

Campaigning for civility, compassion: Three initiatives

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Pastor Jay Geisler had grown weary of fellow Christians squabbling over political ideology. He wanted issues put in the context of the poverty and hopelessness in neighborhoods near his St. Stephen Episcopal Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

So he called Call to Renewal, one of several faith-related groups touring the country this election year to draw Americans together from both sides of the ideological divide for polite conversation, social cooperation or both.

Geisler, who pastors in a once-prosperous steel town that has rusted alongside its shuttered mills, appreciates Democratic attention to health care and other safety-net issues. But he also finds merit in Republican efforts to encourage marriage and discourage abortion.

He hadn't decided which presidential candidate to vote for. And he rejected both election-year stereotypes of "godless liberals out to destroy the family" and "quasi-fascists dropping bombs for Jesus." Adds Geisler: "This polarization is tearing churches apart, tearing our country apart. Each side wants winner-take-all. We don't seem to want to see win-win anymore."

Addressing those culture clashes, at least three religiously motivated groups have traveled about representing a new brand of peacemakers. Each group has its niche, but they share an overarching goal of increasing civility:

- Call to Renewal's "Rolling to Overcome Poverty" bus tour holds rallies and prayer meetings to encourage Christians with disparate worldviews to work together to help the poor.
- "Red God, Blue God" forums bring a religious liberal and a religious conservative together for civil debate about the role of faith in politics and public policy.

- The Gamaliel Foundation trains local religious activists to identify and address pressing community issues that might otherwise be neglected by both sides of the aisle.

Jim Wallis, an evangelical minister, founded Call to Renewal in 1995. It includes Catholics, mainline Protestants, evangelicals, Pentecostals and leaders of historically black churches and peace churches. One sign of its appeal is that the conservative National Association of Evangelicals and the liberal National Council of Churches sit at the same table.

Participants have worked together and lobbied Washington on behalf of social welfare policies. “The cry of the poor rings from cover to cover in the Bible. It’s clear that God hears the cry of the poor and wants us to as well,” Wallis said.

The group has backed some Republican initiatives, such as President Bush’s proposal to expand funding to faith-based social services. It has also taken the Democrats’ side, backing expansion of the child tax credit to the poorest working families.

“God is not a Republican or a Democrat” reads a headline in the organization’s ads.

“The Democrats have a long way to go before they will be seen as champions of the poor,” Wallis said. “And we are challenging the Republicans to make good on the promise of compassionate conservatism. That was strong language, but it hasn’t produced many results this first four years. There are things Republicans can and should do on the issue of poverty.”

Wallis traces religious polarization over the candidates to what he sees as inflexible Democratic Party support for abortion rights. When he was invited to address the Democratic platform-writing committee about economic and foreign policy issues, he also challenged its members privately to appeal to Democrats who oppose abortion.

“I think some smart Democrat someday will figure out how to bring pro-choice and pro-life people together by actually targeting a reduction in the abortion rate,” Wallis said. “I think there’s a middle ground, but the extremes on both sides want to use it as a litmus test.”

Finding a middle ground wherever possible also concerns the “Red God, Blue God” forums, which have toured through several presidential swing states.

The forum’s name comes from colored maps used in the 2000 presidential election, and from polls showing that white churchgoing Christians frequently back Bush. The Red God, Blue God Forum was founded by Democrats to say that not all religious people vote Republican. But the panels, which include a religious liberal, a religious conservative and someone adept at interpreting surveys on faith and politics, aim to puncture several stereotypes.

Shaun Casey, who teaches Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, cofounded the forum with former Clinton press secretary and Kerry adviser Mike McCurry, an active United Methodist.

The two men wanted to show journalists that people of strong faith could vote for John Kerry. But Casey, who belongs to the theologically conservative Churches of Christ, also wanted to counter media stereotypes of evangelicals as uneducated and unconcerned about social welfare issues.

Representation on “Red God, Blue God” panels tilts left but always includes a recognized conservative, such as Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptists’ Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, or Michael Cromartie, director of the Evangelicals and Civil Life project of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington.

“The reality is that evangelicalism is irreducibly plural and complex in America. To say that [Jerry] Falwell and [Pat] Robertson speak for all evangelicals is just laughable,” Casey said.

One goal of the Chicago-based Gamaliel Foundation is building relationships between people of both parties in order to address social issues. Its “Rolling Thunder” tour has gone cross-country to train people to identify community problems.

“Our mission is to bridge the gaps where people differ,” said Evans Moore Jr., executive director of the Pittsburgh Interfaith Impact Network, a Gamaliel partner. “We all realize that social injustice is not something our faith embraces.” -*Ann Rodgers, Religion News Service*