



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Human Needs

Policy Positions

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches envisions a society characterized by a profound sense of justice and shalom in human relationships and social structures at all levels—a vision that leads to wholeness and health in relationships and systems. This vision leads the Council to support the following principles:

- That government, businesses, and society recognize the value of all persons, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status, faith tradition, sexual orientation, or any other identifiable demographic characteristic—**AND** that government give all persons a voice in making decisions concerning legislation and policies that have an impact on the ability of persons to survive and flourish in society.
- That government promotes, enhances, and protects the ability of all members of society to flourish.
- That government ensures that the most vulnerable citizens—children, elderly, poor, physically or mentally fragile—are not made to suffer, but have what they need to create a decent life.

In light of these principles, the Council supports legislation, regulations, government policies, and corporate practices that:

- Ensure access to income security and adequate shelter, nutrition, health care, and education for all persons.
- Provide adequate opportunity for all to work for their own benefit and for the benefit of their communities, with income sufficient to provide for at least a basic standard of living.
- Prohibit patterns of discrimination in employment, housing, credit, health, education, or in any other areas that would limit or prevent access to all that would make for a secure and decent life.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”...So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26a, 27 (NRSV)

Background

From a Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) website on poverty in the United States:

People often make incorrect assumptions about poverty in America. Poverty, some think, only exists in big cities, and only affects the unemployed, the homeless, racial minorities, recent immigrants, or people struggling with substance abuse. In reality, poverty impacts people from all sections of American society: the elderly, the working poor, children, all types of families, and residents of urban, rural, and suburban communities alike.¹

According to statistics provided on the PLU site, approximately 11.9% of the US population lives in poverty.

In a March 8, 2005 statement on moral values in the federal budget, the Rev. Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), cited the following statistics²:

¹ www.plu.edu/~poverty/home.html

² Original source not cited in statement.

- 36 million Americans live below the poverty line, and nearly half of them live in deep poverty, with incomes below *half* the poverty line—and their number is growing.
- 18%—nearly one in five— of children in this country are living in poverty—and their number is growing.
- 45 million Americans are without health insurance, millions more are underinsured— and their number is growing.
- 13 million children in the U.S. live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet—and the number is growing.

A 2005 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) report uses 2002 income and tax information released by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) to illustrate a growing disparity in incomes and wealth.³ The report shows how income gains have become increasingly more concentrated at the top of the income scale over the last three decades. According to this report, between 1979 (the first year the CBO data covered) and 2002:

- The average after-tax income of the top one percent of the population more than doubled, rising from \$298,900 to \$631,700, for a total increase of \$332,800, or 111 percent. (CBO adjusted these figures for inflation and expressed them in 2002 dollars.)
- By contrast, the average after-tax income of the middle fifth of the population rose a relatively modest 15 percent, or \$5,700, reaching \$43,700 in 2002.
- The average after-tax income of the poorest fifth of the population rose just 5 percent, or \$600, over the period.

Because incomes grew fastest among the most affluent, this group's share of the total national income grew as well.

- The top one percent of the population received 11.4 percent of national after-tax income in 2002, up from its already-large 7.5 percent share in 1979. (Each percentage point of after-tax income is equivalent to \$62 billion in 2002 dollars.)
- In contrast, the shares of national income received by various groups of low- and middle-income people all fell. The middle fifth of the population received 16.5 percent of the national after-tax income in 1979, but 15.8 percent in 2002. The bottom fifth received 6.8 percent of such income in 1979, but 5.1 percent in 2002.

CBPP reached the conclusion that income is now more concentrated at the very top of the income spectrum than in all but six years since the mid-1930s, based on a viewing of the CBO data in coordination with “a ground-breaking historical analysis of income distribution trends published in a leading economics journal in 2003.”⁴

Working persons are not immune from poverty. According to an October 2004 report, *Working Hard, Falling Short: America's Working Families and the Pursuit of Economic Security*⁵:

- One in four working families is low-income.
- 40% of minority working families are low-income, twice the percentage of white working families.

³ www.cbpp.org/3-7-05tax.htm

⁴ Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, “Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118, 2003. Their tables have been updated through 2002 at <http://emlab.berkeley.edu/users/saez/>

⁵ *Working Hard, Falling Short: America's Working Families and the Pursuit of Economic Security*, October 2004 (www.aecf.org/publications/data/working_hard_new.pdf), supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations, p. 4.

- Of all children in working families, one-third is in low-income working families.
- A married couple heads more than half of all low-income working families.
- While 35% of all low-income working families have a parent who did not complete high school, 42% have a parent with some post secondary education.
- More than half of low-income families pay more than a third of their income for housing; more than a third have a parent without life insurance.

