

5-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Jantz, Anita (2005) "Life at the fringes: the biblical agenda of Sojourners community," *Consensus*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol30/iss1/3>

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Life at the Fringes: The Biblical Agenda of Sojourners Community

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It has come to be expected within North American Christianity that those who have an affinity and a passion for issues of justice and peace in the world are familiar with the *Sojourners* magazine, a monthly periodical coming out of Washington D.C. The force and stability behind *Sojourners* has come from its founder, Jim Wallis, who has been the editor of the magazine since its inception; first published under the name *The Post American*, in 1971.

Sojourners has, over the years, consistently proclaimed a countercultural witness, probing the realities of poverty, racism and injustices of many kinds and at the same time exposing the specious nature of 'idolatrous' religion in America. Throughout its history, the magazine has been published by a community also known by the name Sojourners, that works alongside the publishing venture. Sojourners, the community, has existed in various forms over the years, from the intense, intentional "common purse" variety to the less structured, more fluid grouping of housemates who share a common purpose and mission. The community itself has been an interesting experiment in radical, countercultural faithfulness and witness.

Sojourners magazine, as well as Sojourners community, claims a mission that is purely faith response, based on radical Christian orthodoxy. "The oldest and best traditions of the church demand that the gospel be proclaimed and lived in the midst of the suffering world, that those who would follow Jesus Christ be particularly sensitive to the poor and the oppressed. Those traditions remind us that the way of Jesus is the way of peace, and that a commitment to social justice is simply a consequence of biblical faith."¹ In its most basic form, this is the manifesto by which Jim Wallis carved out a social justice ministry in the U.S. in the early 1970s that continues today; the dawn of the 21st century.

Such a simple consequence of biblical faith, however, practiced in any society of privilege, is necessarily going to bring about unavoidable discomfiture. Wallis describes this: “The church, when most obedient to its calling, is a stranger, an exile, an alien, seeking to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.... Biblical faith is subversive. The church can only provide a radical opposition when it defines itself outside of the system by being firmly rooted in the revelation of God’s Word.... this makes the Christian community a countersign to the status quo, a scandal to the established order.”²

Analysis of *Sojourners* magazine and the community that nurtures it, is the focus of this paper. Perusal of some 20 years (1982-2004) of *Sojourners*, with an attempt to highlight the topics covered in monthly feature articles, will be the basis on which to discuss the nature and effectiveness of its mission and mandate. The basic question being considered is this, How successful is *Sojourners*’ experiment of “life at the fringes,” as “alien” peacemakers, “exiled” voices for the poor and “scandalous” followers of Jesus? Wallis has made some very pointed and unequivocal statements about what it means to be a Christian in the world, how this stance must be, by its very nature, liminal (at the margins or outside the system³) and that the church must be rebuilt⁴ into something that again resembles faithfulness.

The influences that brought this about are the foundation on which Wallis’ mission and ministry is built. Following will be a brief description of the theological elements of Jim Wallis’ mission and passion for the gospel; the influences that converged to form a particular interpretation of the teachings of Jesus and the resulting imperatives for faithful living. Second, a description of the mission of *Sojourners* will be offered, in terms of the issues addressed over a 20 year period (1982 – 2004); everything from injustices of oppressive governments to the things of ecology, economics, globalization and health. Third, radical discipleship as outlined within the pages of the magazine will be considered in these ways: as personal response, as community response, as partnership with the church and as cultural critique. Fourth, a careful look at sexuality and homosexuality in particular, will raise some significant issues in terms of justice and “life on the fringes.” Finally, in considering the overall effectiveness of *Sojourners*’ radical witness to society, the focal points of community and worship will bracket the experience of this small but insistent group of dissidents and radicals.

Jim Wallis: A Theological Journey

At the outset it is essential to recognize the mission of *Sojourners* magazine as one that is inextricably linked with the person and experience of Jim Wallis. His struggles and insights have propelled the magazine into particular locales, addressing specific themes. Wallis' journey of faith forced him into an early and devastating break with the fundamentalist church of his childhood as he became aware of its complicity in fostering white racism and the war in Vietnam.⁵ After several years of political activism on the college scene he rediscovered the power and radical nature of the biblical text.

Delving into the stuff of theology he read the works of several theologians who had a profound influence on his growing awareness of the realities of poverty, the devastating effects of racism, war and oppression of all kinds. His thought is profoundly shaped by William Stringfellow, Jacques Ellul and John Howard Yoder. These theologians were early contributors to *Sojourners* magazine. Other contributors to the magazine; some who are currently well known authors include: Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Henri Nouwen, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Jean Vanier, Ched Myers, Joan Chittister and Allan Boesak to name a few.

Jim Wallis authored three books in a seven year period: *Agenda for Biblical People* (1976), *The Call to Conversion* (1981) and *Revive us Again* (1983). These are all in some sense autobiographical, yet are simultaneously, an attempt at a constructive theology that builds a case for what he terms "radical discipleship" in society. His thought borrows heavily from the authors mentioned above who shared a common analysis of society, the gospel and evil.

It is necessary to offer a brief description of this common analysis because it is the theological foundation from which Wallis mounts his campaign against the evils of injustice and poverty, including a running commentary on the blindness of North American society and a faltering and often faithless church. Wallis' analysis draws on two familiar New Testament images: the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), "a manifesto for Christ's new social order"⁶ and the fallen nature of the "principalities and powers" (Romans 8:38, Ephesians 3:10, 6:2; Colossians 1:16, 2:15 etc.). These focus, with uncompromising acuity, the relationship and vocation of Christians to the world.

