



CIRCLE *of* PROTECTION

July 20, 2020

Dear Senator/Representative,

We write to you as the steering committee of the Circle of Protection, a coalition of church leaders representing the diversity of U.S. Christianity – including Latino Churches, Historic Black Churches, Protestants and Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox, Pentecostals and Peace Churches. One thing on which we all agree is that our country's policies should reflect Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25 about how we should treat "the least of these."

Thank you for the legislation you have passed in response to COVID-19 and the ensuing economic crisis. The death toll from COVID-19 continues to rise and millions of people remain out of work. We implore you to quickly pass another COVID response bill that addresses the swelling ranks of people in poverty, and we urge you to prioritize the following.

Nutrition Assistance: We urge Congress to increase Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) minimum benefit by 15%. Hunger is surging at an alarming rate. According to a recent study, food insecurity among young children is three times as high as during the worst of the Great Recession. SNAP is America's most effective anti-hunger program and one of the best ways to stimulate the economy as people spend their benefits quickly and in their local communities.

International Assistance: This global pandemic and its economic and political fall-out are likely to hit hardest among poor people around the world. The World Food Program says that extreme hunger is on track to double by the end of the year. The World Bank projects increases in absolute poverty in many countries. Yet less than two-tenths of one percent of Congress' response to this global pandemic has gone to international activities. We urge Congress to provide \$12 billion in international assistance. We won't be able to bring the virus under control as long as it is rampant in low-income countries.

Elections: COVID-19 threatens the integrity of the 2020 elections. The right to vote in free, fair, and safe elections is fundamental to our democracy. For us, this is not a partisan issue. No citizen should have to choose between their health and the exercise of their right to vote. We urge Congress to provide an additional \$3.6 billion for election preparedness in every state.

Racism: As this coalition of Christians has said before, we believe that racism and poverty are theological issues. And the integral relationship between poverty and racism unifies us against both. Our unity on these issues is because they are theological issues for us, not merely political or partisan ones. The more the nation has watched the video of George Floyd being killed, and watched the unprecedented response, the more has been revealed about systemic racism in our policing and law enforcement culture and structures and, indeed, in all our social systems. The deep connection between poverty and racism must be fundamentally addressed in this stimulus legislation and requires a bold outcome to the police reform process that is going on in the Congress simultaneously.

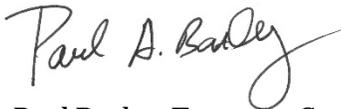
Most states have to balance their budgets by July 1, and without additional aid, they will be forced to cut community services— health care workers, first responders, and teachers. State and local governments also provide help to many desperate people who, for some reason, fail to qualify for federal programs. Adequate funding directed to states is essential to address the impact of the Coronavirus within those states and individual communities. All immigrants should be able to access COVID-19 testing, treatment and assistance. Congress should provide additional desperately needed support for homelessness assistance programs, USDA rural low-income housing development programs, and emergency rental assistance for those in the greatest need. Expansions to the EITC and Child Tax Credit will help stimulate the economy and prevent a dangerous surge in poverty.

The COVID-19 crisis makes us all more aware of the connections among all people, including people on the margins of our economy and society. People of color are being hit especially hard by the virus and economic downturn. Black and brown people with less access to safe and secure housing, steady incomes, and health care are more likely to be infected and die from this virus. Poverty and racism have created pre-existing conditions that also increase the chances of contracting and dying from this lethal disease.

Neglect of the people in greatest need will lead to an even more deeply divided nation and world. Our nation is faithful to God when we provide help to poor and vulnerable people; and our commitment to racial justice must become as systemic as racism is increasingly revealed to be.

Sincerely,

Members of the Circle of Protection Steering Committee



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