

STATEMENT OF COMMON COMMITMENT

We as religious leaders of diverse faiths gather in a moment of historic urgency, with a spirit of unity and collaboration, to convey God's divine message of responding to the needs of society and in particular the plight of the poor and the needs of our children in this nation.

To a great extent the Civil Rights movement grew out of the commitment of religious leaders who were moved by injustice. Today we are moved by the plight of those who struggle against great odds, who require immediate responses in order to have hope for themselves and opportunity for their children.

Recognizing our mandate and mission, our indebtedness to God and our duty to share as stewards of God's creation, we gather out of concern for millions of our fellow Americans who live in poverty.

We gather to sound a moral alarm to respond to this crisis and avert future repercussions. While our nation enjoys unprecedented prosperity, fully 21 percent of American's children live in poverty. Even in these good economic times, the growing disparity between the rich and the poor is evidence that all is not well.

As a nation, we must strengthen and preserve families. In particular, we must foster parental responsibility for their children.

This statement is not a comprehensive look at poverty in our nation. Others have done that ably. What we do know is that no other western industrialized nation has such a high percentage of its people living in poverty. That is a moral challenge to religious leaders, social activists, government officials and all Americans. In its package of welfare changes, Congress called on the religious community to do more.

I

What Can Government Do?

Our faith traditions affirm that government has a moral responsibility to seek the welfare of all citizens. There is nonetheless a general consensus that through government we have not always contended with poverty as effectively as we should. Twenty-three million adult Americans cannot read a newspaper and cannot fill out an employment form. Often their children are then doomed to repeat the cycle.

We particularly want to address the problems of those most difficult to employ and we believe government and the private sector, both profit and non-profit, can and must do more to meet their needs. We applaud those states which are now developing new programs to move people from unemployment and/or welfare to work, particularly by encouraging new relationships among government, the pri-

vate sector, and communities of faith. We urge states and the federal government to initiate programs that assure the capability and opportunity of work for all citizens. We believe that in order to be successful, such programs must include: training; mentoring; childcare; transportation; and medical care.

Promoting good work habits is in the interest of all Americans and we further reaffirm that government assis-



tance and jobs policies should be constructed in such a way as to encourage families to live together.

We urge the President, Governors and Legislators in both the federal and state governments to seriously examine these recommendations.

We call upon our state and federal governments to reexamine what they are doing as servants of all Americans, and we call upon congregations of every religious persuasion to examine their actions and inactions. Working with the poor is an essential part of the religious life and is an effective way of conveying what our faith compels us to do. We gather as people of faith to call upon citizens of all religious traditions to join in a common commitment to set free all those who are trapped in poverty.

II

What Can Congregations Do?

Religious believers of many persuasions are serving their neighbors in countless ways. We applaud these congregations and individuals for their commitment, service and sacrifice on behalf of the poor and encourage all congregations to consider new avenues of service to God and their fellow human beings. We are persuaded that faith-based involvement brings a spiritual wholeness to growth toward self-sufficiency.

Congregations provide self esteem through love and relationships to God which provide the hope that can propel people into the work place: First, by providing for the emergency and long-term needs of the poor; Second, by providing voices on behalf of the people who have no voice in the struggle for equal opportunity.

We ask all congregations to consider what they are doing in these areas on behalf of the poor. We also encourage them to find ways to form partnerships with other organizations already in place.

We urge congregations to engage in meeting emergency needs, carefully discern response that is faithful, and speak truth courageously to power. Being present with those who struggle with poverty and accompanying that struggle with sustained effort are outcomes we should give a priority.

The following questions are designed to encourage congregations to examine themselves to discover and celebrate what they are already doing and to consider how to further expand their service.

Can we better encourage congregation members to be advocates in the public sector for relief and transformation?

Are members of our congregation taking in foster children?

Is our congregation encouraging members to offer pro-bono services as an attorney, physician, financial adviser or in other ways?

How many members of our congregation are providing

volunteer mentoring or tutoring services?

Do we have the courage to take on the challenge of once a year finding a job for an ex-convict?

Are there creative new ways for transportation needs to be met?

Can our congregation provide part-time work for someone with a disability? Are we encouraging members to do this?

