



# Pennsylvania Council of Churches

## A Statement Concerning Poverty

Christian Churches Together's "Statement on Poverty" begins with the following words:

As Christian leaders in the wealthiest society on earth, we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The Gospel and our ethical principles place our service to the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.

This is a fitting statement that speaks to the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' position—that we, as a community of faith, have a unique responsibility to bear witness to the Gospel, seeking to discern what God wants and to act as God's agents in the world to overcome poverty in God's world.

### **What We Believe**

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches believes that we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The Gospel and our ethical principles place our service to the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.<sup>1</sup>

**Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.**

*Matthew 25:40*

We believe the fundamental question for Christians is, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus addresses this question in Matthew 25, when he says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me." Jesus' words strike at the very core of God's call to us as Christians—to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Presumably, loving our neighbors as ourselves means treating them as we would like to be treated—with dignity and respect. This simple "Golden Rule" guides us to work to ensure that all persons have what they need to live lives of dignity, safely and with access to adequate food, shelter, health care, education, and living wage employment.

Treating others with dignity and respect includes having an acute awareness that all members of society do not have the same privileges or opportunities due to circumstances beyond their control, including, but not limited to, race and position. Once we understand that all do not have the same privileges, we have a responsibility to lessen or end the consolidation of power in the hands of those with privilege. See "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack"<sup>2</sup> by Peggy McIntosh.

### **What is Poverty?**

We define poverty as a continual, chronic condition of want for (1) basic necessities, resources, and opportunities, (2) connection to the larger society, and (3) power to affect positive change, which is often exacerbated by social stigmas, isolation, and caste status.

We witness a reluctance to accept individual or societal responsibility for any part of this problem. We also understand that greed leads us to hoard more than our "share" of resources, driven by the fear that there isn't enough to go around.<sup>3</sup> Often we even place blame on persons living in poverty in the belief that our capitalist system will always work to lift persons out of poverty if they work hard enough. We acknowledge that this system can and does lift some out of poverty, but we also stress that this isn't always the case. A free market system does, in fact, require rules to avoid producing extreme winners and losers.

Poverty is not a life-style choice. We believe that most people, given favorable circumstances and the right resources, would choose the path that leads to a comfortable existence and respect within our society.

<sup>1</sup> Wording borrowed from Christian Churches Together's Statement on Poverty at <http://www.christianchurchestogether.org/poverty/poverty.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uakron.edu/centers/conflict/docs/whitepriv.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> This speaks to the notion of "poverty of spirit," and it is this type of poverty that we believe contributes to poverty as defined above.

### **Who Are the Poor? Who Lives in Poverty?**

We all live in poverty, to some degree. Even if we are not poor, many of us live in a state of spiritual poverty. We impoverish ourselves by focusing on the all-too-human concepts of value or wealth.<sup>4</sup>

That being said, there are poor are among us, often invisible. They include inner city dwellers (predominantly minorities), persons in rural areas, those with addictions/mental illness, the elderly, women (primarily single parents) and children, and those who were previously middle class who were overcome by health care expenses, a poor economy, or some other combination of factors.

### **How Does Poverty Affect Us?**

Many in our society tend to view poverty as a problem only for those who are poor, but we believe that poverty is EVERYONE's problem—as inequity increases, the impacts affect all of us.<sup>5</sup>

**Poverty is EVERYONE's problem—as inequity increases, the impacts affect all of 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.<sup>6</sup>

### **What Does Permitting Preventable Poverty to Exist Say About Us?**

Failure to address poverty in our country and around the world suggests that our priorities are not God's priorities, but those driven by human greed. We have been willing to spend billions of dollars bailing out businesses that have engaged in risky practices and providing welfare to businesses that don't need it. On the other hand, we have been unwilling to spend, by comparison, very modest amounts for activities and assistance that help those who are poor. For example, for many years we have failed to provide adequate funding for education that would contribute to lifting people out of poverty. We hesitate to provide for adequate nutrition that would help children to stay well and to be better students, able to stay focused because they aren't hungry.

**What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

*Micah 6:8*

We pay almost any cost to maintain the vision that the economy works and to keep it going, and as a result we claim we can't afford to help others. This viewing of the economy as a god is a form of idolatry, and failure to address the needs of the most vulnerable among us is morally bankrupt.

### **What Does God Call Us to Do?**

We believe that widespread and persistent poverty challenges us to action. The painful truth is that about thirty-seven million people in our country live below the poverty line. Tragically, 18 percent of all our children struggle in poverty. The sad reality is that millions in our nation work hard and still cannot escape poverty. We lament this ongoing poverty.<sup>7</sup>

We believe that what Jesus called the two greatest commandments—love God and love neighbor—require us to take action to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, and to promote the common good of society.<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion**

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion, see “A Theological Discussion Concerning Economies” in “A Companion to ‘A Statement Concerning Poverty.’”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion, see “How Does Poverty Affect Us” in “A Companion to ‘A Statement Concerning Poverty.’”

<sup>7</sup> Borrowed from Christian Churches United's Statement on Poverty.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion on scriptural themes, as well as more specific ways of taking action and our responsibility for doing so, see “What Does God Call Us to Do?” in “A Companion to ‘A Statement Concerning Poverty.’”

As Christians, we acknowledge the scourge of poverty that damages our society and that is counter to what we believe about responsibility for our neighbors. We believe that it is our duty to speak truth to power and to act to overcome poverty wherever it exists. It is our intention to do so at every opportunity, and we will seek to work with all who desire to do the same. We understand that overcoming poverty will require greater commitment by individuals and institutions at every level, along with better choices by individuals and better policies within our society.

**Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power, and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.**

*Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack"*

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches and the broader faith community do not do this work for personal gain. We have no partisan political agenda. Our members cover the political spectrum, but together we believe that our faith demands that we act, and that we seek solutions that transcend political divisions.

For all the reasons embodied in this statement, we pledge to strengthen our efforts to educate and improve understanding, foster better communications, and work to end the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation on earth.