

SESSION 3

The Common Good

- “Our Moral Choice,” by Jim Wallis
- “The Lawyer, the Bible, and the Governor: An interview with Susan Pace Hamill,” by Julie Polter
- “The Safety Net,” by Jim Wallis
- “Saul Alinsky Goes to Church,” by Helene Slessarev-Jamir

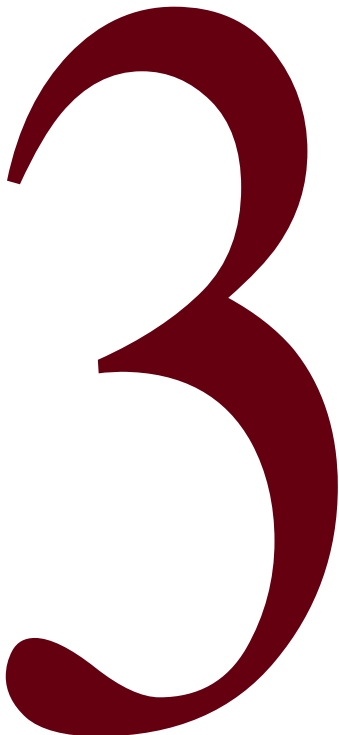
Jim Wallis argues in “Our Moral Choice” that budgets are moral documents that must be assessed in light of their concern for the poor. Though politicians often choose to help only the rich, we in the faith community are called to make moral choices that put the poor first. Susan Pace Hamill, a lawyer and then-seminary student, made such a moral choice when she fought Alabama’s regressive tax laws with research combining Christian ethics and legal analysis. In “The Safety Net,” Wallis discusses the welfare crisis with a group of politicians and humanitarian workers. Religious communities, the participants agree, cannot do everything to solve the problem, but when they join together in advocacy networks change can happen. Helene Slessarev-Jamir gives concrete examples of such networks in her article about congregation-based community organizing. Congregations, she asserts, are relational institutions that are uniquely suited to the task of empowering communities for change.

Questions to Consider

1. What does it mean to you to call a federal budget a moral document? What examples would you give to illustrate this?
2. Wallis’ statement that budgets are moral documents challenges spending habits on personal to global levels. How does what you spend your money on reflect your moral priorities? Your congregation’s money? How can your congregation be involved in efforts to hold governments accountable for their spending?
3. Do you know how your taxes are allocated? How can you speak to your government to ensure that your tax money is used to help the poor?
4. Consider your congregation as a site for community organizing. What issues might you address? How might indigenous leaders be raised to address those issues? What larger organizing networks might you join to further your cause?

Resources

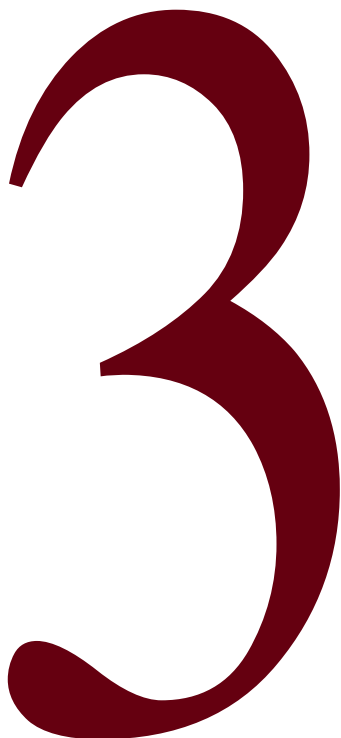
- The White House’s Office of Management and Budget offers the president’s budget proposals for each year, in full text and overview. (www.whitehouse.gov)
- The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities offers nonpartisan research and analysis on the federal budget and other policies affecting the poor. (www.cbpp.org)
- Susan Pace Hamill’s faculty page at the University of Alabama School of Law offers her recent writings evaluating the ethics of federal and Alabama tax laws and making



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the case for a more equitable distribution of tax burden. (www.law.ua.edu)

- Child Care Works is a nonprofit that advocates for just and affordable child care laws, as discussed in “The Safety Net.” (www.childcareworks.org)
- The Neighborhood Funders Group offers the Community Organizing Toolbox, a guide to fundraising for community organizers. (www.nfg.org/cotb)
- The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has a resource guide, “Faith, Hope, and Love: How Latino Faith Communities Can Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy,” in English and Spanish to help leaders of Latino or multicultural congregations address this issue with their congregations and broader communities. (www.teen-pregnancy.org)
- Among community organizing groups that can help congregations organize are the Industrial Areas Foundation (www.industrialareasfoundation.org); the Gamaliel Foundation (www.gamaliel.org); and the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (www.piconetwork.org).



OUR MORAL CHOICE

by *Jim Wallis*

A budget is a moral document. That was our clarion cry during the federal budget debates. You see, we believe that fiscal choices, economic choices are also moral choices and, for us, even religious choices. Who is important? And who is not? What is important? And what is not? Who do we most value? And who don't we value at all? They are fiscal choices, but also moral and religious matters.

Jesus actually got uncharacteristically judgmental about these kinds of choices. He said, "As you have done to the least of these, you have done to me." Are members of Congress paying attention yet?

