

# Christian Leaders Challenge the Right

*Ecumenical Group Urges Civic-Church 'Partnerships' to Tackle Community Problems*

By Laurie Goodstein  
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An ecumenical group of more than 80 Christian leaders yesterday issued a challenge to the religious right and claimed to offer an alternative to those they accused of using the church to pursue a narrow partisan agenda and abandoning Jesus's call to serve the poor.

The coalition representing evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Catholics and Greek Orthodox, as well as African American church members, seeks to amplify the voices of Christians who have been whispering with dismay among themselves about the recent resurgence of the religious right in local and national politics.

"Even the word 'Christian' has become associated with a particular brand of very conservative Republican politics," said the Rev. Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners magazine, based in Washington. "The religious contribution to the political debate of late has made it more divisive, polarized and less sensitive to the voiceless."

The ecumenical leaders said they do not plan to form a national organization or organize coherent opposition to politically potent groups like the conservative Christian Coalition. Instead they said they plan to foster "partnerships" between churches, local governments and businesses to combat problems such as unemployment, poverty and violence.

The group met yesterday with House Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.), House Majority Leader Richard K. Armey (Tex.) and other Republicans, and separately with Democratic legislators. Wallis said his group emphasized that "there really is another voice, and the Christian Coalition does not represent the whole evangelical community, let alone most of the churches."

Their Capitol Hill debut comes less than a week after the Christian Coalition unveiled a new 10-point "Contract With the American

Family," winning a pledge from Gingrich to bring each measure to a House vote.

Yesterday Gingrich told the ecumenical leaders he would hold an extended session with them next month to listen to the grievances of Christian activists whose community programs have been threatened by Republican-backed budget cuts and welfare reforms.

At a news conference at the National

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Press Club, the ecumenical leaders issued a two-page manifesto called "The Cry for Renewal," rejecting "the old political language and solutions of Right and Left, liberal and conservative" as "completely dysfunctional."

The statement criticizes the "almost total identification of the Religious Right with the new Republican majority in Washington." But it also condemns religious liberals whose alliance with the Democratic Party was "lacking in moral imagination or prophetic integrity."

The statement was drafted and spearheaded by two leaders widely known as religious liberals—Wallis and the Rev. Anthony Campolo, an evangelist based at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa., who is the founder of several urban youth programs and a friend of President Clinton.

The signers also include moderate and conservative evangelicals such as J.I. Packer, a renowned theologian and senior editor at the magazine Christianity Today; Stephen Hayner, president of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, which claims student activists on 800 campuses, and Myron Augsburger, president emeritus of the Christian College Coalition.

Mike Russell, spokesman for the Christian Coalition, said, "We are the first ones to admit that we don't speak for all people of faith. There are people who share our faith who don't share our politics, and there are people who share our politics who don't share our faith."

Russell said it was "unfair" to characterize the Christian Coalition as partisan because "we have a very up front track record of trying to work with both parties."

Among the signers of "The Cry for Renewal" are several prominent African American and Hispanic clergymen, including Bishop John Hurst Adams, senior bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Rev. James Forbes Jr., senior minister of the Riverside Church in Manhattan.

Leaders of the religious right, said Forbes, "preach concern for family values but do not respect families which have not been blessed with the benefits they have amassed for themselves. They gloat over a few dollars of tax relief when this in itself may result in the shutting down of social services which have sustained lives of brothers and sisters."

Campolo said his group would form a "progressive evangelical caucus" to represent an alternative at traditionally conservative evangelical events, encourage Christian students to organize through churches instead of campuses, and convene town meetings to address community problems like teenage pregnancy and "gay bashing."

The group shares some common ground with the religious right. "We agree that . . . most of the social and political issues we are facing have a moral core," Wallis said.