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Liberal Christians Mobilize to React to Religious Right

By NEELA BANERJEE

ADISON, Wis., Oct. 9 - The efforts of conservative Christians to mobilize voters against same-sex marriage and abortion and in support of [President Bush](#) have stirred a growing backlash among more liberal believers. And they are taking their cues from the religious right.

Members of the First Unitarian Society here, Claire Box and Linda Knox are part of a broad effort by moderate and liberal religious people to register voters, especially in swing states like Wisconsin and in poor areas with low voter participation.

One autumn morning, the women went to neighboring Madison Town and stepped out into the parking lot of the Maple Glen apartments, home to working-class and poor families, hoping to find new voters. In minutes, those people found them.

"Can I vote?" Tracy Briggs, 26, asked Ms. Box, balancing her baby nephew on her hip.

Soon, Ms. Briggs's younger sister, Tyree, 24, told Ms. Knox that she, too, needed to register. Then came Clarence Martin, 48, a meat plant worker.

None voted in 2000. All were determined to vote on Nov. 2.

Ms. Knox has not been so politically active in 30 years. But as is the case with so many fellow volunteers, the politics of conservative Christians and President Bush have taken her to places like Maple Glen, she said.

"The religious right is defining what it means to be a patriotic American, and they're patriotic because they believe in their God, they have Bush, and they are convinced they have the answer," Ms. Knox said later. "But as Unitarians, we don't believe there is a single right answer."

Long scattered and out of the limelight, some liberal believers, led by Christian groups, said they saw this election as the first step to regroup and take back an agenda and a faith that they believe the religious right has hijacked.

Liberal preachers are barnstorming the country, telling Christians that they are not alone in their moderate views or their questioning of the government. Parishioners are registering people in their congregations, going door to door in their communities and enlisting volunteers to get out the vote.

No one says these Christians are as well organized, well financed or politically formidable as conservative Christians. But they are rousing people, mainly in areas that lean Democratic, around issues of social justice like the environment, the war and, most often, poverty.

"In this election, some religious voices say all our beliefs can be boiled down to - I'd say strangled by - two hot-button issues, abortion and gay rights," the Rev. Jim Wallis, convener and president of Call to Renewal, said in a sermon here.

Mr. Wallis, whose group is committed to reducing poverty, added: "We have Southern Baptists who wear buttons that say, 'Vote your values.' I say, 'Vote all your values.' The cries of the poor ring from cover to cover in my Bible. God hears the cries of the poor. Do we?"

The effects of the efforts will not be known until after Nov. 2, because registration continues in some states like Wisconsin through Election Day. Yet, a partial picture is emerging. In Dane County, home to Madison, the nonpartisan but mostly liberal Go Vote coalition has registered 20,000 voters, many of them low-income.

The Gamaliel Foundation, a grassroots interfaith organization, estimated that it had registered 44,000 people through its Rolling Thunder voter campaign in 18 states. That includes more than 17,000 in the Detroit metropolitan region, or more than 1 of every 10 among the 100,000 new voters registered in southern Michigan this year, the campaign director, Laura Barrett, said.

In Minnesota, the state's Baptist Convention, an affiliation of black churches, led a coalition that has registered more than 10,500 voters, said the Rev. David L. Everett, program coordinator.

Through its Let Justice Roll antipoverty network, the National Council of Churches said it had registered more than 100,000 voters, with 40,000 in Oregon.

Though the groups say they are exceeding their targets, their numbers are modest compared to bigger, better financed efforts like Rock the Vote by MTV. That effort says it has signed up almost 1.4 million voters.

Conservative Christians say their more liberal counterparts pose no threat. Their activism is too weak to slow the momentum of the evangelical movement, said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, a conservative group.

"Historically, what they advocate is a nondescript position devoid of any values, including principles in Scripture," he said. "It's hard to get people excited about mush."

Liberal Christians could counterbalance the religious right, said John C. Green, Director of the Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, a bipartisan research institute at the University of Akron.

People who identify with the religious right make up 12.6 percent of the population, Mr. Green's research shows, and they are strongly Republican. But the "religious left" is of equal size and "probably growing" and "moving in a Democratic direction," the same research finds.

The problem for organizers in the religious left is that they do not behave with the same predictability and cohesion as the right, Mr. Green and other academics said. Those on the left are more heterodox in their views and less willing to accept marching orders from ministers, making them harder to mobilize, he added.

"A reason that the religious left isn't taken as seriously," he said, "is that they may be able to get out a crowd, but people don't think they can swing an election."

The Minnesota Baptist Convention canvassed the six districts in the state with the lowest turnouts in 2000, all but one in the Twin Cities region, and all low income to working class. Volunteers went from homes to homeless shelters to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, said Mr. Everett.

"I've been on corners with men who have been jobless and homeless and may be doing something outside the law, but they still wanted to vote, and I've been with families where both parents work," Mr. Everett said. "I tell them that we're out here because we've been called by God to make a difference in our community, and when we talk longer, I remind them that people have died to give them the right to vote."

With voter drives mostly completed, moderates and liberals are focusing on getting out the vote. In Dane

County, voter participation in poor neighborhoods is 21 percent, said Wendy Cooper, a member of the Go Vote coalition planning committee.

The group plans to start calling new voters two weeks before the election. A taxicab company has offered to give 1,300 free rides to people who need help going to the polls, Ms. Cooper said.

Volunteers like Ms. Box and Ms. Knox are going door to door telling people where polling stations are, urging them to take identification and to go early to avoid possible chaos because of so many new voters.

If Mr. Kerry wins, liberal activism could actually dwindle, said Laura Olson, an associate professor of political science at Clemson, "because a lot of this is countermobilization to the Bush administration."

Some moderate and liberal Christians argue that the country's problems are too severe and that the religious is right too tenacious to turn away now.

"If Bush is re-elected, the work continues, and if Kerry is elected, the work continues," the Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz Jr. of the Forest Hill Church, a Presbyterian institution in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, said. "Just because Kerry is elected doesn't mean we have the kingdom of God here on Earth."

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