

Protesting an ‘immoral’ budget: Civil disobedience by progressive Christians

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In a direct action by church progressives who have repeatedly decried the federal spending cuts affecting the poor, more than 100 activists were arrested for blocking an entrance to a congressional office building during a frigid, pre-Christmas confrontation as the House and Senate struggled to pass bills funding the 2006 national budget.

Mainline church leaders and socially liberal evangelicals realize that most Republican lawmakers believe they can afford politically to disregard church petitions on the issue. The result: a nonviolent demonstration on December 14 that led to a reported 114 arrests.

Demonstrators singing “Caring for our neighbors, we shall not be moved” were frisked, photographed and booked on trespassing charges by Capitol Police officers. The misdemeanor carries a \$250 fine or 90 days in jail. The event was choreographed by two groups that focus on poverty, Sojourners and Call to Renewal.

The lawmakers were rushing to agree before the Christmas recess on a five-year combination of spending cuts and revenue increases.

Senate and House leaders reached a compromise plan December 18, but only after adding a proposal to allow oil drilling in northern Alaska. The House passed the compromise bill December 19, and the Senate adopted it two days later—but struck down the drilling provision.

The Senate-approved version provides about \$40 million in cuts—affecting mostly student loans, Medicare and Medicaid. It avoids cuts in food stamps. The House was expected to pass the bill when members convened after the holidays.

National Council of Churches general secretary Bob Edgar, like other protest leaders, cited biblical verses frequently during the budget debate. In one example, Edgar quoted from the Letter of James, which castigates rich but uncaring believers, saying “you have dishonored the poor.”

On December 21, after Vice President Dick Cheney’s vote broke a Senate tie, Edgar claimed that one half of the Senate had “voted for those in need,” and the other half had “voted for greed.”

Republican leaders have said the budget cuts are needed to make a dent in the federal deficit, which has been driven up by the cost of the Iraq war, recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina and other disasters, and a series of deep tax cuts. Many liberals and moderates have criticized the cuts because they primarily benefit the richest Americans.

It is immoral to cut taxes for the wealthy as Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, whom the Bible says came to bring “bring good news to the poor,” said Sojourners founder Jim Wallis. “There is a Christmas scandal in this nation . . . but it has nothing to do with shopping malls saying ‘Happy holidays’ instead of ‘Merry Christmas,’” Wallis said. “The Christmas scandal is the immoral budget coming out of this Congress.”

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, said at the protest scene, “This is not just bad public policy. This is morally disgraceful.”

Wallis and Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, were among those arrested. About 150 other demonstrators chose not to be arrested, including Granberg-Michaelson, Edgar, and John Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ.

Religious conservatives who focus on different hot-button social issues shunned the rally. Indeed, the Washington-based Family Research Council urged its members to support the House budget bill.

Tim Wildmon, president of the Mississippi-based American Family Association, has been pressuring retailers to make more explicit references to Christmas, and said his 3 million members aren’t galvanized by issues like federal spending policy. “The gospel message is about individuals helping individuals,” said the son of AFA

founder Donald Wildmon. "I don't see it in the Bible where it's the government's responsibility to take care of everyone." Besides, he said, "the budget bores people."

Mainline leaders were encouraged by the church-based efforts. All 65 synod bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had objected weeks earlier to the budget cuts, speaking in unison with ecumenical partners. "Our voices of opposition were heard, and have provided a tangible sign" that the church is living out the gospel, said presiding bishop Mark S. Hanson.

"Single individuals who unite on behalf of persons in need will someday prevail," predicted Edgar of the NCC. *-compiled from Religion News Service, Associated Baptist Press and other sources*