



Priorities for a Faithful Federal Budget: *Acting with Mercy and Justice as One Nation under God*

Our Message to Political Leaders

We write as communities of faith where respect and care for one another is a sacred imperative and we are learning to "love our neighbor as ourselves." But American society as a whole is, or should be, also such a place, where we delight in the value of each and every one, and gladly accept a mutual responsibility for one another's wellbeing.

As the American people we understand ourselves to be "one nation under God," not a mere collection of isolated individuals. All of us have something to contribute to our life together, and none of us is excluded from our circle of mutual care and concern. Government of, by and for the people at its best is a vital forum for promoting the common good and ensuring that no one is left behind.

A faithful budget must promote a compassionate and comprehensive vision for the future. As communities of faith, we call on our elected leaders to craft a federal budget that fulfills our shared duty to each other in all segments of society to those who are struggling to overcome poverty or are especially vulnerable, and to future generations through our collective responsibility as stewards of Creation.

Our message to our national leaders -- rooted in our sacred texts -- is this: ***Act with mercy and justice by serving the common good, robustly funding support for poor and vulnerable people, both at home and abroad, and exercising proper care and keeping of the earth.***

In the current political and economic climate, neither party is giving voice to the needs of the families who are struggling to overcome poverty. It is simply not true that we must reduce assistance for the poorest among us in order to achieve fiscal recovery. A Faithful Federal Budget can advance fiscal responsibility while increasing support for the poor and vulnerable, by focusing on job creation and economic revitalization, an equitable tax system based on fairness, and true human security over disproportionate military spending.

The way to national recovery is not to close our hearts to the poor, but to heed the words of the Prophet Isaiah who assures us, "[I]f you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday . . . you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in" (58:10-12).

In this time of global economic crisis, Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other communities of faith, guided by our sacred texts, advocate a constructive vision of the directions needed for a just society and a healthier world. The common prophetic message found in sacred texts does not rest solely on eternal life, but on God's will being done "on earth as it is in heaven." Our shared traditions insist that piety and righteousness cannot remain only individual endeavors, but must also encompass our society's commitment to justice and mercy.

Principles of a Faithful Federal Budget

Restoring Economic Opportunity: The opportunity to work hard and improve one's economic condition is a value that defines this nation. But it is a reality increasingly available only to those who are already wealthy. We believe in the inherent worth of every individual and that God intends dignity, health, and wholeness for each person. We need an economy that empowers workers to self sufficiency and provides pathways out of poverty. The principles of "liberty and justice for all", as enshrined in our Pledge of Allegiance, seem hollow in light of the pace at which wealth and opportunity have shifted from the many to the few. We believe that everyone deserves equal opportunity and must therefore have equal access to the building blocks for success. *We urge Congress to make the long-term investments needed to sustain the United States' economic renewal, create economic opportunity for all, and work toward ending poverty. This requires investments in high-quality, affordable education, sustainable jobs with living wages, and policies that help families to build assets.*

Ensuring Adequate Resources for Shared Priorities: From the time a federal income tax was established, the concept of a progressive tax system, based on the ability to pay, has been widely accepted as fair and equitable. Over the last several decades our tax system has grown less progressive, and now frequently places more of a tax burden, as a percentage of income, on the middle class than it does on the wealthiest among us. The tax system also creates financial incentives for individuals to act in ways that are thought to strengthen our social fabric, such as investing and saving for retirement, starting a business, owning a home, getting a college education – even charitable giving. Because of the way tax benefits are structured, however, too often low-wage workers do not earn enough to access those benefits. This results in a system that perpetuates inequality by rewarding behavior that generates financial security for those who already have it, while excluding those who are working hard at low-wage jobs and need help the most. An equitable, moral tax code should reward the efforts of low-income people to work and save at every level. A Faithful Budget will act to correct this imbalance. *Investment in the renewal of our nation's economic well-being and protecting the poor and vulnerable will itself serve to reduce the long-term deficit. Such investment should be financed through an equitable tax system founded on fairness, where those who have reaped extraordinary benefits contribute proportionately to the good of all.*

Prioritizing True Human Security: With well over half of the discretionary budget dedicated to military spending, the United States is unable to invest in other areas that build substantial human security in our communities. Global threats to peace and security need not instill a national inclination to make an imbalanced investment in new weapons systems, detention centers, and militarized border walls, leading to disproportionate spending on the mechanisms of war and enforcement, while we become less secure in so many other ways. We believe a faithful budget must reevaluate these priorities, increase investment in the areas of health, education, and community well-being that are essential to true security. *Our budget priorities should reflect a more balanced approach to the full spectrum of investments that build meaningful security for individuals, families, and communities.*

