

Making health care a moral issue: Letter to Congress from religious leaders

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Insisting that health care is a moral issue, religious liberals are demanding that Capitol Hill make it a priority when Congress takes up the president's budget proposal this month.

A letter to Congress signed by more than 75 nationally known religious leaders and scholars says they will evaluate the government budget to make sure it provides health care, education and housing for the neediest Americans.

"The federal budget is a moral document," Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold said January 25 in New York City during a panel discussion sponsored by a left-leaning think tank, the Center for American Progress. "I notice how glibly we use phrases—'One nation under God,' and then I find myself saying, 'So what does God think?'"

The panel, which included Griswold, Center for American Progress President John Podesta, Northwestern University ethics professor Laurie Zoloth and Georgetown researcher Ann Neale, faced audience questions about the absence of liberal religious leadership for the Clinton health plan proposed in the early 1990s. Panel members also addressed religious liberals' failure to mobilize the way religious conservatives have.

The "progressive" religious voice, which Podesta credits for the civil rights and labor movements, has been silenced, he said, as "people began to equate being religious with being conservative."

That can change, panel members said. Health care can become a moral rallying cry the same way abortion and gay marriage issues have mobilized Republicans, said Zoloth, an Orthodox Jew and self-described "optimistic Democrat."

“There is a link between the economy and a moral life,” she said. “Our problem in this budget is how to make the future fair for all Americans. There are ways for health care to move to the front of the agenda.”

About 45 million Americans, or 15 percent of the population, don’t have health insurance, according to the Washington-based Kaiser Family Foundation. A budget that neglects their needs and those of Medicare dependents “is more than wrong,” Podesta said. “It’s immoral.”

Other signatories to the letter included: James Forbes, senior minister of the Riverside Church in New York City; C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance; Derrick Harkins, pastor of Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington; Steven Jacobs, rabbi of Temple Kol Tikvah in Los Angeles; Michael Lerner, editor of *Tikkun* magazine, San Francisco; Sister Catherine Pinkerton of Network: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby; and Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners*, Washington. -*Religion News Service*