

# Bishops join drive to protect anti-poverty programs from budget cuts

WASHINGTON - Religious leaders, including two prominent Catholic bishops, challenged lawmakers to avoid cutting federal spending on anti-poverty programs that help the poorest and most vulnerable people during the country's mounting budget crisis.

The challenge came April 27 as the leaders introduced the Circle of Protection campaign, pointing to biblical values of justice and care for the "least of our brothers and sisters" that Congress and the White House must uphold as the debate over the 2012 federal budget unfolds.

"The poor don't have powerful political voices speaking on their behalf so we are speaking on their behalf. We want to be a strong moral voice that speaks for the common good and those who are most poor," said Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

"A just (budget) framework cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in service. They require shared sacrifices by everyone," he said during one of three nationwide media teleconferences introducing the campaign.

Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif., echoed his California colleague in a separate teleconference for Spanish-language media.

Also supporting the effort is Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA.

The campaign's introduction comes as Congress was set to return from a two-week recess May 2. One of the key issues on its agenda will be the 2012 budget.

As jockeying over budget priorities evolves, Congress also faces having to raise the country's \$14.3 trillion debt ceiling. While congressional leaders agree it must be done, a contingent of conservative House members, led by newly elected Tea Party

representatives, have said they will oppose raising the ceiling unless significant spending cuts are promised.

President Barack Obama has set an early July deadline for raising the ceiling.

Congressional Republicans have said they have a long wish list of budget cuts but have not revealed what they are. Lawmakers of both parties have insisted that military spending is untouchable.

A plan for 2012 offered by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., already has been adopted by the House. It calls for reducing the tax rates for the top 2 percent of the earners from 35 percent to 25 percent and compensating for the loss of revenues by cutting spending in domestic social services and international development programs and embarking on a 10-year effort to change the way Medicare and Medicaid operate.

Congressional Democrats have opposed the plan, saying it places the elderly and poor at too great a risk.

The religious coalition, which includes leaders from Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical, African-American and Latino Christian churches, maintains that addressing the deficit is vital to the country's future, but that all areas of government spending as well as ideas for raising tax revenues must be on the table.

Of particular concern are low-cost, high-impact programs that often mean the difference between a life with dignity and one faced with insurmountable challenges, the leaders said. They cited programs as diverse as low-income energy assistance for poor Americans and the distribution of mosquito nets for people in malaria-prone countries as programs that preserve human dignity.

"Cutting the budget on the backs of the poor ... is simply not worthy of a great nation like ours," said the Rev. Barbara Williams-Skinner of the National African American Clergy Network.

The Rev. Jim Wallis, president and CEO of the evangelical social justice organization Sojourners, said the choices ahead will reveal what values the country holds highest.

"We have to remember that budgets are not just about (financial) scarcity. They're

about choices, moral choices. Our choices reveal ... what's important, what's not, who's important, who's not," he said.

"The Circle of Protection means if you come after the poor, you will have to come through us first," he added.

Despite the coalition's formation, the leaders on the conference calls acknowledged that they face a major challenge in motivating their congregations to take up the banner for the poor if they have any hope of convincing Congress that people on the margins must be a priority for the country.

"There's a lot of discernment here," Bishop Blaire said. "While we're laying (out) biblical principles of justice, people have to accept the responsibility to discern those implications."

"Each church has to work at the local level," he added. "The more we can bring people together to address these issues, the better it will work. It's not just a matter of issues or some kind of statement that we have. It requires engagement. What we have done here is lift up the voice. It's really up to us in our local churches to engage the needs of the poor."