

Poverty 101: Activism on evangelical campuses

by [Stan Friedman](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

When Tim King organized a sleep-out in Chicago last year, 300 students from across the Midwest came to raise awareness of homelessness by gathering signatures for a petition, holding up signs and even “sleeping out” on the Magnificent Mile. King, a senior at North Park University in Chicago, is part of a growing network of students at evangelical campuses who are becoming politically active in combating world poverty and hunger, the AIDS epidemic, debt relief, the humanitarian crisis in Sudan and global warming.

“What gets me excited is that within Christianity is a gospel message that restores us with God and with other people around us,” King says. “That means parts of it are going to be poverty issues and justice issues.”

“In my 30 years of working in this area, I’ve never seen this much activity,” says Peter Vander Meulen, coordinator of the Office of Social Justice and Christian Action for the Christian Reformed Church. He also cochairs the Micah Challenge, an organization of evangelicals committed to making sure that governments keep their commitment to the UN’s Millennium Development goals, one of which is to halve poverty by 2015. “We’re getting calls out of the blue from relatively small and conservative schools.”

For many of these schools, this is the first time that students are seeking to organize on campus even as they focus on issues of social justice in their chapels. Organizations such as the Micah Challenge help connect students by directing them to e-mail addresses, Web sites, conferences and events such as the G8 Summit.

“The ONE campaign has helped immensely,” says Kristin Winn, who heads Earth Keepers at Wheaton College. ONE calls for governments to give 1 percent of their gross national product to eliminate poverty and hunger; it has received support across broad political and religious constituencies. The initiative has served as Hunger and Poverty 101—a primer in the reality of world hunger for students who

had not heard the issues addressed in their churches. Some students purchase the one-dollar white wristbands or sign a declaration, while others join efforts to press for political solutions.

More and more evangelical students support their views with an awareness of economic differences between the West and other nations. "Short-term mission trips have become just a huge thing in evangelical churches," says Larry Eskridge of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals. "Mission trips have sensitized students."

Observers say student activism began to rise dramatically three years ago, when the Republican Party's allegiance with the Christian right stimulated a backlash among younger evangelicals angered by the Bush administration's domestic and foreign policies. Some, including Layla Wiedrick, president of Students for Social Action at Vanguard University of Southern California, call the administration's budgetary and war policies immoral. Others decided that they stand well outside the Republican Party and are openly defiant of its association with evangelicalism.

Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals welcomes the new activism. "This stereotype of our movement has got to be buried," says Cizik, who's been criticized by some evangelicals for his pressure on the government to address global warming. Cizik believes that the students will help advance a positive shift in evangelical political priorities. But these students need encouragement. "It's a hard transition for people," says Winn. "They have their faith worked out with set paradigms that have been reinforced. It's really hard for a lot of students to consider the other side."

Wiedrick, for example, says that she had never heard social issues addressed at her church but was a member of a group of students who were inspired by attending a college class in anthropology and began their own organization.

Members of these organizations are sometimes criticized by their peers. The Vanguard group has the enthusiastic support of the university administration, but, says Wiedrick, "a lot of students stigmatize us [as] the radical liberal group, which is not true. A lot of us are not liberals."

Students at Calvin College are largely supportive. Rachel Reed, who leads the Social Justice Coalition, chose the school because of its evangelical approach. "Calvin was . . . intentional about having this type of group," she explains.

While traditional evangelical issues such as abortion and gay rights are still important to these activists, they are not often addressed. This silence, as well as the willingness of the campus groups to work with nonreligious organizations, has led to criticism from some evangelicals.

Jason Fileta, campus organizer for the Micah Challenge, defends the activists. “I don’t think their opinions have changed, but how much energy and time they spend on fighting for those issues may change. When you look at the amount of life being snatched away by hunger—if you see all of those lives as equal—it puts things like abortion in perspective.”

Most of the students still oppose gay marriage, but they are also angry about the way churches have mistreated homosexuals. Some are questioning the church’s stance on homosexuality.

Unlike in the past, the students are not worried about being co-opted by working with others outside their own circles. “There’s not the commitment to remaining pure by being separate,” says Vander Meulen. When King organized the Chicago event, students came from schools such as Washington University in St. Louis.

“Being able to interact with Christians and non-Christians was great,” says Thomas Hoffman, president of Frontline Homeless Ministry at Moody Bible College. He is frustrated with evangelicals, including a majority of his classmates, who prefer not to make such connections. “We prejudge who is ‘one of us.’ We feel like we have to check their credentials.”

Vander Meulen concedes that some evangelicals will continue to criticize the new activism, but he is confident that students will continue to organize. “I don’t see a liberalization of evangelical college students,” says Vander Meulen. “What I see is a rounding-out of the gospel message.”

“The question is always on what basis do you care for the poor,” King says. “Do you care for the poor because you feel bad that you’re rich, or do you care for the poor because the gospel says everyone is made in the image of God? That’s why you care about the abortion issue. That’s why you care about the war. That’s why you care about the death penalty.”