



**The Council of Bishops
The United Methodist Church**

Bishop Ann Sherer, Initiative Chair
Missouri Area
Bishop Charlene Kammerer, Secretary
Western North Carolina Area
Bishop Donald A. Ott, Staff
Pewaukee, WI

May 2001 - the season of Easter

To: United Methodist People Around the Globe

From: The Council of Bishops

The crisis among children and the impoverished continues unabated as we enter a new millennium. With increasing urgency, we hear the voice of God calling us to respond to the cries of the vulnerable and the violated. The Council of Bishops, therefore, renews its dedication to the Initiative on Children and Poverty through this call to "Community with Children and the Poor." The Council of Bishops also calls every United Methodist congregation and person to a deepened level of reflection and action toward life together with the poor.

We have adopted "Community with Children and the Poor" as a means to advance our efforts to renew our lives and ministry and to reshape the church and the world. It is presented to you with encouragement for reflection and action. That is our commitment in the Council of Bishops.

The paper is a challenge to our thinking and a call to prayer, study, and action in our individual and discipleship settings. We urge you to arrange conversations in your faith communities and congregations. We call on you to claim the promise of God to give us new community with children and the poor. Based on a study of the first seven pages, examine carefully the concluding "Call to Action and Invitation to Pilgrimage."

The paper is not a plan. It is not a how-to document. It is meant to be a stimulus for thinking and action. We will offer you, as we create for ourselves, additional resources in the next few years. Included among these will be a guide for study of this paper; informational and motivational videos which will enable children and the poor to speak; an issue of *Circuit Rider* on local implementation models; and guidelines for action-oriented advocacy.

Jesus calls us to discipleship. He beckons us to follow into expanded understanding of service and the creation of a new community. We commit ourselves to examine and to adjust our lifestyle, both personal and corporate. Join us and others in reshaping our lives, our church and our world.

"Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 6:23-24).



The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church

COMMUNITY WITH CHILDREN AND THE POOR

Renewing the Episcopal Initiative

Eastertide 2001

To United Methodist People Around the Globe

The crisis among children and the impoverished continues unabated as we enter a new millennium. With increasing urgency, we hear the voice of God calling us to respond to the cries of the vulnerable and the violated. The Council of Bishops, therefore, renews its dedication to the Initiative on Children and Poverty through this call to "Community with Children and the Poor." The Council of Bishops also calls every United Methodist congregation and person to a deepened level of reflection and action toward life together with the poor.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995 the Council of Bishops launched an Initiative on Children and Poverty with three goals:

1. *To reshape The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among "the least of these" and the evaluation of everything the church is and does in the light of the impact on children and the impoverished.*
2. *To provide resources for understanding the crisis among children and the impoverished and enabling the church to respond.*
3. *To engage in evangelization: the proclamation in word and deed of the gospel of God's redeeming, reconciling, and transforming grace in Jesus Christ to and with children and those oppressed by poverty.*

The Initiative began with the publication of a Foundation Document,¹ which became a

stimulus for responses by annual conferences, congregations, boards and agencies, and institutions to the plight of children and the impoverished. We rejoice in the many ways the Initiative is influencing the church and the impact it has had on children and those who live in poverty.

Our focus upon children and the poor has borne fruit. However, too often what seems to preoccupy us are our own children and children like ours. Too little attention has been paid to the economically poor, to the systemic causes of poverty, and to the theological and ecclesiological implications of God's identification and presence with the poor.

We confess that our own lifestyles often reflect being in community with the affluent rather than in community with the poor. The benefits we derive from the very economic system that leaves others impoverished undercuts

the credibility of our witness. We stand in need of conversion, and we yearn and commit ourselves to live, like Jesus, in more complete community with the poor.

We knew when the Initiative began that reaching the goals would involve confronting formidable challenges and would require many years of sustained focus by the church. Nevertheless, we have been tempted to and have:

- treated the Initiative as an optional program or temporary missional emphasis rather than as a call to confront powerful idols and to reorder the church's priorities in accordance with the God revealed in Jesus Christ;
- sentimentalized children and the poor and substituted acts of charity for authentic community with the impoverished;
- appealed to a general humanitarianism rather than rooting the Initiative in the nature and the mission of God.

