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WHAT'S AHEAD

Blessed are the poor in spirit

The Reign of God Around Us

BY RACHELLE SCHLABACH

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).

This issue marks several firsts. It is the first issue covering the newly-installed 107th Congress and the Administration of the 43rd president of the United States, George W. Bush.

It is also the first issue in our series looking at public policy issues through the lens of the Beatitudes. Throughout the coming year we will explore what the Sermon on the Mount has to do with Capitol Hill.

In this issue we explore what it means to say that the “poor in spirit” will inherit the kingdom of God, in light of what’s ahead in the coming year.

From other Scriptures, we catch a glimpse of what the phrase “poor in spirit” might mean. For example, we learn that the kingdom is to be inherited by those who are childlike and humble (Matthew 18:3–4).

We are also told that the reign of God “cannot be shaken” (Hebrews 12:28) and is full of “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Furthermore, this kingdom is already among us (Luke 17:20–21).

So, the “poor in spirit” can expect to have peace and joy. And as they wait expectantly, like a child, for God to ultimately fulfill these plans, they also humbly look for ways in which God is already revealing this reign on earth.

After last November’s rancorous election, we, too, find ourselves waiting to see what miracles God might work in the coming Congress. At first glance, the outcome looks rather bleak. Partisan bickering may indeed win the day. Or, as Becky Fast and Julie Hershey Carr point out (pp. 6–7), this may be an opportunity to make real progress on issues on which the two parties agree.

Unfortunately, many of the subjects highlighted in this issue are not ones on which there is widespread agreement. Gun control, the death penalty, another look at welfare reform and the cleanup of U.S. bases in the Philippines are contentious issues which will present challenges in the upcoming year.

Our task is to bring issues like these into the congressional debate. As we do, may we be humble and childlike, expecting God to work in surprising new ways. In doing so, we just may discover the reign of God already unfolding around us. ■

What does the Sermon on the Mount have to do with Capitol Hill?

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

Amid the stuffy self-importance of political actions like these, the reign of God is breaking into our world.

Spirits Poor, Blessings Rich

Packed schedules. Frantic bustle. Information overload. Such are the trademarks of 21st century life in North America. Some days I wonder whether my brain can possibly digest another newspaper article or e-mail message. Or whether my spirit has space for anything or anyone new.

In our attempts to find richness and meaning in life, too often we stuff our lives with more things, more clutter, more activities. Our strategy for “managing” more is to collect and control.

Collecting and controlling are also the twin engines of U.S. public policy. How can we accumulate more wealth as a nation? How can we exert greater power and influence in the international arena? How can we control and contain those whom we fear?

In the MCC Washington Office, I follow U.S. policy issues related to militarism and the Middle East. On these topics, most of the news looks dismal as one glimpses into 2001.

- In the coming decade, the United States plans to increase military spending by tens of billions of dollars a year. Congress voted for a \$21 billion increase this year alone. And based on his campaign promises, President-elect Bush will likely decide to deploy a national missile shield even more costly than the \$60 billion system proposed by President Clinton.

- While many nations are showing signs of impatience with the protracted economic sanctions against Iraq, the United States continues to demand tight controls. This, despite the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children as a result of sanctions.
- In recent months, the injustice of the Israeli occupation has mushroomed into the worst violence in 20 years between Palestinians and Israelis. There is little hope for a lasting accord without a new peace framework that includes neutral mediators and commitments to international norms. Yet, the United States stubbornly clings to its role as the “honest broker” of the peace process. All the while, it has provided massive military aid to Israel and winked at illegal Israeli settlement expansion and other violations of international law.

Such policies reveal pride of heart. They are based on the pompous assumption that *we* are able to protect ourselves. That *we* are justified in taking matters into our own hands—containing other nations and controlling international processes.

Amid the stuffy self-importance of political actions like these, the reign of God is breaking into our world.

God’s reign is never embraced by the haughty, the proud and those who are full of themselves. The reign of God can only be welcomed by the poor in spirit. Those who have space in their hands, their hearts and their lives to receive it. Those who recognize their dependence on God and the community of God’s people for daily protection and provision. Out of such poverty of spirit springs the rich blessing of God’s reign.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3). ■

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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“Thus Far Has the Lord Helped Us”: Whither Jubilee?