Because of moral pressure—much of it from the religious community who every day care for the poor that our national politics neglect—the 2005 budget almost didn't pass. It took a fast trip home by Dick Cheney to pass the budget in the Senate and, in the House, the final budget measure only passed by a few votes. Some elected officials were making new moral choices. But the White House and the Republican leadership seem not to have gotten this message from the religious community, by the look of the new budget they now propose. I thought we were supposed to be their base?

You see a budget process is just a series of moral choices: tax cuts for the wealthiest, or services for the poorest? Congressional pork and earmarks, or investments in the common good? Searching for security through endless expenditures for war, or seeking to end the insecurity of poverty to make our nation stronger? Ignoring the costs of deficits for our children's children, and making the most vulnerable pay the price of fiscal responsibility; or sharing the burdens of financial responsibility more fairly by not asking the poor to carry the heaviest load?

These are all moral choices. Those with the power to make budget proposals have made their moral choices; and so will we. They are choosing to bestow more windfalls of benefit on their wealthy donors—that's their moral choice. We will stand up for the low-income families that we know and serve and whom they will again ignore—no, assault—that's our moral choice.

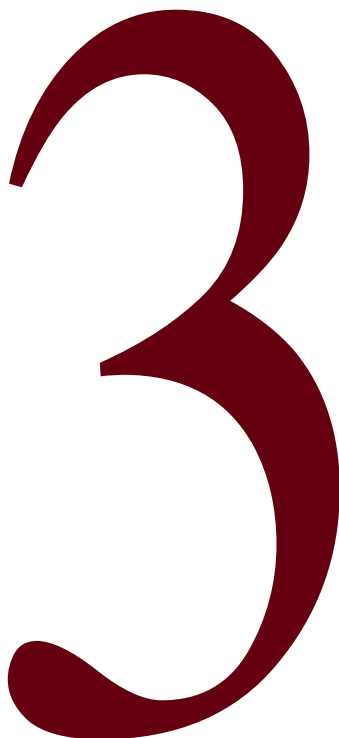
They are choosing the corruption of rewarding the special interests who pay for them—that's their moral choice. We will defend those who have the most need—that's our moral choice. They will place no limits on money for wars that have no end, and weapons systems that have no need—that's their moral choice. We will not let them cut vital programs of nutrition, health care, child care, and education to pay for their bad choices—that's our moral choice.

Here is what the biblical prophet Isaiah says about their moral choices: "Woe to the legislators of infamous laws, to those who issue tyrannical decrees, who refuse justice to the unfortunate and cheat the poor among my people of their rights, and make widows their prey and rob the orphan."

IN DECEMBER 2005, 115 Christians who work with the poor every day interrupted their works of compassion to come to the Capitol—to pray, preach, and prophesy. And we were taken to jail. Mary Nelson, from Chicago, looked up at the congressional staff and members looking out their windows and invited them, "Come walk with us."

John Perkins, 75-year-old evangelical and black church leader who has spent his life in faithful ministry with poor people, told the story of his mother's death from a nutritional deficiency when he was 7 months old. John said he was breastfeeding at the time and thought for years that he had killed her. Only later, he said, did I realize that a white society doesn't care about the nutrition of poor black women and their families. And now they're trying to cut food stamps from this budget. Then he emotionally said, "This is my last stand," before he was arrested.

Due in part to the pressure from the religious community, we saved food stamps from cuts. Now, the proposed cuts on stamps are back. People should know that many of those arrested in December 2005 voted for George Bush, some twice. Now they get arrested to



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Our Moral Choice (cont.)

protest his moral choices. They were his base; they are no longer.

The media noted that the words religious, Christian, and even evangelical are no longer found just alongside the words abortion and gay marriage, but now are alongside words like food stamps, health care, and education. Get used to it. When the politicians pat faith-based organizations on the back for doing such a wonderful job, they are now turning around and saying, “Stop hurting the people we work with and care about!” Come walk with us.

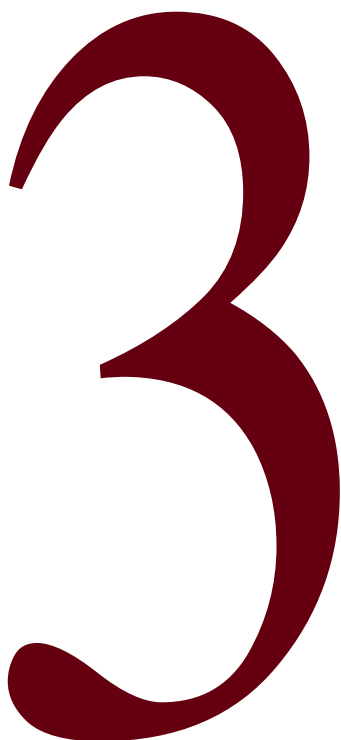
After the 2005 vote, Republicans e-mailed me, “I just want you to know that I voted against this budget and am listening to the religious community.” Bless you. Overcoming poverty must be a bipartisan commitment and a nonpartisan cause. The religious community will ask Democrats to stand firm against this budget violence against poor people, to make the moral choice of favoring the poor over the rich—which is also a biblical choice. Democrats must get religion on the budget.

