

Church leaders decry Bush budget: Ecumenical Advocacy Days

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Shortly before Capitol Hill got down to brass tacks on President Bush's \$2.57 trillion budget for 2006, the spending proposal came under blistering criticism in separate critiques by mainline Protestant leaders and the head of Catholic Charities USA.

The nation's most vulnerable, namely the poor, stand to suffer because of \$214 billion in domestic spending cuts while wealthy Americans will benefit from tax breaks, said the church leaders.

"The prophets said God doesn't judge us on the eloquence of our preaching or the beauty of sanctuaries," said Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. "God will look at the condition of the poor in our midst and judge the quality of faith of God's people. And based on this year's budget, God would find us guilty."

The president, who once said his favorite political philosopher was Jesus Christ, has proposed a budget that "takes Jesus' teaching on economic justice and stands it on its head," Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold of the Episcopal Church said on behalf of five mainline churches.

Hanson and Griswold were joined by Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); John H. Thomas, president-general minister of the United Church of Christ, and James Winkler, general secretary of the United Methodist Church's social action arm.

Appearing together at a Washington news conference March 8, they recalled from the Gospel of Luke the story of a poor man, Lazarus, lying at the gate of a rich man who ignores the poor man's plight. Upon death, Lazarus goes to heaven, the rich man to hell.

The White House, pointing to multibillion-dollar increases for homeless programs and community health clinics, disputes the criticisms raised by the Protestant

leaders.

But in a pointed letter the same day to Congress, Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities, charged that Bush is attempting to rein in a growing deficit by cutting domestic programs for the poor. “At a time when the United States is spending more on defense and homeland security, a question arises about who will pay for it,” Snyder said. “It should not be our nation’s poorest citizens.”

One grassroots group that emerged in last year’s election as a center-left Catholic voice, Catholics for Faithful Citizenship, accused Bush of soliciting Catholic votes while cutting money to the Department of Education that provides computers and other resources to Catholic schools.

Soon after Bush sent his budget to Congress this year, progressive-minded religious groups such as Call to Renewal, an antipoverty lobby, and the antihunger Bread for the World had said the budget “misses the mark” in caring for the poor.

Specifically, the five mainline church leaders criticized changes that would remove 300,000 people from food stamps, cut child care for 300,000 youngsters and reduce funding for Medicaid—health coverage for low-income Americans—by \$45 billion. Also, the leaders said Bush’s proposal to make permanent the tax cuts first approved in 2001 “rests on dubious economic assumptions.”

In general, the spokesmen welcomed Bush’s faith-based initiative, which assists religious groups in providing social services. Lutheran Social Services in America already receives 90 percent of its budget from the federal Department of Health and Human Services. But they said the initiative does not come close to plugging the gap caused by government spending cuts.

“Believe us when we tell you that neither we, nor our evangelical brothers and sisters, nor our friends of other faiths have anywhere near the resources to turn back the rising tide of poverty in this country,” they said.

The White House said Bush does not want to cut Medicaid but simply slow the growth of Medicaid spending. Noam Neusner, a spokesman for the Office of Management and Budget, also pointed to \$1 billion in additional spending on low-income housing, \$4 billion in new spending on homeless programs and \$2 billion for community health clinics.

Neusner defended the tax cuts as a key to stimulating the economy. “What we’re focusing on is the kind of growth that all Americans want to see, which is job growth,” he said. “We had 2.4 million new jobs in the last 12 months. There is no better anti-poverty program than a good economy.”

In a sustained lobbying effort by progressive church activists, nearly 900 Christians went to the nation’s capital for a weekend gathering hoping to broaden the agenda of President Bush and the Republican-controlled Congress. The four-day Ecumenical Advocacy Days for Global Peace with Justice, which ended March 14, was organized by the National Council of Churches and the Interfaith Alliance.

“One of the things that the planners felt very strongly about is that the issues we’re talking about—poverty, the environment, HIV/AIDS in Africa, Sudan—all those issues are moral issues too,” said Leslie Tune of the National Council of Churches. “We want our people to know how to advocate for policies based on those issues as moral values.”

The conference planners said they hoped attendees, who paid \$135 each for the workshops, would become less intimidated about approaching lawmakers and would demand policies that reflect Christian teachings regarding the poor, Tune said.

Environment issues were lifted up, too. After the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops adopted a resolution March 14 calling upon the U.S. Senate to oppose opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for oil and gas exploration, Alaska bishop Mark McDonald was in Washington the next day, and the bishop appeared with Senator Maria Cantwell (D., Wash.) in support of her motion to deny drilling leases.

McDonald said Bush’s plan to allow drilling would destroy the habitat, including caribou herds, of the native Gwich’in people, 90 percent of whom are Episcopalians. The Senate approved the drilling in a 51-49 vote on March 16, though ultimate passage was uncertain because the drilling authorization was part of a larger budget bill.

A few days earlier, the National Association of Evangelicals sought to show lawmakers and governmental officials their broadened agenda of public concerns over global warming and other environmental problems. At a Capitol Hill forum March 10, the NAE formally unveiled a document, “For the Health of the Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility,” that addresses a range of topics—from abortion and family issues to religious freedom, racial reconciliation and “care for

God's earth."

The document was approved by the association's board in October and has been signed by more than 80 evangelical leaders. But some who embraced the overall plan are now raising questions about its environmental emphasis.

"There are great sentiments about broad issues, about bringing evangelicals together, particularly whites and blacks," said Tom Minnery—vice president of public policy for the conservative, Colorado-based Focus on the Family—in an interview. "The movement to preserve marriage characterizes evangelicalism. The issue of global warming does not characterize evangelicalism."

Ron Sider, one of the main authors of the document, said NAE leaders have received mostly positive responses and are addressing environmental issues along with other topics. "They're not in any way making that their central crusade," said Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action. "What's happening is you're getting a more biblically balanced agenda, which is exactly what the document calls for."

Senator Joe Lieberman (D., Conn.) urged the crowd of more than 120 to continue working against global warming, a topic of legislation he has co-sponsored. –
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