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UCSB Study Will Examine Changing Role of Progressive Religions in Public Life

Wade Clark Roof, the J. F. Rowny professor of religion and society at UC Santa Barbara, has been awarded a \$300,000 grant by the Ford Foundation to reassess the changing role of religion in public life as it relates to social justice and a new agenda for social change.

Focusing on the Los Angeles area and the Central Coast, the three-year study will examine the priorities and shifting alliances of the region's growing progressive religious presence, and evaluate the impact of the 2008 presidential rhetoric on the social and ethical concerns of these diverse communities.

A total of 24 African American, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish congregations will participate in the innovative project.

Its goal is to help build networks across faith communities that will lead to social action to address common issues, such as global poverty, racism, and the environment.

"Sorting out this complex mix of religions and ideological currents that represent roughly 75 percent of the American population is necessary if we are to understand the various social initiatives we characterize as part of the religious left," said Roof,

who also serves as director of the Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life at UCSB.

"We will then be able to determine the potential for new alliances among these progressives and gain insight into the types of compelling social and ethical issues they have in common."

As part of the project, the Capps Center will present a series of public lectures, panel discussions, and a conference on "Faith and Progressive Social Change" in 2009.

"We are now at a juncture that suggests that we can probably expect shifts to one degree or another in the nation's 'symbolic center' within the next year or so," Roof explained.

"Because symbolic boundaries in the American context are fluid and subject to groundswells of populist opinion and sentiment, this would seem to be an opportune time for religious progressives to rethink their priorities and for repositioning themselves as agents of social change."

The Ford Foundation makes grants for projects that strengthen democratic values, reduce poverty and injustice, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.

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