



CIRCLE *of* PROTECTION

Poverty-Related Advocacy Issues Now

June 14, 2018

In the name of Jesus Christ, grace and peace to you from our loving God.

Since 2011, church leaders from many families of U.S. Christianity have worked together to maintain a Circle of Protection around people struggling with hunger, poverty, and injustice. You have participated alongside us in this ministry. We are now writing to share the Circle of Protection steering committee's current thinking about the poverty-related issues facing us between now and this fall's elections. We don't all agree on every statement in this letter, but we think you will find it helpful to read about the issues we are discussing.

What we have achieved

The budget and appropriations packages that Congress approved in February and March marked a major step forward in the Circle of Protection's seven-year campaign to protect funding for domestic and international programs that help people in poverty. Despite seven years of budget brinksmanship and the deep cuts proposed in President Trump's budgets, Congress has not approved any substantial cuts in anti-poverty programs. The clear and unified position that you and many other Christian leaders have maintained—and the activism of many Christians across the country—have contributed to this remarkable result.

We are concerned about the recent surge of deficit spending, especially since only three percent of it funded assistance to people in poverty. Most of it went to the top one percent of the income distribution. When Congress and the president decide to address the deficit, as they should, no one should suggest doing so by cutting programs that help people in poverty.

Farm Bill

Right now, Congress is working on the Farm Bill. We are opposing the House Agriculture Committee's version because it would take away SNAP food assistance for more than two million people. It would reduce food assistance by \$18 billion, in large part to finance an expanded SNAP bureaucracy. It would expand job requirements. All beneficiaries would need to report their status (whether they are working, caring for small children, disabled, or elderly) monthly rather than twice a year—a six-fold increase in paperwork, frustration, and possibilities for error. The very limited funding this bill provides for job training would not allow for effective training.

The House bill is defended as a strategy to get SNAP beneficiaries into jobs. But nearly three-quarters of working-age adults who are not on disability work within the month or year of receiving benefits. Almost two-thirds of SNAP participants are children, disabled, or elderly.

The House voted down their Agriculture Committee's bill, but Republican leaders have announced their intention to bring it back for another vote this month. The Senate Agriculture Committee just approved a bipartisan Farm Bill that does not include damaging cuts and changes to SNAP.

Please do what you can to defeat the House version of the Farm Bill and encourage passage of the Senate bill. Action on this issue is urgent.

Executive order to cut means-tested programs

President Trump has directed all the departments of government to do an immediate review of all means-tested programs. The president wants them to find ways to cut costs, mainly by imposing new or expanded job requirements in core safety net programs: Medicaid, SNAP, and housing assistance.

Evaluations of work requirements in assistance programs have found them to be an ineffective way to get people into jobs and reduce poverty. A much-cited exception followed welfare reform in 1996 when TANF work requirements were put in place. But the initial gains in employment were not sustained. Continuing job requirements on cash assistance to needy families have instead contributed to a surge in deep poverty—people living on less than \$2 a day of cash income. The goal of program reforms should be to get people out of poverty, not just get them off the programs.

Policies to improve job opportunities

We are hoping that our nation's political leaders will pivot from their current focus on job requirements to policies that would improve job opportunities, especially for low-income people. When they consider investments in infrastructure, for example, we would like them to give priority to investments in communities of concentrated poverty. Public transportation from low-income neighborhoods to centers of employment would make it possible for many more families to work their way out of hunger and poverty. Broadband internet access would help depressed rural communities connect to economic activity.

Can you educate people who look to you for leadership about the disadvantages of expanded job requirements on assistance programs and about the possibility of policies that would improve job opportunities?

Appropriations

Congress is now working on Fiscal Year 2019 appropriations, including important decisions about many specific programs. President Trump has proposed \$15.4 billion in rescissions from past appropriations, including a \$7 billion cut from the Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Resistance to racism

In January, the Circle of Protection helped to develop and disseminate the Unity Statement on Racism and Poverty. Many church leaders are alarmed by the persistence and resurgence of explicit racism and hateful attitudes and policies toward immigrants. Racism is an attack on the image of God in each person, and racist laws and social structures are a major cause of poverty. Racial profiling and mass incarceration are realities that churches must no longer accept.

The Unity Statement led us to restructure the Circle of Protection steering committee to include stronger African-American and Latino leadership. We are grateful that the October

annual meeting of Christian Churches Together will include discussion of the Unity Statement and of how predominantly white churches can educate their members about structural racism.

Criminal justice reform would be one way to address structural racism. The House of Representatives has passed a prison reform bill, but it does not address the problem of excessive mandatory sentences or effective models of restorative justice. Most of the faith community is supporting the Senate Judiciary Committee's bipartisan Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act of 2017 (S. 1917). It would allow for judicial review of some mandatory sentences and strengthen federal-prison programs that reduce recidivism.

President Trump's harsh rhetoric and policies toward immigrants and refugees have done great harm. The faith community has expressed particular alarm about the separation of children from their parents at the border. We remain concerned about a regulation the White House is currently working on that would keep immigrants from becoming citizens if they have ever accepted public assistance. But the president and some members of Congress from both parties have said they want to reach a deal that would provide security for the "Dreamers." The Dream Act (S. 1615 and H.R. 2440) would provide a path to citizenship for all the Dreamers, allowing almost two million young people to move up into better jobs and, in the process, help many people in their families and communities out of poverty.

We hope you will join in faith-grounded anti-racism education and help to achieve criminal justice reform and positive immigration reform.

International hunger and poverty

There is opportunity for positive action on international hunger and poverty issues. The Global Food Security Act is up for reauthorization. That could continue our country's effective agriculture and nutrition assistance programs for another five years, with concentration on fragile states where conflict and climate change are increasing hunger. It would also continue hard-won improvements that have made U.S. food assistance more efficient and effective. This is important in desperate situations such as in South Sudan and Yemen.

Concerned Christian people can help by urging their members of Congress to cosponsor the Global Food Security Act. It is bill number S. 2269 in the Senate and H.R. 5129 in the House. Broad, bipartisan approval of the Global Food Security Act is possible and would help to protect appropriations for aid to hungry and poor people around the world.

Our wounded body politic and this year's elections

Finally, church leaders are called to be both thoughtful and bold in helping their members contribute to the healing of our wounded body politic. Some Christian leaders are speaking out about the theological dimension of the exceptional turmoil and division we are suffering. Some Christian organizations are helping people of faith have an impact during this fall's elections.

We know you are praying for our nation and the world. Urge people who look to you for leadership to ask God to guide their conversation and behavior as citizens. Urge them to exercise their civic duty and support candidates for office who will serve the common good and improve opportunity for poor and vulnerable people. In Jesus Christ, we experience the love of God for all people and are moved to help and defend people who struggle with hunger, poverty, and injustice.

Circle of Protection Steering Committee

This letter shares our current discussion on current policy issues of importance to people who are experiencing hunger and poverty in our country and around the world. The members of the Circle of Protection Steering Committee are leaders from a wide array of Christian bodies and organizations. The Steering Committee Co-Chairs are marked with an asterisk.

* Rev. David Beckmann, President, Bread for the World

Rebecca Blachly, Director of the Office of Government Relations, Episcopal Church

Rev. Dr. Timothy Tee Boddie, General Secretary and Chief Administrative Officer,
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