

***INTERRELIGIOUS WORKING GROUP ON DOMESTIC HUMAN NEEDS***

December 13, 2005

Dear Member of Congress,

As representatives of diverse faith traditions, we share common beliefs in justice, compassion, and fairness that energize our collective concern for the Common Good. These values have guided our opposition to this year's budgetary priorities and the reconciliation decisions in particular, which fail to address the real needs our country is facing and disregard the impact of the budget on our nation's most vulnerable members. The Hebrew Bible's book of Proverbs exhorts us, "Speak out, judge righteously, [and] defend the rights of the poor and needy (Proverbs 31:9)." With the final reconciliation package now under negotiation, we are writing to reiterate our concerns and urge you again to **oppose moving forward with any budget reconciliation bill that cuts essential safety net programs.**

As we have written in previous letters, we are alarmed by the cuts under consideration as part of budget reconciliation. Although these cuts were mitigated somewhat in the Senate, a conference report that incorporates any of the more harmful House provisions would leave thousands of low-income families, children, elderly and people with disabilities without access to valuable health, nutrition, and financial assistance. Children in low-income families would be especially hard hit by the House bill's combination of cuts to Medicaid, food stamps, child support enforcement, federal foster care assistance, and the inclusion of a restrictive TANF bill that fails to provide the supports struggling families need to obtain safe, quality child care and move to higher economic ground. In addition, we are troubled that these cuts do nothing to achieve their stated purpose of deficit reduction because of additional tax cuts that are also part of reconciliation.

We are also disturbed by the possibility of an across-the-board cut in discretionary spending. In the wake of the hurricanes that have decimated the Gulf Coast, we are reminded daily of the importance of the social safety net and are forced to see in a new way the limited safety it provides for the millions of people living in poverty, experiencing food insecurity, and lacking health insurance. Our partners in community-based organizations and congregations across the country are unequivocal in their assertion that they do not have the resources or capacity to fill in the further gaps in support that these discretionary and reconciliation cuts will leave. With them, we urge Congress to remember that these cuts are not numerical abstractions, but opportunity further denied to individuals and families who have yet to fully share in the promises of our nation.

We stand united in a call for justice and fairness for a renewed commitment to the common good. We are grateful to the Senators and Representatives who are heeding this call by voting and speaking out against these harmful cuts and urge you to join them to help defeat the reconciliation and additional budget cuts before Congress.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contactCarolynn Race at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office at (202) 543-1126 or Alison Prevost at the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd at (301) 622-6838.

*Please find attached an appendix of specific policy statements from our various traditions underscoring the concerns outlined in this letter. These are included for your information and reflect the positions of the specific organizations, not the entire list of signatories to this letter.*

Sincerely,

American Baptist Churches USA

American Friends Service Committee

B'nai B'rith International

Call to Renewal

Church of the Brethren Witness/Washington Office

Church Women United

The Episcopal Church

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs

National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA

NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office

Union of Reform Judaism

United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

United Methodist Church - General Board of Church and Society

## Compilation of Faith Reflections on Budget Priorities

The Biblical injunction to care for the least among us is clear; our society will be judged by our willingness to “*speak up, judge righteously, [and] champion the poor and the needy*” (Proverbs 31:9).

The budget reconciliation proposals currently before Congress will deny help to those most in need: parents with children, children in our foster care system, immigrants, people with disabilities, and elderly Americans. As communities of faith, we note that these are the very groups that our traditions repeatedly single out for special concern.

### **Caring for the Widow and the Orphan**

The Hebrew Bible teaches us to pay special attention to the needs of widows and orphans. As it is written in Deuteronomy, “*Thou shalt not pervert the justice due to ... the fatherless; nor take the widow's raiment to pledge*” (24:7). Acting on this biblical principle, our traditions call on Congress to strengthen programs that help our modern widows and orphans: single parents and their children struggling to escape poverty and children in our foster care system.

Selected faith statements:

- American Baptists are persons who take seriously the gospel call to care for the needy, to protect the vulnerable, to advocate for the oppressed, and to engage in ministries of healing and wholeness... We, therefore, call upon our Office of Governmental Relations, our churches and members to advocate for the poorest among us by calling upon our legislators to refuse the passage of any budget bill that eviscerates vital programs that ensure basic human needs and to work to restore necessary funding to anti-poverty programs so that all people in our nation might experience the wholeness and shalom God intends for us.  
Approved by the American Baptist Church General Board – November 2005
- The Jewish Council for Public Affairs supports policies and programs that help move individuals and families out of poverty; that provide work opportunities at wages that allow for self-sufficiency; that provide adequate financial and social service supports; and that attack problems of inadequate education, housing, health care, and persistent, fundamental illiteracy. In light of continued federal and state budget deficits we anticipate continued efforts to reduce funding for critical programs. The JCPA reaffirms its commitment to fully funding social programs that are part of an overall commitment and strategy to confront poverty.
- NETWORK believes that the Reauthorization of TANF must be for the reduction of poverty and not the reduction of caseloads. “That so many people are poor in a nation as rich as ours is a social and moral scandal that we cannot ignore”. (Bishop’s Pastoral “Economic Justice for All” #16)  
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
- The funds at risk in the House [budget reconciliation bill] are those that strengthen and support positive family ties for the most vulnerable children in our society, and give assistance to low-income grandparents and other relatives who have taken in abused and neglected children: a truly pro-family program.

