

# Church activists see federal budget as moral document

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Jim Wallis,  
founder of the  
anti-poverty  
group Call to  
Renewal, leads a  
budget protest  
outside the U.S.  
Capitol. (RNS  
photo courtesy of  
Ryan  
Beiler/Sojourners)

## Church activists see federal budget as moral document

**By Kevin Eckstrom**

*Religion News Service*

WASHINGTON (RNS)—When mainline Protestant leaders assembled in the nation's capital last March to denounce President Bush's proposed budget as “unjust,” they were received much like the Old Testament prophets they look to for inspiration—just another lonely voice, crying out in the wilderness.

By year's end, the budget they rejected as immoral had passed through Congress, although only by the narrowest of margins. Vice President Dick Cheney was called in to break a 50-50 tie in the Senate.

Even though they lost the budget battle, activists say they succeeded at something more important and long-lasting. They have finally been heard, they say, and have discovered a way to portray arcane budget debates into stark moral choices that test the nation's commitment to the poor.

"I think what's changed is over a period of years ... there has emerged a wide agreement that poverty is a central biblical concern, and that did not used to be the case," said Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America. "That's a gigantic shift."

Activists were quick to claim credit where they could.



Jim Wallis, founder of the anti-poverty group Call to Renewal, is arrested by Capitol Police officers during a protest against the budget outside the U.S. Capitol. (RNS photo courtesy of Ryan Beiler/Sojourners)

“When we began this year, no one would have guessed that the vice president would be needed to break a tie on the budget,” said Maureen Shea, director of the Episcopalians' Washington office. “Our advocacy made a difference.”

Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, added, “Our voices of opposition were heard and have provided a tangible sign that the church is living out the gospel of Jesus Christ ... in our own day.”

For years, Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have lobbied for social service programs to aid the poor. In the 1980s, Catholic bishops said the U.S. budget is—or should be—a moral document.

But 2005 marked the first time they came together in a concerted, coordinated effort to save those programs.

Poverty exposed by Hurricane Katrina, combined with millions in tax cuts that critics argue benefit the wealthy, helped focus the debate.

Experts say the 2004 elections, which saw the emergence of “values voters” and the awakening of a moribund progressive community, may have helped focus activists' attempts to paint the budget as a values issue.

“The basic concern about the poor and preventing budget cuts is not a new concern,” said John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. “They're just more vocal and active about it than they have been in a long time.”

Last month, 114 activists convened by Call to Renewal, a progressive Christian anti-poverty group, were arrested outside the U.S. Capitol in a peaceful protest against the budget. Such a direct confrontation over the budget marked a new strategy for activists, and it got them noticed.

“These voices were heard, and they were heard as voices that had a real religious integrity to them, and that's the first step,” said Granberg-Michaelson, who attended the protest but was not arrested.

The protest, organized by Call to Renewal founder Jim Wallis, included young and old, black and white, evangelical and liberal. Wallis said his group had taken the debate beyond traditional “liberal-conservative” lines.

But a major challenge that remains is broadening that message to other faith groups that are more galvanized by hot-button social issues like same-sex marriage and abortion.

Indeed, the influential Family Research Council urged a vote in support of the budget bill, and Tim Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, called the budget boring and dismissed the debate as more “liberal social gospel.”

Green, an expert on religion and politics, said church groups succeeded in “laying down a marker” for future budget debates and even the 2006 elections, but must find a way to widen their appeal.

“This group is preaching to the choir and not to the whole church yet,” Green said. “That's a real challenge that they face, how to broaden their message to other groups.”

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