



The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church

OUR SHARED DREAM: THE BELOVED COMMUNITY

The Initiative on Children and Poverty has been the commitment of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church since 1996. This is the longest period for any Episcopal Initiative. This commitment represents the bishops' sense of the call and nature of God; the depth of the bishops' concern for children and the impoverished; the new directions resulting from deepening global relationships; and the bishops' belief that the church is to be where God is. The church, therefore, must be in community with children and the poor—as Jesus said, “the least of these.”¹

We on the Council of Bishops challenge United Methodist people worldwide to join in embracing the vision of the “Beloved Community.”²

Introduction

We have been engaged in learning, teaching, and leading on behalf of children and the impoverished. The word to followers of Jesus at Ephesus has been the challenge: “Be imitators of God... live in love, as Christ loved us.”³

In 1996, we said: “The state of the world’s children challenges The United Methodist Church to evaluate its basic theological grounding, its Wesleyan heritage, and its mission... Receiving the gifts of the children and the impoverished... is a means by which God restores and brings life... What is needed is a renewed vision of God’s reign of justice, generosity, and joy for all people. Being empowered by that vision is the challenge and

opportunity before The United Methodist Church and the world.”⁴

In 2001, we renewed our concern and called “every United Methodist congregation and person to a deepened level of reflection and action toward life together with the poor.” We declared: “All aspects of the life of the church need to come under review. We must examine everything in the light of Christ’s new community... We are convinced that the reshaping of the church and the proclamation of the gospel cannot take place apart from a newly developed sense of community...with the... impoverished and the most vulnerable.”⁵

This third Foundation Statement on the Episcopal Initiative is a continuing expression of our responsibility as bishops to be teachers,

preachers, and prophetic leaders as the Spirit guides.

We believe that a vision of the church and of all people as the Beloved Community offers a strong theological framework for the advancement of the Initiative on Children and Poverty and its primary goal: “the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among ‘the least of these.’”⁶

We desire to be an expression of the Beloved Community in our life together, “a sign of hope...that division, destitution, despair and death [are] being overcome”⁷ by the love of God shown in deeds of Jesus-like living.

We recognize that much remains to be done to clarify the relationship between sound doctrine and a commitment to community with the vulnerable and the violated. We are holding before ourselves, and the whole church, a compelling vision of community with children and the poor. The intention is to articulate the vision and to influence priorities through the prophetic and teaching leadership entrusted to us as bishops of the church.

The Vision

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating. (Isaiah 65:17-18a)

The vision of the Beloved Community is set forth in Isaiah 65. In the Beloved Community, God is actively creating something new. The inhabitants of the Beloved Community are at home, where they have access to that which sustains life, where they are deeply known and where they deeply know others. Those who live in the Beloved Community form a web of relationships with one another, with God, and with the whole of creation that enables peace and justice to reign.

In the Beloved Community, young and old, and all in between, know themselves to be formed and empowered to love others by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Their thoughts and actions are one in knowing self-interest is satisfied only when all people are valued and all have enough to live. In the Beloved Community, all participate in work that is significant and meaningful, work that builds up the community. In the Beloved Community, differences are not just tolerated but create a dynamic interaction between the poor and the affluent, the young and the old, the artist and the scientist, the farmer and the manufacturer, the wolf and the lamb.

The Beloved Community is what the prophets longed for and what we believe is the yearning of the whole of The United Methodist family worldwide. We are convinced that it is God’s intention that societies be organized in such ways that the resources of everyone are understood as gifts from God for the building up of the entire community.

The Beloved Community is to be a visible sign of the body of Christ in the world. It is a community that expresses God’s intention that all people be one at heart and experience reconciliation. It is an inclusive human family. It is the cause for which Christ lived and died. The Beloved Community occurs when the church locates itself in places of greatest need and offers the gifts of God entrusted to it, including the distribution of resources so that all have enough. It is what the church looks like when people are reconciled to God and to one another across lines of race, class, nationality, status, culture, age, and gender. The Beloved Community represents the possibility of a truly inclusive human family that embraces everyone but holds in especially high regard the lives and gifts of the most vulnerable: children and the poor.

