

# Churches Rally Support for Imperiled Food Stamps

By Religious News Service

The federal food stamp program, under fire from spokesmen for President Gerald Ford's budget-conscious administration and the subject of several reform bills in the Congress, is receiving strong and continuing support from representatives of many of the nation's leading religious groups.

Not only are these religious spokesmen questioning alleged "myths" and "misstatements" being propounded by anti-food stamp forces, they are calling for an even broader outreach to the nation's disadvantaged through federal food assistance.

In statements and in testimony before Congress, religious spokesmen have sharply challenged the proposed changes in the food stamp program that would cut the number of eligible recipients drastically and reduce benefits by more than \$1-billion. They agree that reforms are needed, but mainly in the program's administration.

Since August, 1975, when President Ford urged Congress to tighten eligibility requirements and called the 11-year-old effort "another massive multi-billion-dollar program, almost uncontrolled and fully supported by federal taxpayers," reaction from religious sources has been building.

Dr. Howard Spragg, executive vice-president of the United Church of Christ's Board for Homeland Ministries, was one of the first to respond. In a letter to President Ford, he said proposed cutbacks in the food stamp program were "inhuman" and show "ignorance of, and insensitivity to, the needs of the poor and near-poor Americans."

Noting that under the initial Ford proposal some 3.4 million people would be removed from the program and benefits for some 15 million others would be reduced, the UCC official said the proposals were "extremely inadequate."

Another critic of the early Ford proposals was Msgr. Lawrence Corcoran, executive director of the National Conference of Catholic Charities, an organization that is deeply involved with services to the poor. He denounced the administration proposal as an "utter disaster" and lashed out at those who would eliminate virtually all the "working poor" from the program.

Reacting strongly to a remark by U.S. Treasury Secretary William Simon that the food stamp program is a "well-known haven for chiselers and rip-off artists," the priest quoted U.S. Agriculture Department data revealing that less than 1 per cent of food stamp households had perpetrated any fraud.

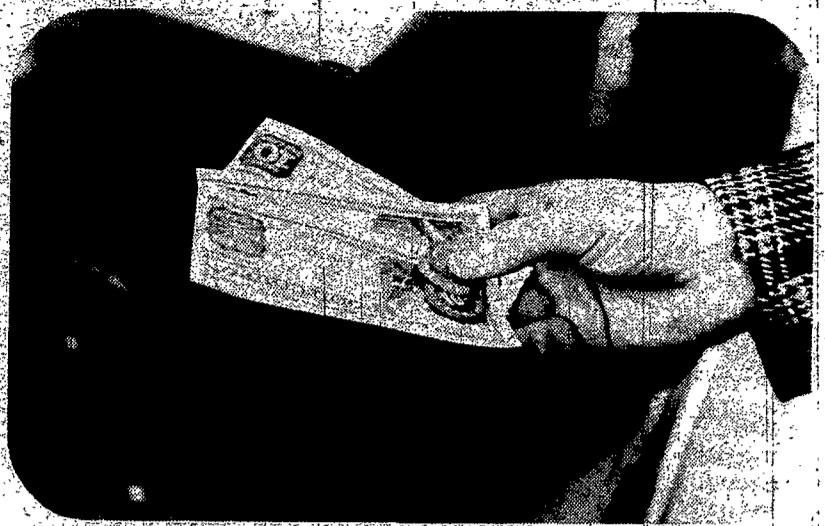
In a background report issued by the American Friends (Quaker)

Service Committee of Philadelphia, last January, it was noted that investigations of the food stamp program by the U.S. Agriculture Department and Congressional committees point up administrative inefficiency and error rather than misuse of the program by the poor.

The AFSC paper also charged that "much serious misinformation" about food stamps is being widely quoted around the country, among them claims that nine million people using food stamps are ineligible, that millions of Americans are getting \$6 billion in "free food," and that the program is "wildly out of control," having increased by 47,000 per cent since 1962.

The AFSC said a Treasury Department claim that nine million people using food stamps are ineligible was later retracted and it was admitted that 95 per cent of all food stamp recipients are in households with incomes of under \$7,000 a year, and 45 per cent are in households with yearly incomes under \$3,000.

The Quaker group also stressed that "free food" would only go to those with incomes of less than \$30 a month and then they would receive only \$162 worth of food a month. The claim by Treasury Secretary Simon that the program has increased 47,000 per cent is explained by the fact that his 1962 point of reference was a test program in eight selected counties.



"Simon was comparing the cost of the eight-county pilot program to today's nationwide food stamp program operating in over 3,000 counties serving 18.8 million people in August, 1975," the AFSC paper said.

It added that in 1962, the main food assistance program was surplus commodity distribution serving 7.5 million and in that year unemployment was 5.5 per cent, as compared with 9.2 per cent in January, 1976.

While there are four bills before Congress — three of them entitled National Food Stamp Reform Act — the major aims of the new food stamp legislation will be methods of establishing eligibility, the top cut-off point for income, how stamp allotments are to be distributed, and what role the states will play.

To many in government, the basic problem with food stamps is escalating costs; to many of the religious spokesmen supporting increased food stamp outreach, the problem boils down to every person's "right to food."

Recently, 27 top American religious leaders, in one of the most broad-based religious appeals ever organized in the U.S., urged Congress to pass a resolution declaring the "right to food" to be a basic element of U.S. policy, both at home and abroad.