Charlotte Mwesigye, chair of Jubilee 2000 Uganda, told a group of Jubilee 2000 U.S. campaigners late last year that debt relief saves lives in her country. Money redirected from canceled interest payments is being used for vital social programs. More primary schools are serving children and more medical clinics are treating sick people. In addition, the Jubilee movement has empowered citizens' organizations in Uganda to have a growing influence on their government officials.

Jubilee has succeeded in getting creditor countries to finance an international debt relief program expected to reduce debt repayments from some of the poorest countries by an average of one-third. This will make an important difference for poor people, but much remains to be done. Although the year 2000 is past, the Jubilee campaign will continue to:

- Seek congressional funding for the \$375 million remaining of a \$920 million U.S. pledge to the current four-year international debt plan. Creditor countries will provide a total of \$27 billion, which should cancel \$90 billion–\$100 billion of debt for thirty-some countries;
- Call on the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and regional development banks to cancel more debt. While many creditor nations have pledged to cancel 100 percent of the debts owed them by the poorest countries, the World Bank and IMF, to which most debt repayments go, plan to cancel only a small portion;

- Work to end “structural adjustment” conditions. Currently, recipient countries must comply with undemocratic, IMF-designed economic policy changes that are harmful to people struggling to overcome poverty.

Finally, Jubilee campaigns in the global South are increasingly changing the moral focus of the Campaign toward a call to end “illegitimate” debt. This change emphasizes the unjust nature of the debt. It urges an expansion of the number of eligible countries. And, most significantly, it calls attention to the exploitative relations existing between the industrialized countries and the global South, expressing the need for a profound transformation of these relationships—a more complete Jubilee.

Congratulations to all the anti-debt advocates in churches and on campuses who have raised their voices on behalf of neighbors around the world! Keep up the good work—the call to Jubilee goes on. ■

BY MARTIN SHUPACK

Campaigns in the global South are increasingly changing the focus to a call to end “illegitimate” debt.

CAPITAL QUOTES

“We just fly missions and drop bombs [on Iraq] from time to time because we’ve been doing it for 10 years and no one can stop us from doing so.”

—Retired Army Col. Andrew Bacevich, quoted in *The Washington Post*, Oct. 25, 2000.

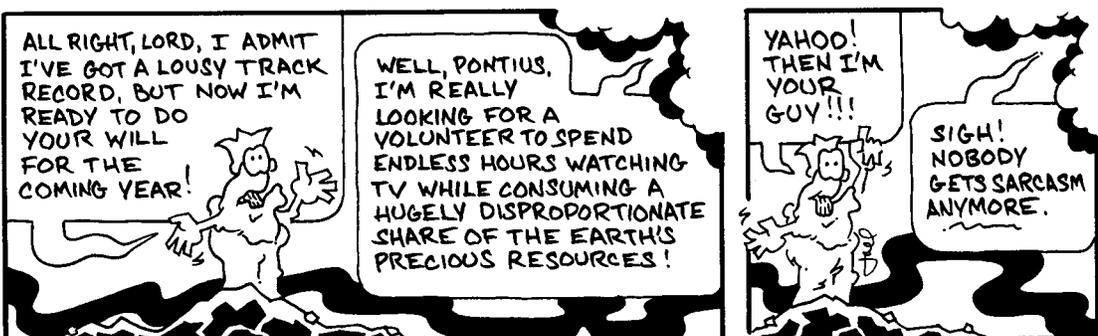
“There is something, well, vaguely American about him.”

—Maclean’s article referring to Stockwell Day, opposition party leader in Canada, who bought a .38-caliber handgun the day a new gun-registry law was introduced in Parliament [in 1994].

“When I left you your hair was black, now it’s turned white.”

—Dramatist Cho Jung-young to his 95-year-old mother at a reunion of Korean families, separated for decades by the militarized border.

Pontius’ Puddle



In the Struggle Against Guns and Death

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

Grassroots advocates for gun control and against the death penalty are among the “poor in spirit.”