The Beloved Community: Where Love and Justice Rule

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and 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)

I give you a new commandment, that you
love one another. Just as I have loved
you, you also should love one another. By
this everyone will know that you are my
disciples, if you have love for one
another.
(John 13:34-35)

Christ comes to us as one of the poor. His mission and ministry were among the impoverished and the excluded. He instructed his followers that what they did for those who were imprisoned, hungry, and destitute was done to and for him. True worship of Christ as Lord and Savior must always take account of specific features of his incarnation revealed in the gospels: as a baby, as a peasant, as a worker, as one who welcomed children and lived among ordinary people.

The plight of children and the poor is inextricably tied to economics, politics, globalization, war, family breakdown, the AIDS epidemic, and other harsh realities. Yet, these alone do not adequately explain the conditions of children and the poor worldwide. Only a theological understanding of the nature of sin and of violence, materialism, and radical individualism can explain injustice and indifference to the suffering of others. Poverty drains hope from the future and leaves the people in a state of meaninglessness.

The roots of poverty, and of the abuse and abandonment of children, lie in a society in which people live in fear. Where there is greed and hate, there is also the fear of death and of the insufficiency of nature to nurture life. The love of God casts out fear. Faith in Jesus Christ grants abundant life. When fear is vanquished by faith, love and justice rule.

For these reasons, we reaffirm the importance of the Initiative's goal: "evangelization: the proclamation in word and deed of the gospel of God's redeeming, reconciling, and transforming grace in Jesus Christ to and with the children and those oppressed by poverty."⁸

The Beloved Community becomes reality when love of God and faith in Christ are expressed in selfless love for all the peoples of the world. This requires a complete turning away from easy religiosity. Too often the name of God is invoked to bless power, prestige, and privilege. The God of the Exodus, who hears the cry of the violated people of the earth, is forgotten. The gods of nationalism and imperial power are sometimes honored instead of the One who hears the cry of the impoverished and the marginalized. What is required in order to reshape the church into the Beloved Community is obedience to Jesus' one command to his disciples: "Love one another."⁹ In practical terms, this means "equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed."¹⁰ John Wesley said that whatever is given to the poor should be counted as "so much given to God."¹¹

The Beloved Community: Where Everyone's Worth Is Affirmed

You shall love the Lord your God with all
your heart, and with all your soul, and
with all your strength, and with all your
mind; and your neighbor as yourself.
(Luke 10:27)

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters,
Has not God chosen the poor in the world
to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the
kingdom that he has promised to those
who love him? But you have dishonored
the poor.
(James 2:5-6)

The Spirit of God makes the Beloved Community possible. The Spirit frees the church of its love of position and possession, transforming it

into a community of openness and welcome. God's spirit of love and hospitality calls us out of merely interior spirituality and into the koinonia of inclusion and sharing.

Every human being is created in God's image. Yet, by the miracle of creation, each is also absolutely unique. Being imbued with God's spirit entitles each to the love, the freedom, and the justice that enable the pursuit of life in all its wholeness.

The Beloved Community is a dramatic sign of the presence in the world of the spirit of Jesus Christ, in which the walls of separation are broken down so that all—Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, slave and free, rich and poor, those near and those far away—may be one. In practice, this means that we “do not argue that the color of [one's] skin determines the content of [one's] character,”¹² or that any other difference is fundamental enough to separate us within the Beloved Community.

Through the Initiative, we continue to seek to become a more inclusive church through which dividing walls of race and gender, culture and class are dissolved.

The Beloved Community: Where Diversity Enriches All Lives Through Common Memories and a Shared Future

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.
(1 Corinthians 12:14-16)

The Beloved Community is a sign of the coming of God's reign. Members are bound by a common human memory and a shared story of the good news of Jesus Christ. Shaped by water and

the Spirit, this community looks with joyful anticipation toward a future characterized by justice and generosity, in which God will wipe away all tears and absorb all suffering into God's own self.