We confess that we, as bishops, have found it difficult to keep focused on the cry of those who are destitute and abandoned. Our routine duties sometimes deafen us to the cries of those who are outside the institutions and congregations for which we have responsibility. We recognize that we have allowed the press of our responsibilities to create incessant busyness and to prevent us from sustaining the kind of focus that will make us effective servants of the divine mission of transformation in response to the God who is among "the least of these." Our own attempts, as bishops, to develop ongoing relationships with the poor and with impoverished children flounder in the face of the many ways we are separated from them by social, institutional, and cultural position.

The great challenge that faces The United Methodist Church is that of overcoming the barriers that separate the relatively prosperous from the impoverished. We are convinced that the reshaping of the church and the proclamation of the gospel cannot take place apart from a newly developed sense of community: that is, relationship of the church, including the bish-

ops, with the economically impoverished and the most vulnerable of God's children. God has chosen the poor, the vulnerable, and the powerless as means of grace and transformation.

Therefore, we call ourselves and invite The United Methodist Church to renewal and evangelization through community with the poor: those whom Jesus called "the least of these" and Charles Wesley called "Jesus' bosom friends."

THE CURRENT STATE OF CHILDREN AND THE POOR

While we celebrate the signs of hope and the renewed commitment to children and the poor, we realize that the conditions among many of the world's children and impoverished continue to worsen. Accelerating gaps between the enriched and the impoverished place growing millions around the world at risk. The global economy increasingly resembles a giant casino in which the few are enormously enriched while myriads toil without prospect of a decent chance at life's necessities. Women, children, and the poor continue to be the primary victims of violence and premature death. Growing violence by children against children shockingly illustrates the poverty of spirit present in our communities and nations. What is remarkable is that most of the severe problems facing the world's children and the poor are readily solvable. Resources and solutions are available. What is lacking is the moral will, the theological vision, and the political commitment to respond.

In its annual report, UNICEF points to the progress that has been made on a number of fronts with respect to the well-being of the world's children. The report notes "a number of goals remain out of reach for hundreds of millions of children throughout the world. Their lives and futures are threatened in a world marked by deeper and more intractable poverty and greater inequality between the rich and the poor, proliferating conflict and violence, the deadly spread of HIV/AIDS and the abiding issue of discrimination against women and

girls."² The same report indicates that in this period of apparent prosperity "more than 1.2 billion people in the world live on less than US\$1 a day—more than 600 million of them children."³ Moreover, HIV/AIDS killed 510,000 children under age 15 in 1998, and nearly 13 million children have been orphaned by AIDS.⁴ One hundred thirty million children do not have access to primary education.⁵

Global economic forces, policies, and practices are creating and sustaining poverty. Transnational trade has increased to about 25 percent of the world's output of goods. However, about a third of this trade occurs within branches of individual transnational corporations, thereby permitting many of these corporations to avoid nation-based regulation (environmental or labor laws) and the taxation that would support the welfare of national populations.

Every day about US\$1.5 trillion (an amount roughly equal to the size of the U.S. federal budget for a year) moves about the globe. Only about 1 percent of this money is directly related to the purchase of goods and services. The rest is devoted to speculation in currencies, stocks, bonds, and future commodity prices generally of a very short-term nature. Because of the instability of these financial flows, developing national economies are subjected to speculative booms and busts that devastate the abilities of these nations to provide basic services to their populations.

One of the ways impoverishment occurs is through the accumulation of onerous debt on the part of nations least able to pay. Thus Mozambique spent twice as much in 1996 on debt service as it spent on health and education, while 25 percent of that country's children died of infectious diseases.⁶ Often these poorest countries spend more money on interest payments than they receive in loans or investments. Thus, the poorest nations actually subsidize the profits of the richest banks of the wealthiest nations.

Even when countries appear economically successful, the results can be devastating for the majority of their population. Mexico, for exam-

ple, has been growing at the rate of nearly 8 percent (faster than any other Latin American economy) and boasts as many billionaires as Great Britain. Yet, the percentage of the population living in poverty (between 40 percent and 60 percent) actually has increased as the purchasing power of the average wage has plummeted.

