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THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Safe Space for Common Ground

Looks like the federal safety net—including health care, food stamps, housing subsidies and social security, even college loans—is all that’s left to cut.

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Cutting Our Neighbors’ Net?

BY BETHANY SPICHER

Tennessee’s governor recently announced he is cutting 323,000 low-income adults from the state’s Medicaid program, Tenn-Care. A day later, Florida’s governor proposed giving Medicaid clients vouchers for private insurance, and the next week, New York’s governor slashed \$1 billion from his state’s Medicaid program.

A case of grumpy governors? Actually, in the past two years, all fifty states have taken steps to cut Medicaid costs, either by dropping recipients, increasing co-payments or decreasing reimbursements. Why are states getting out of the health care business?

The answer goes back to Washington, where the president promises to cut the looming deficit in half. By raising taxes? Rather the president intends to extend last year’s \$1.8 trillion tax cuts. By cutting defense? In fact, the president requested \$80 billion more for Iraq last month.

Looks like the federal safety net—including health care, food stamps, housing subsidies and social security, even college loans—is all that’s left to cut.

Most Christians agree that the church is called to “care for the widow, orphan and sojourner” as the Bible so often puts it. And most Christians affirm that the government is designed to “promote the general welfare,” as the Constitution says. But Christians disagree about the specific roles of church and state in addressing poverty.

Some would call for a division of labor. The government’s duty is to keep order, to main-

tain security and to nurture business and industry. The church’s role, on the other hand, is to support individual families in caring for those who are poor, sick or elderly.

Other Christians see the church as a model for what God wills for society at large. As the kingdom is for the whole world, not just the church, congregations pioneer social welfare efforts with the hope that communities and governments will follow.

In this *Memo*, the second in our series of safe-space dialogues, the Washington Office invites conversation about the roles of church and state in providing for the common good, even as our nation moves toward handing that charter to the private sector and the free market.

Articles by Levi Miller, director of Herald Press, and Yvonne Keeler, director of MCC Great Lakes, explore different takes on the question of the roles of church and state, and MCC staff discuss the environment, criminal justice and the social safety net, all common goods that require protection.

In the president’s inauguration address, he stated, “Liberty for all does not mean independence from one another. Our nation relies on men and women who look after a neighbor and surround the lost with love.” If “looking after our neighbors” means “loving them as ourselves,” as Jesus instructed (and if it includes those 323,000 people from Tennessee), then our nation will be on the right track when our deeds match our words. ■

BY J. DARYL BYLER

Since the attacks of Sept. 11, the annual military budget has bulged from \$300 billion to more than \$438 billion.

Double Negative

If the U.S. military budget were a person, its doctor would certainly diagnose it as “morbidly obese” and would order a strict diet!

Since the attacks of Sept. 11, the annual military budget has bulged from \$300 billion to more than \$438 billion.

This enormous “weight gain” doesn’t even include the costs of fighting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—which Congress funds through emergency “supplemental” bills. This allows lawmakers to bypass the regular budgeting process, which requires spending increases to be offset by cuts elsewhere.

In late January, President Bush requested another \$80 billion for war efforts. This comes on the heels of previous requests of \$27 billion (2002), \$75 billion (2003), \$87 billion (2004) and \$25 billion already requested for 2005.

In Iraq alone, the United States has already spent \$153 billion—roughly \$225 million a day for the past two years.

How might this same amount be invested in U.S. domestic programs? For \$153 billion, the nation could:

- Send 20 million children to attend Head Start for one year; or
- Provide 92 million children with health care for one year; or

- Add 2.7 million new public school teachers for one year; or
- Provide 7.4 million students with full scholarships to a four-year university; or
- Create 1.4 million new units of public housing.

For up-to-date figures, visit:
<http://costofwar.com>

Of course governments alone can’t fix all the world’s problems. But governments should create safety nets, not chaos. The proper role of government is to help fashion a network of programs and policies that allow people to flourish (Psalm 72:5–7; Romans 13:3–4).

The problem with war is not only that it pilfers precious resources from positive programs. It also inflicts further destruction. In addition to the cost of fighting wars, there’s the cost of burying the dead, caring for the wounded and treating the traumatized. Then there’s the cost of rebuilding all that has been destroyed, including local economies. Finally, there’s the cost of lost earning power, as many families struggle to survive with one less wage earner.

Spending for war is a double negative. And, unlike math, when it comes to war, two negatives don’t make a positive. ■

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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Education = Crime Prevention

Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope (Isaiah 51:4–5).

