

Fasting and praying for the poor

by [Cathleen Falsani](#)

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(RNS) Faced with an unjust rule of Persian king who threatened the very lives of her Jewish people, the Jewish heroine Queen Esther called on the faithful to fast and pray for their rulers to have a change of heart.

Taking their cue from Esther, a diverse coalition of religious leaders -- from Bread for the World, World Vision, MercyCorps, Sojourners, the ONE Campaign and the Alliance to End Hunger -- are calling on Americans of good faith to join them in fasting and prayer to protest proposed budget cuts that would jeopardize the poor, sick and hungry at home and abroad.

"What we're doing is humbling ourselves before God and saying, 'I can't do this anymore and I need your help and I'm not going to let go until you do something,'" said former U.S. Ambassador Tony Hall, head of the Alliance to End Hunger and co-convener of the fasting effort known as Hunger Fast (www.hungerfast.org).

Even before its official launch on Tuesday (March 29), at least 3,000 Sojourners activists had already signed on.

"I'm calling (God) in just like in Isaiah 58," Hall said. "I'm calling (God's) power in."

He's done it before. Back in 1993, then-Congressman Hall undertook a

water-only fast for 22 days to protest similar budget cuts to aid programs for poor and other vulnerable Americans.

The proposed 2011 federal budget reductions include cuts to domestic spending of about \$2.3 billion from affordable housing, \$1.75 billion from job training, \$1 billion from community health centers, \$900 million from refugee programs and \$390 million from low-income heating assistance.

The budget cuts, announced in mid-February to combat a staggering \$1.3 trillion federal deficit, also call for slashing foreign aid by about \$5 billion, including \$450 million to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis. According to an analysis of the proposed budget cuts by the ONE Campaign, cuts to the Global Fund would mean that:

-- 10.4 million bed nets to fight malaria will not be provided

-- 6 million treatments for malaria will not be administered

-- 3.7 million people will not be tested for HIV

-- 58,286 HIV-positive, pregnant women will not receive treatments to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV

-- 414,000 people will not be provided their antiretroviral (ARV) medication

-- 372,000 testing and treatments for tuberculosis will be halted

"When you remind Americans what's going on, what is really happening in the world and in their own country, they will respond and respond in a good way," Hall said in an interview. "I think they really don't know. Hopefully we'll get this in front of them with this fast."

Hall, an evangelical, has two goals: a groundswell of Americans joining him in fasting and prayer to oppose cuts to domestic and foreign aid programs; and the prayer that at least a few Republican House members will "break rank" and speak out against the cuts precisely "because they are evangelicals ... because of their faith."

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that evangelicals, more than any other group of Americans, are more likely to support cutting spending for foreign aid (unrelated to security interests) and programs for the unemployed.

But Sojourners founder Jim Wallis doesn't believe the Pew results are an accurate reflection of what he sees among rank-and-file evangelicals -- particularly younger evangelicals who he says are deeply engaged with global issues related to poverty, disease and other forms of suffering.

Wallis, who plans to join Hall in a water-only fast, said that a generation or two ago, global poverty and relief weren't even on the radar as "moral issues" for most American evangelicals.

That's changing, said Adam Phillips, a young evangelical pastor who directs faith relations for the ONE Campaign, founded by U2 frontman Bono. "A younger generation of evangelicals definitely gets this," said Phillips, who said young evangelicals see budgets, as Wallis does, as "moral documents."

Right now he's working with churches to plan "Lazarus Sunday" events on April 11 to support continued funding for life-saving HIV/AIDS drugs that have the ability to snatch a dying person from the jaws of death (a phenomenon known as the "Lazarus effect.")

"In 2002, only 50,000 Africans had access to life saving anti-retroviral treatments (ARVs). Today nearly 4 million Africans are on ARVs," Phillips said. "This is definitely a legacy of President George W. Bush, but it is also a testament to the efforts of Rick and Kay Warren, World Vision, the National Association of Evangelicals and many others.

"We need a responsible budget that reflects our collective values," Phillips said, "and our assistance to our poorest neighbors is part of that equation."

Wallis, who knows a thing or two about going up against forces with bigger budgets and more lobbyists than he has, is ready for a fight.

"It is not only bad economics, but also bad religion," he wrote recently. "And if the super-rich and their representatives in Congress persist in this fight against the poor, they will be picking a fight with all of us."