



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

A Companion to A Statement Concerning Poverty

In “A Statement Concerning Poverty,” we provided a broad statement describing what the Pennsylvania Council of Churches understands and believes about poverty and that we have a responsibility as Christians to speak truth to power and to act to overcome poverty wherever it exists.

We believe that further discussion is warranted concerning some of the issues presented in that statement, thus, this companion document.

A Theological Discussion Concerning Economies

In the Statement, we suggested that many of us live in a state of spiritual poverty, and that we impoverish ourselves by focusing on the all-too-human concepts of value or wealth.

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We typically think of value or wealth in monetary terms, so when we calculate wealth, there are many intangible factors we don't address. It may help, instead, to consider that there are really three economies that might be described as follows:

- God's economy—the natural world
- The industrial/service economy (that which produces goods and services)
- The financial economy (that which focuses on investments that do not produce goods and services)

We believe that God's vision of the world focuses on creation, the natural world—people, the environment, the earth, the universe, and we are called in Genesis 2 to be stewards, to “till and keep” the garden. We also acknowledge the need for the industrial/service economy to provide what we need for living in our modern society, with some reasonable expectation of profits for those who produce goods and services.

It is the financial economy that has permitted the dramatic expansion of wealth for some, and created the conditions that have reduced others to abject poverty, widening the gap between haves and have-nots. There are biblical admonitions against profiting from this kind of activity:

Lev. 25:37: You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance...

Lev. 25:10-18: **10** And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and **you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.** It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. **11** That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. **12** For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. **13** In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. **14** When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, **you shall not cheat one another.** **15** When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. **16** If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. **17** **You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.** **18** **You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely.**

God's economy and the industrial/service economy are each tangible, and when we focus on the fair and orderly conduct of these two economies, people and creation are able to thrive. When we focus on the financial economy, whose sole purpose is the creation of financial wealth, as evidenced by the proliferation of abusive mortgage practices, derivatives, credit default swaps, and the like, we find that the result is big winners and big losers. In reality, we all lose when some of our brothers and sisters are left to suffer in abject poverty.

How Does Poverty Affect Us?

Sometimes we avoid or deny the existence of poverty altogether by simply claiming that “we don’t have poor people,” or that it is only a problem for less developed countries around the world. Many view the ups and downs of the economy and think poverty is only temporary. For those who live it, however, poverty/living without resources is very real, and our denial exacerbates the isolation that they experience.

Even if we do not live in poverty, our lives are touched by the fact that poverty exists. What are some of the ways that we are affected?

- Communities as a whole are affected, though some more so than others. It impacts the quality of life for all. Incidences of violence and crime are often greater, and poverty threatens the health and safety of those who live in substandard housing, without utilities, and without adequate nutrition.
- Congregations are affected when contributions decline, impacting their ability to help members and neighbors—though in difficult times, there is sometimes an impulse to dig deeper.
- Providers of services face an ever-increasing need for service-oriented activities.
- Child poverty is deepening nationally and globally, and children living in poverty are at risk for irreversible cognitive damage caused by malnutrition, disease, and other factors.
- 200,000-400,000 children and infants die because of malnutrition¹—threatening the future of some societies.

Ignoring the impacts of poverty in our society doesn’t make it go away, and it is likely that they will only get worse.

What Does God Call Us to Do?

Some of the most important themes that permeate scripture speak to God’s call concerning what we must do with regard to poverty. These themes include **justice** and **righteousness**...responsibility for **protecting the vulnerable**...**love** of neighbor... **hospitality**... the **evils of predatory activity**...**jubilee** (debt forgiveness/ability to start anew)...the **special responsibility of the powerful**...and the **incarnation—with Jesus identifying with the poor**.

<p>Do to others as you would have them do to you.</p>
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While scripture is replete with passages that spell out specific directives from God, there is a handful of examples that quickly summarize what we believe to be God’s broad call concerning poverty. In the Hebrew scriptures, the prophet Micah speaks with great clarity and simplicity. His words speak volumes: “...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” In the New Testament,

Matthew and Luke share Jesus’ words, widely known as the Golden Rule—“do to others as you would have them do to you.” Jesus speaks more directly about what this means for our most vulnerable brothers and sisters in Matthew 25 when he says, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.”

How do we “do justice” and “do to others as you would have them do to you”? First, it is useful to be aware of the pitfalls—those things direct us away from what God calls us to do (see “What Are the Pitfalls?” below). Then, it helps to put oneself on the receiving end of the actions of others in considering our own actions. How would we want to be treated? It is highly likely that most of us would want to be treated justly. We desire to be loved, respected, treated fairly, and welcomed in our communities, congregations, and by government, businesses, and organizations. And we would like for those more powerful than us to be compassionate and act in the interest of the common good.

Perhaps the best and easiest to recall approach to responding to God’s call is to employ what may be referred to as “The 5 S’s”—Sustainable Living, Solidarity, Speaking Up, Sharing, and Systemic Change.