And to Republicans we say: Follow your conscience, not your party. Help your party make better moral choices than favoring the rich over the poor—stop turning the biblical wisdom upside down—and then having the nerve to claim that you are the religion-friendly party! It’s time for Republicans to get religion on this budget.

We’ve had a year of organizing around the budget in the religious community. We will hold our elected officials accountable in 2006 and 2008 for their votes on this budget—whether they vote for or against poor families.

Budgets are moral documents. We will fight for a just budget. That’s our moral choice. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners. This article appeared in the March 8, 2006, issue of SojoMail.



THE LAWYER, THE BIBLE, AND THE GOVERNOR

An interview with Susan Pace Hamill

by Julie Polter

Susan Pace Hamill, a professor at the University of Alabama Law School specializing in federal corporate tax law, had previously worked at two prestigious law firms and at the IRS. Her research on the Alabama tax code—the most regressive and harsh on the working poor of any in the country—led her to write “An Argument for Tax Reform Based on Judeo-Christian Ethics.” Her article convinced Alabama’s conservative Republican Gov. Bob Riley to propose a state constitutional amendment that would have revolutionized tax policy in Alabama. The proposal failed in the 2003 vote, but the reform work continues—with the potential of spurring a nationwide movement for tax justice. This is her story, as told to Sojourners associate editor Julie Polter.

I had lived in Alabama seven years, which has more taxes than you could shake a stick at, and I had never focused on the state and local inequity. I’m not proud of that. However, I did notice that the first property tax bill for our house was so low that I thought it was for the month instead of the year. I read grocery sales slips thinking, “That’s too high on groceries, that’s not right.” And every year for state income tax I would get refunds while I was writing checks to Uncle Sam.

Meanwhile, my kids are attending a C- funded school system, one of the few in the state I deem minimally adequate, and every year the teachers are begging for donations to cover things. The signs of inequity were there, but I refused to put them together because I didn’t view it as my problem. I would think, “I’m not a state and local tax specialist. I’m a federal person—I’m too busy.”

Then I took sabbatical to attend Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, a primarily Southern Baptist institution. At Beeson, another sign came under my nose: A little newspaper article about a big Washington, D.C. think-tank study on income taxes that ranked Alabama the worst. It stated, “Alabama’s Income Tax Least Fair,” and cited a \$4,600 threshold at which income-tax liability begins. My first instinct was “That has to be a misprint! Even if we’re the worst, that can’t possibly be true.”

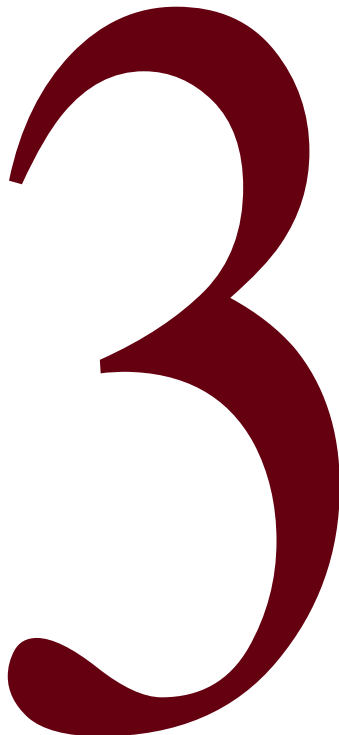
I was horrified to find that it was true. I got my hands on another source, a 30-page report put out by the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama. That report confirmed the first source, giving a broad-brush picture of the major points in what struck me as an ironclad indictment. Then I spoke to Frank Thielman, a Beeson professor I respected. I said, “We’re living in the Bible Belt here, and this tax inequity is a product of our laws, and our laws are a product of our voting, which is a product of our people. So we’re talking about a bunch of voting Christians tolerating this. There’s something wrong here, there’s a gap.”

I asked him if I had a case to attack this on biblical grounds. Frank said, “Not only is your case ironclad, but you should change your thesis and do this topic, because you’re the only one who can.”

IF YOU’RE GOING to attack something morally on biblical principles, you’d better prove your case with 10 witnesses and DNA. I remember the day when the corporate-theory thesis topic I’d been planning went out the window, and it’s good-bye Harvard—Alabama Law Review, here I come! I remember being in despair, because I knew I was going to have to do a lot of empirical research.

My work became public in August 2002. A newspaper reporter convinced me to let him see the draft I had given to the Alabama Law Review. He published a story in the Mobile Register, and it just kind of blew up. Everyone wanted a copy—all the other newspapers were into it.

At the time, Bob Riley and Don Siegelman were running for governor. Riley, the very



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The Lawyer, the Bible, and the Governor (cont.)

conservative Republican, had not spoken to me—and in fact, he still has not; I am a huge political liability. All of the major supporters who got him in office hate my guts. But Riley did say publicly during the campaign, when pressed by an Alabama Public TV interviewer, that I was right, that our taxes are immoral under Judeo-Christian principles.

Riley was elected and his tax reform plan, Amendment One, came out. A lot of people were shocked, especially Riley's traditional supporters. I read the plan top to bottom, in all its complexity, and deemed it a significant first step, or in baseball metaphor a single in the direction of fairness to low-income people. You win more ball games with singles than home runs, and a single is much better than an out. I was a 100-percent unabashed supporter of the plan. I wrote op-eds saying that voting yes was the only moral option. My position was that every Christian-believing, Bible-following, decent Alabamian needed to vote for this.

