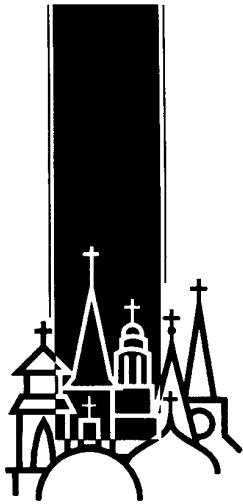


THE RHODE ISLAND STATE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Statement on Poverty
Adopted Winter, 2011



Poverty as a Problem

Systems and Structures

Poverty, as it occurs in the secular world, is an affront to God and humanity. The poverty that is seen on city streets and in rural houses, in soup kitchens and outside of restaurants is sin as a result of the brokenness of humanity. The systemic poverty in our culture, i.e. lack of livable wages, poor economic conditions, and exorbitant demands for housing, food, and medicine is what we, as Christians, speak out against. It is sin of culture when the poor are expected to be a necessary part of the culture. We find in many of the claims of Liberation theologians the idea that our economic culture is one that favors those with means and neglects those without; it is one that creates situations of dependence and exploitation (see Boff, *Liberating Grace*). The American Baptist Churches have observed that the current system will not allow people to thrive, thus continuing the plight of the poor (American Baptist, 1986).

It is important that we are clear that we are not claiming those who are poor are an affront to God and humanity. The United Methodist Church has stated that “poverty most often has systemic causes, and therefore we do not hold poor people morally responsible for their economic state” (UMC, 2008). It is not our place to further condemn those who are already oppressed with economic demands.

While the sin of poverty in the secular world is systematic it is also caused by individual and institutional selfishness. Greed and a perceived value of money drives some to accumulate wealth at the expense of others. Those who believe that they must have more and more live with a sense of hopelessness no matter how much they accumulate. When there are plenty of resources in this nation it is greed that gets in the way of a just distribution of means to meet the basic needs, creating a myth of scarcity so that the least of God’s children can receive sustenance to live. If we were to look at the government budget of Rhode Island, the budgets of individual churches, and the budgets of individuals we would see this fear and lack of faith in God reflected in the allocation of funds.

Human Reality of Poverty

While this statement is focused on poverty as it exists in America and specifically Rhode Island, we are very aware that the poverty we speak of reaches all around the world and does not spare any country or culture.

The chains of poverty are most greatly felt by those who do not have the freedom to leave their plight due to a lack of income, a constant increase of expenses, poor health, or many other reasons. When we speak of poverty we are not just speaking of systems and structures, nor are we looking only at greed and a love of money that creates a certain class of people. When we speak of poverty we are speaking of those individuals who struggle and suffer under the weight not having enough. We are thinking of those 40,000 children in Rhode Island who struggle every day in poverty (2007 American Community Survey). We are thinking of those thousand of families who are hurting and cannot find any way out. Poverty is an affront to humanity because it is humanity that suffers. From the Roman Catholic tradition we hear the challenged that, “some remedy must be found for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily on the majority of the poor...” (Rerum Novarum).

The human reality of poverty must be realized and embraced, as difficult as that may be; “Our faith in Christ... compels us to confront the ignorance and indifference to the scandal of widespread, persistent poverty in this rich nation.” (Christian Churches Together)

Scriptural Responses to Secular Poverty

It is an unfortunate truth that secular poverty is not new to humanity. The poor have been present within humanity for thousands of years. The Old Testament speaks of a sense of righteousness (*tzedek*) and justice (*mishpat*) that must be afforded to all people. We are reminded in Deuteronomy 10:18 that God gave justice for the orphan and widows. We are reminded that righteousness is a right of the poor (Ps. 140:12) Deuteronomy 15:11 leads us to be constantly aware of the presence of the poor. “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’”

In the New Testament we find numerous scriptures calling people to be aware of the poor. In Luke 4:18 we hear Christ proclaiming that he has come to preach good news to the poor. Christ calls a rich man to sell what he has and give to the poor (Matthew 19:21). We note that our Lord, Christ, more than once addressed the systematic inequalities that continued to oppress the poor. The system of taxation that Christ addressed through Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), as well as the payment of taxes (Matthew 17:24-27) can both be seen as direct critiques of the continuation of poverty.

In both Testaments we find scriptural precedent calling us to be aware of the suffering of the poor and to respond with charity, justice, and love.

The Relationality of God

As Christians we affirm the Trinity, the relational nature of God. Through the Trinity we are aware of the way in which God is in perfect relationship with God’s self and calls us to emulate such relationships with others and with God. The very nature of God, God’s compassion for the suffering awakens our hearts to the suffering of our brothers and sisters. We are “...to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ” (Episcopal Statement, 2009)

Often Christians are criticized as only looking inward, avoiding the sufferings of the world. Yet we are reminded that “The joys and hopes ...of the men of the age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted...are the joys and hopes... of the followers of Christ,” (GS, 1965). “Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good,” (Charitas in Veritate, 2009). There is a rich history in Christianity of church communities being a place where people from all socio-economic areas of life can mix and be affirmed as children of God. That potential still exists in the church of Jesus Christ. By being in relationship with all people we thus reflect and respond to the nature of God and claim the relational potential of the church.

