



The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church

CHILDREN AND POVERTY: AN EPISCOPAL INITIATIVE

Biblical and Theological Foundations

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church believes that God is calling this Church to a new level of dedication and commitment on behalf of children and the impoverished. The Council is taking steps, through the Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty, to assist the Church in responding to God's call. You are invited to study and reflect on the biblical and theological foundations which are guiding and undergirding the Council's work. You are also encouraged to pray for the members of the Council of Bishops as they continue to discern the next steps of God's call to be in ministry with children and the impoverished.

The Crisis Among Children

Child sacrifice has been taboo among the world's great religions for at least three thousand years, yet today children are being sacrificed to the gods of consumerism, violence, and neglect. Economic injustice, racial and ethnic and religious hatred, and the abuse of political power are resulting in genocide of the world's most vulnerable citizens, children who live in poverty.

Malnutrition kills an estimated thirty-five thousand children every day. Approximately ten million children die of poverty-related causes each year. During the last decade alone, wars have slaughtered two million and disabled between four and five million children. More

than five million have been forced into refugee camps and at least twelve million have been left without homes. More children than soldiers now die from war. Twelve million of the world's children are growing up homeless.¹ Some eighty million children between the ages of ten and fourteen work for low wages in often dangerous conditions to supply inexpensive products for citizens of more affluent nations. About one million Asian children labor in cramped quarters, making carpets for sale in the West.²

Economic marginalization puts millions of children at risk. In the last ten years the real incomes of approximately eight hundred million people in some forty developing countries have been reduced. In Latin America, the drop in

incomes has been as much as 20 percent. In sub-Saharan Africa the decrease has often been even more severe. Cuts in essential social services have meant health centers without doctors and medication, schools without books and teachers, family planning clinics without staff and supplies.³

The growing disparity in the distribution of basic resources threatens to drastically increase the number of poor people and intensify their suffering. A fifth of the world's people now share less than 1.5 percent of world income. Those most at risk in this growing inequity are the children. They are the most vulnerable to simple disease, injury, illiteracy, neglect, malnutrition, and abuse. The opportunity to close the gap for children now exists, but the door is not likely to remain open for very long because the expense increases with each year of inadequate action.

Accompanying the economic disparity and violence is the ever-present threat of diseases and epidemics. Although progress has been made in the prevention of childhood diseases, new threats are emerging. AIDS, for example, is creating orphans around the world. Worldwide, as many women as men are contracting the AIDS virus. In Africa, for example, women now account for 55 percent of all new cases of HIV. Estimates of the number of children orphaned by war and AIDS in Uganda alone run from six hundred thousand to 1.2 million.

An increasing number of children in the United States suffer from the demons of violence, poverty, neglect, and inadequate health care. The gap between the rich and poor in the United States is wider than at any time since World War II. The U.S. is twice as affluent as it was in 1964 when child poverty was actually declining. Between 1979 and 1989, child poverty increased by 21 percent while the Gross National Product grew by more than one fourth. The top 20 percent of American households increased their share of the national income by more than \$116 billion between 1967 and 1992.

The poorest 20 percent now have only 5 percent of the nation's income. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the upper 10 percent of U.S. families gained as much income in the 1980s, \$543 billion, as did the remaining 90 percent. Crime, violence, retribution, neglect, and despair are bred and nurtured in the soil of America's growing economic disparity.

The United States now has the highest rate of poverty in more than thirty years. More than fifteen million American children live in poverty, nine million lack basic health care, and preschool vaccinations lag behind those in some third-world nations. Recent welfare "reform" legislation, many social scientists agree, will only intensify the poverty among children; and the adverse consequences of health care "reform" are most likely to fall on children, especially impoverished children. At the time technology and science have the means of treating and preventing many diseases, those resources are less available to the most vulnerable people, the children and the impoverished.

Every two hours a child is killed by gunfire in the United States. Between 1967 and 1991, fifty thousand American children died from guns. Homicide is now the third leading cause of death of American children ages five to fourteen. Within a fifteen-year period as many children died from guns in America as there were American soldiers killed in the Vietnam war. Almost three million children were reported abused or neglected in 1992, one very eleven seconds.⁴

The statistics alone do not tell the full story of what is happening to the world's children. Children are victims of many poverties. Spiritual poverty is more difficult to measure, but its devastating effects on the affluent and the impoverished are evident. To be deprived of love, hope, and transcendent meaning is to be robbed of the abundant life that Christ intends for all. All children have a basic need and right to know that they are loved infinitely by God

and that God seeks for them a life of joy, hope, and meaning. Children need to experience their identity and worth as both recipients and means of God's grace. What is happening to the world's children represents a sinful devaluing of God's gracious gift of life and a thwarting of God's justice for all humanity.

