

Guiding Principles for Changing the System

Leaders of 16 religious organizations—including Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Evangelical voices—have endorsed the following six principles as a basis for evaluating proposed changes to the Social Security system.*

Compassion. As citizens and residents of this country, we have a collective responsibility to care for one another. The federal government should continue its important, effective and efficient role promoting a compassionate society through the Social Security system.

Economic security. Social insurance should remain a basic part of our society. Disability and survivor insurance must be maintained. Security for the elderly, survivors and persons with disabilities should not be left to the vagaries of fragile family support systems, voluntary charity or economic cycles.

Equity, fairness and progressivity. The present overall structure of the Social Security system—universal, compulsory employee and employer contributions, an earned right, wage-related rather than means-tested and protected against inflation—should be preserved and strengthened. Overall, the costs and benefits should be distributed progressively in proportion to each person’s ability to pay and level of need. Care must be given to assure that segments of the population are not systematically disadvantaged due to gender, race or marital status.

Savings and pensions. Social Security is intended to be the third leg of a three-legged stool, the other two legs being personal savings and employer-provided pensions. Congress should encourage personal savings and employer pensions in addition to (not as a substitute for) the current system, and, especially, it should explore ways to help low- and middle-income households save more for their future.

Stewardship of the public trust. Congress has a moral obligation to fulfill its trust responsibilities to those who have contributed through their payroll taxes to the Social Security trust fund. Congress also must assure that future beneficiaries will receive benefits sufficient to meet their basic needs, that trust fund revenues and expenditures balance over time and that future generations will not be unfairly burdened by this generation’s debts.

*Go to www.nccusa.org/news/newshome.html for the full text of the April 26, 2005, statement *To Preserve and Strengthen Social Security: Religious Organizations Statement of Principles* and its signers.

To Preserve and Strengthen Social Security: A Biblical Challenge

The churches’ work to protect the Social Security system has a strong biblical grounding, even though you won’t find the phrase “Social Security” in the Bible. What you will find are Old and New Testament texts that repeatedly challenge us—as a society—to provide for the most vulnerable



among us: people living in poverty, the elderly, widows and orphans. Do you remember the story of Joseph, who, inspired by God, dreamed a plan that saved Egypt from famine? Foreseeing lean years ahead, he advised Pharaoh to store up grain. The Bible records the plan: “Let them gather all the food of these good years that are coming, and lay up grain under the authority of Pharaoh for food in the cities ...” (Genesis 41:35) So, too, in our time, we the people, acting through our elected officials, should be prudent and provide a safety net to prevent any in our society from falling into poverty. Social Security is just such an anti-poverty program that shares risks and rewards across our whole society.



The Bible is clear that God judges peoples and nations by how well they carry out God’s assignment to care for vulnerable people. At the end of the debate on Social Security, let us be able to say we have met that challenge well.



Facts About Social Security

Social Security is a program that reflects our values – it is the most successful domestic program in our history and the financial foundation for many Americans.

- ◆ Social Security is a risk-free, guaranteed pension program that on average replaces 40 percent of a retiree's wages.
- ◆ Today, Social Security provides insurance coverage to almost 157 million workers and their families and benefits to close to 47 million people of all ages. This can continue to be a safety net for our neighbors, parents and children for years to come, if we protect it.

Social Security protects the most vulnerable in our community by keeping many of our elderly citizens from slipping into poverty.

- ◆ Social Security is the principal source of income for two-thirds of older Americans, and virtually the only source of income for one-third.
- ◆ More than 90 percent of those over age 65 receive Social Security benefits.
- ◆ As the only guarantee of income in retirement, Social Security has performed admirably over the years, keeping about 40 percent of older Americans out of poverty.

As a faith community, we have the responsibility to ensure that Social Security remains the primary source of income security for low-wage workers and their families.

- ◆ The Social Security benefit formula ensures that lower-wage workers and their families receive a higher return in benefit amounts relative to their contributions than higher-wage workers.

- ◆ On average, women live longer and earn less than men and are far more likely than men to take time out of the labor force for care giving — making Social Security's lifelong inflation-adjusted defined benefit particularly important. This makes Social Security a crucial support to women.

Privatization, reform that is both risky and unnecessary, is not the answer to strengthening Social Security.

- ◆ Social Security will be adequately funded for at least 37 years.
- ◆ According to the Social Security trustees, even with no changes, Social Security will still be able to pay 73 percent of benefits after 2042.
- ◆ The cost of making Social Security solvent for baby boomers is significantly less than the tax packages of 2001-2004.
- ◆ We must always be able to rely on Social Security, if we need it now or in years to come. Privatization will not solve Social Security's long-term problems and may even cut much-needed benefits.

The National Council of Churches USA developed this bulletin insert. For more information visit www.nccusa.org, e-mail bbrossy@nccusa.org, call 202-544-2350, or write National Council of Churches USA, Attn: Justice and Advocacy Commission, 110 Maryland Ave. N.E., Washington, DC 20002.

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