Sustainable Living. Sustainable living, or “voluntary simplicity,” has to do with living the “manna way”—taking only what we need, and leaving the rest for others. According to Doris Janzen Longacre, in *Living More with Less*, it’s about a journey of learning how to be conscientious consumers, shaping our consumption habits and lives according to five “life standards.” These are: “Do Justice. Learn from the World Community. Nurture People. Cherish the Natural Order. Nonconform Freely.”²

¹ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30070&Cr=Financial+crisis&Cr1>

² Longacre, Doris Janzen, *Living More with Less* (Scottsdale, PA, Herald Press, 1980) 6.

Solidarity. Responding to poverty has to do with seeing ourselves as being part of a larger group. We must challenge individualism and speak to the concept of community as embodied in the early church, where “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).³ Though we have our differences, at some level, we are all part of one human family and all of creation, and therefore we must support one another. We must build connections in our congregations and communities that lead to better understanding for everyone—providing a safe space for people who are struggling to tell their stories is one way of doing this.

That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

Leviticus 25:11-12

Speaking Up. On a personal level, we can communicate gently but directly with our neighbors when they express positions that we believe run counter to God’s call to do justice and love our neighbors. We can remind them of Jesus’ healing acts, very often directed at those who were most vulnerable, and note that his actions empowered them—there are several examples in the gospels where, after healing someone, Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” We can remind them of God’s call to love our neighbors—all neighbors—by suggesting that “it’s not loving” to speak or act in ways that are harmful to our neighbors. Also, we must speak truth to power. We must reframe the discussion concerning why people are poor, because it is often government and other institutions that have taken actions and implemented policies that have placed many of our brothers and sisters into vulnerable positions.

Sharing. We must engage in the acts of charity that congregations do so well, sharing our time in service to the community, and our money through the church and agencies that provide assistance to those who are struggling.

Systemic Change. There is some confusion in the faith community about how we can best help our most vulnerable neighbors. While congregations often seem more comfortable with acts of charity, “In this complex age, one way we love our neighbors is to help shape the laws and policies that define how we live together in God’s world.”⁴ We must work to remove roadblocks that prevent our neighbors from reaching their God-given potential, We must provide constant reminders about the “invisible backpack” of hidden privileges that perpetuates a caste system in our society. We must call for policies and actions that put an end to discriminatory practices or that punish vulnerable persons who are affected by circumstances that are beyond their control. In addition, we all have a responsibility to work for the redesign of community systems when they aren’t working. Two scriptural examples provide examples that we might bear in mind. Acts 6 contains a description of a community meeting to address the neglect of Hellenist widows in distribution of food. In Nehemiah 5, we read about the formation of an assembly to challenge the nobles and officials who were demanding too much in taxes from the people, causing them to lose their land and become slaves in order to get grain during a famine.

What Are the Pitfalls?

At every level, there are issues that cloud our understanding and get in the way of constructive dialogue:

- “Facts” can cut both ways. It’s easy to question them, and sometimes they can be inconvenient.
- Many assume “that’s just the way it is.” (John 12:8—“the poor will always be with you.”) Is this cause to give up, or is it a challenge? The concept of “jubilee” (Deut. 15) calls for periodic forgiveness of debt, and for us to meet need whenever necessary, so that the poor are not left to languish and suffer.
- Negative experiences with poor persons can affect the way we view and respond to them, but we have a responsibility to foster the understanding that one negative experience should not color our responses to all.
- There is a perception that some are more deserving than others—that some are just lazy and don’t try to help themselves. This is not God’s view.
- Some believe that our economic system—the markets—will take care of any problems. There is significant evidence to the contrary given the growing number of poor persons.
- We have such busy lives that feeling responsibility to do one more thing feels overwhelming, or we feel powerless to help. We need to provide ongoing reminders of our responsibility to love our neighbors and care for the “least of these,” and that “for God all things are possible” (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

³ There are other similar references. In Acts 11:27-30, the disciples determined that they would send relief to those expected to suffer the impacts of famine. In Romans 15:26 Paul speaks of sharing resources with the poor in Jerusalem, and notes in 2 Corinthians 8 and Philippians 4 where resources were shared to help in his ministry.

⁴ www.pcusa.org/washington

Charity vs. Advocacy

Dr. Heidi Hadsell,⁵ President of Hartford Seminary, suggests that congregations tend to focus on individual acts, or charity, rather than direct advocacy. Assisting in soup kitchens, or building for Habitat for Humanity, or sending contributions or traveling to damaged communities to help victims of natural disasters represent concrete ways of “loving our neighbor.” She says, “We admire acts of charity and compassion not simply because of the good they do, but also because we see such acts as a necessary and natural fruit of Christian conviction.” We are doing things that have visible results. However, she also suggests that when providing direct assistance to those in need crosses a line to include what might be characterized as advocacy, many religious folks get nervous. She says:

Don't you think we should go upstream, find out why this is happening, and put an end to it?

It is almost as if we understand God to be present in small scale, personal, acts of love towards the other, but absent or obscured in larger scale social acts, acts which may be beneficial for many unknown others for many years to come.

Perhaps the modern parable concerning people of faith strolling and talking along a riverside might be most instructive. After several days of pulling out persons who were in distress, floating down the river, one asked, “Don't you think we should go upstream, find out why this is happening, and put an end to it?”

⁵ http://www.pcusa.org/washington/theology_hadsell.htm