

A Report from the January 2009 Annual Meeting of
Christian Churches Together In The USA:
“Implementing the Call to Cut Poverty in Half”

In the midst of the severe economic crisis that especially devastates the poorest both here and around the world, participants of Christian Churches Together (CCT) spent two days, January 14-15, 2009, strengthening and deepening our commitment to the goal of cutting poverty in the U.S. by 50% in the next ten years. We reaffirmed our unanimous conviction that our service to the poor and our work for justice are “at the center of Christian life and witness.” And we agreed to renew our prayers to understand and live in faithfulness to our Lord’s teaching that when we serve “the least of these”, we truly minister to our Lord Himself.

As we reflected on our current economic crisis, we resolved that our economy and priorities must be reordered. The biblical teaching about God’s special concern for the poor demands that any stimulus and economic recovery plan must make the pressing needs of vulnerable and low-income Americans a priority.

In order to help both church and society implement our consensus Statement on Poverty adopted in January 2007, we had a fruitful discussion on further principles and concrete ideas to strengthen our work to dramatically reduce poverty, especially childhood poverty.

Although CCT does not give direction to or speak for its participating churches and organizations, we share these principles and ideas with the hope that they may serve to flesh out and guide implementation of the four objectives in our Statement on Poverty.

Principles

To reduce poverty, we call on churches, government, businesses, communities and families to:

A. Strengthen Families

1. Recognize that financial stress exacerbates family instability and abuse, and family brokenness places families at risk of poverty.
2. Ensure that all families have access to resources for strengthening families and safeguarding child safety.
3. Ensure that all families have access to the basic needs of food, health care, and housing.
4. Correct racial disparities and structural injustices that undermine families, especially in low-income communities.
5. Affirm the central importance of healthy families to strong communities, and reinforce parents’ responsibility for their children.

B. Strengthen Communities

1. Identify, support, nurture and retain local community leadership.
2. Promote together in our congregations the need to address both the results and the causes of poverty in our communities, offering resources and models.
3. Support the efforts of community organizing which empowers local communities in their efforts to overcome poverty.

C. Make Work *Work*

1. Affirm that a full-time job should keep people out of poverty, not keep people in it. People who are able and willing to work full-time should not be poor. People unable to work should be supported and treated with dignity.
2. Affirm that a living family income should include a combination of family earnings and supports for transportation, health care, nutrition, child care, education, housing, and other basic needs to provide a decent standard of living.

D. Improve Education

1. Family, community, and schools must share responsibility for strengthening education.
2. All children have the right to a physically and emotionally safe school environment.
3. School funding must result in equitable education for all.
4. Because everyone is created in the image of God, the inequities and segregation in public education which result from economic and racial injustice must be corrected.
5. It is important to assure access to Early Childhood Education for all children in poverty.

Concrete Ideas for Church and Society

While Christian Churches Together does not endorse or promote specific public policies, we encourage church and societal leaders to consider these specific ideas to reduce poverty:

A. Strengthen Families

1. Strengthened national child-nutrition programs, with funding to meet the growing need.
2. Universal access to health care, especially for children in poverty.
3. Assistance to families at risk of losing housing due to the mortgage crisis, including protections for tenants.
4. Comprehensive immigration reform that protects the dignity and unity of immigrant families.
5. Subsidies that provide access to resources for strengthening families, such as premarital and marital counseling, parenting skills, mental health care, conflict resolution, financial management skills, and other services to prevent family crises and restore healthy family relationships.

B. Strengthen Communities

1. Investment in low-income communities and families should be a part of the economic recovery package (more resources for job creation, food stamps, a fully refundable child tax credit, and education for everyone from pre-kindergarten to adults).
2. People who are poor should be a part of the decision-making process of the recovery proposals.

C. Make Work *Work*

1. In order to protect and uplift vulnerable families, there must be the right mix of the following: an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit; a just minimum wage; expanded coverage of food stamps, increased unemployment insurance; and other proven investments that reward work.

D. Improve Education

1. Mentoring programs to students in pre-school through grade 12 should be provided using the trained voluntary efforts of college students, church members and others.
2. Research should be undertaken to identify safe school models that can be observed as part of a comprehensive program to assure safety for students and staff in all publicly funded schools.
3. Present state/local formulas that depend too much on local property taxes for school funding must be corrected.
4. Funding and/or provision for Early Childhood Education should be a joint effort among government agencies, religious organizations, community groups, and private contributors.

We gratefully affirm the important work of the vast number of organizations related to our churches that work daily to overcome poverty, and we especially call attention to Sojourners' Mobilization to End Poverty (April 27-29, 2009) and Bread for the World's national gathering (June 14-16, 2009).

It is the voice of our Lord whom we hear calling in the cries of the poor that compels us to seek to end poverty here and everywhere. It is the voice of the prophets declaring that God rejects the prayer and worship of those who neglect God's summons to do justice that drives us to call ourselves, all Christians, and all citizens to let justice roll down like waters. Therefore, with prayer for strength and wisdom, we resolve anew to place our work of compassion and justice at the center of our Christian life and witness.