

# Values voters see common cause, if not agenda, with tea party

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September 17, 2010

WASHINGTON (RNS) With its emphasis on lower taxes and smaller government, the "tea party" movement hasn't spent a lot of time on the social issues that animate social conservatives -- abortion, gay marriage or stem cell research.

But that doesn't worry Leigh-Ann Bellew, the New Jersey leader of a conservative mother's group, who sees "faith-based" activists among the tea party foot soldiers heading into the fall mid-term elections.

"What I've seen in the tea party (events) that I've been to is it's a highly pro-life, traditional values group -- not all of them, but many of them," said Bellew, vice president of MOM for America.

"I wish they'd be more vocal about it but I think they're afraid that might divide up the movement."

Texas lawyer Matt Krause, too, may not agree with tea party icon Glenn Beck's Mormonism, but says he saw a kindred spirit in the broadcaster's recent God-and-country rally along the National Mall.

Many of the estimated 2,000 social conservatives who flocked here Friday (Sept. 17) for the annual Values Voter Summit say the tea party's smaller-is-better conservatism resonates with them, even if it doesn't always hit all the same hot buttons.

"We're not just one issue only," said Dale Burroughs, a pastoral counselor from Bradenton, Fla. "We have a social agenda but we also recognize economic problems, too. It's like a train track. You have two

rails and they're going in the same direction. They're just two separate tracks."

Mike Farris, chairman of the Home School Legal Defense Association, said coalition building -- with the tea party or any other ally -- is key for evangelicals and other politically minded social conservatives.

"The historic problem that I have ... with social issues not getting the proper attention is not with grass-roots groups like the tea party," said Farris. "It's with Republican elected officials who rely heavily on social conservative efforts to get them elected, then they ignore those issues once they get into office."

Family Research Council president Tony Perkins, who has built the annual Values Voter rally into a must-attend event for leading GOP figures, is among those concerned that the energy of the tea party is overshadowing the social issues that energize this crowd.

"We can have great economic power, abundant goods and services, a thriving financial system, the finest and best equipped and most technologically advanced military in the world, but they cannot last without strong families and a culture that upholds the sanctity of life and the centrality of religious liberty," he said in a recent speech.

Beck, who has said that gay marriage and abortion aren't his focus because "we have bigger fish to fry," nevertheless gets significant support from evangelicals.

A new poll conducted by Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Service found 49 percent of evangelicals have a favorable opinion of Beck (compared to 28 percent of all Americans), although those views dampen among evangelicals who disagree with Mormon theology.

While some religious conservatives are warming to the tea party movement, the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, sees it as little more than political expediency.

"Religious right leaders are frustrated that their issues have been placed on the back burner, and they're hoping to get back in the game by joining forces with the tea party," said Lynn. "We'll see if that marriage of convenience takes place."

Even though polls indicate the stagnant economy tops voters' priorities heading into November, the fiery base of social conservatives gathered here say they have other issues on their minds, and their agendas.

"I think the economy is important," said Alan LaRue, a pastor of a nondenominational church in Angola, Ind., "but if the other values go down, what do we have?"