When faced with questions about the role of the federal government in securing the social safety net, Anabaptists may be in an awkward position. Many Anabaptists, like other religious folk, strive for self-sufficiency. They do not want to be a burden to others nor dependent upon government. It is from this foundation that they extend help to others. Such actions are meant to be a witness to all peoples. However, are they sufficient to deal with the ills that beset our society?

Recent experiences have reminded me that the answer is “no.” In Philadelphia, I shared with high school students some readings from *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* In his last book, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. insisted that actions on the part of government and society are indicators of the willingness to strive toward justice and right relationships. “America owes a debt of justice, which it has only begun to pay. If it loses the will to finish or slackens in its determination, history will recall its crimes and the country that would be great will lack the most indispensable element of greatness—justice.”

Within the work of criminal justice—including juvenile justice, death penalty and ex-prisoner re-entry—adequate provi-

sions and efforts in education, employment training and community development would go a long way toward empowering individuals not to make wrong choices toward crime. Youth get the signal of little worth and few options if schools are run-down and books are nowhere to be found. The social safety net is an important and significant factor before, during and after prison. This is certainly part of the testimony of service providers.

Yet, in many cases, especially those involving children, there is lack, and crime follows. Both the church and government are namely us. Let us prayerfully reflect and act to offer justice and compassion. ■

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

Youth get the signal of little worth and few options if schools are run-down and books are nowhere to be found.

CAPITAL QUOTES

“Over the past four years, we have witnessed the greatest loss of a very valuable type of American power in our history: our power to lead, to persuade, and to inspire. . . Rather than bolstering this asset, which has helped to make us the most powerful country on earth, I’m afraid we have squandered it.”

—Sen. Russell Feingold (D-Wis.), Nov. 18, 2004.

“The scenario for children is, quite simply, doomsday.”

—Stephen Lewis, U.S. special envoy on AIDS in Africa, lamenting the lack of treatment available for children dying of AIDS.

“Next we’re going to have the Iranian campaign. We’ve declared war and the bad guys, wherever they are, are the enemy. This is the last hurrah—we’ve got four years, and want to come out of this saying we won the war on terrorism.”

—former U.S. intelligence official speaking to Seymour Hersh, in *The New Yorker*.

“If no child is left behind in the doctor’s waiting rooms, my friends, we have a much better chance of leaving no child behind in the schools of America.”

—Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), on his proposed “Kids First” health care legislation.

Pontius’ Puddle



Clean and Green in 2005?

BY LORA STEINER

The economy, budget and military spending often trump environmental concerns, making protection of the environment an increasingly partisan issue.

In a recent presidential election, one candidate offered his views on the environment: “Prosperity will mean little if we leave future generations a world of polluted air, toxic lakes and rivers, and vanished forests.” If you thought John Kerry said it, or Al Gore, or maybe even Ralph Nader, you’d be wrong. It was George Bush, during his 2000 campaign.

At a glance, President Bush’s environmental policies seem rather promising—there’s the Healthy Forests Initiative, a commitment to restore and protect wetlands and allocations for renewable energy. Even Bush’s Crawford ranch is impressively equipped with geothermal heating, a water recycling system and plenty of native grasses and plants.

But in the Bush administration, policies seemingly unrelated to the environment—the economy, budget and military spending—often trump environmental concerns. These policies have translated into pro-industry measures, leaving environmentalists befuddled and making protection of the environment an increasingly partisan issue.

The lack of policies protecting environmental health has motivated several states to fill in where the federal government has been negligent. California has strict emissions controls, several northeastern states have enacted plans to address climate change, and several mid-western states have committed to protecting children from the effects of toxic chemicals and pollution.

This year, Congress will re-introduce several environment-related bills from last session, some supported by the administration, and some not. The most contentious legislation backed by the administration is the energy bill. Originally introduced in 2003,

it includes millions of dollars in tax breaks and subsidies for oil, gas and coal companies, and is unlikely to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil. The bill includes a provision to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas exploration, as well as a liability waiver for producers of the toxic gasoline additive, MBTE, which has contaminated groundwater across the country. The energy bill includes only a small amount of funding for renewable energy and efficiency initiatives.

Initially proposed by the administration in 2002, the Clear Skies Act is aimed at capping mercury emissions and regulating other pollutants through a market-based trading system. Environmental groups say that air quality would be better off if Bush did nothing, noting that the Clear Skies Act actually weakens a provision of the Clean Air Act, which required energy plants to update pollution controls.

In response, Senators Jeffords (I-VT), Collins (R-ME) and Lieberman (D-CT) introduced the Clean Power Act in January. Like the Clear Skies Act, the bill includes a market-based system, but it also includes a capping system for carbon dioxide emissions and maintains existing standards for other pollutants. Market-based systems, the newest movement in environmental protection, limit the amount of pollution any business can release, but allow companies who are under the limit to trade their credits.

