

Two Catholics featured at hearing on poverty

by [Corrie Mitchell](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue

Sister Simone Campbell, the face of the Nuns on the Bus tours, and Rep. Paul Ryan, the brains behind the House Republicans' budget-cutting plans, have for more than a year represented diametrically opposed camps on how to apply Catholic social teaching to American fiscal policy.

At a House Budget Committee hearing on July 31, the two Catholics had a chance to square off. Sister Campbell testified before Ryan's committee about hardship in America as the nation nears the 50th anniversary of President Johnson's 1964 declaration of the War on Poverty.

Yet there were few fireworks and not much in the way of theological debate, as Ryan (R., Wis.) did not go out of his way to champion the GOP budget plan that bears his name. That plan focuses on cutting social programs that Campbell says are key to supporting struggling Americans and also boosting the economy.

Instead, Ryan, the committee chair, stressed that the hearing was about improving people's lives more than it was a debate on cutting spending. "We are losing this war on poverty and we need to know why," Ryan said.

Not that Ryan was endorsing government programs, which he compared to a "giant sedimentary rock" with layers of programs built on each other. With little coordination between the various programs, Ryan said, in many cases they work against each other.

But Campbell, who was invited to testify by Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D., Md.), noted that the 2014 budget resolution plan proposed by Ryan and passed by the House in March would cut the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP. Experts estimate that the cuts could total \$135 billion, almost 18 percent, over the next ten years.

Ryan's previous two budget proposals suggested similar cuts to SNAP, which is often referred to as the food stamp program. The U.S. Catholic Bishops have decried those cuts as immoral, and on July 31 Campbell echoed those statements.

"SNAP is the most effective program we have with the least amount of waste, fraud and abuse," Campbell said, adding that cutting it would be morally wrong.

Campbell is executive director of Network, a Catholic social justice lobby, and in June 2012 she and Network launched the first Nuns on the Bus campaign specifically to oppose the Republican budget plans set forth last year by Ryan. She said she was also responding to Ryan's suggestion that his budget represented Catholic teaching.

Ryan has been criticized by fellow Catholics and even by the hierarchy for his previous budget proposals, though he has defended his views, including during a visit to Georgetown University last year when he was Mitt Romney's running mate on the Republican presidential ticket.

Ryan argued on July 31 that the nation has spent \$15 trillion dollars on the War on Poverty and yet 46 million Americans are currently living in poverty, and 20 million Americans earn an income that is less than half of the poverty level.

Van Hollen, the ranking Democrat on the committee, said that 58 percent of households receiving SNAP have someone who is employed and in 82 percent of households on SNAP one of the family members finds work within a year. He said that shows what a crucial support the program provides to working families.

He called on Campbell to comment about those who need a little help from food nutrition programs "not so they can be in a hammock, but so that they can try to pull themselves and their families out of poverty."

Campbell responded that for her the issue is wages—that minimum-wage jobs are "insufficient to support a family" and that SNAP is, just as intended, supplemental.

Campbell has been working with the interfaith community in Washington to craft what religious progressives call a "faithful budget" that they say advocates "reasonable revenue for responsible programs," as well as accountability in making sure those programs work.

Rep. Reid Ribble (R., Wis.) asked Campbell what the church is doing wrong that it needed to reach out to the government to "do something that is so directly their

nature,” adding that Christianity is about serving the poor.

In response, Campbell said that the issues are so big and charitable dollars aren't sufficient. So there is “a government responsibility to ensure everyone's capacity to eat,” she said. “We do the charity part.” —RNS