Introduced last year in the Senate by Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.) and eight others, and in the House by Rep. Donald Fraser (D-Minn.), and 27 others, the resolution — like the food stamp proposals — is still pending.

Seeking a sense of Congress that every person in this country and throughout the world has the right to food and a nutritionally adequate diet, the resolution states that this right should be recognized as a "cornerstone of U.S. policy" and be a basic point of reference in the formulation of legislation and administrative decisions in all areas of life that "bear on hunger."

Among those supporting the resolution are: evangelist Billy Graham, Roman Catholic Archbishop Joseph Bernardin, president of the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference; Greek Orthodox Archbishop Iakovos; Episcopal Presiding Bishop John M. Allin; Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee; Claire Randall, general secretary of the National Council of Churches; and Eugene Carson Blake, current president of Bread for the World.

In their appeal to Congress, the 27 leaders said: "Every man, woman and child on earth has a right to a nutritionally adequate diet. This right is not ours to give or take away. It is fundamental and derives from the right to life itself."

While almost 20 million Americans now receive food stamps, at a cost of about \$5 billion a year (averaging about \$250 per person), several witnesses before Congressional committees have claimed that 5 million eligible families still remain outside the program.

Dr. Raymond Wheeler, a member of the Southern Regional Council who testified before Congress on malnutrition, pointed out in an article in Christian Century, Chicago, that "the task delegated by Congress to the food stamp program is to get money for food into the hands of those who need it."

"Doing so is a matter of self-interest," he stated. "The social costs of 30 million poor and near poor in our midst are enormous, primarily in terms of human potential lost forever to malnutrition."

In a more caustic appraisal of the food stamp debate, Msgr. Corcoran, who heads the National Conference of Catholic Charities, told a House agriculture committee in March that some opponents of food stamps were engaging in "brinkmanship over the lives and welfare of the needy." He urged the debate be placed in a "moral context."

With respect to reforms in the program, he urged the elimination of the purchase requirement because many of the poor cannot scrape together enough money monthly to meet the requirement. He also called for eligibility based on net income, cost of living increases in food stamp allotments, standard deductions of \$135 a month, and special consideration for migrant families and college students.

Another witness before the House committee was Father James J. Sheehan, executive director of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, who said opposition to the food stamp program stems largely from racism. He also expressed the fear that severe cuts in the program "would exacerbate racial tensions," already strained by unemployment and other social ills.

The priest, whose organization is involved in the food stamp program through advocacy training programs, declared that the food stamp outreach is really a "success story" and a "life saver" for the 19 million citizens it had aided.

He said that if budget cuts must be made "they can best be made in the costs of administration through simplification of regulations which serve to needlessly complicate the program, maximize worker error and frustrate clients."

Because of rising food prices and the increasing number of American families whose annual incomes are dipping below the poverty line, some religious observers claim that the struggle over food stamp legislation may become one of the most important social and economic issues in Congress this year.

In terms of placing the issue in a "moral context," as Msgr. Corcoran urged, there are basic questions such as who will receive food assistance and how large the benefits will be. In addition, however, there are questions concerning how Americans view the poverty situation and what steps they are willing to take to eliminate hunger and malnutrition in this country.



Skyline Sign

Photo by Ben Susso

The ever-changing Rochester skyline boasted yet another modification as an unknown person took marker in hand and expressed his views by altering this one-way sign. View is from Clinton Avenue, looking north.

## Regional Highlights

### Tompkins-Tioga

The Tompkins-Tioga regional education committee will have a workshop from 1-4 p.m. on Saturday, May 8 at St. Patrick's School, 309 Front St., Owego. The purpose will be to update the education committees and to share the programs presently being used.

There also will be a Human Development workshop from 1-3 p.m. at St. Patrick's. The workshop will stress the need for issue selection, selecting correct rather than meaningless or service oriented issues. All Human Development personnel are strongly urged to attend by regional officials.

### Northeast Region

The Northeast Regional Assembly adopted a resolution directing the regional Diocesan Pastoral Council

delegates to bring its concern for prompt action, by the Pastoral Office, regarding decisions on inner-city ministry, to the DPC. Mount Carmel Parish finds itself in financial difficulty because of overhead expenses generated by four buildings which are not used. The resolution urges prompt decisions before it is too late to help the parish.

A Jubilee Celebration, for all couples married 25, 50, or 60 years, will begin at 3 p.m. on June 20 at St. Patrick's Church, Victor. Bishop Joseph L. Hogan will celebrate Mass and a reception will follow immediately. The region requests pastors to submit the names, addresses and dates of all couples who are celebrating their silver, gold or diamond anniversaries to the Office of Family Life by May 15. Each couple will receive a personal invitation and a memento of the occasion.

The Northeast Region began a "Talent Pool" in March and is now looking for volunteers. Many parishes have skilled and professional people such as accountants, engineers, heating contractors, etc., who contribute these skills to their church. However, not all parishes have such professionals to draw on. The Talent Pool will make these people available to parishes that do not have them. The region asks volunteers to send their names, addresses, areas of expertise and availability to Ron Keller, NE Region Talent Pool, 25 Empire Blvd., 14609.

The final Natural Family Planning information session, until autumn, will begin at 7:30 Friday, April 30 at Mother of Sorrows Church, Greece.