From the vantage point of privilege, many of us are concerned with unconstructive tensions between spiritual and political aspects of life. Yet, the “poor in spirit” start in a blended context. They are small in number, unnoticed, discounted, and disadvantaged. Their “politics” is a long, painful journey of losses and gains. Alienated from community, they are credited with little capacity, little wisdom. Their adversaries do not accept their goals as helping or contributing to the welfare of all. As allies, we have much to learn from them.

Regardless of empathy, we initially have an adverse reaction in being deemed among the “poor in spirit.” Yet our convictions lead to a common struggle. Grassroots advocates for gun control and against the death penalty are among the “poor in spirit.”

Gun Control

A few decades ago, calls for gun control were easily overwhelmed by the National Rifle Association. Pleading with politicians availed nothing. The issue was considered a fatal, political “third rail.” A silent, immobile majority existed with little outcry. But mothers, families, youth, and those related to victims of gun violence have stepped into the gap. They speak up to tell their story. They ask for transformative, preventive action before tragedy strikes a community or family.

These advocates will surely influence the agenda of the 107th Congress. They and legislators will call for: closing gun show loopholes by requiring mandatory background checks of gun purchases; registering and licensing of hand guns; and regulating firearms as consumer products for safety purposes.

Death Penalty

Even after the reinstatement of capital punishment in 1976, calls to abolish the death penalty have often had only a few dozen visible supporters at public protests. The number of executions has swelled from 21 in 1984 to a record 98 in 1999. Enmeshed in an atmosphere of “getting tough on crime,” public opinion still favors the penalty. The alternative sentence of life without parole, at best, receives an even divide in public opinion polls.

An annual conference in San Francisco during November demonstrated a change. Nearly 800 people gathered together to work on a unified strategy—calling for a moratorium as an initial step to abolish the death penalty. Seasoned and new advocates were renewed. A critical core to this group are the families of victims, both of homicide and state killing. They are determined in their commitment.

We can expect bills requesting: DNA testing (where applicable) to prove innocence, adequate legal defense in capital cases, and a moratorium leading to a thorough examination of the death penalty with the hope of abolishing it.

Advocates in both groups are mindful that actions and inactions on the part of state and society make strong statements to children and about our future. The Bible correlates “poor in spirit” with the promise of the reign of God in mind and heart, and the faith to act with this conviction. The “poor in spirit” remind us that God can indeed work through history and the world. Let us seek to be in accordance with such grace. ■

Revealing a History Towards Redemption

The struggle to clean up the former bases in the Philippines is embedded in the painful history of Philippine struggle for sovereignty, independence, and equality. Just when Filipinos began to celebrate their freedom from a domineering U.S. military presence in 1992, they realized that their former colonizer left behind deadly toxins that continue to threaten the surrounding communities and environment.

Recent efforts by the Filipino/American Coalition for Environmental Solutions (FACES) continue to highlight this problem among the grassroots and in Congress. This year's elections kept key Congressional advocates in office—allowing for the continuation of ongoing efforts in the legislative arena.

Change cannot happen soon enough. Organizers from the Philippines continue to paint a bleak picture. Recently, a former

employee of the Subic Bay Naval Facility revealed that several neighborhoods sit on top of former base dump sites where there is an unfortunate trend of cancers, leukemia, birth defects and other illnesses.

As Henry Nouwen wrote in *In the Name of Jesus*, we are called “to discern from moment to moment how God acts in human history and how the personal, communal, national, and international events that occur during our lives can make us more and more sensitive to the ways which we are led to the cross and through the cross to the resurrection.”

This is an opportunity for us all, not only to trace the painful history of Filipinos as they struggle towards redemption, but to accompany them in revealing a Kingdom where all are treated with dignity and justice. ■

BY CHRISTINA A. LEAÑO

The struggle to clean up the bases is embedded in the Philippine struggle for sovereignty, independence, and equality.

Welfare-to-Work: Critical Questions

Funding for a range of welfare programs is scheduled to be renewed by Congress in 2002. This year's debates will entail far more than simply how much money will be distributed to which programs. Rather, government and the public will analyze what happened with 1996 welfare reform goals in considering the future of national poverty policy.

One such program is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). For a total lifetime limit of five years, TANF recipients may receive assistance in the form of cash payments, vouchers and other benefits to meet a family's most basic needs as parents move into work. Key questions in the debate over TANF will include the following:

- *Should the purposes of TANF be modified?* Currently, states disburse funds at their own discretion, with minimal federal oversight, to accomplish the following goals: end dependence on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; prevent and reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and encourage two-parent families.

