



Circle of Protection
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Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 25, 2013

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Christian Leaders Ask Political Leaders to End Brinkmanship as Sequester Looms

Washington, DC, February 25, 2013 – As the political blame game for the March 1 sequester heats up, nearly a 100 national Christian leaders released a pastoral letter to President Obama and the leaders of Congress calling for an end to the political brinkmanship that is slowing the nation's economy recovery. The letter asks both the Democrats and Republicans to replace poverty with opportunity.

The letter represents the latest effort by the Circle of Protection to protect programs that serve the poor and vulnerable from devastating budget cuts. It is also a call for elected officials to create a proactive, long-term strategy for addressing poverty and hunger that reduces the deficit, grows the economy, and expands economic opportunity for all God's children.

The full text of the letter and quotes from several leaders appear after the letter below. The full list of signatories to the pastoral letter is available at www.circleofprotection.us:

A Pastoral Letter about Faith, Finances, and the Federal Budget

Dear President Obama, Majority Leader Reid, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Boehner and Minority Leader Pelosi:

Throughout two years of budget negotiations, we and other faith leaders have urged you to maintain a Circle of Protection around effective programs focused on hungry and poor people in our country and around the world. This pastoral letter offers faith-grounded counsel on the current stage of the budget negotiations.

First, we thank you for reducing the deficit while limiting cuts to programs serving poor people. Together, you have reduced deficits by an estimated \$2 trillion, a significant step in getting our fiscal house in order. We are grateful that programs focused on hungry and poor people have not seen large cuts so far. We appreciate that President Obama has kept his promise to the Circle of Protection to protect the poor, and that Republicans and Democrats agreed to shield many core programs benefiting people living in or near poverty from the sequestration cuts. More critical decisions must be made as we consider specific program cuts to reach previously agreed upon funding levels, look for additional ways to reduce the deficit, and avert the looming sequestration; but the moral calculus has not changed. Our long-term fiscal challenges will not be solved by increasing the burden on those who Jesus called the "least of these" (Matthew 25).

Second, we are praying for you. The Bible teaches us to pray for those in authority, and prayer contributes to mutually respectful debate that advances the common good. The focus of our nation's budget negotiations should not be about which politicians win or lose, but about whether our budget decisions reflect our values. We will ask our churches to pray as you continue to work together on the budget.

Third, we plead for a renewed commitment to respectful bi-partisan dialogue and an end to brinkmanship. Moving from one crisis to another has slowed economic recovery and has kept Congress from finding a sound, moral path to fiscal sustainability. Other important issues go unaddressed,

all the while increasing cynicism about our political process. Congress' actions should not provoke a serious economic setback or push more people into poverty.

Fourth, we understand that the country's fiscal health will require further cost savings and additional revenue. To reduce the deficit, we need revenue and savings that don't increase poverty. Increased health care costs are major drivers of the nation's long-term fiscal challenge, and adjustments will be needed over time. Medicare can be reformed in ways that do not harm those who depend on the health care coverage it provides, especially seniors with modest means. Any savings in Medicaid should avoid changes harming low-income beneficiaries either directly — by cutting benefits or eligibility — or indirectly by shifting costs to states.

Fifth, we strongly affirm the government's responsibility concerning poor people. The Bible teaches that civil authority comes from God, and God calls for protection of poor and vulnerable people. Government is imperfect, and there are legitimate differences over how the government should carry out its responsibilities. These should be debated. Assuring government's obligation to advance the common good, ensure fairness, and defend the most vulnerable is good religion and good politics.

Sixth, it is time to frame the budget debate in terms of moral choices that are understandable to the American people. Important choices must be made: we must weigh the benefits of tax credits for low-income people and tax breaks for high-income people; of nutrition assistance to low-income families and subsidies to agricultural businesses. Within the category of "defense," there is a difference between legitimate national security and unnecessary spending. Congress can and must develop a balanced and thoughtful path forward that protects the most vulnerable and preserves economic opportunity.