Senators Lieberman (D-CT) and McCain (R-AZ) plan to reintroduce the Climate Stewardship Act this year. Narrowly defeated in 2003, the bill demonstrated a growing concern about climate change. It also uses a market-based trading system to regulate carbon dioxide and other gases which cause global warming. The senators have vowed to reintroduce the bill every year till it passes. “Campaign finance reform took us seven years,” said McCain. “This may take longer, but we’ll stay at it.” ■

Passing the Buck on Social Security

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will have your welfare (Jeremiah 29:7).

The buzz in Washington these days is over the Social Security “crisis.” By the time my generation hits retirement, the president asserts, the system will be “bankrupt.” Our only hope? Individual stock market accounts.

Meanwhile, social safety net programs like Medicaid are slated to be cut in the president’s budget. The administration’s substitute for health care? Individual medical savings accounts. What’s going on?

As Ron Stief writes in “Privatization: A Challenge to the Common Good,” “Members of American society consider themselves rugged individualists: they are conditioned to equate freedom with capitalism, placing ultimate trust in the market. Freedom is exclusively linked to the success of the individual, almost as if community didn’t exist.”

Accompanied by tax cuts—which diminish public investment and force budget cuts—our government’s effort to privatize or diminish safety net programs moves us toward a society of winners and losers, in which security belongs to those who are already wealthy and powerful.

Pitting individuals in need of social security or health care against “the market” violates the principle of common good: pooling the resources of people with varying amounts of risk—rich and poor, healthy and sick, old and young—so that no one’s burdens are theirs alone.

The early church modeled the principle of common good, selling all they had and sharing the proceeds. The Mennonites who passed health care resolutions in 1992 and 1993 agreed: “As delegates we call on our congregations, institutions, and members to recover a commitment to community in bearing the cost of health care. Those of us

who have power, financial resources, and access to care must be willing to pay more or do with less so that those without may have access to care.”

Indeed, the church has historically led the way in caring for the most vulnerable, founding clinics, shelters and soup kitchens. Does this mean the church can pick up the government’s safety net slack? The administration’s faith-based initiatives would have us hope so. But while the church’s efforts have saved lives and heeded Christ’s call to serve “the least of these,” charity is no substitute for justice.

Doubt it? In *It Takes a Nation*, Rebecca Blank calculates that every single U.S. church, synagogue, mosque and other religious congregation would have to come up with \$300,000 per year to cover the costs of just three government programs: public assistance for families, disability payments for those in poverty and food stamps. Add Medicaid and the need more than doubles.

As David Hilfiker writes in his 2000 article for *The Other Side*, “The Limits of Charity,” poverty is built into our society and economy in the form of low wages, rampant unemployment and rising costs for housing and health care. Because it can not meet all the needs, the church’s work includes advocacy to government—to call for structures that provide for the common good, rather than institutionalize injustice.

“Only the government,” Hilfiker writes, “that is, ‘we the people,’ acting in concert locally, state-wide or nationally can create or oversee programs that assure everyone adequate access to what they need.” Neither the market nor the church can provide for the “welfare of the city.” But, unlike the market, the church can model the reign of God and seek its justice for all. ■

BY BETHANY SPICHER

“Only the government, that is, ‘we the people,’ acting in concert locally, state-wide or nationally can create or oversee programs that assure everyone adequate access to what they need.”

—DAVID HILFIKER

The State's Role

Nurturing Economic Opportunity and Religious Freedom

BY LEVI MILLER

Levi Miller is director of Herald Press.

The road to freedom from want and poverty is a government which allows opportunities for businesses to thrive and employment to flourish.

During the mid-1960s, I read Michael Harrington's *The Other America* and Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* while in a voluntary service program in a poor neighborhood of St. Louis. At the time, however, over half of the African-American kids I encountered grew up in two-parent and relatively safe families, and prayers were still common in the public schools.

By the 1990s, the unintended consequences of Harrington's socialist visions were increased poverty and danger to children. There was a tragic decrease in children of all races growing up with two parents in the household. In the meantime, a revival of vigorous Christianity in America's heartland greeted Cox's secular future.

Economic opportunity. One of the roles of government is to provide a structure for economic opportunity for all citizens. The road to freedom from want and poverty is a government which allows opportunities for businesses to thrive and employment to flourish. One could name other responsibilities of good government such as providing a safety net in regards to health care, catastrophic illness, natural disasters and economic depression. Then there is maintaining public order and transportation.