- *Should federal time limit laws be revised?* Many recipients face multiple barriers to employment or need income supplements even while working. Proposals may be offered in favor of state-granted exemptions to the five-year limit for the most needy families. Exemptions might apply to families with mentally and physically disabled members, language barriers, domestic violence, and those in rural areas where jobs are scarce.
- *Should the “work first” approach be revisited?* All adult recipients are required to work within two years of first receiving TANF funds. Proponents of this policy contend that on-the-job training is most important. Those who oppose moving recipients into the first available job argue that education will lead to better, more permanent jobs and ultimately do more to end poverty.

When people of faith answer these questions publicly and truthfully, the reign of God here on Earth may come ever nearer for the poor in spirit. ■

BY ELISABETH T. HARDER

Government and the public will analyze what happened with 1996 welfare reform goals.

IN OTHER'S WORDS

To get a firsthand perspective on issues coming up in Congress that will be of interest to Mennonites, we turned to several congressional staffers. Both women are Mennonites—one works for a Democratic member of Congress, the other for a Republican. Their responses are on pages 6 and 7.

DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE

Next Congress Faces Difficult Challenges

The 107th Congress will face a number of inescapable challenges. First, this Congress follows one of the closest elections in U.S. history. The presidential election failed to produce a strong mandate for exercising presidential power. A strong political leader depends on broad popular support to function effectively.

There are 50 Republicans and 50 Democrats in the Senate for the first time in its history. The Republican Party has a nine-seat advantage in the House of Representatives. Congress has not been this evenly split since 1881.

Election 2000 results could either lead to legislative gridlock, or to a true bipartisan approach in dealing with critical issues. The election produced no tide or crusade behind either presidential candidate or political party. This is not to suggest that little or no legislation will pass in the upcoming 107th Congress. One only has to look to education, campaign finance reform, and a prescription drug benefit to find areas of consensus, which is why the presidential election was so close.

It is clear that both parties have a great interest in improving our nation's schools. Common ground can be reached, if the Republican Party can leave aside the issue of vouchers to help students attend private schools. The proposal has been criticized for draining funds from public school systems. Agreement could be easily reached on providing more federal funds to reduce class size for grades K–12, renovating our nation's crumbling classrooms and increasing the number of charter schools.

Both parties also share an interest in giving patients an ability to sue their health plans for denied medical services and some form of new prescription drug benefit for seniors. During the election, even staunch conservatives campaigned for these two Democratic initiatives, including Senator Ashcroft (R-MO), who changed his previously-held position.

It is highly unlikely that President-elect Bush's proposed tax cut of \$483 billion will be enacted. Targeted tax incentives to encourage saving for retirement, purchasing health insurance and tax relief for child-care expenses will likely be addressed.

Lastly, campaign finance reform is likely to receive significant attention during the 107th Congress. The McCain-Feingold bill, which would dramatically change the way campaigns are run and financed, is now close to a filibuster-proof 60 votes in the Senate, since the election swept out some GOP foes of this legislation.

During the next Congress, I encourage Mennonites to write, call and meet with their U.S. Representatives. John Roth's call for nonparticipation ("The Rites and Rights of Voting") in the October 17th issue of *The Mennonite* will not send a powerful message to anyone. Such passivism will only signal to our leaders that Mennonites are not concerned about changing policies for those who are poor or marginalized in society.

As a congressional aide, I have witnessed first-hand the impact that Mennonites have had on my member's voting record including efforts to close the U.S. Army School of Americas, debt relief for Third World countries, and hunger relief. As Mennonites and as Christians, our voices can be heard if we work together for change. ■

BY BECKY FAST

Becky Fast is Constituent Services Coordinator for U.S. Representative Dennis Moore (D-KS). She attends Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kansas.

Religious Liberty and Human Rights

While closely divided along party lines, the 107th Congress will provide opportunities for Republicans and Democrats to work together on several important issues. One of those issues is international religious freedom.