The disparity of wealth is not restricted to developing and least developed economies. In the United States of America, the gap between the rich and poor has been growing to reach levels of inequality never known before in that country. The number of poor children in the United States exceeds the number of inhabitants of the largest metropolitan area in that nation. A million and a half children have at least one parent in prison. The *Chicago Tribune* reports that "over the past 20 years, the United States has become by far the most unequal nation in the industrialized world."⁷ The gap between the average CEO and his/her worker is "closer to 500-1 and is growing."⁸ If the "minimum wage had grown as fast as the CEO pay in the 1990s, it wouldn't be \$5.15 now but \$24.13, enough to lift America's millions of working poor out of their poverty."⁹ In the United States, nearly half of all wealth is owned by the wealthiest 1 percent, while the bottom 80 percent owns only 4 percent. "In other words, the 2 million Americans at the top own 10 times as much as the 200 million further down."¹⁰

This growing disparity of wealth most severely affects children. More than 25 percent of U.S. children live in poverty, the highest rate among industrialized nations. Children of poverty are sent to the worst schools and have reduced access to health care. Mothers who live in poverty are told they must work rather than take care of their children. They are paid wages that do not get them above the poverty level. When they do find work, they often are not provided benefits or child care.

Our economic values are contrary to the interests of children and the poor and with the purposes of God revealed to us in Scripture

and in Jesus Christ. The market logic, with its pervasive dependency upon consumerism, shapes modern life, including churches, and reduces everything to commodities available to those who have money to exchange. As a result, the chasm between the rich and the poor widens, and the poor are relegated to the margins of society. The chasm deepens the spiritual poverty of the prosperous and fragments Christian community. From among the poor and vulnerable people of the world, the crucified and risen Christ is calling us into a new community, formed and shaped by the God who hears the cries of the poor, and incorporates them into a community formed and shaped by grace (gift) and basic life provisions for all.

RECONSTITUTING THE BODY OF CHRIST: COMMUNITY WITH THE POOR

Scripture reveals a God whose vision for creation is a community of interdependency, mutuality, and harmony. As creatures made in the divine image, human beings are called into community with the Triune God, with one another, and with the whole of creation (Genesis 1-2). God enters into covenant with Abraham and Sarah to form "a great nation" through whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2, 3). From the dawn of creation and throughout history, God has sought to form a community that reflects God's own being and purpose and by which God blesses the human family.

In the Exodus, God identifies with the powerless slaves in Egypt and forever reveals the Holy One as one who observes the misery of the oppressed, hears their cries, knows their suffering, and comes to deliver (Exodus 3:7f). The Law and the Prophets make clear the importance of attending to the plight of the poor as the mark of the people's faithfulness to their God. Widows, orphans, and immigrants are typically singled out as those whose wel-

fare is determinative of the nation's standing with God. Thus the Law warns against oppressing the immigrant or abusing the widow and the orphan (Exodus 22:21-24). This concern extends to making provision for the poor to glean crops and the prohibition of a complete harvest. The prophet Jeremiah proclaims, "Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow . . ." (Jeremiah 22:3a).

Leviticus contains the provisions for the "year of jubilee" which is to be a visible, tangible reminder of God's vision for the community (Leviticus 25). Jubilee is marked by special provision and concern for the poor and "the alien" as debts are to be forgiven, the land returned to the rightful owners, and generous sharing of the fruits of the earth as gracious gifts from God. Jesus announced his own mission in the image of the jubilee as he quoted from Isaiah 61: "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).

The Prophets declare that faithfulness to God requires justice for the poor. Biblical justice is more than equality; it is defined by what happens to the poor. God's justice begins with the most vulnerable: the orphans, the widows, and the landless. Authentic worship requires ongoing relationships with and justice for the poor, as Amos proclaims, "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21,23,24).

The image of God's new community is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who invites us to intimate community with the vulnerable and the violated, the humiliated and the impoverished. He was born of a peasant girl among the home-

less in a stable (Luke 1-2), spent the first months of his life as a refugee in Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15), and grew up in a working class family. It was among the marginalized that he announced and enacted the coming of the divine reign, and it was among the indigent and the working poor that he called his disciples. Others, like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, joined his movement, thereby entering into solidarity with those who had no security in the world. And Jesus was saddened by the inability of one who wished to join him to unburden himself of the trappings of prosperity in order to live in solidarity with the impoverished and so in community with Jesus (Mark 10:17-22).

