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Pushing poverty into 'moral-values' debate **Some religious leaders trying to broaden discussion beyond abortion and marriage**

- [Don Lattin, Chronicle Religion Writer](#)
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Kim Bobo has spent the last 30 years trying to get people of faith to see the connection between their Bibles and the federal budget, to see "moral value" in tax policies that would bridge the widening gulf between rich and poor.

Instead, she sees conservative Christian forces monopolizing the morality- in-politics debate around such issues as abortion rights and same-sex marriage.

Meanwhile, government statistics show, the rich get richer and the poor stay poor.

"Shame on us," said Bobo, executive director of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, a Chicago-based advocacy group. "Those of us who work with the religious community have not adequately made the connection between economic disparity and moral values."

In the aftermath of an election in which President Bush solidified his hold on white evangelical voters, Bobo and other left-leaning religious activists are struggling to broaden the "moral values" debate in American politics.

They hope to move beyond issues of sexual morality and put the spotlight on the administration's new domestic agenda to overhaul the tax code and privatize Social Security.

Earlier this year, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church, the nation's second-largest Protestant denomination, directed its regional offices to "prepare a strategy for action to promote and establish a just tax code in every state."

Last week, more than 100 church leaders from across the nation met at the Washington office of the National Council of Churches, where they vowed to put new emphasis on poverty issues.

"From a Christian perspective, we can't ignore our communal responsibilities to one another. From the Hebrew Scriptures on through, the Bible talks about how important it is that we care for the poor," said the Rev. Leslie Tune, a spokesman for that ecumenical organization. "We need to get our legislators and policymakers to understand that there's more to morality than who you have sex with and whether or not you have an abortion."

Last month, the nation's Roman Catholic bishops voted to join Protestants and Orthodox

Christians in a new, broad-based ecumenical forum called Christian Churches Together in the USA, and some activists hope it, too, will take up the cause.

"One issue that brings us all together is the commitment to overcome poverty," said Jim Wallis, a religious left leader and editor of Sojourners magazine.

Perhaps. But being against poverty is one thing. Going head-to-head with the Bush administration on tax cuts is something else.

Between the 2000 and 2004 elections, the president increased his already impressive share of the white evangelical vote from 72 to 78 percent.

This once-Democratic voting block has been shifting its political alliances to the GOP since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

While many of these evangelical voters have lost ground during this economic shift, they have also abandoned the political party that claims to embody their economic interests.

That does not surprise Charles Jarvis, a former Reagan administration official and executive vice president of Focus on the Family, an influential radio and print ministry headquartered in Colorado Springs and led by evangelical psychologist James Dobson.

Jarvis now heads USA Next and United Seniors -- two nonprofit organizations dedicated to "tax freedom" and "retirement freedom."

"One reason people in this county don't want to 'burn the rich' is that Americans are incredibly open to the possibility that they themselves can become rich," Jarvis said.

Jarvis says the "social justice" activists in the liberal Protestant churches are "woefully ignorant of elementary-level economics" and "anachronism in public policy."

"For five decades they have been wedded to the idea that the growth of government promotes 'justice.' For them, the word 'justice' has been equated with larger government programs," he said.

"Taxing the rich is such a negative approach," Jarvis said. "The question they should be asking is what creates economic well-being. Finding jobs is what liberates people to be what they were made to be, and the government is terrible at creating jobs."

Liberal religious activists counter that tax cuts for the wealthy and trickle-down fiscal policies have created economic well-being for a small fraction of the American people

They cite U.S. Census Bureau data showing that 8 in 10 Americans saw their share of the total U.S. income shrink between 1980 and 2001. Real gains were made only by the richest 5 percent of American citizens, whose share of total U.S. incomes rose 42 percent during that period.

"So much for fairy tales about rising tides," said Charles Morris, the author of many books, including "Money, Greed and Risk."

Morris calculates that the last two decades have seen "the densest concentration of wealth since the peak of American inequality, which was in 1929."

"A not entirely reassuring precedent," he adds.

In an interview with *The Chronicle*, and in an article in *Commonweal* magazine titled "Economic Inequality -- What This Election Should Be About," Morris documents "the yawning gap between the very rich and everyone else."

This trend was well established, he says, before Bush took office in 2001 and began "a binge of upper-class tax cuts."

Now the president has proposed more tax cuts and extensive government borrowing to begin the privatization of Social Security.

"Taken together," Morris predicts, "the Bush program will beam the very rich out to new galaxies of wealth far, far away from the rest of us."

Morris, whose other books include "American Catholic," said the Democrats have more to worry about than losing white evangelical voters.

Roman Catholics -- and there are 65 million of them in the United States -- are slowly defecting to the Republican Party -- although not nearly as fast as evangelical Protestants.

"My impression is that the center of gravity in the (Catholic) church has shifted into the suburbs," Morris said. "There just aren't as many blue-collar Catholics as there used to be."

George Wesolek, the director of public policy issues for the Archdiocese of San Francisco, said it's easy to forget that the church has issued numerous proclamations over the years on economic justice -- from a landmark 1891 encyclical by Pope Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum*) to a 1986 pastoral letter by the U. S. Catholic bishops titled "Economic Justice for All."

"It's there, but sometimes it falls on deaf ears," he said. "We are such a free market kind of economy that Catholics get pulled into it. Many don't realize the church's position on economic matters -- that the role of government is to keep things fair and equal. It's not socialism, but there is a communitarian aspect to it."

At the same time, Wesolek said, the nation's Catholic bishops have not been as outspoken on issues of economic justice as they were in the 1970s and 1980s.

Issues like abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage and embryonic stem cell research (not to mention their own sexual abuse scandals) have taken up much of the hierarchy's attention over the last 15 years.

Meanwhile, neoconservatives in the Catholic Church have stressed the value of private initiative and personal responsibility over government assistance and the redistribution of wealth.

"Those folks have changed the parameters of the debate," Wesolek said. "That kind of thinking is on the rise."

These prophets of privatization are also the folks who have connections in the Bush administration.

Jarvis said the way to help the poor is not "a massive redistribution of wealth," but small, low-interest loans that will allow low-income people to start small business, buy homes and better themselves through hard work.

"Micro-loans," he said, "are the most effective tools to promote social justice."

Two years ago, USA Next and United Seniors -- which bills itself as the conservative alternative to the American Association of Retired Persons -- worked with the pharmaceutical industry and the GOP to support its version of a prescription drug plan for seniors.

That plan provided subsidies for Medicare beneficiaries to buy private health insurance -- rather than create a comprehensive drug coverage program through Medicare. It also prevented Medicare from pushing for deeper discounts from drug companies.

USA Next has now started a campaign to support President Bush's plan to allow workers to divert part of their Social Security taxes to private retirement accounts.

"Social Security is not just a financial issue -- it's a justice issue," Jarvis said. "It's not a safety net for tens of millions of people. Social Security is a debt time bomb. Religious people may have good intentions, but they can be astonishingly naive. Good intentions can recreate immoral results."

Others, such as Morris, say the Bush administration is exaggerating the Social Security crisis.

Morris argues that "privatizing" the system could put trillions of trust fund dollars into the hands of Wall Street, "the same folks who brought us the dot-com fiasco."

"A 1 percent management fee on a trillion dollars is \$10 billion," Morris said. "We're not talking about chump change."

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