Call to Renewal

## **Caring for and Welcoming the Least of These**

- "The caring for sisters and brothers and the caring for and sharing of the resources of the earth are so important that Jesus predicates the entry into new life (even here on earth by rising against coveting and greed) as depending on whether this sharing and caring is done. (Matt.25:31ff)."  
Church Women United Policy Statement on Hunger

- Union of Reform Judaism Adopted Resolution, "The Eradication and Amelioration of Poverty":

WHEREAS Judaism teaches that poverty is destructive of human dignity and proclaims that men must endeavor to fulfill the dictate, "There shall be no needy among you,"

WHEREAS the persistence of poverty in a society possessing the abundance to satisfy the material needs of all its citizens is morally indefensible,

BE IT RESOLVED that this 48th General Assembly of the UAHC declares its wholehearted support of effective programs designated to eradicate poverty. We urge our government to implement its policy, first enunciated in the Employment Act of 1946, of promoting "maximum employment, production and purchasing power"; and to adopt measures which would assure every man willing and able to work at a wage which makes possible a decent standard of living, and if he should be involuntarily unemployed of adequate income during this period of unemployment.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Assembly affirm its conviction that the amelioration of the condition of poverty of the old, the young and the sick is an obligation of charity, but of social justice, and urges that all programs of public assistance be formulated and administered in a manner to assure utmost self-respect to recipients.

- The 207th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called on Congress "to defeat any proposals that base budget or deficit reductions primarily on the services provided to children, families, the needy, and the homeless" and urged strengthening of federal commitments to these groups. The Assembly also called on Congress "to insist on a government that follows ethical values of justice for the poor, welfare for children, hospitality to the stranger, and assistance to the disadvantaged." (*Minutes*, p. 718)
- In *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food* [2003], the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops reiterated that a primary goal of food and agricultural policy should be providing basic food and nutrition for all. In *Food Policy in a Hungry World* [1989] the bishops called for strengthening the domestic food assistance programs to ensure that no one in America goes hungry or suffers malnutrition. "When the economy fails to provide the jobs and income necessary to prevent hunger and malnutrition, the various local, state, and national food assistance programs must be funded and expanded to provide food to all in need."

## **Don't Place a Stumbling Block in Front of the Blind**

"You shall not curse the deaf nor place a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God - I am your Lord." (Leviticus 19:14)

- Medicaid is an essential component of our nation's health care system, providing health care coverage for low-income children, their parents, seniors and persons with disabilities. NETWORK supports the preservation of Medicaid as a fully-funded entitlement program, with appropriate levels of funding to meet the needs of all who are eligible for benefits. NETWORK opposes funding caps, cuts and block-granting of services.

NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby

- Since biblical times, Jewish tradition finds a profound value in the preservation of health and life of all individuals. We recognize that to save a life is as if to save an entire world. For decades, the JCPA has been dedicated to improving the American health care system and Medicaid in particular. Medicaid is our nation's health care safety net, the only source of health care coverage for 47 million Americans, including working families, low-income children, seniors, pregnant women and people with disabilities.

The Jewish Council for Public Affairs

### **The Nations Will be Judged**

- In April, during consideration of the budget resolution we wrote to Congress that, “As we view the FY '06 Federal Budget through our lens of faith this budget, on balance, continues to ask our nation's working poor to pay the cost of a prosperity in which they may never share.” It is clear that programs such as Medicaid and the Food Stamp Program that were slated for cuts by Congress will in fact have greater burdens placed on them as a result of Hurricane Katrina. These programs are not simply entitlements or “government hand-outs,” they represent the deep and abiding commitment of a nation to care for the least among us.

Signed by the leaders of the Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church,  
United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),  
and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

- Our teachers have said: “If all the troubles of the world are assembled on one side and poverty is on the other, poverty would outweigh them all” (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 31:12). Our prophets have taught: God commands us to “share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house” (Isaiah 58:7). And according to Maimonides, the highest degree of charity is to aid a person in need by “offering him a gift or a loan, by entering into partnership with him, or by providing work for him so that he may become self-supporting, without having to ask people for anything. In regard to this, it is written: ‘You shall maintain him; whether stranger or sojourner, he shall live beside you’ (Leviticus 25:35); that is to say, maintain him so that he may not fall and be in need of help” (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, "Gifts to the Poor" 10:7).

If our prophets and sages lived today, surely they would be crying out against a nation that allows children to go hungry and families to sleep on the streets. Surely they would cry out against a society that neglects healing the sick, clothing the naked, and feeding the poor as national priorities. We, too, cry out.

Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Resolution on  
Confronting and Combating Poverty in the United States, 2003