

Voices: If poverty is the church's responsibility

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Marv Knox's editorial ["Christians: It's time to knit safety nets"](#) gave a helpful overview of the massive cuts to federal social safety-net programs proposed by the Trump administration, as well as the challenge to the church's witness such cuts have potential to bring.



Jake RaabeThe budget is [highly unlikely to pass](#) in its current state, but many have defended it nevertheless. "Taking care of the poor is the church's job, not the government's" has been a consistent refrain from Christians in support of the cuts. Knox challenged churches to begin to take that sentiment seriously, and many readers indicated a readiness to do so. Can the church really take on the entirety of poverty response in America?

Brad Williams at Christ and Pop Culture [did the math](#) on this a few years ago. Take WIC—Women, Infants and Children—a program that provides funds for food and healthcare to the neediest and most vulnerable members of society. This program spends about \$6.6 billion a year. Given that evangelicals typically give about 4 percent of their income to their church and make up about 24 percent of the population, every evangelical church in the country would need to spend around 17 percent of its budget in

order to provide the same coverage WIC currently does.

Budget hikes

I've worked in several churches, and none of them has ever had one-fifth of its budget free and available for immediate use. Something would need to be cut significantly in most church budgets to be able to spend an additional 17 percent on benevolence. For most churches, this likely will have to come from ministers' salaries, typically the largest non-building expense. Given that most churches spend 40 percent to 50 percent of their budgets on salaries, evangelicals would need to tithe around twice as much as they currently do or reduce their ministers' salaries by half to make up for WIC alone, which only provides basic food and health care to women in poverty with children under 5 years old.

This is just one program for one group of people in need. These numbers don't take into account benevolence for disabled people, elderly people, the recently unemployed or families with children over age 5.

What would it look like for the church to take on the full extent of poverty relief in the United States? According to [an article](#) in the Washington Post, America spends about \$212 billion per year on welfare services. Determining total annual U.S. church contributions is difficult, but [one estimate](#) from 2007 put the number around \$97 billion for all religious institutions combined. This means the church taking on full responsibility for U.S. poverty alleviation would require all American Christians to give more than double what they give currently—triple, if they want their churches to be able to operate in more or less the same way they do now.

Triple giving?

Would your congregation be prepared to triple its total giving in order to alleviate poverty? Maybe it is. Maybe the church really can end poverty in the United States. We should be realistic in what this would require,

though. Most churches struggle to increase yearly giving enough to keep pastors' salaries in line with inflation. If we're willing to claim poverty alleviation is the exclusive work of the church, are we willing to drastically adjust our giving accordingly?

Of course, some might question if we should be spending as much as we currently do on social services. I would answer yes, for two reasons. First, most evidence suggests abuse of social services happens [significantly less](#) than we're led to believe by politicians and media outlets with budget-related agendas. Does welfare abuse exist? Of course. Is it rampant and out of control? Not by any means.

On that note, the second reason: Which will Christ be unhappier with us for—giving to someone who didn't need it, or not giving to someone who did? Which will God judge us more harshly for—giving to one person who didn't need it, or denying it to 99 who did? Better to err on the side of generosity than neglect.

Can the church in America support our country's poor? If we all gave a lot more, maybe. I'll put my money where my mouth is. If the White Houses' proposed cuts pass, I'll find a way to triple my church giving. Anyone with me?

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