"We have no right to accustom ourselves to this world, nor to try to hide it from ourselves with Christian illusion. Living in the world

we are living in the domain of the Prince of this earth, of Satan,” writes Jacques Ellul. Taking sin with utter seriousness, Ellul describes the non-negotiable realms of experience in which Christians inhabit: “...on the one hand it is impossible for us to make this world less sinful; on the other hand, it is impossible for us to accept it as it is...it is a very painful and a very uncomfortable situation but it is the only position which can be fruitful for the action of the Christian in the world. We must accept this tension and live in it.”⁷ Mission involves engaging the troubles in the world by being different from the world⁸ yet knowing intimately the complexities⁹ and realities of daily life.

H. Berkhof describes “the powers” referred to in the New Testament¹⁰ in this way, “The state, politics, class, social struggle, national interest, public opinion, accepted morality, the ideas of decency, humanity, democracy – these give unity and direction to thousands of lives. Yet precisely by giving unity and direction they separate these many lives from the true God; they let us believe that we have found the meaning of existence...”¹¹

In *Christ and the Powers*, Berkhof, a Dutch theologian read by the early group of dissenters who contributed to *Sojourners*, makes the case that the powers have dominion over the world except where “Christ is preached and believed in”¹² and herein lies the vocation of the church. Principalities and powers in themselves are not evil. However, they are powerfully seductive in distracting humanity, including the church, from acknowledging the lordship of Christ; seductive in the sense that human nature quickly and conveniently ascribes to them ultimate power and authority. As Berkhof argues, allegiance to political movements and ideologies that keep people and nations poor, acceptance of an economic status quo that ignores the world economic situation and exclusive acts that attempt to protect the institutional church from “undesirables”, in reality, separates humanity, even church-going Christians, from God.

William Stringfellow in his book *Conscience and Obedience* maintains that a confession of Christian faith is a political act and as such is in direct conflict with the ways of the world. “Biblical politics always has a posture in tension and opposition to the prevalent system and to any prospective or incipient status quo, and to the ideologies of either regime or revolution. Biblical politics are alienated from the politics of this age.”¹³ This is the stance and

theology of Wallis also, who admits that when Christians stand up for the poor and the marginalized, the church “too will become marginalized, pushed to the edges of society.”¹⁴ Stringfellow contributed articles to *Sojourners* expanding on this theme, critiquing with sharp insight the abuse of power of current government leaders and exposing their policies for the destructive effect that they had on the powerless and disenfranchised.

Another author of influence with a similar theology of “discipleship” (there were certainly other theologians as well) was John Howard Yoder, an Anabaptist theologian in the Mennonite tradition who was a contributing editor of *Sojourners* until 1988. Yoder, too, made reference to authors like Jacques Ellul, William Stringfellow and Hendrik Berkhof and his understanding of the church and the world was of that ilk. Yoder’s book *The Politics of Jesus* published in 1972 was frequently cited by Wallace in his early writing.

Yoder wrote unceasingly of the implications of following Christ; that this enterprise is not regarded as responsible, honorable or worthwhile by a society unwittingly under the influence of the principalities and powers. Yoder, in a manner not unlike Dietrich Bonhoeffer, preached a costly discipleship: “Jesus’ cross was a form of suffering that Jesus could well have avoided. It was the cost of his obedience in the midst of a rebellious world. It will be no different for us.”¹⁵

Jim Wallis and the Sojourners enterprise were unqualified in their commitment to a lifestyle that looked after the needs of the little, the lonely, the least and the lost and that peace is foundational in a Kingdom that lives and works for justice. Further, from Yoder: “What Jesus renounced was not first of all violence, but rather the compulsiveness of purpose that leads men to violate the dignity of others ... Our readiness to renounce our legitimate ends whenever they cannot be attained by legitimate means itself constitutes our participation in the triumphant suffering of the Lamb.”¹⁶

The Mission Of Sojourners

Outfitted with this biblical agenda or gospel hermeneutic, *Sojourners* magazine sets out to expose and address oppression in America and critique the principalities and powers driving the American economy, lifestyle and agenda. “We live in one of the most self-centered cultures in history,”¹⁷ states Wallis and as such the

church has a huge challenge in terms of trying to extricate itself from the idolatry of riches. “Jesus talked more about wealth and poverty than almost any other subject.”¹⁸

Their most consistent target was the United States’ foreign policy in Central and South America. According to the frequency of feature articles, coverage of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua in Central America was at its most comprehensive in the 1980s. Virtually every month, if there was not a feature article in the magazine, there were columns, letters and notices about America’s complicity in, and funding of, the injustices taking place.

The political and social situation in Nicaragua was one of the most publicized in *Sojourners*. For example, the March 1983 issue featured six articles on Nicaragua, following a visit by evangelical church representatives; Jim Wallis and others from the Sojourners community being a part of that delegation. They had been asked to witness the “covert effort by the United States government to destabilize the new government of Nicaragua and destroy the revolution that had toppled the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in 1979.” Jim Wallis reported, “The United States has a shameful history in that country. It is a history of greed. We have exploited their land and their people. We have been the perpetrators and the supporters of unspeakable violence against Nicaraguan people.”¹⁹

Stories from South America were also on the agenda but these generally came later in the early 1990s with a focus on Colombia and Brazil. Consistently the writers and editors of *Sojourners* held the United States government accountable for policies that kept Latin America poor, servile and mercenary to the dictates of American power mongers. Since 1982 *Sojourners* covered stories on Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Peru. By far and away, their most consistent interest over the years has been El Salvador and Nicaragua!