The idea of God’s preference for the poor rings in our hearts; that God goes out to those who are suffering. Such love and compassion from our Lord leads us in our awareness and our own actions. From the Orthodox community we are reminded that the “Church always comes out in defense of the voiceless and the powerless,” (Orthodox Christian Statement). Because of who God is, because of what God does we are also led to serve, help, and love those who are burdened with the yoke of poverty in our state, country, and world.

Responding to Poverty

The Redemptive Value of Poverty

We must stress that just as the poor in our society are not the sinners, nor is poverty in itself a sinful state. There are many examples in our varieties of Christian traditions where a deliberate embrace of a life of poverty leads to blessings and for some a closer walk with God. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” (Luke 12:34). In the Quaker tradition we are reminded of the value of simplicity in living; freeing oneself from the desires to accumulate material possessions and desires. Many orders in the Roman Catholic tradition willingly choose the path of poverty so that they may be freed from the demands and concerns of material accumulation and possession. For some, choosing a life of simple poverty is a calling, a vocation enriching one’s spirituality.

We want to stress that what is important is that one is free to choose and has the ability to choose a life of simplicity. Those who are prisoners of systematic poverty are those who we reach out to. For those who do not feel called to embrace a life of simplicity and a calling of poverty we implore all Christians to consider the fear and lack of faith that drives our desire to accumulate wealth. The love of money separates us in one way or another from God, “Being wealthy is more dangerous than being poor,” (Orthodox Christian Statement). Virtue is not achieved by dishing out large sums of money, our Lord reminded us with the example of the Widow’s Mite (Matthews 12:42,43), but by making choices informed and led by the movement of the Holy Spirit. Again, we implore all people in Rhode Island and beyond to look at the State budget and ask what priorities are embraced based on that budget. With each decision that is made, the question should be asked, “how will this effect the poor?” Look at a budget of a parish or church community and discern what the priorities of that community may be. Finally, look at your own spending patterns and budget and pray for the guidance of God.

The Call to the Churches

We have a Gospel that demands a response to the secular poverty in our state. We are called to become involved in the problem of poverty and to actively be a part of hope, redemption, and if God is willing, the salvation of those in despair. Some Christians remind us that we are actively expecting a time of God’s Kingdom here on earth, among us (Revelation 21), and that unless we work to offer a piece of that Kingdom, led by the Holy Spirit, we are disingenuous in our passive waiting. How can we preach to people that the Kingdom is coming when we do nothing to assuage the pains in their stomachs? Caritas in Veritate reminds us that “charity demands justice and goes beyond it.”

Yet we recognize that for many Christians it is not a simple thing to become involved in what is a secular wound of the world. When Christians become involved in the world and work within the systems and structures of the world they are participating in what is a broken system and will be culpable of sin in one way or another. Even as we are called to be a light to the world, we are also called to stand against the world, showing the City of humanity what the city of God is be. When we participate in the world, we participate in brokenness.

The dichotomy of participation and all of the considerations in-between is due to the richness of the diversity of Christianity. What that in mind we suggest that traditions, churches, and Christian communities may be called to respond to the problem of secular poverty in different ways. As St. Paul reminds us, we are all given different gifts but from the one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). We humbly suggest the following charisms that different communities may embrace knowing that very likely there are many more: (note: these gifts are taken from Avery Dullis’ *Models of the Church*)

The Institution – Through soup kitchens, shelters, and other formalized forms of help the Christian community provides systems and structures to aid and help the poor.

Mystical Communion – As Christians many are aware of the way in which the mystical communion of God’s saints is incarnated in gathering. Such a communion reaches out to all of God’s children reminding them of their worth and value as a child of God. “Poor can be saved without the rich, but the rich cannot be saved without the poor” (Orthodox Statement).

Sacrament – Through the grace of God the Church can be the real presence of Christ to the poor in Rhode Island. Such a presence calls communities to prayer and a witness that meets the temptations of wealth and greed with asceticism, prayer, and almsgiving.

Herald – As speakers of truth to the powers and principalities, some churches feel the call to share the Gospel with systems and structures of the world. It is important to call institutions, governments, and individuals to accountability. Churches should support policies and “develop... other ministries that promote asset-building among the poor,” (UM, 2008).

Servant – Churches are called to strengthen families and individuals (Christians Churches Together). These churches feed the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison and serve the least of society.

It is important that we recognize no one parish or community can embrace all of these charisms in totality. But the whole, one church of Christ can. Different church communities have different gifts but every gift can be used for the sake and the help of the poor. We call all church communities to pray and discern the gifts and charisms that it may have in service and helping the poor.

There are poor in this world who suffer because they are not free. They are oppressed with economic injustice, with hunger, and with despair. In Rhode Island it is a very real concern. We call all Christians to unite in praying for, reaching out to, and serving those who suffer from secular poverty. In doing so we proclaim with our Lord, that the Kingdom of God is indeed here for all people rich or poor.