In his death, Jesus was executed among bandits and found there one who was his companion not only in death but also "in Paradise" (Luke 23:39-43). Prior to his death, Jesus told his followers that he would be found in the faces and needs of those who were hungry and naked, sick and imprisoned, abandoned and excluded (Matthew 25:31-46). His resurrection validated his promise to be with us always, calling us toward his future where God will be all in all and every tear of suffering consoled and transformed into joy.

In order to be a sign of the presence of Christ's spirit and the coming of God's reign, the first community of faith was constituted as a fellowship of prayer and praise and of sharing of life and substance with and among the impoverished (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35). Paul referred to the community as the body of Christ, that is, as the way in which the crucified and risen Christ would be tangibly, visibly, and dramatically present in the world. As Paul reported to the Galatians, "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, . . ." (2:10). It is the remembrance of the poor that demonstrates the continuity of gentile Christianity with the Jewish Christianity of Jerusalem established by Jesus' first companions.

The inability to discern or recognize the community as the body of Christ was encountered when prosperous Christians in Corinth

separated themselves from indigent Christians in the enactment of the Lord's Supper and communion meal (1 Corinthians 11:17-34). The unworthy way in which the Corinthians practiced eucharistic fellowship was that their table fellowship reflected not the community of solidarity but the class divisions of the Greco-Roman society. "For this reason," Paul says, "many of you are weak and ill, . . ." an apt description of a church separated from the poor.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that "not many of you were wise . . . powerful . . . of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1:26). Yet it was this very community of some who were prosperous and some who were not that would make it possible to celebrate the diversity of gifts and ministries in the community in which not uniformity but unity in Spirit could be discerned and affirmed. The removal of economic barriers, therefore, may be the path to unity in Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Paul emphasizes the importance of excelling in the work of sharing of resources among disparate communities. In this way, a new equality or mutuality is created in which the abundance of some supplies the needs of others "that there may be a fair balance." The community's love is shown to be genuine insofar as it mirrors the activity of Christ who "became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."

Could it be that what some have seen as malaise or crisis in congregations is related to our forgetfulness of the poor and the resulting separation from the God who has chosen "the least of these" as special means of grace? Is not our failure in evangelization and mission related to the way in which congregational life replicates rather than transforms the barriers between the prosperous and the impoverished as well as between races and cultures, thereby making it impossible to discern or recognize the body, even in our eucharistic practice? Is not the inadequacy of our stewardship due in part to our refusal to see the poor and the world's children as beloved members of our

family with whom we mutually participate in God's grace?

Our Wesleyan heritage calls us into community with the poor. John Wesley believed that the Methodists could be a community that transcends divisions of class and social standing. Throughout his long life and ministry, he sought to constitute the Methodists as a community with and among the impoverished. On his constant travels across the British Isles, he made it his practice to live with the poor. In his sermons and letters, he urged his followers to visit the poor: to acquaint themselves personally and daily with the plight and the piety of the impoverished. He remarked that the reason the prosperous have so little sympathy with the poor is that they had so little direct intimate acquaintance with them. Therefore, he urged the discipline and practice of visiting them, and he considered visitation of the poor as indispensable to Christian discipleship as acts of piety and worship. The absence of this discipline perpetuates false stereotypes of the poor, thereby justifying and solidifying the separation between the prosperous and the impoverished.

Wesley, however, knew that sustained relationships between the prosperous and the impoverished were difficult and he considered the accumulation of wealth to be a serious threat to the Methodist movement. He called on the prosperous Methodists among the societies to share their prosperity with the poor, thereby avoiding the destructive influence of wealth on the spiritual life. The early societies included the prosperous and the impoverished, but the dominant focus of Wesley's ministry was toward and among the poor whom he considered a means of blessing to the rich.