As the 1980s proceeded, other countries began to take the spotlight too. *Sojourners* did not back down from exposing the political corruption of ruling regimes and America’s entanglement with them. Stories came from Haiti,²⁰ the Philippines,²¹ and, always, the Middle East. Apartheid in South Africa was covered extensively in the 1980s.²² As the Gulf War was fought by the United States in Iraq, the February/March and April issues, in 1991, offered extensive anti-war coverage.

Again, in 1999, the Balkan war forced an in depth analysis of ethnic violence: a breed of violence that continues to erupt around the globe, in spite of the world's resolve to stop such pogroms. The writing staff of *Sojourners* magazine addressed the possibilities of non-violent strategies to stop the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Yugoslavia.²³ David Hartsough, in an article entitled "Creative Courage," illuminates an alternative to the deadly carnage of sanctions and bombings: "The world lost a crucial opportunity to support the massive nonviolent movement in Kosovo and Yugoslavia before the conflict erupted into the tragic war engulfing the entire region. Part of the problem was that media did very little to tell about the nonviolent movement that was taking place."²⁴

True to form, the magazine mounted a radical and alternative campaign, condemning the policies that escalate violence and irrevocably lead to confrontation. Critics of non-violent strategies say that these are ineffective in the face of the massive firepower available to all sides. Yet, loss of life is certain in either event. A non-violent alternative has the potential to go farther than most would expect in "disarming" enemies.

Coverage of international issues of war, military and governmental alliances and poverty in third world countries were issues of paramount importance through the 1980s. Closely aligned with injustice and poverty around the world was the related spectre of nuclear weapons development and the arms race. Jim Wallis edited two books in the same number of years, *Waging Peace: A Handbook for the Struggle to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* in 1982 and *Peacemakers: Christian Voices from the New Abolitionist Movement* in 1983. These were compilations of articles by Christian writers who spoke against the evil of nuclear war. In his introduction Wallis describes the danger:

The bomb was developed in secret. Similarly, United States nuclear policy has never been the subject of national political debate. The most important questions affecting the life of every American—and of everyone in the world for that matter—have been decided by a handful of political rulers, without discussion or consent of the people...

For years now, the nuclear danger has preoccupied our minds, hearts, prayers, and action. The labor for peace has been long and often hard, involving speaking, writing, vigiling, demonstrating, organizing, resisting war taxes, committing civil disobedience,

going to jail. For all in our community, the nuclear arms race has been a point of conversion. Our struggle for peace has deepened our faith and reshaped our lives.

From the beginning, we have seen nuclear weapons as not only a threat to survival, but as a crisis of faith. Our acceptance of these weapons among us poses a theological and spiritual challenge, not just a political problem. We have held that the church's response to the nuclear danger will be the most urgent test of our conversion in this perilous age.²⁵

Sojourners community members, in the 1970s and 80s organized and participated in all manner of demonstrations, sit-ins, tax protests and civil disobedience in order to bring to public awareness the dangers of nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war. These were actions of radical protest; Jim Wallis, the Berrigan brothers, William Stringfellow and others were arrested, monitored and otherwise scrutinized by the U.S. government and more than likely, other countries' intelligence agencies as well.

In documenting the activities of the Sojourners movement it becomes unmistakable that all the ills of society, any that could be named and discussed, were indeed named and discussed, debated and decried by this relatively small grassroots movement of theologically and socially conscious radical outcasts. They were outcast in terms of the mainstream. This did not mean that they were not people of means; they were. Many were well-educated and not of necessity poor, however, they occupied a place at the fringes of a society that saw nothing immoral about aspiring to empire status in the world.

This fringe element, to the theologically and politically proper, continued to rub North America's nose in its own mounting systemic injustices, uncovering a mentality of affluence and superiority facilitated by a blunted conscience and an abysmal lack of awareness of the way the world really was. *Sojourners*, the magazine, continued to pump out article after article on every social ill.

The Vietnam War remained a topic of discussion and comparison well into the 1980s and even into the present, as other American instigated conflicts have made their way onto the world stage. The most obvious comparison is the current invasion of Iraq following the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center. Rhetorical tone and content of articles written in the last couple of years, following the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq by the U.S., are not at all

dissimilar to the critiques made of American offensives in the Vietnam War and the Gulf War.

War, poverty and racism lead to the widespread lack of rights and freedoms of much of the world's population. And it was racism that was the first real issue arising for Jim Wallis, pushing him onto the dissenter's path. "I had a deep sense that something was terribly wrong – with my world, my country, and my church. And I began to realize that it had something to do with the condition of black people ... I felt the tension and hostility that pervaded the conversations among whites whenever the subject of blacks, race, the city, or crime came up; people whom I knew to be otherwise kind and loving would be transformed, uttering vicious words of intolerance and fearful hatred. I wanted to know why. My growing alienation and questioning began to focus on one overriding issue: the status of black people in America."²⁶

The civil rights movement, the writing and legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and a host of others who worked to expose the culturally entrenched prejudices of white racism have occupied a major place in the Sojourners' experience and ministries. The social structure that breeds racist tensions in the United States is a constant and most oppressive reality; the likes of which Canada has experienced only to a minor degree in comparison. If *Sojourners* is an accurate indicator, the major justice issue besetting the United States of America is that of racism.

