

Can You Tell Me?

Sojourners: Who They Are, What They Believe

Question: *An ad in USA TODAY (Nov. 1, 2004) from an organization called Sojourners and signed by some 200 theologians and others from seminaries, universities and colleges comes out strongly against the war in Iraq. What is Sojourners and what are its main tenets of beliefs?*

Answer: The signers of the ad in *USA TODAY*, express their dismay about "A 'theology of war,' emanating from the highest circles of American government, that is seeping into our churches as well... The roles of God, church, and nation are confused by talk of an American 'mission' and 'divine appointment' to 'rid' the world of evil." They state that "Christ commits Christians to a strong presumption against war. Christians have the responsibility to count the cost, speak out for the victims, and explore every alternative before a nation goes to war." The ad is more anti-Bush than a discussion of "a just war" principles. Its purpose, published just prior to the U.S. presidential election, appears to be to get liberal voters to the polling stations to vote for Senator John Kerry.

Who are the Sojourners? Sojourners is an ecumenical community, located in Washington, D.C. While fully grounded in Christian faith and theology, members of the community also work tirelessly for a generally "left-wing" political agenda of ending violence, racism, war, and power. They view themselves as an alternative to evangelical conservative politics. Among the books and study guides the community has published is a title called, *Recovering the Evangel: A Guide to Faith, Politics, and Alternatives to the Religious Right*.

One of its founders and its principle spokesman is Jim Wallis (1948-), an evangelical on the left, who is quite vocal in distancing himself from Jerry Falwell and the religious right. He was born into a Plymouth Brethren family. He broke with his church over the Vietnam War, which he viewed as an extension of America's racism and its callousness toward the poor. As a student at Michigan State University, Wallis led protests against American policies in Southeast Asia, but when the antiwar fervour began to diminish early in the 1970s, he turned to the Bible. In the Sermon on the Mount, Wallis found a Biblical warrant for his own concerns about justice, and in Matthew 25, he "was deeply struck by a God who had taken up residence among the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts." He enrolled at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, located in the affluent Bannockburn section of Deerfield, Illinois. He became the leader of the Bannockburn Seven, the name given to seven students who led protests and demonstrations on an evangelical campus more accustomed to Republican, middle-class sensibilities. Wallis and friends distributed leaflets opposing racism, discrimination against women, militarism, and American policies in Southeast Asia. At the seminary this "radical discipleship" met with resistance from the administration, the faculty, even fellow students. This group, with additions and defections, eventually formed a Christian community in the Rogers Park neighbourhood of Chicago and published the *Post-American* tabloid. It was so named Wallis recounted, because it "tried to put forward a Christian faith that broke free of the prevailing American civil religion." Wallis and the *Post-American* relocated to a poor neighbourhood in Washington,

D.C., in the fall of 1975. Both the community and the magazine took the name *Sojourners*. The community has an ambitious leftist agenda. It advocates public action, focussing on the major issues of our day. It also has a growing network of individuals, groups, churches, and organizations that want to work for change in their lives, the nation, and the world. Wallis became the editor of *Sojourners*. Under his direction, it has reflected an eclectic mix of theology and spirituality. Wallis is well known in evangelical circles for his controversial views. He argues for a "comprehensive pro-life agenda." He has called on both the pro-choice and the anti-abortion forces "to collaborate together to radically reduce the rate of abortion in this country by working on teenage pregnancy, by working on adoption reform, and by changing the moral climate in which we treat women and children." He supports "gay rights." In *The Soul of Politics; A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Change*, Wallis does not use kind language to describe his opponents. He accuses the Religious Right of fierce "hate-mongering homophobia." He says, "to deny fundamental rights to a group of people (homosexuals) is to violate the core of professed theological integrity." He also favours the use of inclusive language. He says "male definitions of God, faith, and patriarchal authority have long kept women in a subordinate role." The Sojourners Community uses inclusive language in worship, the pastoral and the liturgical leadership of women. Wallis says "the efforts to re-imagine God in more inclusive and Biblical ways are helping to create the space where women can feel affirmed and safe in the religious community."

To understand the sentiments of the ad in *USA TODAY*, we do well to remember that Wallis is a peace activist. He aims to work for a nonviolent solution of conflicts. His role models are Ghandi and Martin Luther King. He calls peacemaking "an attempt to resolve the sources of the conflict and restore a situation to justice and balance, thereby eliminating the need for victory and defeat." He believes that peacemaking demands the pursuit of justice as the prerequisite of peace. He says, "Perhaps it is time to explore the meaning of a nonviolent army, of which Ghandi dreamed. Trained and disciplined but unarmed people could be deployed in sufficient numbers to make a strategic difference in many situations of both domestic and international conflict - but only if they were prepared to make sacrifices and suffer casualties just as soldiers are."

In 1995, under the leadership of Wallis, Sojourners helped convene a new political organization: Call to Renewal. It is a coalition of religious leaders who took offence at the assumption on the part of Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, and the Christian Coalition that articulated the political views of evangelical Christians. Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, and Ron Sider drafted *The Cry for Renewal: Let Other Voices Be Heard*. The Call for Renewal argues for an end to America's culture wars and invites Christians of all traditions to unite in finding a new Biblical place to stand, and a new compassionate, non-adversarial approach to political engagement. In other words, it calls for an alternative vision. This broad-based movement has a four-point agenda - rebuilding the family and community, affirming life in every respect, ending poverty, and dismantling racism.

The Call for Renewal declares that "Christian faith must not become another casualty of the culture wars." It claims that "The almost total identification of the Religious Right with the new Republican majority in Washington is a dangerous liaison of religion with political power. With the ascendancy and influence of the Christian Right in party circles, the religious critique of power has been replaced with the religious competition for power." It

also states, "Neither right-wing religious nationalism nor left-wing lobbying will serve us at this critical historic juncture. Such faith is often more ideological than truly evangelical."

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