



# BAPTIST PRESS

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### Church Groups Urge Action On Liberal Welfare Reform

WASHINGTON (BP)--Spokesmen for a number of major religions groups urged the Senate Finance Committee to reform the present welfare system which they said "fails in virtually every respect."

In doing so, they also labeled one section of the bill supported by the Nixon administration as "not only inadequate" but "dangerous."

Testifying for 12 groups, including the American Baptist Convention Division of Christian Social Concern, and the National Council of Churches, the religious leaders pled for a larger guaranteed minimum income than the amount presently supported by the administration.

The testimony before the committee represents the first major response from the 12 religious groups to the President's welfare reform proposals as outlined several months ago and re-emphasized strongly in his State of the Union address one week before the hearings. Southern Baptists have made no response, pro or con, to the welfare reform proposals.

The testimony of the religious leaders attacked a number of "myths" concerning welfare, and called for a reform of the present system that does not "relegate the poor to the status of second class citizens" whose lives would be "controlled by the government."

William P. Thompson, stated clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., was the chief spokesman before the Senate Finance Committee, which is in the midst of three weeks of public hearings on welfare reform proposals.

Thompson was joined by Miss Dorothy Height, vice president of the National Council of Churches, and Hobart Burch, general secretary for health and welfare of the United Church of Christ Board for Homeland Missions.

The joint testimony was given in behalf of the following additional groups: United Methodist Church Board for Christian Social Concerns, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church, U.S., Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), United Church of Christ--Council for Christian Social Action, United Methodist Church Women's Division, Church of the Brethren, and the Joint Washington Office for Social Concerns (representing the Unitarian Universalist Association, the American Ethical Union, and the American Humanist Association).

Thompson said the 16-page appeal from the religious groups was "rooted" in the policy statements and resolutions adopted by the governing bodies of the organizations they represented.

The chief recommendation of the religious groups calls for a minimum guaranteed income that matches what the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says is the amount needed to live "at a minimum level of decency." This was computed in 1970 to be \$6,960 for an urban family of four.

The administration-backed bill, which the House of Representatives passed last year, supports a guaranteed minimum income of \$2400 for a family of four. The government's poverty index for the same sized family is \$3,968 (a figure that is adjusted upward regularly to match the cost of living).

The testimony of the church groups criticized the poverty level index as "an arbitrary figure whose greatest claim to validity is constant reiteration."

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They claimed the administration-backed bill "fails miserably" because it imposes a maximum of only \$3,600 in benefits for families with eight or more members and provides no cost-of-living increases. Furthermore, they charged, the forced work requirement of the bill "has no place in American social policy," and the "custodial day care" provision is based "on a fatal flaw."

"A coercive work requirement is no answer to the problems of welfare and will serve only to create an embittered welfare population and an harassed welfare administration," the religious panel continued. They urged legislation that would provide an adequate work incentive that will "encourage rather than discourage efforts at self-help" and supportive services necessary to enable the welfare recipient to work.

The panelists spoke urgently for the extension of aid to the working poor "so that it is no longer possible for one who works to get less than one who is on welfare."

They also called for laws to protect the working welfare recipient by requiring that they be referred to jobs that pay the federal minimum or the prevailing wage, whichever is higher.

Discussing the day care provisions of the bill, the panel said that the "fatal flaw" they are based on is that day care is "being created not to serve the child but only to permit the mother to go to work.

"The children are treated simply as something to be gotten out of the way so that the mother can leave the home, not as persons in their own right," the religious leaders asserted. Furthermore, the bill does not require day care services to meet any quality standards whatever, but only that they provide "custodial care" rather than "developmental day care." These provisions should be changed, they urged.

Thompson and his panel began their testimony before the powerful Senate Finance Committee of which Sen. Russell B. Long (D., La.) is chairman, by attacking a number of "welfare myths" which they said persist for one fundamental reason: "That is that people find in these myths a convenient excuse for avoiding their own responsibility."

The central myth, they contended, is that the welfare rolls "are filled, not with people in need, but with able-bodied loafers." They cited government statistics to show that a minimum 80.5 per cent of those receiving welfare benefits are unable to work. Also, the statistics show that "able-bodied unemployed males comprise only 9/10 of one per cent of the recipient population" and most of these want work and cannot find it, they said.

Other myths listed by the panel concern the notion that the welfare rolls "are rife with fraud . . . that recipients have more children simply to get additional welfare benefits, that most welfare children are illegitimate, that the rolls are primarily black and that once a recipient gets on welfare, he stays on welfare.

"Each of these stereotypes can be and has been rebutted by the government's own studies and statistics," the church leaders said, citing a number of references and government studies.

"We want reform of this 'system,'" the church spokesmen declared, "but we believe that that reform ought to proceed on the basis of facts, not on the basis of self-serving myths.

"The fact that seems to be most forgotten in the debate around welfare reform is that we are talking here about people, not about things or objects, but people--people who are children, who are aged, who are blind, who are disabled, who are mothers with dependent children or who work full or part time for less than a living wage," they said.

"We are talking about human beings, people like you and me, who lack income sufficient to their basic needs," the joint church group said.

The Senate Finance Committee has promised to report a welfare reform bill by March.



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