volume's unique accomplishment, requiring a lot of gumshoe reporting by Beck, a seasoned journalist in the church and secular press. The handbook is one of only three serious treatments of religious lobbies in Washington, beginning with Allen Hertzke's *Representing God in Washington* (University of Tennessee Press, 1988), and followed

by the forthcoming *In Washington But Not of It* by Daniel Hofrenning (Temple University Press, 1995).

The 18 topical chapter headings (for example, "Diversity in Activism," or "Staffs") look simple enough to follow. But in reading cover to cover one can easily get lost on the road, probably because nearly every chapter looks at all 15 groups — adding up to about 250 snapshots. For a reference work like this, the modules of data are a

plus. They also are necessary since there is no index in which to look up "Mennonite," "health care reform" or "United Methodist Building." Cover-to-cover readers can be assured, however, that Beck's writing is clear and light, often with a

dash of wit. The author touches on, if only briefly, nearly every religious lobby dynamic at work. These range from how a church's theology translates into a social agenda, its histories and personalities, to who picks the staff and how alliances come and go.

"The 15 church lobbying offices have little power when they are in sharp disagreement," Beck writes. "But when most of the 15 speak in unison ... it is almost impossible for an opponent to beat them."

Examples abound. Beck argues that open immigration policies "hold the moral high ground" because of church voices. These same voices have kept religious freedom a priority in Congress, and they certainly drove civil rights reform, withdrawal from Vietnam, and the abortion debate.

Yet on most other issues, from defense spending and genetic engineering to pollution and pornography, the church impact is far less clear. As one chart reveals, these churches have taken up 97 different causes — no wonder the prophet's voice gets hoarse.

Some of the topics lend themselves well to Beck's charitable humor. He explains, for example, that Baptists came to Washington in fear of Catholic clout, and evangelicals arrived to counter mainline Protestants. Later, Baptists and Lutherans

PROPHETS AND POLITICS:
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split their family voices, liberal and conservative. "Whew!" writes Beck.

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Beck visited the 15 offices to learn their budgets, staff numbers and priorities. By such quantifying, he has been able to limn trends, both obvious and obscure. Large churches — Catholic (\$2.4 million) and United Methodist (\$2.6 million), for instance — outstrip others on annual budgets.

However, the massive Southern Baptist Convention has a small office of four staff members, while the tiny Society of Friends (Quakers) have a considerable operation with 17 on staff. The reasons are what fascinate. Quaker activism on peace makes Washington a priority target, while the recent rise of conservative Southern Baptist leadership makes their office a newcomer in 1989. Baptist polity, moreover, puts limits on what a Washington office can say on behalf of Baptist consciences.

Though the book's focus is the 15 church groups, Beck also points out that Washington is populated by an array of religious coalitions and issues offices, such as Witness for Peace or Concerned Women for America. These groups, he says, "have much more ideological clarity because they are formed around agreement on certain issues." An in-house church debate of the past decade has been on who controls their bureaucracies, and thus the Washington voice. The process by which activists, agendas and quotas gain influence in denominations has been likened to the patterns of change in political parties. This was a founding concern of the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), publisher of the handbook. The IRD wants religion to speak to power, but with accountability to constituents — not as free ranging "prophetic" voices.

"Most church democracy," Beck writes, "is more akin to the way officials were elected in the early days of the country when the common people were felt to be too poorly informed to directly elect national leaders." National church committees, he continues, by their nature fail "to reflect the nuance and complexity that the grassroots could have provided." And for other practical reasons, retirees, singles, activists and persons of means tend to reach policy-making levels. "Substantially under-represented," he writes, "are the men and women with full-time laboring, service and professional jobs,

the largest group among church members."

The author eventually moves to a more prescriptive analysis of where the lobbies are going, for good or ill. Of their priority issues, he says the prevailing category is "rights," a leaning that was set by the 1960s civil rights milieu. What is almost completely lacking, he argues, is lobbying about "responsibilities" for society and churchgoers. Amid much lobbying against institutional evil, personal battle lines such as illegitimacy and divorce are absent, despite how much they fuel the family and welfare crises.

In tone and purpose, Beck is wholly respectful of these important voices in Washington. "This book is not an exposé [but] a factual handbook, designed to help church members," he says with accuracy. The slim volume should also be on the desks of church executives, and at arm's reach for religion and political reporters in the national media. ■