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Remember state's pledge to fight poverty

By PETER ROGNESS

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We're in the midst of a hard budget year in this state. Choices loom. These choices reflect the kind of people we want to be.

In 2004, more than 30 heads of religious bodies in this state signed "A Common Foundation: Shared Principles for Work on Overcoming Poverty." Two years later, much of the language of those principles was written into a state statute calling for the creation of the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020.

Leaders of both parties recognized the value to the people of this state in creating a common vision for how we might be a place where people do not have to live in poverty. The governor signed the statute, members of both parties were appointed, and the commission is now doing its work.

A few weeks ago, many of these same religious leaders signed another letter, short and to the point: "We are grateful for your establishing this Commission for the high-ground vision of overcoming poverty, and we look forward to supporting that effort. In the meantime [read: in the face of tough budget decisions], please don't take immediate steps that make poverty worse!"

Those are precisely the choices now before us in these budget decisions. To make major cuts from the Health Care Access Fund leaves thousands without health insurance (a foolish decision, since when the uninsured get sick, they then go to the emergency room, which is the most expensive provider society has). Outreach dollars that were forecast to enroll 10,000 children and 1,200 adults in health insurance would help lift people toward health and self-sufficient lives. Lacking such care, they will be propelled in the other direction.

Reducing welfare-to-work funding makes the journey out of poverty harder if the poor can't find child care or gain work experience.

Backing off of community services for the disabled sends this population further away from self-sufficiency, into greater dependency and despair -- and in the process ignores the federal matching dollars that assist us in this commitment.

Even transit funding directly affects low-income people's ability to rise out of poverty, since it is this population that is most dependent on transit.

Reducing the renter's credit directly makes the poor more poor.

On and on the list of choices goes. We live up to a commitment to being a place that overcomes poverty, or we make it worse.

To commit ourselves as a whole community to being a place where our neighbors can move out of poverty to full and productive lives is to set our sights on being a strong, interconnected, even noble people. It is deciding to take the high ground. The Legislature has committed itself to those principles. The Legislature and the governor need to be vigilant and courageous as they create a budget that lives out this commitment and doesn't relegate it to the pile of nice-sounding words that have no substance.

I believe the faith community and people from every corner of this state embrace this vision and stand ready to support hard and courageous decisions that move us in that direction.

Peter Rogness is bishop of the St. Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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