

# The Witness

Archdiocese of Dubuque

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*Activist Jim Wallis says . . .*

## ‘Wind change,’ discernment needed

By Calvin F. Gatch, Jr.

For the Witness

DUBUQUE — Politicians don’t change things; people do.

That was the message noted author, public theologian, nationally renowned preacher and faith-based activist Jim Wallis gave to a crowd of 120 people at Loras College on Monday, May 14.

“Because politicians are always ‘putting their finger to the wind,’ the only real changes that take place are when people ‘change the direction of the wind,’” Wallis remarked.

Wallis encouraged people to become “wind changers.” He invoked Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Micah, Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King in urging his audience to make social justice a priority in determining how the national budget is allocated.

Wallis was in Dubuque to give the commencement address at Wartburg Theological Seminary. His talk at Loras was sponsored by Iowans for Sensible Priorities and Loras’s Father Ray Herman Peace and Justice Center.

Wallis listed changes that a \$60 billion reduction of the military budget would allow:

- Health insurance for all uninsured children
- Rebuilding America’s schools over a 10-year period
- Achieving energy independence with clean technology
- Doubling humanitarian aid to poor countries
- Beginning to reduce the deficit

Wallis is the founder and editor-in-chief of Sojourners, and convener of Call to Renewal, organizations dedicated to promulgating the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church and the world.

He is also the author of numerous books, including “God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It,” which was on the New York Times Best-Selling list for four months.

That was one of the books Loras College English professor and Dubuque City Council member Karla Braig bought after the last presidential election. Braig, who introduced Wallis, said she learned from reading “God’s Politics” the importance of “following the money” to see what a society values. As a voice for the marginalized, she knew of Wallis through her 30-year association with the Catholic Worker House in Dubuque.

### Dorothy Day

Wallis paid tribute throughout his presentation to Dorothy Day, at one point expressing hope that more Catholic Worker associates get elected to local offices. He recalled his excitement as a young man meeting Dorothy Day in Chicago at the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Worker House on Kenmore Ave.

The community vehicle Wallis used was broken down, so he ran the six blocks to be on time for the meeting. Dorothy Day, renowned for her compassion, did not always exhibit a warm and personable side; on the contrary, she could be in-timidating, even a bit gruff.

At one point in the conversation, Day asked Wallis if he was a Catholic. Wallis said he replied, in one of his least memorable responses, “No, but some of my best friends are.”

Dorothy Day, Wallis said, believed most of our problems stem from acceptance of a “filthy rotten system.” Changing systems is something Wallis has been trying to do since he found himself at odds and eventually left his evangelical church at the age of 14 because of the church’s intransigence on racial justice.

Paul Schultz, Dubuque’s Solid Waste Management Supervisor, was one of the founders in 1972 of the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Worker. He has long been familiar with Wallis and Sojourners but had never met him in person before the Loras talk.

“It was a joy to witness Jim speak a hopeful message of a new engagement in broader social issues by an increasing number of young Christians,” Schultz said.

“A new spiritual awakening, moral discernment and political wisdom is gaining its collective voice to speak truth to power.”

### **Prophetic vision**

Even military officials are speaking out on the war in Iraq, Wallis said. He told of a recent retreat he gave to evangelical Christians in England in which he contrasted the prophet Micah’s prophetic vision with that of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

At the end of the retreat, a British major general, who had been in charge of the occupation forces in Iraq, told him that Micah, not Rumsfeld, was right.

“Micah’s vision is not just more compassionate,” the major general said. “Micah’s vision makes the world more secure.”

One of the questions Wallis was asked dealt with immigration policy. We are called upon to welcome strangers, just as we are called upon to take care of orphans, widows and strangers, Wallis said. God hates walls. Unfortunately, the poor end up blaming the destitute. He advocates a spiritual-based immigration policy that is not rooted in fear.

### **Swing vote**

David Overby, a retired journalist, asked about the separation of church and state. The Religious Right, Overby pointed out, has been using the government to enforce its beliefs on others. How will the Religious Left keep from doing the same thing?

People of faith have a moral compass they use when acting as citizens, Wallis said. It is important not to identify with one party or to try to advance a particular religion through the government. We should use our moral compass to make discerning judgment on civil issues. People of faith should be the “ultimate swing vote.”