Racism in turn leads to the related justice issues of poverty, crime and the deficits of the prison system, violence on the streets, the abuse and social degradation of women and issues of health care. In fact, racism exacerbates most of the justice issues addressed by *Sojourners* over its three decades. This was obviously the case in the early 1980s and still is, into the 21st century. In 2004, for example, *Sojourners* published articles on Martin Luther King Jr. and features about race and politics, civil rights and music, power and the ever-failing democracy in the U.S. (August, 2004) All is tinged with the underlying reality of racism: an inequitable and unjust social infrastructure. Jim Wallis railed against this for more than three decades. Racism and poverty are inextricably linked and continue to erode the social fabric of American society. And as Wallis writes early on in his career, this is not only a social issue but a matter of faith: "White racism is this country's oldest and deepest sin."²⁷

As the world became aware of all manner of injustice, *Sojourners* was quick to address these challenges from its biblical and marginal perspective: mission in a hostile world. Its writers boldly spoke to issues of women's rights, disabilities, globalization, ecology, biotechnology, labour issues, immigration, health care, economics and big business, the justice system, gang violence and U.S. politics.²⁸ They did not back down from a challenge, writing and lecturing in a way that government considered subversive, verging on the treasonous. To quote Jim Wallis:

The American involvement in Vietnam was not an aberration but in fact only the most current example of a long and bloody record of U.S. interventionism ... at the heart of this ugly record has been economic and political self-interest.... law is on the side of racism and war, and that law and order are often code words for the suppression of dissent and the frustration of social change. At Kent State University, we saw that America would kill its own children for the crime of disobedience against the state.²⁹

Established religion viewed *Sojourners Community* as an irritant, their protests embarrassing, and Wallis' writing offensive. He mounted an offensive of scathing critiques of the church in the early years: "in a world where most people are poor, a rich church is living testimony to idol worship ... much of what the church calls defending the faith is in fact a resistance to offending the world."³⁰

Discipleship: A Personal Response

All that *Sojourners* and Wallis is about is rooted consciously in what they believe to be faithfulness to the gospel imperative of loving the neighbour. The poor, the exploited, the disenfranchised, victims of any kind and even enemies must be the focus of concern and justice. "A relationship to Christ always involves a vital relationship to persons and the conditions of their lives."³¹ Following Christ – a life of discipleship – cannot be disengaged from the needs of the world. In other words, the political cannot be distinguishable from the spiritual.

Discipleship for Wallis means an equation between Christ and love. This equation has always been set against another equation; that of the principalities and the powers with their self-indulgent priorities of the world. Christ and the world will always be at odds with each other. Discipleship, then, is a conscious choice and understanding

about God and the world that demands a radical opposition to the forces that tempt us, like siren voices, into supporting the status quo. Following Christ is mission on the margins that, of necessity, places Christians at odds with the goals of society.

The strategy and lifestyle forming the bedrock of faithful Christian practice is the way of peace. *Sojourners* magazine is filled with articles on peace as a proposal for how to live well together. If there is no peace, there is also no justice. The raft of social ills that grip the world burgeon and then explode into all manner of diabolical events and circumstances. War, violence and greed, the opposite postures to peace, are at the root of social strife. The Sojourners Community and all of their activist efforts proceed from this basic understanding of the gospel and what makes for peace. “Everything we mean by conversion must take human form and flesh in the place we call community. Such a life is more than the Christian’s only hope. It is also the world’s only hope.”³²

As experience matured the community, articles were included that offered support and nurture of the spiritual underpinnings of discipleship; the Christian convictions and teachings that call forth a radical response to the world’s needs. With added frequency throughout the 1980s and 90s, articles appeared about love in community translating into hospitality, hope, vocation, service, mission, healing and friendship. The April 1984 issue of the magazine focused its articles, poetry and protest on “hope” and the many places where people find hope: from the desperate situations in the Philippines, Honduras and inner city Detroit to prisons and seminaries. In a boldly biblical and radical style Wallis comments:

The powers that be are counting on our losing hope. That is their hope. Some people, especially in places of high political authority, are just waiting for us to wear down and out. It is the persistence of hope, even in the midst of their seeming domination, that is the single greatest threat to their absolute authority. To hope against their power is to undermine the illusions and control they depend upon. The poor of the world, on the other hand are hoping we don’t give up. Their very lives are at stake in keeping hope alive. Our despair and resignation do them no good at all. Only in hope can we join with them in the quest for justice and freedom. For the poor and for those who take their side, hope is not a feeling or mood, it is a necessary choice for survival.³³

The life of prayer and worship was always implicit in the magazine's agenda and evolved into something more explicit as the 1980s gave way to the 90s. Various columns and series were devoted to nurturing faith in bible study and lectionary preaching. "Living the Word: Reflections on the Common Lectionary" became a regular offering of the magazine in January 1992 in which short commentary is given on the texts for the coming month. For some years the column, "Simple Feast" covered issues of food and faith.

Discipleship: A Community Response

When Sojourners was still an intentional community that lived together under the same roof, the magazine carried a regular column "Euclid Street Journal," referring to the street address of their residence. This column abruptly ceased publication in December of 1986 after what appears to have been some major conflict within the community, probably related to issues of sexuality.³⁴ Wallis writes occasionally about community disagreements in both the magazine and his books, referring to the evolution of their intentional living arrangements to the eventual conclusion that most Sojourners members no longer lived together.

