

Advocates of the poor praise new budget plan

Tom Roberts NCR Staff | Mar. 3, 2009



Jim Wallis speaks at Washington rally (CNS photo)

President Barack Obama's proposed federal budget, which would result in a massive transfer of wealth, received rave reviews Mar. 2 from representatives of a number of religious groups, some of which have long ministered to the poor and are among the first to witness firsthand the widespread effects of the current economic crisis.

The Obama proposal, said Jim Wallis, author, activist and president of *Sojourners*, a Christian community in Washington, attempts to reverse a 30-year trend of growing inequality in the United States caused by policies that presumed that "enhancing the benefits of the wealthiest among us will eventually benefit us all. I think that has been proven false."

For a long time, said Wallis, "we've thought that we did not have to take morals or values into consideration in making budget decisions" and that markets would provide sufficient protection to all. But concern for the common good "disappeared" under that thinking, he said.

Budgets are moral documents, he said, and as such the current proposal represents a "fundamental moral shift in the right direction." The question, said Wallis, is whether a three-decade trend of "growing inequality" can be "turned more in the direction of the common good." During the past 30 years, he said, wealth has been redistributed from the poor and middle class to the wealthiest. This budget, he said, reverses the trend.

Some 25 religious groups from across the country, foreseeing a protracted battle over the budget, are coordinating a rally to be held in Washington April 26-29 to press the point. "The faith community is really going to weigh in on this, Wallis said.

He spoke at the start of a conference call hosted by *Sojourners*.

Participants included Candy S. Hill, vice president for social policy and government affairs for Catholic Charities USA; Noel Castellanos, CEO of Christian Community Development Association of Chicago, a network of more than 500 non-profits nationwide that serve poor neighborhoods; and Mary Nelson, founder of Bethel New Life, an urban ministry located on Chicago's West Side.

"For the first time in a long time," said Hill, her agency is "not just responding to cuts to basic programs for the poor."

Overall, she said, she rated the budget proposal as "very positive" for the millions of poor served by Catholic Charities each year. "We see the president's budget request as providing a number of important investments in programs that we think will reduce poverty in America including healthcare reform, child nutrition, housing reform and education and training programs."

She and others cautioned, however, that the proposed new rules cutting deductions to charity made by the wealthy could be harmful to agencies working with the poor.

Donors giving significant funds to Catholic Charities, she said, "are not merely donating because they get a tax deduction but because they are committed to our mission to serve the poor and advocate for justice."

Hill also suggested that Catholics return to the 1980s pastoral by the U.S. bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, a document against which the Obama budget proposal might be measured. The principles outlined in that document, which urged that the economy be viewed in light of the common good and what it does for the poorest in society, "need to be looked at now more than ever," she said.

Another Catholic endorsement came from Alexia Kelley, executive director of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, who described the budget as "a moral document that reflects our values as a nation." In a statement emailed to *NCR*, she said, "We are pleased to see that President Obama's budget signals a shift in priorities towards the common good, with special attention to low-income communities and policies that can lift everyone up," Kelly said in a prepared statement. The budget affirms the positive role that government plays in promoting the common good, which is also represented clearly in Catholic social teaching."

Kelly said the budget's proposals for "robust investments in housing for low-income citizens, ensuring college is affordable and beginning to invest in universal health care" represent "a first step toward building an economy that works for all Americans, not simply the privileged few."

Each of the representatives spoke of needs that were growing quickly because of the economic downturn. Castellanos said the problem of poverty was quickly moving beyond the inner city into the suburbs where people who have lost jobs were increasingly seeking help for the first time with basic needs "from food and shelter to help paying utilities.

In Latino communities, Castellanos said, people are excited about the budget's proposals for increased aid to education but criticized the budget for failing to address immigration reform.

It isn't enough, said Nelson, to say the budget is "just good for needy people and that it is good for our moral values." The religious groups "also have to make the business case" that investing in such areas as education, nutrition and child care not only meets immediate needs but will prove a good investment "down the road." She said that funding greater access to health care and education, for instance, would translate into fewer prisoners and fewer visits to the emergency room, far more expensive alternatives, in the future.

Roberts is NCR Editor-at-Large.

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