Before the Riley plan came out, the Christian Coalition of Alabama launched a slander attack on me. I consulted with the political science department [at the University of Alabama]. They told me "your instinct is to ignore this because it's hogwash, but that's the wrong instinct." So I took on the Christian Coalition. I said to newspapers, "Let me tell you how much of this is a lie." I also went to the divinity school for help. After much discussion and a fairly lengthy faculty meeting, they ended up issuing a unanimous public resolution supporting me and my work and urging all of Alabama's Christians to join in the efforts to reform the state's unjust taxes. That was an enormous amount of courage for the Beeson faculty—they took the Christian Coalition on. They stood behind me.

The Christian Coalition of Alabama, in this case, was using faith as a fig leaf for someone's greed. They are funded by the big timber special interests, but we can't prove it because Alabama disclosure laws are so lax. They try to discredit me by saying, "Well, she's wrong because it's up to the church to take care of the poor. She's wrong because low taxes are good for families." Which families? We are overtaxing the fire out of our poorest families. The Christian Coalition makes platitudes that are easily shot down and personal attacks that are just a sign of desperation. Nobody here has been able to touch the credibility of my work. They taught me that my future work better be ironclad, because at the federal level the special interests are meaner, greedier, and better funded.

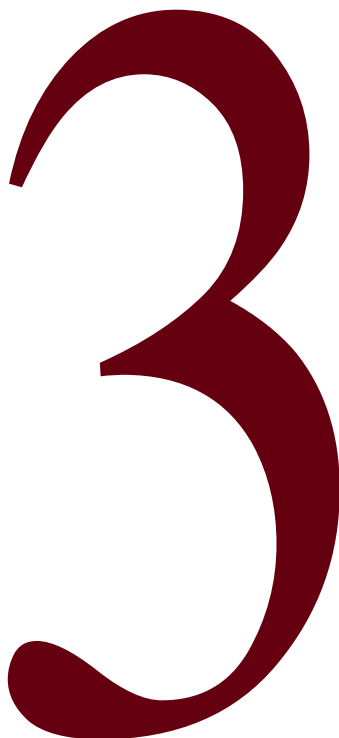
NATIONALLY WE ARE headed for a tax policy of moving the burden downstream to the middle- and lower-middle classes. As a tax person, when I look at the ideas and the policies put out by this administration, they are equating a minimum infrastructure with some kind of welfare state.

I am not in favor of steeply progressive rates, of high tax burdens overall, and of a generous welfare state. That is not defensible under the Judeo-Christian approach that I take. You could defend it under other Judeo-Christian theory, such as liberation theology, but I'm not going there.

My goal is to seriously look at our national tax policy and take the position that we are not thinking and talking about this from a moral framework. We are thinking about this solely from an economic "money is God" framework. We're talking about people, not dogs and cats. We're talking about human beings made in the image of God. Whether or not the recipient deserves it is irrelevant. This is very important. People have said, "Why should I be concerned with people who are lazy?" My response is that if you're pagan, you don't have to be, depending on what kind of pagan you are. But if you're Christian, you must be.

We are all in the image, and what does that mean? It means that your faith in God and your relationship is not a one-way street, it's a triangle situation. You've got God, and you, and the others in the image. And they're connected to God. It is a triangle you can't break. So to disregard others, to treat them as something less than the image, is a sin directly against the Maker. You cannot divorce the connection.

When you start talking about community, taxes are an important element, because you're not going to run an infrastructure from charitable contributions; we're too greedy for that! You've got to run it through the arm of the law, and that brings in justice. Justice in the community means a minimum chance of improving one's lot if you're at the bottom. No matter how despicable you think they are, Jesus says you have to love them anyway, and that's that minimum bar.



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The Lawyer, the Bible, and the Governor (cont.)

This is according to an orthodox, Judeo-Christian, biblically based, evangelical, divine command, ethical approach—you can not get more conservative than that. It's not about class. It's about the standard that we will not dip below with regard to any human being. If that standard is set by mammon and the market, you're not operating under any godly principles. For that matter, you'd probably flunk a whole bunch of other principles too—virtue theory, Immanuel Kant, even utilitarianism. You can't take a "starve the beast" [anti-tax advocates consider the government a beast to be starved] position that wipes out minimum nets for education and basic inoculations and call yourself moral. In my federal work I am going to talk about the other major ways of thinking ethically besides Judeo-Christian. I completely agree with *New York Times* columnist Adam Cohen, who wrote, "So goes Alabama, so may go the nation" as the last sentence of one of his op-eds.

Amendment One was defeated, but the fight is not over. I've wondered what further obligations I have personally, as a professor who knows a lot about this and is a sincere, believing Christian who is trying to live out my life given what that means. I stewed over that for a month and a half; friends of mine said, "Just be patient; it will be revealed."

It was revealed to me, by a wonderful man down in Geneva County. Geneva County is at the bottom of the state in the wiregrass region, near the Florida border. It's a relatively poor area. Eighty-five percent of Genevans voted against Amendment One. Joe Paul, a small-town lawyer—sort of the Atticus Finch of Geneva—called me up and said, "Would you consider coming to Geneva?"

