

# Forgive Haitian debt, religious leaders urge: Grants, not loans, for rebuilding

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Appeals for the world's banking leaders to cancel the remaining foreign debt owed by earthquake-devastated Haiti were made in late January by the leader of the World Council of Churches and by a newly founded alliance of U.S. Christian leaders.

New WCC general secretary Olav Fykse Tveit, a Norwegian Lutheran, said January 25 that the international community must "focus on how Haiti can become sustainable." Tveit was to take that message days later to the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in the Swiss winter resort of Davos.

In Washington, the new Evangelical Partnership for Common Good announced January 22 a petition signed by 66 Christian leaders, many of them known as progressive evangelicals, calling on all nations and institutions that have made loans to the Haitian government "to quickly and completely forgive these debts."

Last June, international financial institutions wrote off \$1.2 billion of Haiti's \$1.9 billion debt. But the country's debt level remains at around \$640 million, with annual payments of about \$50 million required to meet interest payments on that sum.

Debt cancellation would be an important step in the right direction, although not a solution, said Tveit in representing the view of the Geneva-based WCC. The minister-theologian said that the international community needs to show moral leadership and make sure that "any financial assistance to rebuild the country comes as grants rather than loans."

The petition announced by the U.S. evangelical group was newsworthy not so much for its stance as for what Associated Baptist Press called "the full return into public life of Rich Cizik, the former vice president for governmental affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals."

Cizik resigned that post in 2008 following an outcry after he said on National Public Radio that he no longer opposed civil unions for gays. His positions on social issues, including environmental protections, had irked some conservative NAE members.

Cizik co-founded the new group with David Gushee, who teaches at Mercer University, and Steven Martin, a minister, filmmaker and activist. "We have yearned to offer a better model for how Christians address public issues; to be known for always standing up for those whom God loves but the world or the church often mistreat or neglect," according to their statement.

Other signers of the Haiti petition included Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland Church in Longwood, Florida; preacher-activist Brian McLaren, and author Jim Wallis, president and CEO of Sojourners. -*Ecumenical News International, Associated Baptist Press*