Finally, we ask both parties to work together toward ending hunger and poverty. The Circle of Protection continues to be committed to protecting vital programs for people in or near poverty in our country and around the world, but that is not enough. Help us reduce hunger and poverty by expanding opportunity and justice, promoting economic growth and good paying jobs, stabilizing family life, and protecting the well-being of children. We celebrate the progress the world is making against hunger, poverty, and disease, and we are encouraged by the possibility of ending extreme hunger and poverty globally. Dramatic progress against hunger and poverty in our richly blessed country is also possible. Please, protect the poor and help create the opportunities that make them poor no more.

Respectfully,

The full list of signatories is available at www.circleofprotection.us

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Press release quotes from some of the signatories:

Rev. David Beckmann, President, Bread for the World and laureate, World Food Prize:

"I'm excited that the President and several key Republicans have recently made proposals that would open opportunity to hungry and poor people. Congress should quickly agree on ways to further reduce the national deficit that won't make life tougher for people who struggle to feed their children. It's time for our nation to turn our attention to making a place at the table for everybody."

Sr. Simone Campbell, Executive Director, NETWORK:

"Some in Congress think that if we make sequester "flexible" we can avert disaster for our people and the economy. They are wrong. The only way forward is to acknowledge the more than \$2 trillion in cuts that have already taken place and to enact policies that grow the economy and protect the most vulnerable

people in our society. Our faiths and our Constitution challenge us to act for the ‘general welfare’ of all. Now Congress needs to measure up to that challenge and act for the benefit of all in our society.”

Bishop Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

“The charter of the Circle of Protection is a powerful witness that people of faith join together in our commitment to those who are hungry and live in poverty. The measure of the necessary work of debt and deficit reduction should not be political gain or loss, but whether or not fiscal decisions reflect the needs of all people, particularly for vulnerable people. I pray for public officials and ask them to remember their God-given call to servant leadership and to forego irresponsible brinksmanship.”

Ms. Kathryn Lohre, President, National Council of Churches:

“It is a scandalous reality that today more than one in seven Americans (46.2 million people) – and one in five children – are living in poverty. Budgets are moral documents, reflecting our core values and commitments. For this reason, we urge our elected leaders to continue to seek financial health for this nation while protecting those who are living at its margins, those whom Jesus called “the least of these” (Matthew 25). This is not only a good thing to do; it is the right thing to do. The fiscal showdowns of recent months fail to honor the fact that 46.2 million of us are already living on the brink. This is not acceptable to us, nor is it acceptable to God. We must find another way forward – one which honors the dignity and worth of all of God’s children. We pledge our partnership and prayers as we seek together to become a nation where there is truly enough for all.”

Stanley J. Noffsinger, General Secretary, Church of the Brethren:

“The Church of the Brethren has always affirmed and lived out Jesus’ call to clothe the naked and feed the hungry. If we do not care for the least among us, then we are not truly fulfilling Christ’s mission. We must continue serving the poor and marginalized in our own communities, while also supporting programs that provide basic services that help our neighbors pull themselves out of poverty. We cannot allow our leaders to continue to ignore issues of poverty at the expense of our suffering brothers and sisters.”

Rev. Jim Wallis, President and CEO, Sojourners:

“Leaders in Washington face serious moral choices on sequester and the budget that will have significant consequences for millions of people across the country. The faith community is urging them to offer moral leadership by protecting vulnerable people living in poverty from further harm and ending the brinksmanship that has slowed our economic recovery. It’s time to move away from ideological politics to save our nation’s fiscal and moral soul. Now is the time for Washington to create an opportunity agenda that ensures everyone is included in the recovery of our economy.”

Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ):

“As people of faith, we are called to stand with those among us who are most vulnerable economically, encircling them with the care and protection they need and deserve. As citizens, we can and should call upon our government to do the same.”

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The Circle of Protection is composed of more than 65 heads of denominations, relief and development agencies, and other Christian organizations. For more information, please visit www.circleofprotection.us.