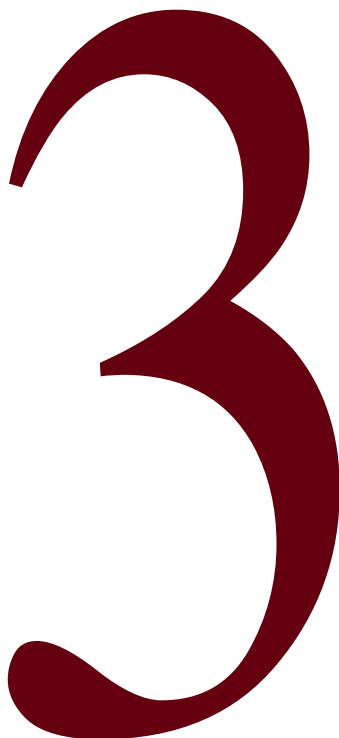
With the help of Joe Paul, his girlfriend, and her buddies, I didn't only do Rotary, I did a Wednesday night church, a town meeting, the high school, the drug store soda fountain on the town square, and Doc's radio show broadcast throughout the county. I stayed with the high school librarian, who's a pillar of the church where I spoke. The point of it was, don't just breeze in and out as some outsider. In order to win support for the reforms that are necessary to pull Alabama off the bottom, you have to reach a certain grassroots level of community leaders and impress upon them that it's up to them to carry everybody else. Now I understand my obligation—I have to find the Joe Pauls in the other 60 or so rural counties and get them to bring me in. That's not easy.

WHAT DO WE DO now? If you want to see the end result of bad tax policy, which is also immoral tax policy, just look down here at us. The least among us are suffering the worst. We may see draconian cuts that will turn poor senior citizens out of nursing homes because Alabama can't match the federal share of Medicare coverage. The easiest way to get more revenue here is to raise sales taxes on groceries and the like, which are unfortunately already sky-high and the most regressive. This all gets down to the property tax, especially big timber. The largest of the big timber companies are robbing us blind. When you have low gross retail sales, because your economy is basically based on big timber, you're not even going to get anything from sales tax increases except further oppression of the mothers that have to buy milk.

The knowledge that our taxes are grossly unfair is not a new thing. I'm not the only one in Alabama that has ever thought about or written this. But my work did two things that were new. The most important is that it made the moral link to Judeo-Christian values. But I also documented extensively the big timber and the schools situation, adding some indicting statistics to just how little big timber is paying. We all know we're being robbed, but my study has very specific information; less than 2 percent of the property tax is paid by people who own 71 percent of the land—that wasn't known.

My hope is that we can get to a long-term solution before it becomes more or less impossible—at some point you sink so low that you can't get back up again. You can talk about that from an economic point of view, you can talk about that biblically; that's the whole message of the prophets. And that's been one of the warnings that I've issued. At some point we are not going to be able to recover, and we will be judged. Morally speaking. ■

Julie Polter is an associate editor of Sojourners. This article appeared in the April 2004 issue of Sojourners.



THE SAFETY NET

A conversation with Sharon Daly, Peter Edelman, Barbara Howell, and Wendell Primus

by Jim Wallis

In the aftermath of President Clinton's signing of "welfare reform" legislation in August 1995, three top administration officials—Peter Edelman, Wendell Primus, and Mary Jo Bane—resigned in protest. Two of them, Edelman and Primus, joined Barbara Howell of Bread for the World, Sharon Daly of Catholic Charities USA, and Jim Wallis of Sojourners in a December 19, 1996, discussion in Washington, D.C., on the social catastrophe connected with this repeal of welfare—and what the churches could do about it.

Wallis: What would be the elements of a positive welfare reform package within the context of this law?

Primus: The states are going to be under pressure to run work programs or to try to move individuals into self-sufficiency. They need to design good welfare-to-work programs that aren't punitive, that reward work. If individuals are going to do community work, they should turn the AFDC benefit check into a wage, and then that family would be eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit.

Daly: Turning the welfare check into a paycheck gives people dignity, it makes them part of the community, and they can say on their resume they had a real job. That's one of the most creative things that states can do.

Wallis: What are some practical things the states can do on child care?

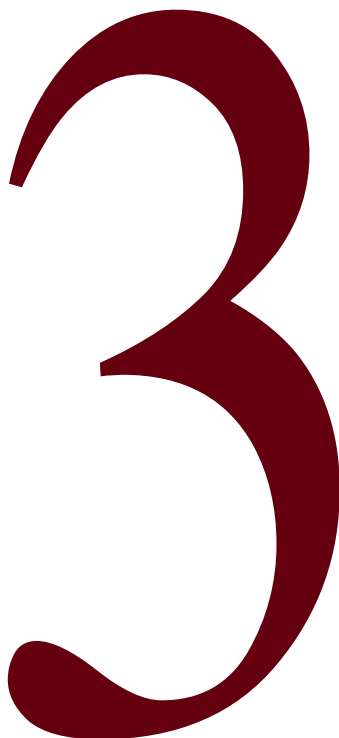
Edelman: One of the major constraints is that there isn't enough money in this program. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the bill is cumulatively \$12 billion short of what would be necessary to do adequate job training. The child care is short, too. People should advocate that the state use enough of its own money so that there is a seamless system of affordable child care.

