

Poverty Forum offers new solutions to aid marginalized people

WASHINGTON – Eighteen individuals with expertise in anti-poverty initiatives and poverty reform efforts have put forth a multitiered proposal that they say can help reduce poverty for Americans living on the margins.

Under the title the Poverty Forum, the individuals Feb. 17 called upon the administration of President Barack Obama and the Congress to adopt various parts of their proposal, any of which, they claimed, can begin to lift people out of poverty.

The Rev. Jim Wallis, forum co-chairman and president and CEO of Sojourners, a progressive evangelical organization that addresses justice issues, said during a press conference the effort comes during a time of “poverty emergency” in the United States. He said ensuring that the needs of poor people are not ignored as the country focuses on rebuilding the economy in a deepening recession is a major goal.

He described the Poverty Forum as a bipartisan effort based on the biblical call to justice for the poor and vulnerable.

“For us (as Christians) not to speak of poverty is impossible,” Rev. Wallis said. “This is for us a matter of faith.

“You hear lots of people saying that poverty is important, then you run into disagreements on how to move forward and there the discussion ends,” he said. “We’re saying since we haven’t succeeded in overcoming poverty, let’s take some of the best ideas from liberal and conservative elements and transcend the argument and come up with innovative ideas.”

The forum includes representatives from a broad spectrum of policymaking organizations, but who participated as individuals in discussions that led to the development of the proposals. Among the 18 are Kathy Saile, director of the Office of Domestic Social Development at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; Mary Nelson, founder of Bethel New Life, a community organization in Chicago; Chuck Donovan, executive vice president of the Family Research Council; Ron Sider,

president of Evangelicals for Social Action; and several former federal government officials.

Forum co-chairman Mike Gerson, who once worked as a speechwriter for President George W. Bush and now is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, joined Rev. Wallis in introducing the more than two dozen proposals, which he described as the result of “the power of good ideas.”

The initiatives cover a wide range of policy reforms in areas such as family policy, health care, education, asset building, strengthening civil society, employment and community factors. Specific proposals call for raising the minimum wage to \$8.25 as a start to reinstating the right of convicted felons to vote once their jail sentence is completed, allowing them a voice in their communities.

One proposal calls for passing the America Saving for Personal Investment, Retirement and Education Act - ASPIRE - which would establish a lifetime savings account for every child born in the United States.

Under the plan, each child at birth would receive \$500 from the federal government in an account governed by rules similar to Roth individual retirement accounts. Additional tax-deductible contributions of up to \$2,000 a year could be made by individuals, family members and foundations to help young adults pay for college tuition, buy a home or start a business.

Other suggestions include changes in the tax code to allow people who do not itemize deductions on their tax returns to deduct charitable giving; extend tax credits for child and dependent care; eliminate the marriage penalty under the Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income working families; and establish an education savings program to allow low-income students to more readily attend college.

Another proposal from the group, the expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program to cover the unborn children of pregnant women, already has been passed by Congress and signed into law by the president.

Rev. Wallis said the policies were developed prior to the 2008 election. The goal, he

explained, is for many of the suggestions to become part of domestic policy so that over time the poor and marginalized will be able to rise into the middle class.

“The Obama administration has already asked about information about these proposals,” said Rev. Wallis, who recently was appointed to the President’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

The full list of policy proposals from the Poverty Forum is available online at www.thepovertyforum.org.