In many parts of the world, religious minorities are persecuted and imprisoned for their faith, often as a matter of national policy. Religious prisoners suffer beatings, torture, incarceration, and even death. These violations strike at the heart of basic religious liberties guaranteed by international treaties.

In 1997, Representatives Joe Pitts (R-PA) and Tony Hall (D-OH) and Senators Sam Brownback (R-KS) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) started the bipartisan Religious Prisoners Congressional Task Force. The task force appeals directly to foreign government leaders to release religious prisoners and to change hostile policies, and encourages private citizens to join them in this effort.

Reputable human rights organizations report that these appeals can change prison conditions, stop torture, and even secure the release of prisoners. As citizens of a nation which ardently guards religious freedom, we should join these members of Congress and speak out on behalf of those whose greatest crime is expressing a belief in their God.

Not only are religious minorities experiencing egregious human rights abuses, so too are unborn children. There is one form of abortion over which there should be no argument—partial birth abortion. Unlike conventional abortions, partial birth abortion involves inducing labor and partially delivering a baby, followed by stabbing the child in the back of the head and vacuuming out his or her brain. This barbaric act happened to as many as 5,000 American children last year.

More than two-thirds of the House of Representatives has voted for the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act in the 104th, 105th and 106th Congresses. Nearly two-thirds of the Senate has done the same. These votes were cast not only on the basis of strongly-held public opinion, but also on the basis of established medical science. Each time, the president vetoed it. The 107th Congress, and a newly-elected president in the White House, will provide a new opportunity to make this gruesome act a thing of the past.

Another important bill that will come before the 107th Congress is the Born Alive Infants Protection Act. While it has long been an accepted legal principle that infants who are born alive are persons entitled to the protections of the law, recent changes in the legal and cultural landscape have brought this principle into question. Testimony before Congress this year indicates that “live-birth abortions” are being performed, resulting in live-born premature infants who are simply left on tables to die, sometimes without the basic comfort of warmth. On one occasion a living infant was found lying naked on the edge of a sink. One live baby was wrapped in a paper towel and accidentally thrown into a garbage can.

The Born Alive Infants Protection Act would firmly establish that a live-born infant who is completely expelled or extracted from his or her mother is indeed a person under the law, regardless of whether the baby survived an abortion. Isn't it only logical that all babies who are born alive receive the same care? ■

We should speak out on behalf of those whose greatest crime is expressing a belief in their God.

BY JULIE HERSHEY CARR

Julie Hershey Carr is Senior Legislative Assistant to Rep. Joseph Pitts (R-PA). She attends Washington Community Fellowship in Washington D.C.

SOUND THE TRUMPET!

<p>In 2000, we asked readers to respond to a number of issues. Here are updates on some of those issues.</p>	
Colombia	In July, Congress agreed to send \$1.3 billion in mostly military aid to Colombia to fight drugs. Although the Colombian military failed to meet required human rights standards, President Clinton waived the conditions, and the aid is now beginning to arrive.
Cuba	Congress passed legislation permitting sales of U.S. food to Cuba, but prohibiting U.S. financing, thus severely limiting Cuba's ability to purchase. Congress also codified travel restrictions, preventing the president from loosening these without congressional approval.
Hunger Relief Act	Two parts of the Hunger Relief Act were signed into law this fall. Persons with high housing costs and/or a reliable car can now qualify for more food stamp benefits.
Iraq Sanctions	Some 70 members of Congress sent a letter to President Clinton calling for de-linking economic and military sanctions. Later, 131 members sent the president a letter in favor of the sanctions, which remain in place.
National Missile Defense	President Clinton delayed a decision about deploying a national missile defense system until the next president takes office.
Philippine Bases	Despite a growing awareness in Congress and at the grassroots, neither S. 2382 nor H. Res 355, which address the environmental contamination problem in the former U.S. bases in the Philippines, passed.
Refugee Assistance	The Migration and Refugee Assistance budget for FY 2001 was funded at the full \$700 million requested by advocates—\$42 million more than the president requested and well over congressional proposals.
School of the Americas	Congress voted to change the name of the U.S. Army School of the Americas to the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation. Military training will continue to be central to the program.
Violence Against Women Act	VAWA was signed into law, more than doubling the amount of funding for domestic violence education, prevention, and services for battered women, with special protections for immigrant women.

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