

Pastor Offers Spiritual, Political Leadership

Observers say Dave Edler, mayor of Yakima, Wash., is poised to move on to a bigger political stage.



[] Pentecostal pastor is offering both spiritual and political leadership in his community as mayor of Yakima, Wash. Dave Edler, a former professional baseball player with the Seattle Mariners and senior pastor of Yakima Foursquare Church, became mayor in 2006 and has since been praised for building broad, bipartisan coalitions to address local issues.

Now, having helped his hometown achieve success in crime reduction and economic development, Edler, 51, a Republican, stands poised to move on to a bigger political stage, observers say. His pro-business stands combined with his willingness to consider new taxes and support for legalizing undocumented workers give him bipartisan appeal.

“I think he has the potential for higher office and would have no problem getting elected,” said Yakima County Democratic Party chairman Paul George, who served with Edler on the City Council. “I would hope he'd run as a Democrat.”

Edler, who has aspired to be a U.S. senator since his youth, said he is “open

to what might come politically in the future.” But recently when a chance to run for an open state House seat emerged, he passed it up to focus on launching a satellite congregation.

“[I’m] committed to making sure our church is prevailing, that whether I’m there or not it will continue to have impact, be a blessing to our community, and fulfill its redemptive purpose,” said Edler, who is training Mark Grange, one of four young men he took in as a foster son, to eventually succeed him as senior pastor.

Edler accepted Christ in 1979 while struggling with drinking, drug use and a troubled relationship with his alcoholic father. After he retired from the Mariners in 1984, he eventually became a volunteer with Young Life, a Christian youth program. His work with young people led to his being offered a position as assistant pastor at Yakima Foursquare in 1994. He was named senior pastor in 1997.

Since then the church has moved into a larger facility on the booming west side of town and planted a satellite congregation led by another of Edler’s foster sons, Cesar Dominguez. “What Dave does better than most is seeing the best in people and giving them the sense that they can accomplish and overcome anything,” Dominguez said. “That had an impact on me as a teenager.”

Edler said he decided to pursue his long-time interest in politics because he was troubled by a lack of strong leadership in the Yakima community. He was elected to the City Council in 2003, chosen by the council as mayor in 2006 and re-elected in 2007.

Edler said he is proudest of making the city and county governments work together more effectively, helping reduce crime rates through a citizen committee he led, speeding redevelopment through more public and private investment, and improving the public image of Yakima, which long was seen as a hotbed of crime and drugs.

But Edler has faced his share of criticism. Some Christian conservatives complain that he doesn't talk publicly about issues such as abortion and stem-cell research. "I'm not one who chases those issues politically," Edler said. "It's the hearts of men and women that change the culture, not the political system."

Others, however, criticize him for talking too much about God. Even some supporters chided him for his National Day of Prayer speech in which he credited prayer for bringing \$5 million in state funding for Yakima's downtown development project. They note that the downtown redevelopment money was the result of a deal with the governor in exchange for the Yakima legislative

delegation's support for her gas tax. "Prayer wasn't the reason," former Mayor Paul George quipped.

Edler responded with a disarming combination of faith and reason. "If there is a God, and He is able to move mountains," Edler said, "why not have a conversation with Him while you're trying to move those mountains, then acknowledge Him when the mountains get moved?"

After the 2008 election, Edler began participating in talks with other Republicans who are concerned about the GOP's future locally, statewide and nationally. "The Democrats did a better job of telling their story this year, and it doesn't hurt when the things that have happened with our economy happened," he said.

Yet despite his party affiliation, Edler said he will support the incoming president. "I personally will back President Obama and pray for him and for the best for our nation," Edler said. "Although I've been labeled a Republican, there are leaders in the Democratic Party I have voted for and would vote for.

We don't need partisan politics. We need good leaders."

-Harris Meyer in Yakima, Wash.