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In a Year Dominated by Elections, Americans Voted Against the Status Quo

by Kevin Eckstrom

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Elections, the late columnist Franklin P. Adams once said, "are won by men and women chiefly because most people vote against somebody rather than for somebody."

And whatever Americans were voting for in 2006, it seems clear that what they were voting against was the status quo. Episcopalians, for one, decided to give a woman a shot and elected their first female leader, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori. U.S. Muslims turned to Ingrid Mattson as the first woman to lead the Islamic Society of North America. Southern Baptists, dissatisfied with the old guard, chose a relative unknown, Frank Page, as their dark-horse choice to lead the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

"I'm not in the 'Who's Who' of Baptists," Page said earlier this month. "I'm in the 'Who's He?' of Baptists."

In church basements, school gymnasiums and fire stations across the country, Americans in November registered their frustration at the voting booth and gave control of Capitol Hill to the Democrats, making

2006 a year when votes -- sacred and secular -- became the year's biggest religion news story.

After years of vowing to "get religion," Democrats saw modest gains among religiously minded voters after a concerted effort to cast their policies through a moral lens. The party gained ground among Catholics, weekly worship attenders and those who rarely or never attend worship services.

John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, who crunched the numbers, said white evangelicals remained the bedrock of the Republican base, but Democrats wooed enough secular or less religious voters to put them in the majority.

"What that suggests is that the religion gap, or 'God gap,' works both ways," Green said. People who attend worship most regularly "can help Republicans, but it (the gap) can also help Democrats by getting a higher vote among the less religious."

With the 2008 run for the White House already heating up, Green said the midterm elections show that religious voters are up for grabs.

"There are a lot of religious votes to be had by both Democrats and Republicans, or whichever party can figure out how to appeal to them,"

Green said. "Religious groups can move around. They do have tendencies, but they can't be taken for granted."

On the other side of the world, an obscure Afghan man named Abdul Rahman faced a possible death sentence after he elected to change his religion -- from Islam to Christianity -- in a case that reflected growing tensions between Islam and the West, the other big story of 2006.

Tensions flared in February when Muslims around the world protested -- sometimes violently -- a Danish newspaper's refusal to apologize for printing cartoons depicting Islam's Prophet Muhammad, which many Muslims found deeply offensive. Muslims said the cartoons (and all depictions of Muhammad) were sacrilegious and irresponsible, while Westerners asserted their rights of free speech, free press and artistic freedom.

The controversy eventually subsided but was reignited by Pope Benedict XVI in September, with a speech in Germany in which he quoted a medieval Byzantine emperor who called Muhammad's teachings "evil and inhuman" and "spread by the sword."

Riots and violence flared again, fueled by lingering tensions over European attempts to place limits on Islamic headscarves and veils in public. Benedict apologized if people were offended, but never retracted the substance of the remarks. The pope tried to soothe concerns in late November with a trip to Turkey and an appeal for both sides to "utterly refuse to sanction recourse to violence as a legitimate expression of religion."

Conflict of a different sort raged within American churches -- the ongoing fight over homosexuality. The Presbyterian Church (USA) approved a plan to keep its rules against actively gay clergy intact, while also allowing local bodies to bypass them in limited cases. A group of American Baptist churches in Southern California, upset by a perceived leftward drift, voted to break away from their denomination.

Episcopalians, meanwhile, agreed to "exercise restraint" before electing another openly gay bishop as conservatives laid the groundwork to leave the deeply divided church. By year's end, one diocese (San Joaquin, Calif.) had voted to sever ties with the national church, and several large congregations in Texas and Virginia voted to leave.

Neither Jefferts Schori nor Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was able to craft a solution that would keep conservatives in the fold.

Religious activists mobilized to pass seven statewide bans on gay marriage while Arizona became the first state to reject a ban. The New Jersey Supreme Court said gay couples may not be denied marriage rights, but lawmakers instead approved a civil unions bill that will take effect in early 2007.

The Conservative Jewish movement, meanwhile, in early December moved to allow gay rabbis and same-sex unions while also giving local synagogues the option of maintaining traditional prohibitions. Activists on both sides said the tortured compromise was unlikely to prove a lasting solution.

Within the Catholic Church, pay-outs for clergy sexual abuse topped \$1 billion in March. U.S. bishops, meanwhile, adopted a formal ban on gay men who want to be priests, reiterated church

teaching against homosexuality and birth control, and approved changes to the familiar words of the English-language Mass that has been used by U.S. Catholics for 40 years.

As some evangelicals moved to broaden their agenda beyond hot-button social issues, the president of the National Association of Evangelicals, the Rev. Ted Haggard, resigned in disgrace in November after admitting to "sexually immoral conduct" involving a male escort and drug use. Another evangelical leader, Florida pastor Joel Hunter, abruptly resigned as the new head of the Christian Coalition after his efforts to broaden the group's activism were rejected by the board of directors.

Not far from Haggard's church in Colorado Springs, Colo., church-state concerns flared at the Air Force Academy -- and throughout the military -- over charges of aggressive proselytizing by evangelicals, coupled with questions over how military chaplains should share their faith. Meanwhile, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in February that a small South American sect in New Mexico could not be denied access to hallucinogenic tea used in sacred rituals.

Many Christian groups thought Dan Brown was hallucinating when he wrote "The Da Vinci Code" and quietly protested the film version that hit theaters in May. The film's storyline -- that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married with children -- was called heretical by some, but others used the film to reintroduce Christian history and theology to their moviegoing flocks.

Perhaps the year's most poignant story was the response of Pennsylvania's Amish community to a schoolhouse shooting that left five young girls and their killer dead. Drawing on deep -- and rare -- wells of forgiveness, the Amish in Nickel Mines, Pa., reached out to the killer's family, attended his funeral and helped raise money to pay expenses.

Their acts of generosity, forgiveness and sturdy resolve won them the vote by the Religion Newswriters Association as the year's biggest newsmaker.

"Forgiveness is woven into the fabric of Amish faith," wrote Donald Kraybill, an expert on all things Amish at Elizabethtown College in Lancaster County, Pa., after the shootings. "Such courage to forgive has jolted the watching world as much as the killing itself. The transforming power of forgiveness may be one redeeming thing that flows from the blood that was shed in Nickel Mines."