Daly: Under the law, the idea is that you get day care for one year when you go off welfare. One year later you're still making the minimum wage, you still have to pay rent and buy groceries and put new brakes in your car. Day care for one year is not going to do any good. People who are entering the labor force from welfare are going to need day care subsidies for five or six years minimum.

Primus: We have 1.5 million mothers who are going to be asked to move into the labor force, and a million 18-to-50-year-olds on food stamps. If they all went into the labor force, they would further depress our lowest unskilled wages by an estimated 15 percent. If these mothers are to work, they're going to need child care. There's not near enough. The welfare recipient next door might have to be trained to care for a child or two, which would also translate into better parenting skills. Child-care advocates have concerns about quality, but I think it still has to be on the table.

Edelman: There aren't enough jobs out there for this massive infusion to the labor force. Over the last six years, for example, the New York City metropolitan area *lost* 260,000 jobs. There are slightly more than 300,000 adults on AFDC in New York City. That just doesn't add up. You'll find a similar situation in just about every metropolitan area in the country.

This is the hardest part of our population to get into jobs. A lot of people who've been on welfare are taking care of chronically ill children or chronically ill relatives. A lot of these people have poor skills. A study from the state of Washington shows that 30 percent of the wel-



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fare case load is learning disabled.

Wallis: We can't really be active on this issue without bringing the larger structural questions, such as the loss of jobs that pay a living wage, before the public consciousness.

Primus: Studies done at Michigan State found that in inner-city New York there were 14 applicants for every McDonalds job. We're going to have to do some public job creation if we're going to meet this demand.

Daly: I don't think we should kid ourselves that even if we did that, it would fix anything. Seven out of 11 people that come to Catholic Charities now come for emergency services—they don't have a place to live, they don't have food for that day. Most of those people are not on welfare.

The president talks about these millions of people who've gone off welfare and the governors announce all their great successes. Many of those people who've been pushed off welfare aren't working. They got jobs for a little while and then they couldn't get back on welfare. There are people working full time who can't get by without coming to the church for a bag of groceries, who can't pay their electric bills, who can't put gas in the car or get it fixed. Those people are still very poor, and their children are suffering. Way beyond welfare, we have a much bigger problem in this country.

Primus: Our welfare system is very sexist in the sense that we've expected the mother to do everything: the parenting, the caring for the child, as well as the breadwinning. We need to be more concerned about the male population that has been divorced from their families.

Howell: A large percentage of the women who are on welfare have experienced domestic violence and other abuse. In many instances they have had to leave a partner to get away from that and have had to depend, for a time, on welfare—sometimes for an extended time. What happens now, when there is a time limit?

Wallis: The problems that we're talking about often have economic and cultural causes: work, public jobs, family breakup, violence against women. Apart from the policy questions, what are the other economic or cultural questions that we need to address, societally and culturally?

Edelman: We're talking about the wrong subject out there. The subject should be ending poverty, not welfare. That's where we should start. Talk about employment policies that relate to everybody, including young people coming up. Start talking about how we make schools work, about safe neighborhoods, about dealing with the violence in our society—in the home and in the media and on the street. Start talking about health coverage for everyone, about child and youth development. We really need to be talking about safe passages into adulthood, surrounded by caring adults and supportive parents and a context of community responsibility.

Those are the more fundamental issues than the question about welfare. We've been tricked into this debate; welfare is what you do when everything else fails. We've never done all the other things that are necessary to prevent people from going on welfare in the first place.

Wallis: A lot of people, liberal and conservative, are saying that government programs by themselves aren't always the best way to solve social problems. What can the religious community do that addresses the larger questions of how to eliminate poverty in this country?

Daly: The first thing is to educate the religious community about what it *can't* do. We've all heard speeches about how the churches are going to pick up the slack. In this welfare bill, Congress cut \$54 billion over five years—on average, just under \$16 billion of cuts a year. All the private giving to programs for the poor in the whole country in a year totaled \$11 billion. That includes all the money that's raised by United Way in every work place in America, and

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all the money raised by Catholic Charities, the Salvation Army, Lutheran Social Services, the Jewish Federation. So they are cutting more in a year—almost one-and-a-half times as much—than is raised now by the whole human services network, secular and religious.

Churches have got to be advocates, first and foremost. The churches can't make up this difference. These are not little Band-Aid problems that little Baptist congregations can fix. Besides, the Baptist congregation isn't trying to help just one family. They've got 400 families all around them who are going to have their food stamps cut.

Make sure that you're part of a statewide advocacy network in your state—because if you don't speak up, the 11 million people that the churches are serving now in emergency services around the country is going to be 22 million next year and 30 million soon.

Howell: If the 350,000 churches in the country were expected to pick up these cuts, it would cost on average \$150,000 for each church.

Daly: Not many churches have a budget of \$150,000.

Howell: It's just not realistic at all. We all know that hunger is preventable. It's unacceptable that we have any hunger at all in this country. This year Bread for the World will be pushing national legislation to restore some of the cuts to the food program and to improve the nutrition safety net. We are also asking people to increase charitable efforts.