During the 1960s, however, President Johnson's well-meaning Great Society initiatives nurtured poverty being passed from one generation to another, using tax dollars to sponsor inter-generational dependency, unemployment and family disintegration. One of the boldest moral legislative changes begun by the Clinton administration and continued by the Bush leadership was the 1996 welfare reform initiative. Sadly, too much poverty still exists, but now it is based on natural disasters or governed by personal and family choice, and not by government sponsorship.

Religious freedom. Catholics, Jews, Baptists and Mennonites came to the American colonies for a context where religion could be freely practiced or non-practiced. Believer's churches especially, such as the Amish and Mennonites, cherish a country where freedom of religion can thrive: to pray in public spaces or to live as Christian pacifists.

Hence, when at mid-century the American courts began to curb religious expression, we were rightly concerned. A secular legal dogmatism and a cultural elite became increasingly hostile to religion, especially in its public and popular expressions. Religious groups had to pretend to be non-believers to use government funds for social services. Schoolteachers, especially, faced onerous restrictions. I've served on the local school board for over a decade, and we banned ministers from showing up to pray at public ceremonies, thanks to legal threats. Our school administrators now open commencement with the U.S. Marines color guard and its attendant martial themes.

A relatively free society allows Amish, Mennonites, Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, Jews and Muslims to have their own schools and to pray in their classrooms or at school ceremonies, or for an atheist to refuse to pray. The unintended benefits of government allowing free expression of religion is that religious communians are generally good citizens, learning sound moral and cultural behavior which allows a free, democratic and civil republic to thrive. In most American communities, our families are safe at night not because of armed police officers posted on the street corners, but because our neighbors and their children respect human rights, property rights and civil liberties. In short, they practice basic Ten Commandment-type norms.

Two cheers for economic opportunity and religious freedom! ■

The Church's Role

Offering Comfort and Advocating for Change

SAFE SPACE
DIALOGUE

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

Forty-five million persons in our country do not have health insurance despite various attempts by legislators. A disproportionate number are children and heads of single-parent households. Many also work in jobs that do not provide a living wage.

Health insurance costs are climbing higher. Persons who do have insurance are finding costs increasing substantially, even with greater restrictions in services or coverage. For those of us who do have coverage, we look for the lowest-cost insurance, and therefore make choices to support plans that discriminate against the chronically ill who are most in need of care.

If we are witnesses calling people toward justice, peace and compassion for all, how do we look at the issues of health care access that impact our communities? How do we identify needs and concerns in our own backyards? How do we help congregations to implement change in the health care system when it seems such a daunting task?

I have been involved with the Center of Healing and Hope for the last few years. The organization's mission is to "serve in the name of Christ, helping people who

experience difficulty in obtaining health care services in the Goshen (Ind.) area regardless of their ethnic, cultural, religious or economic background." The center "seeks to cure when possible and to care always, emphasizing long-term solutions, prevention and holistic health care."

In a small way, we, along with many local congregations, are offering some practical solutions in our own community. Many in medical professions share their expertise with those in need. Some help by translating, others by transporting, organizing, contributing resources (financial and material) and praying. Still others counsel, educate and serve on the board and staff.

Most of us in the local church community have health insurance, and despite hearing about it from various sources, many don't understand that others lack insurance. In Goshen, those without insurance are the poor or the immigrants—our neighbors with whom we have little contact. Especially for new immigrants, it is difficult to understand our health care system, because the systems in their home countries look very different from that in the United States.

We as a church must continue advocating for legislative changes, part of the solution to the health care debacle. But as people of God, we are also called to comfort those who need comforting. If we examine ourselves and acknowledge our complicity in the issues of health care access, we have taken the first step. By being involved in small efforts like the Center of Healing and Hope, we can offer some comfort to those nearest to us until the legislation changes. ■

BY YVONNE KEELER

Yvonne Keeler is director of MCC Great Lakes.

We as a church must continue advocating for legislative changes. But as people of God, we are also called to comfort those who need comforting.



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to find information on everything from militarism to immigration, tools for advocacy, news from the Washington Office and resources on setting up safe space dialogues in your own congregation.

SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
CAFTA	Congress may vote soon on whether or not to ratify the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Key provisions are likely to cause great harm to impoverished Central Americans.	Tell your senators and representatives to vote no on CAFTA.
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Family's, the nation's primary public assistance program, is set to expire at the end of March. Bills currently introduced in the Senate and House do not include sufficient provisions for child care, job training or immigrant benefits.	Ask your legislators to make poverty reduction a priority in TANF re-authorization.

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