The state of the world's children challenges The United Methodist Church to evaluate its basic theological grounding, its Wesleyan heritage, and its mission. To respond decisively to the crisis among "the least of these" is to share in the life and mission of the God of the Exodus and of Jesus who is making possible new opportunities for bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives.

The Theological, Historical, and Missional Mandate

The plight of children and the impoverished raises critical theological concerns. The Apostle Paul confronts us with the basic challenge: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us" (Ephesians 5:1). The primary issue is the nature and action of the God whom we imitate. The church is called to imitate and be a sign of the presence of the God revealed in the Scriptures and supremely in Jesus Christ.

The nature and purpose of God are revealed to Moses as One who sees, hears, and knows the sufferings of the oppressed: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them" (Exodus 3:7-8). Throughout the Pentateuch, the Psalms, and the Prophets, connection with the most vulnerable classes of society, including impoverished children, is essential to defining the nature of God. In fact, the essential defining character of the God of the Bible as distinguishable from

other gods is precisely this God's connection to the vulnerable, especially the "widows and the orphans" (cf. Exodus 22:21-24, Psalm 10:17-18, Psalm 68:4-6, Isaiah 10:1-4, and Jeremiah 5:28-29).

Faithfulness to God requires solidarity with and justice for the most vulnerable, the widows and orphans. Relationships of justice, compassion, and mercy toward the poor are more important than cultic practices and are normative expectations of the people of God. "Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:3-4). The following words from Isaiah are typical of the prophets' definition of faithfulness to God:

Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:12-17)

The tithe is intended as a means of aiding and caring for the poor, as Deuteronomy makes clear:

When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites [the landless tribe], the aliens, the orphans, and the widows so that they may eat their fill within your towns, then

you shall say before the LORD your God: "I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments."
(Deuteronomy 26:12-13)

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is the one who executes justice for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. God is defined not in terms of abstract holiness, omnipotence, or omniscience, but by relationship to the vulnerable. It is this God we are to "imitate." Any other god is an idol.

This God who is defined by relationship to the vulnerable is incarnate in Jesus Christ. Luke depicts Jesus as a child born of Mary before marriage and adopted graciously by Joseph who thereby becomes a prototype of justice and mercy. Matthew depicts Jesus as an illegal alien and a refugee in Egypt, thus combining the characteristics of the impoverished child and of the alien or immigrant.

In Luke, Jesus is born in a manger among the homeless. He begins his ministry in Nazareth with the words from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus associated with "outcasts and sinners," the marginalized of society. He was executed between two criminals and buried in a borrowed tomb. He so closely identified with the poor and "the least of these" that ministry done unto them is done unto him (Matthew 25:31-46).

The Gospels identify the reign of God with children. Mark's Gospel declares: "Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever

welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:36-37). It is for them that the reign of justice, generosity, and joy is especially directed (Matthew 18:1-5). Jesus strongly rebukes those who would hinder and thwart the divine will for children (Mark 10:13-16). He breaks down the distinction between "our" children and the others (Matthew 10:37-39, Luke 14:26-27). He clearly calls for caring for all children as our children. All children are equally loved by God, and God seeks the fulfillment of the divine image in every child.

James defines authentic religion in these words: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). As the body of Christ, the church is to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's reign in the world. The church, therefore, must identify with those with whom Christ identifies and to whom he ministers. Indeed, the faithfulness of the church is measured by the presence of and response to "the least of these," especially to children and to the poor.

Methodism, Children, and the Poor

Methodism was born among the impoverished of eighteenth-century England. So significant was John Wesley's ministry with the poor that he affirmed, "And surely never in any age or nation since the Apostles, have those words been so eminently fulfilled, 'the poor have the gospel preached unto them,' as it is at this day."⁵ Studies document that the poor were the central focus of the early Methodist movement.⁶ Everything Wesley did in leading the Methodist revival was influenced by the impact on the poor—where and to whom he preached, the design of preaching houses, the availability of

published material, the education of children, the leadership of the classes and societies. Wesley considered regular visitation of the poor as a necessary spiritual discipline. He would no more neglect regular visitation of the poor than he would miss partaking of the Eucharist. The poor literally accompanied him to his grave. As directed in his last will and testament, he was carried to his grave by six poor people who were paid one pound each. The black drapings used in the Chapel for his memorial service were remade into dresses and distributed to poor women.⁷