Despite evidence that poverty is growing in the United States, federal legislators and decision makers have extended tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans while making further cuts to budgets for programs that support the country's most vulnerable citizens—budgets that are already insufficient to meet the growing needs of these persons. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities states: “In 2005, the cost of tax cuts enacted over the past four years will be over three times the cost of all domestic program increases enacted over this period.”⁶ CBPP also notes the following information from the Congressional Budget Office:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

Isaiah 10:1-2 (NRSV)

The new CBO data show that changes in law enacted since January 2001 increased the deficit by \$539 billion in 2005. In the absence of such legislation, the nation would have a surplus this year. Tax cuts account for nearly half—48 percent—of this \$539 billion in increased costs. Increases in program spending make up the other 52 percent and have been primarily concentrated in defense, homeland security, and international affairs.

Pennsylvania's experience reflects that of the nation. Carol Goertzel, President and CEO of Pathways PA, states:

*In Pennsylvania, almost 20 percent of working families earn so little they have difficulty surviving financially, and one in nine jobs in the Commonwealth pay less than a poverty-level wage. The Commonwealth ranks 22nd in the size of income gap between the lowest-earning 20 percent of working families and the highest-earning 20 percent of working families, with households at the top earning 7.3 times more than those at the bottom.*⁷

A July 2005 article in the *Bucks County Courier Times* cites Pennsylvania statistics from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual *Kids Count*⁸ report. These numbers provide further evidence of the problems that exist within Pennsylvania with regard to meeting basic human needs as they relate to children:

Pennsylvania ranks 27th in the nation for child well-being in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's annual Kids Count report...

The state did worse in recent years in eight of 10 factors used to measure child well-being than it did in 2000, including higher rates of infant mortality, teen and child deaths, high school dropouts and the percentage of children living in poverty.

Researchers said the report used the newest national and statewide numbers available, which in some cases were only from 2002.

⁶ www.cbpp.org/1-25-05bud.htm

⁷ “What Would It Take to Really Value Working Families?” Allentown *Morning Call*, January 9, 2005.

⁸ Basic *Kids Count* information at www.aecf.org/kidscount; Pennsylvania data available at www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/profile_results.jsp?r=40&d=1.

Of the more than 2.8 million children who lived in Pennsylvania in 2003, about 147,000 lived in low-income households where no adults work. That number jumped by about 30,000 children since 2000.⁹

Theological Perspective and the View of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

From Dr. Kirkpatrick's statement (cited above):

Enslaving poverty in a world of abundance is an intolerable violation of God's good creation...Our scriptures do not tell us that possessions and wealth are evil in and of themselves. Our scripture tells us that possessions and wealth may be good things that God gives for us to share with those who are in need. The Gospel of Matthew 6:21 says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." The heart of our Federal Budget must be directed toward those who are in need.

Evangelical leader Jim Wallis of Sojourners says:

The biblical prophets frequently spoke to kings and rulers. They spoke to "the nations," and the powerful were most often their target audience; those in charge were the ones called to greatest accountability. The Hebrew prophets usually spoke for the dispossessed, widows and orphans (read poor single moms), the hungry, the homeless, the helpless, the least, last, and lost. They spoke to a nation's priorities.¹⁰

The Council's ***Principles for Public Advocacy*** (draft, 4/05) says:

Wholeness is achieved when persons know themselves to be worthy of respect simply because they are, each one, made in the image of God.

We experience wholeness in society when:

- *the value of human beings is not based upon their monetary worth or power of position, upon their abilities or disabilities, upon their demographic characteristics, gender, culture, language, or sexual orientation, but rather upon their being part of the human family*
- *every child is nurtured and educated because each child is recognized as precious*
- *its most vulnerable citizens—the young, the old, the poor, the mentally or physically fragile are not penalized or made to suffer, but rather have access to all that helps create a decent life: adequate health care, housing, food, education, and nurture.*

**Look at the birds of the air;
they neither sow nor reap nor
gather into barns, and yet your
heavenly Father feeds them.
Are you not of more value than
they?**

Matthew 6:26 (NRSV)

Economic justice is rooted in our awareness of abundance—abundance visible in creation and testified to by scripture. Beginning with a presupposition of abundance frees us to live in generosity, recognizing that there is enough for all. God's riches are not to be stored up selfishly in barns of our own building, but are rather to be shared generously by all. Since we are freed from the fear that we need to accumulate, we are also freed to affirm "enough" is sufficient for our needs and best for healthy human life and society.

⁹ ***Bucks County Courier Times***, July 27, 2005, www.phillyburbs.com/pb-dyn/news/111-07272005-519586.html

¹⁰ "Immorality of the Bush Budget," AlterNet, March 9, 2005 (www.alternet.org/story/21426).