

Poor priorities: Making poverty a nonnegotiable issue

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 2, 2004](#) issue

The Call to Renewal's "Rolling to Overcome Poverty" project is attempting to convince religious people to start talking about poverty again. Its leaders have been traveling around the country in a big bus, sponsoring local events and worship services that feature Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* and director of Call to Renewal, and James Forbes, pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan.

When the campaign came to Chicago, I met with a racially diverse group of clergy and laity—so diverse that we are not frequently in the same room. Wallis's and Forbes's message, powerfully delivered, was that although Christians do not and will not agree on many matters, we ought to be able to agree that, according to scripture, God cares for the poor and expects people of faith to do the same. Along with many others I signed a "Covenant Against Poverty and for the Common Good" which calls on the governor and the next president to convene conferences and task forces to address the poverty in this wealthy nation.

Afterward, feeling a little bit better about the world, I turned to the morning paper and discovered that the news about the religious community and the election wasn't about poverty at all but about abortion, stem cell research and same-sex marriage, and the claims of some Roman Catholic officials that these are "nonnegotiable issues" for the faithful. One Colorado bishop said that "abortion outweighs every other issue."

There is enough conflict and anger in my own denomination to make me hesitate to comment on other communions. But I continue to hope for the acknowledgment that people of good faith can come to different conclusions about abortion, stem cell research and same-sex marriage. And I look for signs of humility, the recognition that the language and attitude of absolute moral certainty have produced some less than attractive moments in our history.

More important is the conviction that poverty is a biblical priority; “Read the book,” urged Wallis. “One out of 16 verses of scripture is about poverty—one out of nine in the synoptic Gospels.” Forbes, who is always creating imaginative images, added that according to Matthew 25, “nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor.”

In this plentiful land there are 36 million who are poor, 45 million who are without health insurance and 25.5 million who are hungry. There are 7,500 homeless children in the Chicago public school system. The average age of a homeless person here is nine.

How about making poverty the nonnegotiable issue for religious people? How about making the lives of those hungry, homeless children without health care the moral issue that “outweighs every other issue”?