Children and their total needs were of particular concern to the early Methodists. Wesley was especially concerned that impoverished children not only learn "to read, write, and cast accounts, but more especially (by God's assistance) to 'know God and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent'."⁸ The curriculum of the Methodist schools included religious instruction, worship, and even fasting as well as strong academics. Methodist preachers were expected to spend time with the children. Whenever a society included ten children, the preachers were to establish a band and meet with them twice a week. Some preachers hesitated, claiming "But I have no gift for this." Wesley's firm response was "Gift or no gift, you are to do it, else you are not called to be a Methodist preacher."⁹

Wesley's commitment to children and the impoverished went beyond friendship and proclamation. He sought to provide holistically for their needs. He provided education, opened free health clinics, established a sewing cooperative for women in poverty, provided a lending agency, opposed slavery, visited the imprisoned, and ministered to condemned malefactors. Methodism in the eighteenth century was a movement of the poor, by the poor, and for the poor; and Wesley considered affluence the most serious threat to the continued vitality and faithfulness of the Methodist movement.¹⁰

Wesley was convinced that the poor are

means of grace. As he wrote in his *Journal* (April 15, 1745), "Religion must not go from the greatest to the least, or the power would appear to be of men." He found the gospel of God's universal grace validated in the poor. The response of the poor to the proclamation of the gospel of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace was a primary source of Wesley's own assurance of salvation.

Francis Asbury shared the Wesleyan evangelical zeal for the poor. He warned the preachers that faithfulness requires that they be among the poor. The building of plain preaching houses and the focus on the less economically well-to-do continued until the middle of the nineteenth century. Then American Methodists sought to compete with other churches for the "weightier" people, the more wealthy. Preaching houses, homes, and camp meetings as centers of liturgical and congregational life were replaced by more ornate buildings built on main streets. Gradually the church distanced itself from the poor, who became objects of mission rather than constitutive to the life of the church. That trend has continued to this day, and the poor are seldom present in our worship and fellowship.

The United Methodist Church in the United States is experiencing an alarming loss of not only impoverished children but middle-class children as well. The decline in church school enrollment and attendance among children in United Methodist churches precisely at a time when children are increasingly at risk physically and spiritually is a judgment upon us and a call to immediate action. The American church may be fulfilling Wesley's fear of the consequences of affluence and separation from the impoverished: having the form of religion but lacking its power.

A church separated from "the least of these" is separated from the source of its identity and power, the God who is among the most vulnerable as the Crucified and Risen One. Receiving the gifts of the children and the

impoverished, therefore, is a means by which God restores and brings life. The state of the world's children and poor people challenges "the people called Methodists" to reclaim their identity and mission as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the coming of God's reign of justice, generosity, and joy.

The Challenge and Opportunity for The United Methodist Church

The crisis among the world's children and impoverished people represents a *kairos* opportunity for The United Methodist Church. Many agencies, governments, and individuals are paralyzed by fear and despair in the face of the overwhelming needs. Yet signs of hope abound for "those who have eyes to see and ears to hear." *For the first time in history it is actually possible to create a world in which all children share in at least the basic opportunities for life.* The technical resources are available to protect children from the most common diseases, to provide them with the necessities of food, shelter, clothing, and health care. For the most part, we know what to do and how to do it. What is lacking are the vision and the moral will. Vision and moral will are the responsibilities of the Church.

Children are amazingly resilient. Recent studies suggest that the primary sources of the resiliency of children include a supportive community and hope. Loving relationships, hope for the future, and a sustaining value system are necessary for children to flourish and fulfill their God-given potential.

All children need to know that they are made in the image of God and loved supremely by God, who is present with them and who intends abundant life for them. Jesus Christ welcomes them as an integral part of a community of grace and service. Children of all

economic conditions need to experience the gospel.

The crisis among children and impoverished people is, in reality, a spiritual crisis that affects all persons. The growing fear and sense of powerlessness and boredom among the middle class and affluent have roots in the poverty of vision, community, and hope. The "poverty of affluence" and economic poverty are related. Without a challenging vision that includes justice and compassion for the most vulnerable, we become self-absorbed. Studies indicate that attitudes toward wealth are changing and wealth is increasingly seen as "mine" rather than being considered a trust from God. The biblical witness and our Wesleyan tradition clearly affirm that separation from "the least of these" robs the affluent of abundant life. Relationships of justice and mercy between the wealthy and the impoverished are means of transforming grace to both.

Recent legislation in the United States intensifies the urgency and the opportunity for the Church to be in ministry with children and impoverished people. Local, state and federal governments are open to form partnerships with the Church. The current political climate makes the prophetic and compassionate voice of the Church on behalf of children and the impoverished all the more important. Public policy decisions that affect the children and the impoverished urgently need participation by the Church in the local, state, national, and world political arenas. The time is now for the Church to become the voice of the voiceless.

