

## CHILDHOOD POVERTY

The Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society offers the following theological statement to facilitate an understanding of the Church's role in addressing the issue of childhood poverty in Vermont. The member Churches of the Council are: Friends, The American Baptist Churches, The Presbyterian Church (USA), The Roman Catholic Church, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, The United Methodist Church, The United Church of Christ, and The Episcopal Church. This statement is informed by and references, but is not limited to, various statements and positions of our member Churches.

The Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society enjoys a unique position among the Christian Communities of Vermont. We are able to speak with a common voice to and for a diverse and significant group of Churches. For that reason we also have a unique responsibility to address the common concerns of the society and Churches of Vermont. As Christians and as people of compassion and good will, we are distressed at the economic plight of children in our state and in our world, especially children who are born into or fall into situations of poverty. We recognize that children are always the most vulnerable and defenseless people in a society and that the children of poverty are even more vulnerable.

As Christians we understand the ancient, prophetic witness of Israel to call God's people into an ever-increasing concern for social justice as a necessary component of the practice of authentic faith. This call for justice is most often expressed as a demand that the larger community care for its most vulnerable members: the sojourner, the resident alien, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the homeless, and the hungry.

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: 16-17 [1]

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Isaiah 58: 6-7

Our own Christian tradition calls us, in similar manner, to express our faith through works of compassion and charity, to seek to uplift the downtrodden and care for those in need.

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Mark 10:21

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. James 1:27

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He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the Hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. Luke 1: 52-53

The controlling concern of the Scriptural witness is the obligation to care for those who are at risk and vulnerable. Those who lack the means to secure their own welfare are placed in the sacred trust of the community. In our time, no single class of people better exemplifies this situation than children who are often completely powerless to affect their own welfare. For that reason, the Biblical call to defend the powerless becomes a direct challenge to Christians in our age to treat children as the sacred trust of our society.

Not only are we called to specific works of good will as an expression of faith, but we believe we are also called to speak with a prophetic voice to society, calling all people to a greater regard for the vulnerable in our midst and to enact programs and construct systems that will ensure the wellbeing of those most at risk. For this reason we seek to speak with a united voice to our member Churches and the people of Vermont. It is time for us to come together as a compassionate society and through our corporate efforts ensure that children will be safeguarded from the multi-dimensional threat of poverty.

We must speak out bluntly and openly for we believe our message and our advocacy to be rooted in and inspired by the will and word of God. We speak from our own experience because all of our denominations, in one way or another, have practiced what we preach. We have given our funds, our hours of volunteer work; we have established institutions and programs to feed and clothe the hungry. Government knows, many in the general public know, the long and continuing record of the Church for the poor. They are not our “clients” or nameless citizens. We know them as our brothers and sisters, our own children. All of them are in our care and are objects of our love and concern because they are God’s children and our brothers and sisters.

Yet as great as our efforts may be, they are never enough without the help of others in our society and without the contributions of private and public agencies. Here in the United States, the cooperation of Church and public/private agencies has been unique and has reflected the positive implications of religious freedom for the benefit of the national community and the common good.

Yes, the Church does more than talk - much more. Nevertheless, the enormity of the problem, the extent of the needs, demands that all Americans hear and respond to the cry of the children. We must, we must, help those NOW who are the least able to help themselves.

“Our children AND poverty,” “poor children,” these are ugly words. These words should never appear together. We respond quickly to those who abuse children and we are swift to act to protect children. As members of a society who neglect children in poverty, we too commit abuse.

- In 1995, 8.5% of U.S. children were hungry and 20.1% were classified as “at risk” [yet] increases in food production during the last 35 years have kept well ahead of the world’s population growth of 16%. [2]

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- During the course of a year, an estimated 4,000 Vermonters are homeless (1994) [3]. In 1995, eight percent of students in grades 8 through 12 reported going hungry because their families do not have enough money to purchase food, [4] 21,000 Vermont children under 12 are hungry or at risk of hunger. [5] We must act immediately to remedy and to end this abuse.

It is not only a matter of children's rights and of the justice owed to them. It is a question of our responsibility and duty toward them. It even transcends the respect for human dignity. It is the serious matter of our love for our little ones. It is the question of what will become of our future. Our children are our future. Their suffering now has permanent and dire effects on that future.

More than all of that, as Christians we must ask, "What does God think of us; what does God require of us?" The Giver of new life places these little ones in the hands of all of us to guide their growth and to rejoice in their presence among us. If we neglect them, we are saying bluntly, "God was wrong to create them!" We are rejecting these gifts of God's love. Such neglect is an act of wickedness. Can we expect mercy when we refuse to give it?

We refuse to speak in abstract terms. We do not advocate any specific programs. We stand with and support anyone or any group that names the poor children and touches them in their plight. We encourage our Churches to seek out and initiate activities that will increase awareness and concern among their members and to develop and support initiatives that minister to children of poverty in their midst. We stand in solidarity with members of our own communities and other people of good will who seek to discern the proper role for our state government to play in addressing this problem.

We warn of the consequences of our failure to help, but more, we promise the joy that God gives to those who lift up the little ones. Those who love God's children are themselves loved. They are blessed with the foretaste of the eternal happiness God has for those who comfort the poor. God shares life with those who nourish and protect life.

No one can say that we cannot eliminate childhood poverty. For the first time in history, it is actually possible to create a world in which all children can share in the basic goods of 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 are lacking are the vision and the moral will. Stated more clearly, what is lacking is more love and more love in action.

This is not a "one shot" initiative on the part of our churches. This is not another "drive" or another one-time "war on poverty." For us it is a call to renew our permanent commitment as followers of Jesus Christ. This means that we will continue to proclaim this message as often as it is necessary. We will monitor our progress and will criticize our failures as well as note our success.

Finally, we know that we cannot do this alone. We commit ourselves to work with all faith communities who share our desire and concern to end childhood poverty.

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(Approved by the Trustees of the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society on 2 December 1998.)

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1. All scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
2. Task Force/Episcopal Initiative (United Methodist Church) on Children and Poverty.
3. Vermont Housing Study, Special Needs Housing, 1994.
4. Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1995.
5. Study conducted by the Food Research and Action Center, 1995

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