

RESPONDING TO THE LEAST OF THESE

Infant, Refugee, Rejected One, Sufferer

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church, in session April 29–May 3, 1995, adopted a resolution setting forth The Bishops’ Initiative on Children and Poverty. This initiative grew out of our hope for renewed commitment to the God who is among the most vulnerable and marginalized, God as revealed in the Bible and supremely in Jesus Christ and also in our Wesleyan tradition. John Wesley taught us that community with the poor is a means of grace, alongside prayer and Bible study, worship and the sacraments. Aware that many of us are denying the church and ourselves the blessings and new life that God longs to give, we as a Council felt impelled after study and prayer to lead the church into community with the “least of these”—children and the poor.

As the new council formed in the fall of 1996, a document was adopted with three goals: 1) Reshape the United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among “the least of these.” 2) Provide resources for understanding the crisis among children and the impoverished and enable the Church to respond to them. 3) Proclaim in word and deed the gospel of God’s redeeming, reconciling, and transforming grace in Jesus Christ to and with the children and those oppressed by poverty.

Rejoicing in work being done and recognizing the enormity of the need, the Council of Bishops unanimously renewed the Initiative for another quadrennium in 2000. We also recognized that much of the focus had been on our own children and children like ours. We rejoiced in this

new ministry with children and want it to grow, but we knew that community with the poor had yet to be a reality for many of us. Thus the goals were continued and expanded, moving the Council more deeply into the causes of poverty in our world and toward the imperative to bear witness to the coming of God’s reign,



where human division is abolished, the spiritual and material gifts of poor and rich are shared with one another, and partnerships across national and cultural boundaries flourish.

This Initiative is not a program, nor an emphasis, rather it is an invitation to the church to reorder our priorities and evaluate our life and mission in light of the impact on children and the poor. We want our daily life and work shaped by this vehicle of grace. The implications are not abstract but concrete and influence, among other things, how we compensate, evaluate, and appoint clergy and employ church staff; how we define and practice evangelism; how and where we form new congregations; whom we recruit, nurture, and deploy as pastoral leaders; how boards and agencies are structured; and how they, we, annual conferences, and local churches determine priorities. It shapes how we understand justice and mercy and what we preach and live. It influences the issues to which we speak and helps form the responses. It could turn our life upside down.

Such radical change is not easy. The Council made covenant with one another to let the foundation document inform and shape our daily work and relationships. That is not easy because daily duties can lure us away from our commit-

ments. Most of us find that where we live and work forces us to be much more intentional than we have been before about these commitments. Yet we envision leaders and communities of faith intentionally shaped by choosing to live in community with the most vulnerable and experiencing God’s grace.

We become a new and stronger community when the resources of the impoverished and the affluent are brought together for the fulfillment of God’s purpose. We have a clearer picture of reality when those who are affluent study scripture with those who work two minimum salary jobs just to eat and have a roof overhead. Our disparate experiences illuminate scripture and offer deeper glimpses into the heart of God and a clearer sense of God’s mission for us. A woman who has been on welfare serves on our task group in Missouri. She has made us rethink what just, hospitable, compassionate community looks like.

When a diverse community gathers around God’s table of abundance, a community capable of sharing with one another emerges. Recently I listened to Dr. Daryl Hobbs, professor at the University of Missouri, as he talked about census data. Over and over when we asked him to generalize, he would say, “Everyone has a name and a story. We have to know each person and situation individually.” As we learn each other’s name and story around the table in the midst of The Story we are transformed. We begin to care enough to learn about the principalities and the powers and to know what God is calling us to do to make the world more just. We experience nudges toward decisions and actions that are more just and compassionate as we see one another and God more clearly.

What the Council of Bishops longs for is a reshaping of persons and leaders, a reshaping of the United Methodist Church in response to God who is “the least of these”: infant, refugee, rejected one, sufferer. □



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