In response to the crisis among children and the impoverished and in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, the Council of Bishops is launching an Episcopal Initiative focusing on children and poverty. We call upon all segments of The United Methodist Church to be shaped by God's presence with "the least of these." *Ours is the first generation in history to have the capacity to accomplish what has previously only been*

imaginable. God, through technicians and scientists, has brought the goals of removing and preventing needless suffering within reach. What is needed is a renewed vision of God's reign of justice, generosity, and joy for all people. Being empowered by that vision is the challenge and opportunity before The United Methodist Church and the world.

Authorization to Develop an Episcopal Initiative

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, in session April 29–May 5, 1995, adopted the following resolution, presented by the Episcopal Initiatives Committee:

Throughout the world children are suffering and dying as victims of violence, poverty, neglect and exploitation. During the last ten years 100 million children died of poverty-related causes. Every two hours a child is killed by gunfire in the United States. Genocide is being visited upon the world's impoverished, abused, and neglected children.

The God of the Exodus and of Jesus Christ identifies with the least, the defenseless, and the most vulnerable. God hears their cries, knows their suffering, and seeks to deliver them. God's suffering and redemptive presence among the most vulnerable of God's children summons the Church to join the divine initiative of liberation, reconciliation, and salvation.

The Council of Bishops is, therefore, requested to authorize the Episcopal Initiatives Committee to develop a means by which the Council can lead The United Methodist Church to a transforming response to the reality of God's presence and ministry with the world's children.

A task force was appointed and directed to prepare a proposal for an Episcopal Initiative focusing on children and poverty. That task

force prepared this document, which is now being sent to the Church with the authorization of the full Council of Bishops. The Initiative continues in the process of development as the Council of Bishops seeks to lead the Church toward the following goals.

Goals of the Episcopal Initiative

The crisis among children and the impoverished and our theological and historical mandates demand more than additional programs or emphases. Nothing less than the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among "the least of these" is required. The evaluation of everything the Church is and does in the light of the impact on children and the impoverished is the goal. The anticipated result is the development of forms of congregational and connectional life and mission that will more faithfully reflect and serve the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Communities of faith shaped by God's presence with the most vulnerable represent alternatives to the values and visions of the prevailing culture.

Providing resources for understanding the crisis among children and the impoverished and enabling the Church to respond is also a goal of the Initiative. Components of the resources will include the following: a description of the crisis; the theological, historical, and missional mandate for response; and strategies for faithful response by local churches and connectional agencies. Among the questions to be answered in the resources are these: What is the nature and extent of the crisis among children and the impoverished? In what way is the crisis a theological crisis for The United Methodist Church? What realities put children at risk? What are the causes of poverty? How extensive is poverty around the world, especially among children? What are the implications for The United Methodist Church of God's special presence

among the vulnerable? How can The United Methodist Church more adequately incorporate children and the impoverished in its life and mission? How can the Church respond to current victims of poverty? How can the Church prevent poverty and avoid putting children at risk? What must local churches, church institutions, and connectional agencies be and do to respond to the crisis among children and the impoverished? What is the relationship between economic poverty and "the poverty of the rich"? How can the resources of the impoverished and the resources of the affluent be brought together for the fulfillment of God's purposes? How can the Church be a prophetic presence in the formation of public policy related to children and the impoverished?

The primary goal is evangelization, the proclamation in word and deed of the gospel of God's redeeming, reconciling, and transforming grace in Jesus Christ to and with the children and those oppressed by poverty. The United Methodist Church is called to be a means of grace to the vulnerable. The Church must also be open and hospitable to God's transforming grace *through* the vulnerable. Receiving the gifts of the children and the impoverished will be a means through which God evangelizes the contemporary Church. Evangelization involves the incorporation into the community of grace of those who are marginalized; therefore, the Church must go beyond social service delivery. It must nurture and build just, hospitable, and compassionate communities in which the least have access to God's table of abundance. The focus is on communicating and living the gospel

of Jesus Christ with *all* children and intentionally reaching out to impoverished persons as recipients and means of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Notes

1. *The State of the World's Children* (UNICEF, 1995).
2. Pharis J. Harvey, "Where Children Work: Child Servitude in the Global Economy," *The Christian Century* (April 5, 1995).
3. *The State of the World's Children*.
4. Marian Wright Edelman, "Cease Fire! Stopping the Gun War Against Children in the United States," *The Chicago Theological Seminary Register* (Winter, 1995).
5. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd edition, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; many later reprints), 8:308.
6. See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), and M. Douglas Meeks (ed.), *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995).
7. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 533.
8. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 105-6.
9. *Ibid.*, 232.
10. See Wesley's essay "Thoughts Upon Methodism," dated August 4, 1787, and his sermon "O God's Vineyard," written in 1787 after Wesley visited the societies across England.

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