

Religion and Poverty: God and the Poor, By Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary, National Council of Churches

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For the 45 million persons who attend congregations related to member communions of the National Council of Churches, poverty ministries are not a sideline. They are at the very heart of our faith.

Even a casual reader of the bible, including those familiar with the Psalms and Proverbs, is immediately struck by the sheer volume of references to God's concern for the poor. The theme is repeated relentlessly in all holy writ, including the Torah, the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, the words of the Buddha, and in millions of lines of religious verse.

The message is clear: God has an unabashed focus on persons living in poverty.

For Christians, the message is unmistakable, and Jesus makes the point with varying degrees of subtlety. In Luke 4, he asserts that God has anointed him "to bring good news to the poor," which is nice, but in Matthew 19, he is unnervingly direct. When a rich young man asks him how to get to heaven, Jesus tells him to obey God's commandments and "sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor." For two millennia, we have blanched at this radical suggestion and convinced ourselves Jesus is being hyperbolic. But I doubt it. I think he's making it unmistakably clear how much God loves the poor.

Given all this evidence, it boggles the mind to consider how little attention we have paid to poverty. The one bright spot in our long history is the emphasis churches placed on giving alms to the poor, but principalities felt no such largesse. Less than a century ago in our own country, few politicians felt government had any obligations to help the poor, and people without means were left to fend for themselves. As the industrialization of the world intensified, the rich got richer at the expense of the poor. At the turn of the 20th century, workers – including their young children – were forced to labor in unbelievably degrading conditions while their employers luxuriated in extravagant homes.

Conditions were, to state the obvious, sinful. It was amid the squalor of early 20th century America that churches and persons of faith came together to right these terrible wrongs. In December 1908, at the founding of the Federal Council of Churches, Methodist cleric Frank Mason North delivered a report on poverty in America that evolved into the Social Creed of the Churches. The Creed called for safe working conditions, the abolition of child labor, a living wage for all workers, at least one day off per week, and for "the abatement of poverty."

Considering the ample evidence of God's prejudice for the poor, it's hard to believe that the Social Creed was regarded as a radical document, but labor conditions in the U.S. began to improve.

A century later, in 2008, the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches and Church World Service unveiled an updated document called "A Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century." Among other things, the new creed calls for:

☐☐Abatement of hunger and poverty, and enactment of policies benefiting the most vulnerable.

☒☒High-quality public education for all and universal, affordable, and accessible healthcare.☒

☒☒An effective program of social security during sickness, disability, and old age.

☒☒Tax and budget policies that reduce disparities between rich and poor, strengthen democracy, and provide greater opportunity for everyone within the common good.

☒☒Just immigration policies that protect family unity, safeguard workers' rights, require employer accountability, and foster international cooperation.

☒☒Sustainable communities marked by affordable housing, access to good jobs, and public safety.☒

☒☒Public service as a high vocation, with real limits on the power of private interests in politics.

Amid the strains of the current economic downturn, many of the proposals have become political hot potatoes as politicians in both parties fret that they will beget programs that the nation cannot afford or that will benefit persons who do not deserve them.

The fact that the abatement of hunger and poverty or the provision of universal healthcare or the assurance of just immigration policies are subject to political debate is, to put it mildly, sinful. And God has gone out of God's way to make that clear to us.

A decade ago, the United Nations proposed Millennium Development Goals that call on the nations of the world to pool their resources to accomplish many of the objectives cited in the Social Creed for the 21st century, including the elimination of the level of poverty and hunger that kills millions of people around the world.

Many social scientists, most notably Dr. Jeffrey Sachs, believe we have the means of doing just that.

Of course, there are many critics who believe the elimination of killing poverty will never happen, and some of them suggest with dark Malthusian tones that it would not be worth the effort.

That's the kind of reasoning that breaks God's heart. God has been trying to get our attention since the dawn of creation, and in written scripture for millennia:

"Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth," the Lord said, "I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'" (Deut. 15:11, NRSV).

Working together, we can accomplish the abatement of poverty worldwide.

But even if we fail, it is clear God is commanding us to make the effort.

God is not on the side of social scientists, politicians, or cynics.

God is on the side of the poor.

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