Meeting Immediate Need: As it always has been, the faith community itself continues to be committed to serving vulnerable populations at home and around the world. At the same time, we urge our nation to implement policies that will reduce poverty and hardship. As a united people committed to compassion and justice, we fulfill our calling as a people when we invest in a social safety net that will support the vulnerable in times of hardship, such as recession, unemployment, sickness, and old age. Even as the economy has begun to revive, unemployment rates remain remarkably high. Proactive stimulus policies and the elasticity of the mandatory safety net programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, are incredibly effective measures that have prevented millions from falling into poverty. *Congress has the moral and pragmatic responsibility, even as it pursues long-term deficit reduction, to adequately fund critical human needs, social service, environmental protection, and humanitarian and poverty-focused international assistance programs, all of which ensure human security in its broadest sense.*

Accepting Intergenerational Responsibility: We cannot leave our children a legacy of debt, but neither must we leave them a legacy of rising poverty and growing inequality. As educational programs, adequate housing, health care, nutrition programs, job training, and other community services all fall victim to pressures to reduce the deficit, economic vulnerability continues to grow and more families find themselves one disaster away from poverty. Our nation's vital social safety net did not create the deficit, and the vulnerable populations served by the social safety net should not bear the brunt of deficit-reduction measures. *A Faithful Budget will seek wise and far-sighted ways to reduce the nation's long-term deficits while protecting the most vulnerable among us.*

Using the Gifts of Creation Sustainably and Responsibly: In the book of Genesis, God called Creation "good." Because of Creation's intrinsic worth, the earth and its resources deserve our respect and our consideration. While the earth has been given to us as a home, and while its resources are bountiful and good, we have abused this gift, placing unsustainable burdens on our environment and its resources. As a human community, we owe a debt to our environment, both for its own sake as well as our own. Environmental degradation has substantial, and potentially irreversible, short and long-term impacts, such as rising health care costs from air pollution and resulting respiratory problems; increased premature deaths due to the cumulative impacts of poor air quality; declining water quality in our communities; degradation of public lands; global climate change, which is already affecting some of the most vulnerable populations on earth; and loss of open space. *A Faithful Budget must encompass a reverence for our created environment, making choices that protect air, water, and land—the entirety of Creation—gifts from God that must be available to and protected for this generation and to come.*

Providing Access to Health Care for All: As providers of services and care, both physical and spiritual, our members, congregations, and institutions are well-acquainted with the importance of providing access to health care for all people. All individuals, regardless of their age, income, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, geography, employment status, or health status, deserve equal access to quality, affordable, inclusive and accountable health care. Reducing health care options for some based on any of these factors is profoundly unjust. As we examine the interwoven web of access within the federal budget, there are areas of profound concern for the common good and practices of good stewardship. *A Faithful Budget will ensure access to quality health care by investing in wellness and making needed improvements in the health care system.*

Recognizing a Robust Role for Government: We are inspired by a common conviction that God has called on all of us – as individuals, as communities of faith, and as a society acting together through our government – to protect the vulnerable and promote the dignity of all people. For this reason the faith community has worked alongside the United States government for decades to protect those struggling

to overcome poverty in the U.S. and abroad. People who need help paying rent or feeding their children come to us, frequently as a first and last resort, and we do all we can to provide the aid that compassionate love demands. And yet, faith communities and agencies cannot do it alone. The need is great as many who once gave to our ministries of mercy are now recipients of our charity. *We need the government's continued partnership to combat poverty by providing a truly adequate short-term safety net, and by means of policies that serve to prevent poverty, reduce extreme inequality, restore economic opportunity for all, and rebuild a robust middle class.*

The Call

As faith communities and Americans of conscience we stand with those among us with those whose need is great and we call on all of us to act together as the American people with mercy and justice, and to re-arrange our national priorities to focus on the common good. Accordingly, this Faithful Budget boldly proclaims the aspirational goals toward which, we believe, our nation much strive. More pragmatically, we urge Congress and the President to show their intent to move toward these goals by enacting legislation that enhances the well-being of all Americans and to make a good faith increase in funding for the impoverished and the vulnerable here and abroad in fiscal year 2013.

Let us embrace a call to live together in community, not agreeing on everything, but sharing in the common purpose of bettering our nation, protecting our brothers and sisters here in the U.S. and around the world, and sustainably caring for our environment. We call on Congress and the Administration to craft a federal budget that protects the common good, values each individual and his or her livelihood, and helps lift the burden on the poor, rather than increasing it while shielding the wealthiest from any additional sacrifice.

Endorsements

American Friends Service Committee
Arkansas Interfaith Alliance
Bread for the World
Center of Concern
Center on Conscience and War
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the
United States and Canada
Christian Reformed Church Office of Social
Justice
Church of the Brethren
Church World Service
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach
Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Faithful Reform in Health Care
Franciscan Action Network
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Institute Leadership Team of the Sisters of
Mercy of the Americas
Islamic Society of North America
Jesuit Conference
Jubilee USA Network

Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Office,
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate,
United States Province
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
Mennonite Central Committee US
Minnesota Council of Churches
Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity
Muslim Public Affairs Council
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the
Good Shepherd
National Council of the Churches of Christ, USA
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice
Lobby
Pax Christi USA
Presbyterian Church (USA), Office of Public
Witness
Progressive National Baptist Convention
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness
Ministries
United Methodist Church, General Board of
Church and Society