The Beloved Community reaches beyond those who confess Jesus as Savior to the entire world, loving and serving and standing with all God's children. In practical terms, this means that “our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone, but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity.”¹³

The Beloved Community: Where Stories Inspire Hope

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.
(Psalm 85:10-12)

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.
(Ephesians 2:19)

The Beloved Community inspires hope for renewal and regeneration as God's spirit summons all to grow in grace and empowers all to become witnesses to the Spirit of life and liveliness for all who struggle and are oppressed. The great gift of love is being understood and accepted by others.

The stories of “the least of these” are sacred testimonies that give voice to the experiences of community. All people's stories and our common Story, told in the context of God's love and the hope that is in Christ, move the human family toward a future of love and justice. In practice, this means that “[everyone] will come to respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and [humankind] will dare to live together as [sisters and] brothers.”¹⁴

The Beloved Community: Where All Are Loved Unconditionally and Forever

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

(1 John 4:7)

At the heart of the Beloved Community is the deeply held belief that love prevails. Each member is formed and given ability to love others by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Such love uproots self-interest and self-protection, transforming them into sacrificial love that puts the needs of others above one's own. Such love does not reject but embraces, does not exclude but welcomes, does not condemn but affirms the other. Such love respects the dignity and worth of all and dares to live in such a way as to demonstrate that every human being is one's own sister or brother. In the Beloved Community, human love is a reflection of God's love, which endures forever.

Longings, Learnings, and Discoveries

As disciples of Jesus Christ and as bishops of the church, we long for the Beloved Community. It is the gift of God. The Beloved Community is a guiding vision calling the church to a dramatically new and vital life together. The Beloved Community can create the motivating force to address the church's reluctance to reach beyond the limits of established ways.

We have learned the difficulty of grasping the urgency of Jesus' commitment to "the least of these." For that reason, we reaffirm the commitment we first made in 2001 to seek "to engage the church in biblical and theological reflection for the purpose of articulating its mission for this new millennium and for reshaping the church in the

image of Christ."¹⁵ To aid this goal, as teachers of the church, we, the Council, published *Community With Children and the Poor: A Guide for Congregational Study*.¹⁶

We have learned that much remains to be done in facilitating greater clarity in the church about the day-to-day decisions that must be made by every disciple in order to create community with the vulnerable and the violated. We have been aided by spending extensive time in Council seminars on such subjects as HIV/AIDS and with community agencies engaged in education and public policy advocacy, as well as direct service to people in need.

We have learned that we must be intentional and constant in fulfilling our responsibilities as teachers of the church. It has become clear that the foundational changes required in reshaping the church compel us to approach both teaching and preaching responsibilities as lifelong endeavors not subject to episodic calls and quadrennial emphases.

We have learned and relearned that Christian doctrine is not only a set of beliefs but also that which names specific commitments that form the ways we are to see and engage the world. Bishops among us from Africa and Asia have made extraordinary contributions to the Council's understanding that support is much more than financial and should always be characterized by mutuality. We have been aided by challenging engagement with mission partners in Latin America and the Caribbean.

We have discovered that there is within the church a strong desire to be led by example into community with children and the poor. Our relationships developed in response to personal covenants have been dramatic means of seeing the vision of a church reborn. We are grateful for the energies and commitments of partners who have given concrete mission expressions to our teaching in the Initiative.

We have discovered that the church needs to broaden its understanding of its local mission. Too many congregations and individual Christians are content to be involved in direct service ministries to the impoverished without the faith sharing and congregational inclusion that is essential to Christian community.