Wallis: If I had to pick one thing that makes the most difference in a young person's life, it's a mentoring or eldering relationship.

Daly: It's important that church folks get to know poor people so that you can talk about people you know and not poor people in the abstract. There's this terrible stereotype out there that poor people are poor because they are bad, that they're not as moral as the rest of us. You know the radical thing that Jesus said: Blessed are you poor. Even in Jesus' time people liked to say that it was their own fault that people were poor, because they were bad. As Christians, we know better.

Edelman: There is such a disconnect in this country between private action and the public sphere. Church people need to have an overarching perspective of both. In the '60s the stereotype was that such action was a kind of Band-Aid, and we were going to get laws passed by Congress that solved everything. Some people disdained activity that wasn't structural, that wasn't going to change thousands of millions of people.

Well, that's wrong. It's vitally important, but it is not enough. People need to understand when they work in a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter that these places shouldn't have to exist in that way if we had a decent housing policy and decent services. We will not have affordable housing for all the people if we don't have decent public policy, and we're not going to have decent public policy on any subject unless people get involved.

Howell: It is important to do something, and this is a critical time, even if it is just writing a letter. There are organizations, Bread for the World being one, that can help.

Primus: I've been inside the beltway here for the last 25 years. We have such an anti-government mood in this country that we have to show that government programs work. These poverty programs reduce poverty significantly. That message has to come back to Washington, D.C., from the states. These programs aren't nearly as much of a failure as the rhetoric of the last two years would have indicated.

Daly: I'd like to remind Catholics that in our teaching, helping the poor is not an option for extra credit, it's a requirement. But we can't do this alone. We have to do this as the Body of Christ. We have to do this all together. I'm proud that the church has stood up for poor people. We can do a lot better for the poor if a lot more people will join that effort. ■

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of Sojourners. This excerpt is from "The Issue Is Poverty," which appeared in the March-April 1997 issue of Sojourners.

SAUL ALINSKY GOES TO CHURCH

by Helene Slessarev-Jamir

The origins of community organizing are generally traced to the pioneering work of Saul Alinsky, who built the first community organizing effort in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood in the 1930s. Alinsky created the early community-based efforts by organizing existing groups into collective action around particular issues. Today many communities are much less cohesive, so it is necessary to build relationships first and then take on issues that grow out of those stronger bonds. In poorer communities, churches are often experiencing the same loss of cohesiveness as they struggle to survive in an increasingly barren environment. Thus, organizing becomes a means for such congregations to reconnect with their own members and with the broader community around them.

Congregation-based community organizing is the fastest growing form of organizing in the country, according to Doug Lawson of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. "No one else approximates faith-based organizing," he says. The only non-faith-based organization that has built comparable power is ACORN, or the Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now.

In 1999, CCHD funded 89 different faith-based community organizations. In all of the local networks, the majority of the member institutions are churches. In some cases, synagogues and mosques have also joined along with other nonreligious organizations, such as unions, hospitals, and other social service providers. In Chicago, the Metropolitan Alliance of Congregations recently brought together 2,000 people to celebrate the creation of a partnership with 10 banks that have agreed to provide up to \$1 billion in loans for 13,000 families between now and 2005. The churches will recruit, nurture, and train these families in home ownership.

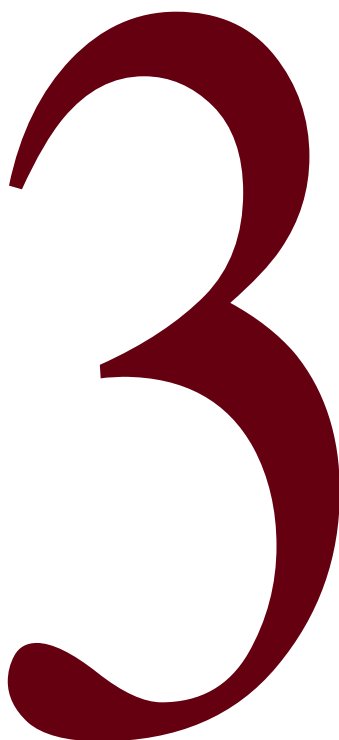
All community organizing begins with the premise that 1) the problems facing distressed communities do not result from a lack of effective solutions, but from a lack of power to implement these solutions; 2) that the only way for communities to build long-term power is by organizing people and money around a common vision; and 3) that a viable organization can only be achieved if a broadly based indigenous leadership—not one or two charismatic leaders—can knit together the diverse interests of their local institutions.

A 1996 study done by Jeannie Appleman for the Discount Foundation documents the strength of local congregation-based organizing in empowering communities. Of the five faith-based organizing networks studied, she found that all won concrete improvements for their communities and all were able to sufficiently alter the local structures of power to influence resource allocation by effectively rewarding and punishing local elected officials and CEOs. Several of them were able to become a party to decisions on future resource allocations.

The earlier generation of community organizations focused on a single community and issue. Over time, however, it became clear that this approach did not build the power base needed to challenge larger institutions, including city and state governments or big corporations. For that reason faith-based community organizing now is carried out through large city-wide or even metropolitan-wide networks. Rev. Dennis Jacobson, pastor of Incarnation Lutheran Church and a leader in MICAHA (Milwaukee Innercity Congregations Allied in Hope), admits that Wisconsin's governor writes off the organization, just as he writes off the inner city of Milwaukee. MICAHA, which began as a network of 36 inner-city churches, is now expanding into Milwaukee's suburbs. "We have to build a larger power base because a lot of issues that affect our communities are statewide issues," says Jacobson.

