

Doing the math on churches and food stamps

By [Daniel Schultz](#)

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[Amy Sullivan has a terrific piece](#) countering the old conservative saw that churches should step up their charitable work so the government doesn't have to. Here's the money quote, as it were:

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, writes in another article at Religion & Politics that “We cannot food-bank our way out of hunger.” And he lays out the numbers that should provide a reality check to politicians who think that churches can just pick up the reins if government stops providing food assistance: “All the food that churches and charities provide to hungry people is only about 6 percent of what is provided by federal government nutrition programs ... There are 335,000 religious congregations in the United States. If the House’s proposals to cut SNAP by \$133.5 billion and \$36 billion [over ten years] are enacted, each congregation will have to spend about \$50,000 more annually to feed those who would see a reduction or loss of benefits.”

There's no way that's going to happen. It's simply too much of a hit for all the but the very largest congregations to absorb.

But as it happens, we can quantify the disaster SNAP cuts would create even beyond Beckmann's estimate. [The median church size in the U.S.](#) is 75 members: there are lots of little congregations, and a few very large ones. That in turn leads to this fun figure: asking a 75-member church to absorb \$50,000 in increased ministry costs works out to about \$666 per person each year, a 44 percent surcharge on [the average worshiper's contribution](#).

To make matters worse, according to [one estimate](#), the average church budget is \$55,000. In other words, saddling the average congregation with the costs of not renewing SNAP would mean almost doubling its entire annual budget. And of course, as Sullivan points out, SNAP is just one program among many that conservatives would like to slash. You don't need a calculator to figure out that it's more than the

churches could keep up with.

Just trying to meet the increased need would lead to big cutbacks in church staffing and programs. We could ask why Republicans (and a few Democrats) would want to drop this kind of tax increase on churchgoers, who are more conservative than average—but of course, there's nothing serious about the suggestion that the churches should pick up the tab for cutbacks in social services. Paul Ryan isn't trying to care for the poor; he's trying to justify tax cuts. If the churches take up the slack, that's their business, not his.

Rep. Ryan would no doubt try to justify his position by saying that it equalizes the social burden by relieving job creators, or something to that effect. But again, it doesn't take very much math to see how the opposite is the case. Cutbacks in SNAP and other programs create a highly *unequal* distribution of the burden, saddling churches and other charities with costs that could be much more efficiently borne by the federal government.

To bring this back to where we started, conservatives often try to justify their positions by saying that feeding people and other relief work is the job of churches, not the government. They point out, rightly, that the New Testament has no vision of a welfare state. But that's the whole point of churches stepping in to take care of the widows and the orphans: they do it not because it's their natural work, but because *nobody else will*. It doesn't matter whether you live under the Roman emperor or President Obama: people have a responsibility to take care of one another. That the governing authorities abdicate that responsibility doesn't make it right. It just makes them hard-hearted.

Asking somebody else to take care of what you refuse to do is the very definition of entitlement. It seems like conservatives, with all their glorification of independence (not to mention Christian virtue), ought to understand that. What's dumping hungry women and children on the churches, then? Well, just go back to that \$666 figure and "do the math," as they say.