

# Democratic Party courts Catholics, other faith-based voters

DENVER – The Democratic Party has made a concerted effort to court faith-based voters and party officials are happy to see religion come out of the closet at the Democratic National Convention.

“We in the Democratic Party don’t believe that you have to change your values to cater to people of faith,” said Howard Dean, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, at the faith caucus Aug. 28. “We have been people of faith for a long time, but we haven’t known how to talk about it.”

The 2008 Democratic National Convention featured the party’s first interfaith gathering Aug. 24 and its inaugural faith caucuses Aug. 26 and 28.

Faith-based Catholic Democratic organizations were spread throughout convention activities during the week.

“We didn’t move to bring faith to the party,” Leah Daughtry, CEO of the Democratic National Convention Committee, told attendees at the interfaith gathering. “Faith has always been here.”

Mr. Dean, a self-described member of the United Church of Christ, a former governor of Vermont and a former presidential candidate, accused the Republican Party of using faith as an improper tool to gain voters and insinuated that conservatives talk about faith values but don’t live them.

“We are closer to living those values every day than those on the other side,” Mr. Dean said. “It matters how you live, not necessarily what you say.”

Mr. Dean laid claim to the Democratic Party as the home to Jews and Muslims in addition to Christians, hinting that Republicans fail to recognize there are more religious traditions in the United States than Christianity.

“Jews and Muslims matter a lot in our party because we are a diverse party,” Mr.

Dean said. "We talk differently about religion than the Republicans. We talk about respecting everyone's faith."

Catholic Democratic groups were eager to point out that some of Sen. Barack Obama's political ideology falls in line with church doctrine, but downplayed the abortion issue. Sen. Obama supports access to legal abortions.

Mark Linton, Obama for America's national Catholic outreach coordinator, hosted two panels at the Faith in Action caucuses Aug. 28. Catholic Democrats, a Boston-based organization led by Patrick Whelan, supports Obama based on a broad range of social justice and pro-life issues. He said many people want to narrow the scope of his organization's focus to abortion, but he includes life issues to mean war and poverty.

"Very few issues are as difficult (as abortion)," said U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., who introduced the Pregnant Women's Support Act in the last congressional session, and told attendees at a Democrats for Life gathering Aug. 26 that life issues include making sure pregnant women have the proper economic and health support systems.

Mr. Whelan said the Bush administration has not been beneficial to Catholic causes, citing as examples the war in Iraq, the environment and the economy.

He also said abortion rates fell more slowly during the Bush years than in the 1990s, when Democratic President Bill Clinton was in office.

"I think on a whole range of life issues Obama is vastly better than the alternative," said Mr. Whelan, concentrating on his opposition to war and nuclear weapons. "He represents someone who represents diplomacy over combativeness."

Father William Fitzgerald, a retired priest from the Archdiocese of Omaha, Neb., who now makes his home in Scottsdale, Ariz., was seen sporting a "Catholics for Obama" sticker on his lapel during the convention.

"Ultimately, I have no problem being a pro-life Democrat," he said. "Being a Catholic Democrat is not an oxymoron."

Father Fitzgerald said he believes Obama will help decrease abortion in the United States through social programs that help lift women out of poverty.

"I think, in the broadest sense, Obama will be good for social justice and good for life," he said.