It came to be that the intensity of living together became too complicated, divisive and distracting to the larger ministry of the Sojourners initiative.³⁵ As the communal living arrangements faded somewhat in importance in the community, issues of family life and the nurture of children grew. Articles relating to children's experience of faith, parenting, women's roles, marriage and divorce took their turn as matters of justice and biblical interpretation. It is of interest that Jim Wallis himself was married sometime in the late 1990s and now has two children.

Community was always envisioned as multivalent, beginning with the personal and immediate experience of the Sojourners fellowship, its magazine and to name only a few of its ministries; publishing, community housing initiatives and affordable child care. The local was merely a launching site for the wider ministries of God's love, lived out in the world. On the occasion of Sojourners Community's 20th anniversary, the magazine (Feb/Mar 1992) published a new statement of faith entitled "Our Life at the Foot of the Mountain" and with it, a renewed call for subscribers of the magazine to become not only readers but joiners of a faith-based

movement for justice and peace. “*Sojourners* is more than a magazine; we are a community-based network with the feel of a family. Sojourners doesn’t want to become a national organization; we want to help link the organizations who could be working together more fruitfully. Sojourners certainly doesn’t want to become a new denomination; we want to help unite the forces of radical renewal in all of them. Sojourners isn’t the movement; we want to serve one – connect it, nurture it, and help prepare for its fuller emergence.”³⁶

Discipleship: Partnership With The Church

The focus of the magazine remained consistent over the years; justice, peace and love. The radical basis for Christian ministry to the world did not change. However, the arena in which justice-seeking was expressed did evolve over time. From a strident voice against racism, the war in Vietnam and plight of the poor living under oppressive and abusive political regimes, the witness of Sojourners, although continuing to address these original issues, moved into the mainstream of ever newly-emerging social issues. In this context, by the mid-1990s Sojourners was making overtures at working more closely as partners with the institutional church.

Momentum was building toward a recognition that the church could become an influential partner in justice-seeking. This is a noteworthy reversal from the early years of Wallis’ berating of the church for selling out to the world. A new and hopeful proposition for partnering in radical discipleship seemed possible once again. In the newly explicated manifesto of 1992, Wallis expresses hope: “By helping to make connections at the local level, offering resources, and providing biblical reflection, we hope to support the development of small communities within and alongside the churches and to connect them together both ecumenically and multiraciallyFrom many corners and different streams, a more prophetic church is aborning.”³⁷

Discipleship: Critique Of Culture

As Wallis and *Sojourners* magazine continued to press the church for some signs of rejuvenation and renewed engagement with justice seeking, they were very deliberate in gauging and monitoring the popular trends in the culture. This was not a new thing for the magazine in the 90s because all along *Sojourners’* writers offered

analyses of popular music, poetry, film and television. In the columns “Critique” and later “Under Review: Culture Watch” songwriters and performers were featured: Carlos Santana, John Coltrane, REM, Toni Morrison, Bob Dylan and especially Bruce Cockburn. It was never the intent of Wallis and the community to disengage from culture but rather to meet it head on, to critique it and to build bridges with people who were searching for meaning in life that found expression through these artistic media. In this regard, *Sojourners* has remained true to its mission of engagement.

It has used the things of cultural sensation and popularity to make its readers aware of the choices they face. Generational differences, as popularized by sociologists, were adopted to discuss the trends and needs of people growing up and aging in America, i.e., analyses of the Baby Boomers and Gen Xers. Articles on youth culture, the internet, aging, the funeral industry, consumer spending, brand names, banking trends and business enterprises built around the likes of Martha Stewart made headlines in *Sojourners*.

As America’s interest in sports, both spectator and otherwise, continued to build over the years, the magazine offered commentary on this cultural phenomenon. With the availability of cable and satellite television as well as the growing trend of family involvement in children’s daily individual and team sports, this whole new area of middle class “idolatry” came under scrutiny. New idols continue to replace old ones in any society. As sports, recreation and leisure morphed into opportunities for wild financial profits in an astounding growth market, the magazine challenged readers to consider their personal priorities in the face of a world that does not adequately care for its own. “The high priests of the athletic arena feed off of the cult of celebrity that infects all of American society.... It would not be difficult to argue that the sports stadium has replaced the church sanctuary as the dominant arena of piety ...”³⁸

On a more personal level, as the pace of life for middle class Americans continued to accelerate, questions were pointedly posed about use of time, living the faith and service to the world. “We can make choices of how we live our lives.... To make these against-the-grain choices, however, we will have to give up something, that we spurn societal definitions and affirmations of success, that we redefine and be satisfied with enough. All that is only possible when our life is firmly grounded in contemplation.”³⁹

As far as the principalities and powers are concerned, the media is definitely one of those structural influences that inadvertently becomes diabolical. Though not evil in and of itself, the media has incredible power over the concerns of humanity and as such holds sway over public perceptions of friendship and hatred, propaganda around war and peace and the proclamation of what is deemed valuable or ignored as insignificant. The media is controlled by wealthy and powerful corporations who have access to people's hearts and minds. *Sojourners* relentlessly challenged this system and encouraged their readers to keep aware of the sins that are committed in acquiescence and thoughtless embrace of the daily offerings of the media.

Wallis has constantly critiqued the Religious Right and the media power that they wielded, influencing the spiritual sensibilities and political lives of the American people. The magazine has never let up in publishing articles decrying the relationship of the White House to fundamentalism. It critiqued, and continues to critique, the myopia of self-serving, self-interested religion, racism in the church and trendy religious initiatives like Promise Keepers⁴⁰ and the "Left Behind" series.⁴¹

However, as I have already suggested above, Wallis' steady harangue against the evils within the institutional church shifted significantly in the last decade. Acknowledging the shortcomings of the church as institution he, nevertheless, turned back to the church hoping to forge a partnership that would work once again to raise awareness of injustice and poverty in America. This initiative came to be known as "The Call to Renewal Movement."

