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One More 'Moral Value': Fighting Poverty

By JOHN LELAND

During the inaugural festivities in Washington this month, three evangelical Christian groups sponsored a black-tie "Values Victory Dinner," where they celebrated the electoral strength of "moral values" as a factor in the campaign. In the shorthand of postelection polls and analysis, that meant opposition to abortion, gay marriage and stem cell research.

But many religious leaders, including some evangelicals, think the current focus on moral values has created a platform to talk about other issues, especially poverty, as both political and moral concerns. "The good news about the bad news was that the spin doctors, whether they got it right or wrong, have said that values are so important to our political system," said Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, an association of liberal denominations that represents more than 100,000 congregations. "They've given an opportunity for us to say, 'We're people of faith, too, and we're going to talk about what the Bible says about poverty.' When nine million children are living in poverty, that's a moral value."

Mr. Edgar and other religious leaders across the theological spectrum are trying to shift the debate. Last week, Mr. Edgar announced an ecumenical summit meeting, sponsored or supported by more than 30 religious groups, to promote world peace and the elimination of global poverty.

Evangelical organizations, whose views were often stereotyped after the election, are also seeking a broader definition of moral values. "We've let not evangelicals, but the right wing determine what moral values are," said David J. Frenchak, president of the Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education, a nondenominational group that helps develop urban ministry programs at 12 seminaries or divinity schools around the country.

In Chicago last weekend, Dr. Frenchak joined a gathering of 20 Christians, mostly evangelicals, to produce a book defining moral values to include a focus on poverty. At the meeting, one man held up a Bible from which he had cut every verse that addressed poverty. "There was hardly anything left," Dr. Frenchak said. "He said, 'I challenge anyone in the room to take their Bible and cut out every verse about abortion or gay marriage, and we'll compare Bibles.' "

Dr. Frenchak said he had been involved in more conversations about moral values in the past two months than ever before. "We meet to discuss how poverty got left out of the discussion of moral values. The question is, 'How do we talk about what we do as a moral value, rather than as an assumed good?' I don't think a day goes by that I don't get some communication about rethinking an

understanding of moral values."

In postelection analyses, "values voters" were often equated with evangelical Christians, just as "values" were equated with opposition to abortion and gay marriage. But evangelical churches and seminaries have become increasingly mobilized around poverty both in the United States and abroad.

"This is the great secret story," said Jim Wallis, a progressive evangelical who runs Sojourners magazine and Call to Renewal, a network of religious groups committed to combating poverty.

"The perception of evangelicals is that all they care about is abortion and gay marriage, but it isn't true," he said. "It hasn't been for years."

Mr. Wallis has long tried to assemble a coalition of progressive or moderate evangelicals and Roman Catholics with mainline Protestant organizations on moral issues like poverty. Though his voice has sometimes been a lonely one, his new book, "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It," enters the New York Times best-seller list this week at No. 11. Mr. Wallis, Dr. Edgar and other religious leaders, including Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, met with Democratic members of Congress to advise them on how Democrats could inject their faith and moral values into discussions of their policies, including those intended to help the poor.

"There's serious new common ground to explore on poverty, across theological and political lines," Mr. Wallis said. "Poverty is front and center, and not just among mainline Protestants, but at Fuller and Wheaton," he added, naming two of the nation's largest evangelical schools.

Glen E. Stassen, a professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif., said his students, who were largely conservative, agreed that poverty should be part of the moral values discussion.

"A lot of Christians who are worried about abortion see poverty as a pro-life issue, because if you undermine the safety net for poor mothers, you'll increase the abortion rate and infant mortality rate," Dr. Stassen said. "We've seen that happen since welfare reform, just as the Catholic bishops predicted."

Dr. Stassen, who describes himself as "pro-life," added that many evangelicals, including his students, want to change the current moral values rhetoric because they think it drives people from, rather than to, the church. "They're both offended and worried that it will persuade people concerned about justice that they should not be Christians," he said.

At Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a liberal school, students this year developed a nine-day course called the Poverty Immersion Experience to provide a practical grounding for the moral values discussion.

"How do you preach on poverty?" said Amy Gopp, one of the students who developed the course. "People rely on theological apathy - 'The poor will always be with us' - things that don't demand that we do anything."

On a blustery January morning, Ms. Gopp and 10 classmates piled into a rented van to meet with a

group of formerly homeless people in northeast Philadelphia who had organized to protest their condition.

The intent of the course is to get students to think "beyond the soup kitchen" or charity work and consider how religious institutions can address the underlying structure of poverty, said Willie Baptist, who is a scholar-in-residence at the seminary. A community activist and organizer, Mr. Baptist had been homeless in this Philadelphia neighborhood. "We're not just crying crocodile tears about poverty or singing 'Kumbaya,'" he said. "We're making contact with an organized section of the poor that's doing something about poverty."

The students visited neighborhoods where drugs are sold on street corners. They met a woman who described her experiences living in a tent city, including bathing her children in water from a hydrant. The woman is now on the staff at the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, an organization started by poor people in the neighborhood to call attention to their plight.

For some of the students, it was their first close look at urban poverty. "I've done academic work on poverty, but here is a chance to meet poor people firsthand," said Paul Gremier, 23, who said he might use his education to become a minister, a social worker or a professor.

On the ride back to New York, Ted Pardoe, a former Wall Street executive, said the trip had given him ideas about ways to work with the poor through not-for-profit agencies. "Yesterday I was skeptical about reality tours," Mr. Pardoe said. "Now I'm not skeptical at all. Each person we met was more impressive than the one before."

There was little discussion of God or church on the trip, but lots of talk about values and responsibility. Andrea Metcalfe, who is studying to become a Lutheran minister, said she was frustrated that the issue of poverty had received so little attention in all the recent talk about values and voting. Ms. Metcalfe blamed a reticence among liberals to connect their faith publicly with their actions.

"There's this tendency for liberals to say, 'We don't want anything to do with mixing church and politics,'" Ms. Metcalfe said. As a result, she said, liberal Christians and their concerns have not entered the values debate.

Elizabeth Theoharis, a doctoral student and community activist who was leading the class with Mr. Baptist, challenged the students: "How do we move from the idea of poor people being sinners to poverty being a sin?"

That, she said, was a moral value, and the students agreed.