

News

S.J. RELIGIOUS LEADERS SEEK 'MORAL BUDGET'

THEY URGE STATE TO AVOID CUTTING PROGRAMS FOR POOR

By **Julie Johnson**

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California lawmakers should consider the poor when deciding the fate of the state's overdue budget, a coalition of San Joaquin County religious leaders says.

Members of a group representing 40 Christian churches and Stockton's Temple Israel have signed a statement outlining a "moral budget" that would prioritize housing, safety and health care for the state's poorest residents.

They met last week with state Sen. Michael Machado, D-Linden, and Assemblyman Greg Aghazarian, R-Stockton. On Monday, they met with The Record's editorial board.

With California facing a \$17 billion budget deficit, these religious leaders worry that programs serving their neediest congregants will be unfairly targeted. They argue it is time for morality to play a larger role in deciding how funds are allocated.

"We are called by our faith to provide for the poor and the vulnerable," said Rich Fowler, executive director of Stockton's Catholic Charities. "They need to be first on our list."

Disappearing Meals on Wheels deliveries and cutbacks in other services for the elderly are what drove Pastors Jim Dunn and Doug Butler of First Baptist Church to sign the petition. Between 30 percent and 40 percent of their church members are older than 60 years old, Dunn said, and their well-being is key to the church's ministry.

"Seniors are facing the high cost of gasoline, PG&E bills, food," Dunn said. "For people on fixed incomes, what are they going to do?"

More people are coming to the food pantry at Zion Lutheran Church, the Rev. Cheryl Corneliussen said.

"We've seen people who we would not normally see; maybe they've suffered from the mortgage crisis, who are now coming for food," Corneliussen said. "And people who would normally come only once now come repeatedly."

Jennifer Robinson, a member of Resurrection Power Evangelistic Center in Stockton, said she has personally and physically felt the impact of budget cuts.

When Robinson could no longer afford the expensive medication to treat her rheumatoid arthritis, her health declined, and she was forced to use a wheelchair. In recent months, she has recovered thanks to treatments paid for by Medi-Cal.

But her doctor recently told her that he can no longer treat Medi-Cal patients. Medical bills - more than \$550 every month - are sure to pile up again. Robinson is a single mother of two children.

"I'm a human being that's in need of those services - and so are my children - that may get cut," she said.

The coalition of religious leaders does not promote one budget solution over another - but some do believe certain proposals will better serve the poor.

Father Mark Hall of St. Anne's Episcopal Church encourages his mainly middle-class congregation to give whatever they can to help the needy. Hall says the concept of paying more taxes goes along with what they preach.

"When we talk about a morally just budget, we're really speaking in terms of making sure the poorest of the poor

aren't written off because we can't afford it," Hall said. "Because the truth is we can afford it."

Group members, describing the breadth of their organization as "unprecedented," said it is their duty to advocate for the poor. That is why they outlined a position for a "moral budget" in California and why they met with the politicians from Sacramento.

"What we did last Wednesday is church in action, faith in action," Fowler said.

The idea for a joint statement began early this month when Catholic Bishop Stephen Blaire called a meeting to propose they unite around the budget crisis. Many in the group say this is the first time they have reached beyond religious differences to work together on an issue, a welcome change after divisive issues such as gay clergy have cooled relationships.

"Bishop Blaire suggested we gather over concern that the budget cuts will have the greatest impact on those on the lower rungs of society," Temple Israel's Rabbi Jason Gwasdoff said.

Many of the churches involved will distribute the statement - which includes legislators' names and numbers - out to their members Sunday, Fowler said. Others are planning to host special forums on the budget to educate people on the issue.

"My belief is that we spend too much time behind stained-glass windows," Fowler said. "We need to be doing a lot more sharing what we learn behind stained-glass windows in the broader community."

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