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Religion leader bringing action call to Eastern Iowa

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CEDAR RAPIDS -- Calling on faith communities to assert themselves as ``the ultimate swing vote'' in presidential elections, Sojourners and Call to Renewal president Jim Wallis on Friday urged religious leaders to bring more social issues to the political table.

``There are 30,000 children dying today, tomorrow and yesterday of completely preventable diseases,'' Wallis said in a telephone interview from Washington D.C. ``It's hard for me to believe that God's top priority is a gay marriage (proposal) in Ohio.''

Wallis, 58, will meet with religious leaders in Cedar Rapids Monday for a talk: ``The Federal Budget as a Moral Document: Compassionate Priorities in a Time of Need.'' He is to meet with Bishop Gregory Palmer of the Iowa Conference of the United Methodist Church; the Rev. Walter May, representing Bishop Phillip Hougen and the Southeastern Synod of the ELCA; and Christopher Blake, president of Mount Mercy College, in a press conference at Mount Mercy at 10:30 a.m. Monday.

He also is the scheduled speaker for Sunday's commencement at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque.

Religious leaders have a strong role in shaping politics, but must be careful of crossing partisan lines, Wallis told The Gazette.

``We shouldn't be in any party's political pocket,'' he said. ``I think the public does expect faith leaders to be outspoken on moral issues. At the same time, I don't think they want to see their faith leaders getting involved in party politics.''

Wallis said faith leaders have for years spent their efforts serving the poor and disadvantaged, often without government assistance.

``For a long time those folks just did their work as an act of faith,'' he said. ``But the work got harder and the numbers were growing.''

Sojourners and Call to Renewal, he said, have met with politicians about creating a federal budget ``that would make us more secure.'' Examples, he said, would be increasing spending on education and health care for children.

``There's a biblical imperative to address these things, but this is also a system that would make us more secure,'' he said. ``When people are insecure and fearful, that's when they are most vulnerable.''

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