

MEDIA RELEASE
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CONGREGATION APPROVES UNUSUAL RESPONSE TO TAX REBATE

ASHEVILLE, NC—Members of an Asheville, N.C., congregation have taken the unusual step of voting to give away the anticipated tax rebates recently approved by Congress and signed into law by President George Bush as an economic stimulus package.

In a special business meeting on Sunday, 24 February, Circle of Mercy Congregation approved an open letter to President Bush and leaders of Congress which states members' intentions to "give away all or part" of the rebate "to organizations that foster justice."

The letter begins by thanking the President and Congressional leaders for their bipartisan work to address the nation's economic crisis, but goes on to speak of the "frightening, and escalating, pattern of economic disparity" both within the U.S. and between nations, saying "In the language of our faith, this disparity is a sin and the evidence of spiritual distress."

In criticizing the rebate goal of boosting consumer spending, the statement says, "We do not believe that shopping is an appropriate response to our trauma." Claiming no "special expertise" on policy options, the letter urges "there must be more commonness in the good we pursue."

Circle of Mercy's co-pastor, Ken Sehested, who drafted the statement, said when the idea for redirecting tax rebates came up, "We did some very quick calculations and realized checks totaling at least \$25,000 will be coming to the 33 households in our membership. That's a significant influx of cash—and an exciting opportunity for us to consider extravagant missions funding."

Sehested acknowledged not everyone will choose to contribute all or even part of their rebate. "We have a few households living on a very thin margin." More important than the total amounts of money redirected, he said, is "prompting our congregation—and other communities of faith—to ask these kinds of questions [about economic disparity] in the context of who we are as followers of Jesus."

This is something everybody can do, Sehested said, "regardless of whether they agree with our perspective." People across the theological and political spectrum can agree that "there's something terribly wrong" with the way things are. "And together we can rise up, enter the public arena with our concerns and insights, and find ways to alleviate the suffering caused by poverty."

Recognizing that "relinquishing our rebate checks is a modest step," the open letter explains "our vow to forego the extra income is a sign of our resolve to bear the cost of moving toward the beloved community."

Founded in 2001, Circle of Mercy is affiliated nationally with the Alliance of Baptists and the United Church of Christ. Sehested, along with Nancy Hastings Sehested and Joyce Hollyday, serve as co-pastors.

Ten Suggestions for congregational leaders on the tax rebates

Using the "open letter" on the tax rebates to stir reflection and action in local churches

1. *People are already making plans* for spending the tax rebate. One parent in our congregation reported that her four-grader came home from school talking about a friend's question: "Are your folks going to let you spend your part of the tax rebate?" (Most common figure used: about \$168 billion to be distributed, with about 60% going directly to individual households. Checks will be in the mail as early as May.)

2. *Find an appropriate occasion* to ask if there's interest among your members in thinking of alternate spending plans. Maybe raise this in a sermon, Sunday school lesson, newsletter column, prayer meeting, etc. Your goal isn't necessarily to get your entire congregation to approve this (although they may). Work with the willing, however large or small that group may be.

3. *Tease your people's imagination*, doing a rough calculation of the total amount coming to the households in your congregation. (The calculus is a bit complicated, but generally speaking middle-

income folk with get \$600 per adult, \$300 per dependent child. For instance, based on rough estimates our congregation of 48 adults and 25 children will collectively receive at least \$25,000—four times our '08 missions budget.) Then tell your folk, “That’s a huge infusion of cash. The majority of us can get along without it. Is this a time for us to be bold? Think about what we could do with that money that would support the values we profess.”

4. *Sound the call.* Organize a time to allow interested members to discuss such ideas. Give people a chance to daydream about what might be done with this money. You probably already have some mission projects that could use a boost. There are probably others things you’ve wanted to do but haven’t had the resources.

5. *Feel free to use or adapt* the Circle of Mercy “open letter” in any way you think appropriate. Better yet, draft your own statement for circulation within your congregation and elsewhere.

6. *Avoid issuing a “y’all think about this” appeal.* This is a moment to use your pastoral authority. This is a time when the revivalist tradition of having a “hymn of decision” is appropriate for spiritual formation. You don’t have to squeeze people—just ask who’s ready to make a commitment based on joyful response.

7. *Assure everyone’s freedom of choice*, including whether to contribute, how much to contribute, and where to contribute. (In our case we requested those voting on the open letter be willing to give away at least 10%.)

8. *Consider communal decision-making.* Some in our Circle will make joint decisions, first developing a list of potential recipients (including brief advocacy statements), then agreeing on terms of the final vote (how many different recipients? gifts to be equal or proportionate?), narrowing the list by a first round of voting, then a second vote to come up with the final list of recipients. This method takes more time. But there’s an important community-building element in the process.

9. *Make this a public event.* Contact your local media if you take this step. A story like this is juicy enough to merit press coverage.

10. *Use this exercise to stimulate additional reflection and action* on economic justice to prompt ongoing attention for Bible study and commitment. There are several excellent books and articles on the “sabbath economics” tradition in Scripture. Raise the possibility of alternative investing, via socially-responsible and/or microcredit lending institutions (for your own congregation’s savings and/or endowment, as well as that of individual members). Find ways to get acquainted with leaders of nonprofit agencies in your own area, both those who foster emergency relief and who work for economic justice.

—Ken Sehested, co-pastor, Circle of Mercy Congregation, Asheville, NC, 3.3.08