Do we have any direct contact with people who are on welfare? Do we understand their problems?

Can we assist in childcare?

Can we help make available shelter, both transitional and permanent, to those who need it?

Is our congregation reaching across racial barriers, either through membership or through our congregation's activities?

Are there immigrants in the community whom we could be serving in some way? How?

What services, if any, are we providing for the homeless?

Are we making our facilities available for groups like Alcoholics Anonymous that help people with special needs?

Can we do something to establish family-to-family links between our congregation and those who are struggling?

If a young person in our community is in trouble, are we doing anything to help?

Can we provide voluntary transportation for those who are elderly or disabled? Are there practical things in their households — such as simple repairing — where we can help?

Can our congregation help in any way on programs for drug counseling and treatment?

What can we do to encourage help on basic literacy for those in our community or other communities who need this fundamental help?

Are persons with mental illnesses welcome in our congregations, worship organizations, fellowship and leadership? How can we provide support for individuals with mental illnesses and their families?

For suburban and rural congregations: What can we do to establish ties either with an inner city congregation or with people in the inner city who are poor?

Can our congregation place some of its investment dollars at the service of the poor? How can we use our financial resources to foster economic development and economic opportunity in poor communities?

Are we encouraging lay and clergy to have a passion for helping those in need?

III

If only 10 percent of our policy makers and 10 percent of our congregations take this call to action seriously, ours will be a better nation. Drifting indifferently in our com-

fort is not a serious option for people of conscience. Bestirring ourselves for those who struggle, often with a feeling of helplessness, is what our religious heritage requires, and our nation needs.

Those drafting this statement were Dr. Victor L. Brown Jr., Welfare Services, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; Dr. John Buehrens, President, Unitarian-Universalist Association; Reverend Barrett Duke, Director of Denominational Relations, Conferences and Seminars, The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Southern Baptist Convention; Reverend Dr. Richard L. Hamm, General Minister and President, Christian Church; Bishop Leroy C. Hodapp, United Methodist Church (Retired); Reverend Dr. Isaac I. Ihiasota, Rector, Episcopal Church of St. Andrew; Reverend Dana C. Jones, Pastor, Maxwell Street Presbyterian Church, Louisville, KY; Reverend Yeprem Kelegian, St. Mesrob Armenian Church, Racine, WI; Reverend Herbert Martin, Progressive Community Church, Chicago; Bishop Marshall L. Meadors Jr., Resident Bishop, United Methodist Church, Mississippi Area; Imam Wallace D. Mohammed, International Spokesman for the Muslim American Society; Reverend John D. Paarlberg, Office of Social Witness and Worship, Reformed Church in America; Mr. Howard A. Peters III, Secretary, Illinois Department of Human Services; Reverend E. Roy Riley Jr., Bishop, New Jersey Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Dr. Pat Robertson, Chancellor, Regents University; Elder Jose V. Rojas, Seventh-Day Adventist Church; Rabbi Jacob Rubenstein, President, Rabbinical Council of America; Ms. Maureen Shea, Office of Public Liaison, White House; Mr. James W Skillen, Executive Director, The Center for Public Justice; Mr. James M. Wall, Editor, The Christian Century; Reverend Dr. Daniel E. Weiss, General Secretary, American Baptist Churches. Unfortunately, because of committee meetings of the Roman Catholic bishops, none of the Roman Catholic bishops was able to be present, but Roman Catholic leaders have since praised the statement.



If you want additional copies of this folder, they are available free, in limited quantities, from the Public Policy Institute, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, 62901 or call 618-453-4009.

Statement of Commitment

An unusual, probably unique, gathering of religious leaders of a variety of faith groups met at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale under the auspices of the Public Policy Institute of the University. They included people of backgrounds as differing as Imam Wallace Mohammed, the Muslim leader, to Dr. Pat Robertson, the Christian university and television leader, from Dr. John Buehrens, head of the Unitarian-Universalists in the United States, to Dr. Daniel Weiss, leader of the American Baptist Association. This symposium was made possible through grants from the Ford Foundation and the Rapoport Foundation. For two days they worked to develop a statement on the issue of religious faith and the moral challenge of poverty. That statement, agreed to unanimously on March 25, 1998, follows.