

Social Security Reform in the United States

The Old and New Testaments share prophetic-messianic traditions in which God stands with the oppressed against a dehumanizing and destructive social order. The emphasis on the protection of those in deepest need was a theme of the events of Exodus. And Jesus, drawing on intimate knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, inaugurated his ministry with a quotation from Isaiah:

“The spirit of the Lord . . . has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18-19, RSV; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2).

The early Christian church in Jerusalem, following this tradition, established a community in which all things were held in common. Special attention was given to those who were living on the economic margins of society, including widows, the elderly, children, and the disabled. Israel and the early church exemplified the role of the community of faith as they addressed concern for the welfare of the poor and establishment of a just social order.

It is the birthright of every child of God to live a life with dignity and access to the basic necessities of life. It is our responsibility as individuals, as churches and as expressed collectively through our government, to ensure that all God’s children are cared for through all stages of life.

In modern society, the establishment of retirement security programs has greatly reduced the number of individuals living in poverty in their older years. Retirement security is often described as a three-legged stool composed of workplace retirement plans, private savings and government sponsored income security programs, such as Social Security. In recent decades workplace retirement plans, particularly traditional pension plans, and private savings have weakened thus increasing the importance of programs such as Social Security. At the same time, however, Social Security is experiencing long-term financing challenges which have given rise to proposals that would fundamentally alter and weaken the program.

The United Methodist Church celebrates the success of the Social Security program and advocates changes that would preserve and strengthen the program for this and future generations.

History

The Social Security system in the United States, with its disability, survivors and retirement benefits, has historically functioned as a basic insurance program to provide income and medical expenses for those persons who are retired or disabled or are the survivors of deceased workers. Since its enactment in 1935, The Social Security has been a cornerstone of the social policy of the United States and remains the most successful antipoverty program in US history.

Principles of Reform

Because of the important role of Social Security, people of faith have a special interest in ensuring that it is operated fairly and securely and that its benefit structure and financing are regularly reviewed to ensure that it is flexible enough to adjust to the changing needs of society. We affirm the following principles when discussing potential changes to the Social Security program:

- **Compassion:** The program must embody our collective responsibility to care for one another.
- **Economic Security:** Security for the elderly, survivors and persons with disabilities should not be left to fragile family support systems, charity or stock market cycles.
- **Equity, Fairness and Progressivity:** The program must continue to provide universal coverage based on compulsory employee and employer contributions with costs and benefits distributed progressively in proportion to each person’s ability to pay and level of need.
- **Savings and Pensions:** In addition to preserving Social Security, we advocate government actions which expand access and availability of employer pension plans as well as a higher level of personal savings.
- **Stewardship of Public Trust:** Social Security has demonstrated the positive role that the government can play in advancing the common good. Future generations deserve nothing less.

In addition to these broad principles for reform, The United Methodist Church recognizes that Social Security

is an issue of particular and critical importance to women. Since its inception, Social Security has often been the only income source keeping women from living in poverty. Today, while women's lives have changed, women are still overrepresented in the lowest wage jobs and earn only 77 percent of what men earn. Women leave the labor force for an average of 15 percent of their working careers, primarily to fulfill responsibilities as caregivers to their children, spouses, or elderly family members. In addition, women live an average of seven years longer than their male counterparts. In recent years, advisory commissions have issued proposals that have caused turmoil in the debate over the future of Social Security in the United States. Especially pernicious were the proposals to divert portions of workers' current payments from the Social Security system into individually held private accounts.

The United Methodist Church affirms Social Security's central role in family income protection. We believe that all proposals to address the future solvency of the Social Security Trust Fund must be viewed through the eyes of beneficiaries—particularly the most vulnerable recipients—and with the goal of addressing remaining inadequacies in the current system affecting women. If we strengthen the Social Security system so that it works well for women, we will have a system that works well for all persons in the United States.

To truly strengthen the Social Security system, we believe any reform effort must:

- continue to help those with lower lifetime earnings, who are disproportionately women;
- maintain full cost-of-living adjustments;
- protect and strengthen benefits for wives, widows, and divorced women;
- preserve disability and survivor benefits;
- protect the most disadvantaged workers from across-the-board benefits cuts;
- ensure that women's guaranteed benefits are not reduced by individual account plans that are subject to the uncertainties of the stock market;
- address the care-giving and labor force experiences of women; and
- further reduce the number of elderly living in poverty.

Action

The United Methodist Church supports the above principles and guidelines for reform and directs The General Board of Church and Society to distribute these principles to policymakers and to advocate on their behalf. Furthermore, The United Methodist Church shall continue to educate its constituents about the importance of preserving a strong social insurance program for future generations with particular attention paid to the needs of women and vulnerable populations