Wesley's fear that growing prosperity among the Methodists would result in separation from the poor and a weakening of the movement materialized even before his death in 1791. As Methodism spread to America, it began to take on the character and values of the American frontier as individualism and upward mobility influenced the shape and pri-

orities of the new church in the new world.¹¹ Immediately following the organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, the denomination began to compromise some basic principles in the name of institutional expansion and cultural prominence. For example, the strong anti-slavery position taken by Wesley and adopted at the Christmas Conference in 1784 was weakened by subsequent General Conferences until the American church split in 1844, foreshadowing the division in the country.¹² Once compromise on such fundamental principles as human worth and dignity became acceptable, classism and fractured community followed almost unnoticed and unchallenged.

By the middle of the 19th century, Methodists in the United States began to move consciously from the back streets to the main streets as they attempted to get their share of "the weightier people" in growing communities. Plain meetinghouses gave way to more ornate sanctuaries, and circuit riders were replaced by settled and limited itinerate clergy who assumed pastoral power from local laity. The missionary movement, though exceedingly helpful in taking the gospel to many lands and establishing schools and hospitals and churches, also exported American individualism and economic capitalism.

The market logic of exchange became a dominant value of American culture, including the churches. Today the market—with its tendency to define everything from health care to education, from food to shelter, as commodities available to those with financial resources—is the pervasive reality competing for the loyalties of the world's people. Consumerism has infiltrated religion as people regularly shop for churches and religious experiences. Even ministry is subject to the competitive market forces as pastors compete for bigger salaries and larger congregations. Wealth has become not only the means to the world's goods and services but the definition of human value and the means to "salvation."

In a world constituted by division and com-

petition, in which the gap between the rich and the poor widens like a yawning chasm and human life is reduced to a marketable commodity while the impoverished majority of the earth becomes invisible to the prosperous few, it is the church that is called to be the visible and tangible presence of a community built upon grace (gift). It is the church which is summoned by God to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of Christ's victory over the powers of domination, division, and death. How closely the church resembles Christ's inclusive community of grace is the true measure of its doctrinal integrity, its evangelical witness, and its missional faithfulness.

The United Methodist Church may yet be a visible and tangible presence of Christ's victory over the powers of domination, division, and death, by the power of God through the Holy Spirit, if we seek obediently and humbly to constitute community with and among the impoverished. This will never be easy, for we struggle against systemic sin, the principalities and powers that seek to rule this planet. These powers lodge deep within our hearts and congregations as ignorance and fearfulness of the other, the one who is different from ourselves. Yet, with God, who raises Jesus from the dead and who in Jesus Christ has reconciled all things in heaven and on earth, all things are possible. The decisive victory in defeating the powers of sin and death and in removing the barriers among the human family has already been won in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, we can live with confidence in the light of Christ's present and future reign of justice, generosity, and joy.

CALL TO ACTION AND INVITATION TO PILGRIMAGE

In addition to the previously stated goals of the Initiative, *we seek to engage the church in biblical and theological reflection for the purpose of articulating its mission for this new millennium and for reshaping the church in the image of Christ.*

1. We call upon the whole church to pray that the Holy Spirit will guide our thoughts and actions as we seek to reshape the church toward a new community inclusive of children and the impoverished, all God's people.
2. We call upon 'the people called Methodist' to join with us in seeking specific and dramatic ways to bear witness to the coming of God's reign in which human division is abolished. Concretely we seek to *be* and to *build* up the body of Christ as a new community with and among the impoverished, in which the spiritual and material gifts of poor and rich are shared with one another. The task of evangelization and church development should focus on bringing into being new congregations which reflect this new community.
3. Established congregations, especially those of the prosperous, must seek actively to involve the indigent and the working poor in their own congregational life, treat them not as objects of charity but as indispensable members of the body of Christ. The gifts and ministries of the impoverished must be nurtured, received and honored as others have the honor of serving them in their need.
4. All aspects of the life of the church need to come under review. We must examine everything in the light of Christ's new community, including:
 - how we compensate, evaluate, and appoint clergy and employ church staff;
 - how and where we form new congregations;
 - how we design and locate church facilities;
 - how we define and practice evangelism;
 - how we recruit, nurture, and deploy pastoral leaders; and
 - how boards and agencies are structured and how they determine priorities.

Let us accent our connectional ecclesiology by yoking parishes so that more economically prosperous congregations have direct relationships with congregations in need and thereby more effectively share resources and facilities.