Sexuality: A Justice Issue?

In the 1980s and 1990s *Sojourners* carried numerous articles on family and family-related issues. As divorce became an issue for the church, Wallis addressed it as did many other writers with him. Of course the net was cast wider and came to include articles on women and their struggles for equality; their struggles with poverty and abuse. True to form, Wallis and the magazine dealt with the issues that society was experiencing – moral discussions about teenage pregnancy, abortion, drug use, young offenders and the justice system.

In the same vein, the faith nurture of children, topics of family life and discipline were amply covered. A column entitled "Close to Home" was introduced in April of 1994 that alternated between

topics related to parenting and those of nurturing adults. The mission of radical discipleship was brought into the home to be lived, not only in remote countries where injustice prevails or in the upper echelons of governmental power but right at home in the new and evolving family patterns that dominate society.

Many female writers wrote passionately about finding a place in the leadership of the church and articulated the inequalities that exist for women in both church and society. Racism greatly adds to the struggle of many women, often single parents who are poor and forgotten by the social security and social justice system. *Sojourners* did not back down from these discussions.

From time to time they published articles about sexuality. In the October 1982 issue, Richard Rohr contributed a two-part series entitled, "Pure Passion: The Holiness of Human Sexuality." In it he states, "God's way of loving is the only licensed teacher of human sexuality. God's passion created ours. Our deep desiring is a relentless returning to that place where all things are one. If we are afraid of our sexuality, we are afraid of God."⁴² Three years later, in the July 1985 issue, Richard J. Foster contributed an article from his book *Money, Sex and Power* with the title "God's gift of Sexuality." Both of these articles were writ large on the cover of the magazine. The latter article had a short segment on homosexuality that touched off a serious and divisive debate within the *Sojourners* community.

According to the *Sojourners* Community column *The Euclid Street Journal* (December 1986), the members of *Sojourners* were not in agreement about homosexuality and did not expect to come to a consensus. However they stated: "We ... reaffirmed our commitment to speak out more clearly on questions of justice for homosexuals.... we are committed to dealing with the issue of homosexuality within the context of our commitment to the authority of scripture as God's revelation."⁴³ Despite this promise, there followed only two more columns entitled "The Euclid Street Journal," with no further reference to the community's struggle. Then, the column itself disappeared from the publication with no explanation.

And noticeably absent in *Sojourners* magazine, from that time forward, are the exposés, stories and struggles of the homosexual community. Homosexuality has not been given full exposure on the front cover of *Sojourners* – with one exception. The July 1991 issue's front cover was billed as a "forum" with the title, "Is Anyone

Listening: The Need for a Better Dialogue in the Churches on Gay and Lesbian Sexuality.” There were 6 articles dealing with homosexuality, several of which told personal stories of people who are gay and lesbian. The editors explained themselves:

... our approach to the questions of gay and lesbian sexuality, and sexual ethics more generally, must have biblical and theological integrity, must be pastorally concerned with the people most affected, must make justice a central priority, and must respond especially to those who have suffered and been abused. Our commitment is to seek to be more faithful to those principles in the days ahead. We offer this issue of *Sojourners* with prayers for those people and places in the churches now seeking to find their way through the thicket of contention and controversy surrounding any discussion of these matters – and for all of us who seek the mind and heart of God in relation to our sexuality.⁴⁴

It was already 1991 and the conflicts over homosexuality had been publicly raging for some time, and even though *Sojourners* was rather late into the game, these articles seemed like a good beginning. However, they appear to have also been the end. Besides the editorial strategy of making this look like it was merely an issue for the church, *Sojourners* never again did a cover spread on the topic of homosexuality. Every other major social issue, especially those front and centre in the media, have been given centre stage on the magazine’s cover. Not so with homosexuality! The July 1991 issue took a sideways approach to it and then dropped it.

Sojourners has basically ducked the issue. In years prior to the 1991 forum, there had been occasional mention of homosexuality but these were buried in book reviews, letters to the editor, a couple of short side bar articles and advertisements for lectures. The May-June 1999 issue published the title “A Dialogue on the Church and Homosexuality” as one of three small print titles at the very top of the front cover. Besides the two articles that fell under this description, aimed at the churches to discuss, only one more feature article was found in February of 2004. This too was cited as a dialogue necessary for churches and was reprinted from a conversation between two Presbyterian seminary professors, Richard Mouw and Barbara Wheeler.

Sojourners writers did not deal with the topic themselves and when the subject showed up in print it was deflected as an issue for

churches to discuss. It has obviously been a seriously divisive issue in the Sojourners community. Jim Wallis preached early on that a prophet “will not rage against injustice and violence in some places and be strangely silent about oppression elsewhere.”⁴⁵ Or as he stated more bluntly in *The Call to Conversion*, “Prophets do not attack some injustice and ignore others.”⁴⁶ It must be assumed that since the magazine has not dealt with it as it has all other social troubles, they do not consider homosexuality to be a matter of injustice for the American people.

