

Friends ... check out this article sent by [BGCT Christian Life Commission](#) Director [Suzi Paynter](#), just out in the Dallas Morning News. They helped get the cause into the news ... Good news ... and keep those *Angels* in your prayers ... Mike

## **Faith-based lobbyists press on in Texas Legislature despite tight budget**

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They've been called the God Squad and Charlie's Angels.

Misery loving company, the three female, faith-based lobbyists have drawn even closer in this Texas legislative session, in which deficit projections as high as \$27 billion almost certainly mean big cuts to education, health care and other social programs.

"This is a very unusual session," said Suzi Paynter, who lobbies for the Dallas-based Baptist General Convention of Texas as director of its Christian Life Commission.

Jennifer Carr Allmon, associate director of the Texas [Catholic Conference](#), said, "Our level of concern is much higher, because of the depth and breadth of the cuts."

Paynter, Allmon and Bee Morehead — executive director of Texas Impact, an interfaith group — are hardly the only religious folks who try to make a case with legislators and other state leaders.

But they're the ones who do it daily, professionally, keeping close track of a range of legislation, learning nuances of state financing and policy, and trying to make a long-term difference.

"We'll be here next year, and the next. We're not just here to win one bill in one session," Paynter said.

The women are often in the same hearings and sometimes team up for visits with legislators. Morehead describes their work as public interest as opposed to special interest lobbying.

"Generally speaking, when the faith community is lobbying, it's not enriching the faith community in any way," she said. "It's improving the broader world."

Their legislative positions and priorities can differ sharply.

Anti-abortion legislation ranks first on the agenda approved by Texas Catholic bishops. Baptists remain stalwart gambling opponents, and Texas Impact champions a state income tax to stabilize funding for state government.

But they share an overall concern for maintaining a safety net for the poor. They're aware, as well, that such groups as [Catholic Charities](#) and Buckner International, a Dallas-based, Baptist-affiliated nonprofit, have social service contracts with the state that are endangered in the current budget crisis.

### **Alliances form**

This session, the three lobbyists have aligned on a couple of specific issues.

One is to save the professional chaplaincy program in state prisons, which was zeroed out in the House budget bill.

"Everybody's freaking out about that," Morehead said.

At an annual cost of about \$4.8 million, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice employs 121 chaplains in prisons across the state. They provide pastoral care to 156,000 inmates and their families, and also recruit, train and supervise volunteer chaplains.

“If there’s one place you need professional chaplains, people with training and skills, people who know the First Amendment and where the lines are, it is in prison,” Paynter said. “It’s only because we have a professional chaplaincy that we’re able to have volunteers go into the prisons.”

The lobbyists are collaborating in a more formal way on a campaign called Texas Faith for Fair Lending, an effort to reform payday and auto title lending practices in the state.

“It’s the first time our three organizations have publicly partnered in forming a coalition on an issue,” Allmon said.

Faith-based lobbyists are expected to be compassionate, and that extends to the legislators they try to persuade. Morehead laments many of the cuts but sympathizes with those having to make them.

“The leadership is really trying,” she said. “This is not the hard-hearted pharaoh budget ... This is somebody’s effort to minimize damage in places they can. But \$27 billion is a lot of money.”

#### **‘Momentary chaplains’**

The women say their faith backgrounds sometimes prompt legislators to pull them aside and ask for a prayer.

“Legislators are just human beings,” Paynter said. “Their daughters get cancer, their moms die, things just happen in their lives.

“A lot of times, when you’re the religion lobbyist, whether you’re prepared for it or not, you become the momentary chaplain.”

Source: <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/texas-legislature/headlines/20110222-faith-based-lobbyists-press-on-in-texas-legislature-despite-tight-budget.ece>

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