

# **Social justice takes back seat to hot-button political issues\_80904**

August 6, 2004

Posted: 8/06/04

## **Social justice takes back seat to hot-button political issues**

**By Sandi Villarreal**

*Associated Baptist Press*

WASHINGTON (ABP)—Same-sex marriage and abortion are overshadowing other moral issues in the presidential election, even among Christian voters, who make up the overwhelming majority of the electorate.

“It has to do with the nature of our political structure,” said Gerald Zandstra of the Acton Institute, a conservative public-policy organization. “Our leaders function in the same self-interested way as anyone else.”

Zandstra said politicians campaign for issues on which they can differentiate themselves from their competition. Abortion, same-sex marriage and stem-cell research are more simplistic issues with clear positions, he said.

“You can't look at homelessness and say if you are for it or against it,” Zandstra said.

Richard Troxell, founder of Universal Living Wage, said the issue of poverty

is being ignored by politicians because poor people are not a sought-after constituency.

“Who is going to speak for these people?” Troxell asked. “I don't think (poverty) is being addressed at all. There are 3.5 million people who are going to experience homelessness this year. ... We see no plan to end homelessness or even address the issue in a pragmatic way.”

According to polls, an overwhelming majority of American voters—both liberal and conservative—identify themselves as Christians. And while Christians have a theological stake in a broad spectrum of issues, it's the hot-button, often sexually charged, issues that get most of the attention.

For example, Roman Catholics—who have a track record of grass-roots involvement on poverty and other social-justice issues—made headlines recently when some Catholic bishops said they would deny Democratic candidate John Kerry communion because of his pro-choice stance on abortion.

Other Christians criticized the bishops for elevating one moral issue while ignoring others. But among many evangelicals, a narrower political agenda is becoming commonplace.

When he addressed the Southern Baptist Convention in Indianapolis, Pastor Steve Gaines of First Baptist Church in Gardendale, Ala., honed the list to two: “I personally believe with all of my heart that the two issues that will determine what God will do not only with America, but to America, are abortion and homosexuality.”

Why are some issues more politically potent than others?

Barry Hankins, professor of church-state studies at Baylor University, said the paradox has been around quite some time.

“The abortion issue got religious conservatives involved in politics in the 1970s and '80s,” he said. From there, these groups got involved in other human-life issues such as stem-cell research and same-sex marriage, he said.

Many religiously conservative groups are more motivated about abortion because they believe actual life is being taken, Hankins said. Social justice issues that involve human suffering—such as poverty and homelessness—don't hold the same sense of urgency.

Not all religious voices are remaining silent on those issues, however.

One group trying to gain a hearing for a broader social agenda is Call to Renewal, a network of churches and faith-based organizations that work to overcome poverty through public-policy activism. Jim Wallis, head of the organization, told the Washington Post he believes the Religious Right's agenda is “out of touch” with most Christians' concerns.

“Do we really think that Jesus' primary concern in this election year would be a marriage amendment—with the poverty rate rising, with one in six of all U.S. children and one in three children of color living below the poverty line, with more than a billion people around the world living on less than a dollar a day?” Wallis asked.

The National Association of Evangelicals also has noticed the lack of attention paid to poverty. A position paper being drafted by the NAE, titled “For the Health of a Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” reminds evangelicals of their duty as citizens to address not only abortion and same-sex marriage but poverty and social welfare.

“The Bible calls rulers to shoulder certain responsibilities for the economic well being of their people,” the draft document reads. “We urge Christians who work in the political realm to shape laws pertaining to wages, education, taxation, immigration, health care and social welfare that will

protect those trapped in poverty and empower the poor to improve their circumstances.”

This year's presidential candidates have not been completely silent on social justice matters.

President Bush's main effort to address poverty has been his faith-based initiatives, which channel federal money to religious groups for charitable efforts. He has touted this plan since the beginning of his presidency, but some critics have denounced it as a dangerous intermingling of church and state, saying federal money brings federal regulation.

Wallis, an early supporter of Bush's faith-based initiatives, said the plan has been “reduced to a photo op.”

But he also criticized Kerry for his lack of attention to these issues. In the same article, Wallis wrote that Kerry hardly has mentioned lower-income families and instead is courting the middle-class vote.

Issues of poverty and social justice likely will never have the political impact to take center stage in elections, say some observers. Candidates “might tip their hats to living wage or faith-based initiatives,” Zandstra said, “but they're not going to make them large planks in their platforms.”

Hankins of Baylor said some of the blame rests on the media's attention to “flashpoint” issues.

“It comes down to the press coverage of controversy,” Hankins said. “Human-life issues are so controversial that they get more coverage.”

John Couretas, communications manager for the Acton Institute, agreed with Hankins, calling the attention to these issues “pack journalism.”

“People tend to write about what others are writing about,” Couretas said.

Even without a headline-hungry media, Hankins noted, it would be difficult for candidates to “campaign on a platform of helping the poor.”

“There is a large constituency that is pro-life, and there is a large constituency that is pro-choice,” Hankins said. “There is not a large constituency for the poor.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention ( SBC ) and around the world.