On the other hand, *The Other Side*, a publication that is also known for its active voice against injustice in American society, has had a very different history with the issue of homosexuality. This journal is considered to be a liberal version of the more theologically conservative *Sojourners*. *The Other Side* began as a voice against racism and eventually grew in scope to include “all who are shut out, excluded, or banished to life on ‘the other side’ of the world’s affluence or privilege.” The publication addressed the topic of homosexuality head on in June of 1978 by publishing an article “The Gay Person’s Lonely Search for Answers” at which point the founder of the magazine, Fred Alexander, quit the magazine. To this day *The Other Side* continues to publish study resources on gays and lesbians and openly addresses the issues and theology relating to homosexuality.⁴⁷

The questions that hang in the air in regards to *Sojourners* and homosexuality are these: Where is the protest against injustice toward homosexuals? Does the theology of the Sojourners community not include a voice for this issue, especially since the topic has been part of the very public debate over same sex marriage? Has Sojourners abandoned its mission? Has it lost its prophetic voice?

A Community At Worship

Leaving these questions for the moment, it must be noted that the thrust of Sojourners mission has been conceived of, and mobilized by, a community at worship; a community that has journeyed into the fray for more than three decades now, committed to a vision, to each other and to God. This has been expressed and witnessed through their deliberate attempts at maintaining Christian community and as community, expressing their love for God and for the world through worship that leads to service.

Change has been a challenge and a catalyst for ever-new initiatives in the Sojourners community. In its earliest manifestation Sojourners attempted a household community, living under the same roof and sharing pooled resources. This experiment failed after some years and several reconfigurations of living arrangements. Now, they publish a magazine, engage in many kinds of ministry and education but no longer live together. They sponsor a yearly complement of Sojourner interns who do live together; a group of young people who commit to a year of household community living while learning about, and participating in, Sojourners ministry. However the Sojourners ministry has been organized over three decades, it has remained a community in prayer and worship together.

Jim Wallis recognized early on in his experience of social advocacy that worship is an essential ingredient of faithfulness in mission.⁴⁸

Worship and politics both raise the same questions: Whom do we love most? Where is our security finally rooted? ... becoming known as peacemakers in the world is not simply a political stance; it is through and through a reflection of our worship ... when we worship in this way, we make a statement about where our security ultimately rests. We stand before the world free of its securities. Nothing is more threatening to a system than people who are free of its control, free of its rewards and punishments ... worship is that place where we remember that nonviolence arms for truth and not for power ... the nature of our corporate worship will ultimately be the test of our other involvement in the world.⁴⁹

Whether in Wallis' books, within the pages of the magazine or on their website, the evidence of the centrality of worship to the mission of Sojourners community is unequivocal, undeniable. Their vision for ministry has been discerned in and through the many acts of worship that they have experienced together; subversive acts, binding the community together and illuminating the changing opportunities for service to the world. Wallis testified that through the freedom of praise in worship, Christians are freed from societal constraints and called back to their roots to become a community of resistance.⁵⁰

Sojourners has reached individuals and churches, enhancing the corporate life of worship through columns and articles that nurture faith formation and offer resources. The magazine would regularly

runs series based on the liturgical year and eventually incorporated a monthly reflection on the lectionary texts in the column “Living the Word.” The magazine has always offered written resources for worship and study. In the early years before electronic resources made information available by the click of a button, the Sojourners community published a resource catalogue that offered books and audiovisual resources “for spiritual renewal and social change.”⁵¹

Their ministry of the printed word has been strong and steady over the years. *Sojourners* has consistently maintained a roster of contributing editors and board members who have a vibrant countercultural presence in the theological/liturgical/homiletical and ecclesiastical world: the early years of John Howard Yoder, William Stringfellow, the Berrigan brothers and Joan Chittister to the more recent present of Walter Brueggeman, Catherine Meeks and Ched Myers. *Sojourners* community remains a strong witness and a thoughtfully studied commentator of “faith, politics and culture,” true to its magazine’s current subtitle.

Life At The Fringes

Fundamental change comes through the leavening process originating from groups at the peripheries or at the bottom of society, groups who live and act out of different commitments and values than the rest of society.⁵²

Sojourners magazine has maintained its vision and commitment to seek justice. It has thus kept its status as a liminal or marginal voice in the mainstream of American religion and culture. In its most recent Call to Renewal campaign, *Sojourners* community is trying to remind North Americans that poverty still exists in spite of the proliferation of middle class wealth, access and option. The peripheral voice of *Sojourners* continues to advocate for those who live at the bottom of society.

The members of *Sojourners*’ mission and the readership of the magazine, however, do not occupy the space at the bottom of society. They, and some of us in the church, are seen as irritants to the designs and goals of “glorious empire” but are not, by far, poor or outcast. On the other hand, those of us supportive and embracing of *Sojourners*’ ministries are not to be found in the cheering section of the game that seeks to crown North America “king” of the world. Nevertheless, we do not, and neither does *Sojourners*, remain fully consistent with a

gospel vision of a motley crew of aliens and exiles living as social deviants for the proclamation and realization of the Kingdom come and coming.

What Sojourners accomplishes in its publication and ministries is true to its original vision of living as biblical people, yet there are deeds left undone and theological stones left unturned. The case of homosexuality as a human and social justice issue has not been adequately engaged. It is probable that this has come about in order to keep the structures of the publication in place and the ministry in operation. Ironically this seems to underscore the truth that anything, once institutionalized, has territory to protect and persons to safeguard. The principalities and powers remain!

