

May 11, 2011

**Budgets are Moral Documents**

Now as always, the test of any economy or government is to ask a very straightforward question: how are the most vulnerable among us faring?

The Maine Council of Churches represents the united voice of nine Maine denominations who share in the Christian tradition. Like many other institutions, the churches in Maine are seeing more Mainers every day who are hungry, working in low-wage, no-benefits jobs; at risk of losing their housing or unable to afford decent health care. Losing access to general assistance or TANF or Mainecare will push more families and individuals over the edge into hunger, homelessness and illness. We're seeing more people asking for help at a time when churches already can't meet the need. In times like these, we believe it is simply wrong to ask more of the poor while asking less of the rich.

Meanwhile, these proposals do not "reform" the system. They will not create prosperity, alleviate hunger and poverty, or help anyone reach their full human potential. Cutting people off from public benefits is not "reform" any more than suddenly pulling a rug out from under someone is inviting them to sit down and rest.

Budgets are moral documents, a series of choices that add up to what kind of a society we're all willing to live in now, and someday hand over to the next generation as our legacy. Building prosperity will take more than shoving out those who are inconveniently too poor or too old or too young or from too far away. We believe that if

one of us is hungry or homeless or without health care that means all of us are in trouble, because we're all in this together.

There is a story in the Christian tradition that applies to our situation today. Long ago, Jesus faced a large crowd of hungry, anxious people. He took a few ingredients – a few fish and some loaves of bread – and together they created a meal big enough to go around for everyone.

The ingredients we have to work with are not fishes and loaves, but modern, publicly accountable systems like progressive taxation and public benefits. But the ancient recipe still works because it is founded on powerful moral ideas about community.

The recipe calls for an awareness of the abundance we've been blessed with. It calls for us to stir in the courage of our convictions. It calls for us to stick together, to keep passing the baskets along through the crowd, instead of hoarding more than we need. It calls for us not to be duped into being scared of each other, or into thinking we can afford to discard anyone. And it calls for us to have faith in the infinite potential of each of us to contribute to the common good. It calls for us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We at the Maine Council of Churches still believe in the power of this ancient recipe. Together, we can create a better Maine, seasoned with hope, with enough to go around for everyone, and a future we can be proud to hand down to our children.