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U.S. evangelicals call for step back from politics

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By Ed Stoddard

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DALLAS (Reuters) - A group of U.S. evangelical leaders called on Wednesday for a pullback from party politics so that followers would not become "useful idiots" exploited for partisan gain.

One in four U.S. adults count themselves as evangelical Protestants, giving them serious clout in a country where religion and politics often mix. Conservative evangelicals have become a key support base for the Republican Party.

But the movement has had growing pains and the statement issued on Wednesday, called an "Evangelical Manifesto," is the latest sign of emerging fractures as some activists seek to broaden its agenda beyond hot-button social issues such as opposition to abortion and gay rights.

"Christians from both sides of the political spectrum, left as well as right, have made the mistake of politicizing faith," the manifesto declares.

"That way faith loses its independence, the church becomes 'the regime at prayer,' Christians become 'useful idiots' for one political party or another, and the Christian faith becomes an ideology in its purest form," it said.

The manifesto was signed by leading and mostly centrist evangelicals such as Leith Anderson, president of the 30 million-member National Association of Evangelicals; Mark Bailey, president of the Dallas Theological Seminary; and evangelical academic and author David Gushee.

Many of the more than 70 signatories have been critical in the past of evangelical partisan involvement which was seen as the crucial element behind U.S. President George W. Bush's re-election victory in 2004.

Leading figures on the conservative "Religious Right" such as Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, did not sign the document and his office said he had not been asked to sign it.

LIMITED POLITICAL IMPACT

Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, said of the statement: "It's a sign of maturation of the evangelical movement ... It's an important theological document but it will have limited political influence because it is making a essentially a theological argument."

The document also highlights divisions that have been there for a while as some leading evangelicals attempt to redirect the movement's considerable energies toward areas such as action on global poverty and climate change.

Polls show growing numbers of evangelicals receptive to a wider social agenda and Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have been attempting to woo them in a bid to peel some away from the Republican camp ahead of the November election showdown with John McCain.

But analysts say most are still center-right politically and polls consistently show most remain opposed to abortion rights. They are also deeply committed to their faith.

"We have a big umbrella called evangelicalism which is theological in nature. We are called to be followers of Jesus Christ and men and women of the book," said John Huffman, a pastor and chairman of the board of Christianity Today.

Huffman, who helped draft the document, told Reuters by telephone that the group wanted to bring back "civility of discourse in the public square."

(Editing by Michael Conlon and Mohammad Zargham)

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