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount also remains: a rigorous challenge for Christians and for *Sojourners*. "To look from the margins usually enables us to see better what is to be done ... being closer to the edges than the mainstream yields perspective. Part of being on the margins is new association with the people who have been made marginal."⁵³ Sojourners Community ministry does work at the margins and actively attends to the needs of many who are poor. Sojourners is vocal and active against racism, war and violence of every kind. It offers a countercultural perspective that flows directly out of its call to worship and study together.

Jim Wallis, who remains the driving force behind the movement, has not understood the plight of gay and lesbian people in society, and gay and lesbian Christians in the church, as a justice issue, however.⁵⁴ At this juncture, theology matters; it comes down to critical realities of biblical interpretation. On this, Christians in almost any shape and size of community will be inclined to differ. Biblical interpretation also marginalizes!

Who then decides what constitutes true and faithful mission and service? The principalities and powers would have us destroy each other over this matter. All that can truthfully be said is that the winds of change and discernment continue to blow on us, as the Spirit of a living God moves over the earth, compelling radical acts of love and intervention. Sojourners Community has been true to, and successful in, its mission. The ministry has not been complete just as the *eschaton* has not yet arrived; these two are inextricably linked! We live in the already and the not yet, the complete and the incomplete, in the midst of that which is fundamental and that which is liminal.

For us, the word “radical” has always meant “rooted.” The explosive mix of biblical faith and radical renewal that ignited Sojourners in the beginning will continue to fuel our pilgrimage and light our way in the years to come.⁵⁵

Notes

- 1 Jim Wallis, *Revive Us Again: A Sojourner's Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 16.
- 2 Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 46-53.
- 3 Ibid., p. 53.
- 4 Ibid., p. 144.
- 5 This journey is described in detail in *Revive us Again: A Sojourner's Story*.
- 6 Ibid., p. 74.
- 7 Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), pp. 16-17.
- 8 *Agenda*, p. 101.
- 9 Ellul, p. 137.
- 10 Romans 8:38; 1 Corinthians 2:8, 15: 24-26; Ephesians 1: 20, 2:1, 3:10, 6:12; Colossians 1:16, 2:15.
- 11 H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1962), p. 25.
- 12 Ibid., p. 35.
- 13 William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in Light of the Second Coming* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), p. 13.
- 14 *Revive*, p. 181.
- 15 John Howard Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1964), p. 60.
- 16 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 244.
- 17 Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion: Recovering the Gospel for these Times* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), p. 27.
- 18 Ibid., p. 58.
- 19 March 1983, p. 5.
- 20 June 1990.

- 21 April and August/September 1986.
- 22 February 1985, May 1988, August/September 1988.
- 23 July/Aug.1999.
- 24 July/Aug 1999, p. 23.
- 25 Jim Wallis, ed., *Peacemakers: Christian Voices from the New Abolitionist Movement* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 3
- 26 *Revive Us Again*, pp. 34-36.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 113.
- 28 The attached appendix entitled “Themes from feature articles of *Sojourners* magazine” illustrates the vast number of topics discussed with a prominent, “in your face” manner!
- 29 *Revive us Again*, pp. 52-52, 55, 60.
- 30 *The Call to Conversion*, pp. 71, 92.
- 31 *Agenda*, p. 30.
- 32 *The Call to Conversion*, p. 139.
- 33 Jim Wallis, “Living in Hope,” *Sojourners* Vol. 13, No. 4 (April 1984): 4.
- 34 In reading articles in both December 1986 and January 1987 issues, it becomes evident that there is some major disruption of community over the disagreements about homosexuality. There seems to be no explicit statement about what happened.
- 35 Luther E. Smith, *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community as Crucible for Radical Discipleship* (Waterloo, Ontario: Scottdale Press, 1994), pp. 84ff.
- 36 Jim Wallis, “Keeping Faith, Doing Justice, Building Community,” *Sojourners* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Feb/Mar 1992): 17.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 16-17
- 38 Randal Balmer, “Is God a Rams Fan?” *Sojourners* Vol. 30, No. 1 (January-February 2001): 21.
- 39 Jim Rice, “Why Play? Contemplation, freedom, and the spirit of leisure,” *Sojourners* Vol. 26, No. 1 (January- February, 1997): 27.
- 40 Jan-Feb1998.
- 41 Sept-Oct 2001.
- 42 Richard Rohr, “Pure Passion: The holiness of human sexuality”, *Sojourners* Vol. 11, No. 9 (October 1982): 18.
- 43 Sojourners Community, “Listening Together,” *Sojourners* Vol. 15, No. 11 (December 1986): 37.

- 44 The editors, “The Need for a Better Dialogue: A Forum on gay and lesbian sexuality,” *Sojourners* Vol. 20, No. 6 (July 1991): 11.
- 45 Wallis, *Revive Us Again*, p. 158.
- 46 Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, p. 147.
- 47 “The Other Side – Our History.” n.d.,
<http://www.theotherside.org/about/history.html> (8/26/04).
- 48 Wallis, *Agenda for a Biblical People*, p. 109.
- 49 Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, pp. 142-149.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 153
- 51 Sojourners Resource Catalogue, “Resources for Renewal and Change,” *Sojourners* Vol. 16, No. 10 (November 1987): c4.
- 52 Wallis, *Agenda for a Biblical People*, p. 124
- 53 Wallis, *Revive Us Again*, p. 179
- 54 From a conversation that I had with Ched Myers in 2004.
- 55 Members of Sojourners Community, “Our Life at the Foot of the Mountain: Sojourners Community Statement of Faith,” *Sojourners* Vol. 21, No. 2 (February-March 1992): 23.