

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 more than \$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 an end to brinksmanship. Lurching from one crisis to another has slowed economic recovery. Manufactured fiscal showdowns have kept Congress from finding a sound, moral path to fiscal sustainability and addressing other important issues, all the while increasing cynicism about our political process. Defaulting on our debt could provoke a serious economic setback and push more people into poverty. Please don’t put our country’s credit at risk again.

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 disagree with those who deny 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. But those who would abandon the responsibilities of government for advancing the common good, ensuring fairness, or defending the most vulnerable are religiously — not just politically — wrong.

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: tax credits for low-income people or tax breaks for high-income people; nutrition assistance to low-income families or subsidies to agricultural businesses. There are choices between protecting the most vulnerable or preserving benefits for special interests. Within the category of “defense,” there is a difference between real national security and wasteful spending with political pork.

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,

Please add my name to the above letter.

Name as it should appear: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Organization: _____ Position: _____

Email address: _____ Phone: _____

Home Congressional District or zipcode: _____

The persons listed below anyone who should be copied on correspondence about this letter:

Name: _____ Position: _____

email: _____ phone: _____

Name: _____ Position: _____

email: _____ phone: _____