MICAHA used the Community Reinvestment Act as leverage to force 17 lending institutions to change their underwriting criteria for home and business loans. The result was \$480 million in home and small business loans to 2,400 low- and moderate-income minority residents.

Churches that become engaged in community organizing are most often rooted in faith



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Saul Alinsky Goes to Church (cont.)

traditions that recognize that sin is not just personal, but social and economic as well. Thus, poverty is not simply the result of personal moral failure, but is also caused by the sins of the larger economic or social system. For example, the United Methodist Church's *Book of Discipline* explicitly states, "we do not hold poor people morally responsible for their economic state." Community organizing becomes a means by which churches can act against corporate sin. In several cases, higher church bodies have contributed funding.

BY ITS NATURE as a faith community, the church is a relational institution. Individual congregations often consist of members with extensive ties to each other by virtue of being part of a larger extended family, or families whose children attend the same schools, or people who have been in fellowship with each other for many years. For people who have been marginalized by mainstream society, the church is often the one institution offering them the space to freely develop their leadership abilities by serving as deacons, trustees, musicians, and teachers. This makes the church an excellent starting point for building a powerful community organization.

The Discount Foundation study concluded that having a membership based in community institutions, especially within congregations, had enabled the community organizing projects documented to establish themselves as stable and financially viable organizations, accountable to the communities in which they operate. Each organization has leveraged the social capital of congregations to achieve social change; provided a progressive alternative to the Religious Right; and built an organizational culture that fused religious language, symbols, and values with organizing principles of accountability and civic participation.

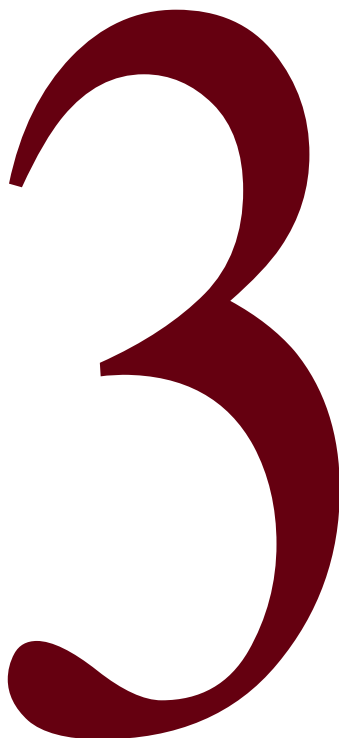
Chicago's United Power for Action and Justice—a wide network of churches and local unions—spent months discussing the values on which their broad-based effort would be founded. In a region seriously divided by race, class, and geography, those discussions formed an organization that, remarkably, encompasses people from the city and suburbs, various religious denominations including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Muslims, and people from a variety of ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds. The organization spent its first two years, including a founding meeting attended by more than 9,000 people, establishing common ground before it sought to define its agenda. Modern organizing is concerned with building these kinds of relationships, out of which emerge a commitment to civic engagement.

THE FIRST STAGES of organizing occur within the congregations themselves. Those members of a congregation interested in initiating an organizing effort reach out to other members of their church, listen to their concerns and hopes, and engage them more deeply in the life of the congregation. Then members reach out to neighbors of the congregation—knocking on doors and meeting one-on-one to ask people what they see as pressures affecting the quality of family and neighborhood life. Greg Galluzzo, head of the Gamaliel Foundation, one of the four national organizations that recruits paid organizers and trains community people in organizing, emphasizes the importance of these one-on-one meetings as the foundation for any organizing project. "If you understand the depth of our lack of community, you understand our lack of relationship building," Galluzzo said. "We need one-on-ones because people don't know each other."

As a church becomes active in the broader issues of the community, new leaders emerge from within the congregation who become engaged not only in the broader organizing efforts, but in the life of the church itself. Pastors whose churches are involved in community organizing note how much better organized their own parish committees are, how much more eager lay people are to become involved and participate in church activities.

Bishop George McKinney, pastor of St. Stephen's Church of God in Christ in San Diego, explains his commitment to community organizing by saying, "Because of the church's involvement in addressing certain social and justice issues, we have been able to present God to many who would never have come to church. Thus, community-based organizing has been used by God as a tool of evangelism."

Father Michael Jacques, whose church led the formation of All Congregations Together in New Orleans, has seen new leadership emerge in his church "from people I never imagined." ACT has successfully campaigned for increased accountability on the part of public



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Saul Alinsky Goes to Church (cont.)

officials—including the mayor, police department, and the board of education. In each case, ACT has influenced these officials to act upon a reform agenda that grew out of hundreds of one-on-one conversations conducted by members of their congregations. Father Jacques sees how participation in community organizing increases a sense of ownership in the church and pride in the community. “It restores those old time concepts of building relationships and looking out for each other.” ■

Helene Slessarev-Jamir was the director of urban studies and associate professor of political science at Wheaton College in Illinois when this article appeared in the March-April 2000 issue of Sojourners.