We have discovered that statements made in our 1996 and 2001 Foundation papers¹⁷ have intensified in importance. For example, the following statements are more true now:

- “Children are victims of many poverties.”
- “Spiritual poverty is more difficult to measure, but its devastating effects on the affluent and the impoverished are evident.”
- “What is happening to the world’s children represents a sinful devaluing of God’s gracious gift of life and a thwarting of God’s justice for all humanity.”
- “[Jesus] clearly calls for caring for all children as our children.”
- “We are convinced that the reshaping of the church and the proclamation of the gospel cannot take place apart from a newly developed sense of community.... God has chosen the poor, the vulnerable, and the powerless as means of grace and transformation.”
- “Partnerships merit nurturing and expansion, such as those encouraged by the Bishops’ Appeal: Hope for the Children of Africa, and sharing across national and cultural boundaries.”
- “[We] enter into cooperative efforts with grass-roots movements and organizations who can guide us into community with the poor and strengthen advocacy for justice and compassion in public policy matters and international monetary and trade policies.”

Continuing Crisis/Continuing Commitment

In the lives of children and the impoverished and in the nature of the concerns in the church and world, the crisis continues as when we first spoke. We affirm the statement of the president of our Council, that “people around the world are searching with a new desperation for a sign of hope that acknowledges our differences, transcends them, and allows the human family to live together in both diversity and in peace. People are yearning for a sign of people with great difference among them living in love and peace.”¹⁸

As commitment to the goals of the Episcopal Initiative has grown in the church, it has become increasingly evident that the Council, with the whole church, has fallen short of the four goals.¹⁹ Continued and concerted focus must be given in order to transform the church in relation to the welfare of the widows, the orphans, the lepers, and the sojourners of our time. In this way, we become more faithful to the biblical mandate. Bible study, exploration of our Wesleyan heritage, research data about the state of The United Methodist Church on all continents, and calls for continuance of the Initiative indicate that ministry with children, their families and their communities, and, indeed, with all people who live with poverty remains a compelling mission of the church.

Our first stated goal remains essential: “the reshaping of The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among ‘the least of these.’”²⁰ With this goal in our mind, we urge all to join with us as we

- Dream, pray, and work for the day when the church is a more inclusive fellowship in which dividing walls of race and gender, culture and class are broken down, and the life we have together points toward the accomplishment of the divine purpose of the Beloved Community.

- Dream, pray, and work for the day when church and world overcome the competitiveness that dominates relationships.
- Dream, pray, and work for the day when the ability to give with boundless generosity replaces the drive to collect, possess, own, and withhold.
- Dream, pray, and work for the day when our relations across the globe will be characterized not by charity, dependence, and paternalism but by partnership and solidarity.
- Dream, pray, and work for the day when we are free from pride of self, group, tribe, and nation and thus more completely reflect the image of the selfless, self-giving God who is within us and among us.
- Dream, pray, and work for the day when every church conference asks: “How are we living for the impoverished? How are our individual vocations lived for the poor and contributing to the growth of the Beloved Community?”
- Dream, pray, and work for the day when every human community on earth is a place committed to preventing violence and offering healing to its victims.
- Dream, pray, and work for the day when all things have become new in Christ Jesus, all in each place are one and the Beloved Community is our reality.

We live in the tension between God’s call and distressing realities. The vision of the Beloved Community, to which we are drawn, compels and enables us to act now as if it were fully present.

Blessing

Drawn by the vision of the Beloved Community, we continue our life in faith with one another and with all in the church. We invite and challenge the fellowship of believers to join us in praying and living toward the blessing of life with God and one another in the Beloved Community. We seek partnership with all the “people called Methodist”²¹ in

the journey that leads to growing relationships with children and the poor. We pledge ourselves to continue to hold this vision, the dreams it has birthed in us, the goals here reaffirmed as lifelong, and the hope the Holy Spirit cultivates in our hearts.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.²²

The Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church

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- Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Rader, Secretary

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Notes

- 1 Matthew 25:40.
- 2 The phrase “Beloved Community” is often ascribed to Martin Luther King, Jr. Theories about its earlier source are varied. James J. Evans, Jr., in the article “Eschatology, White Supremacy, and the Beloved Community,” in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, edited by Rebecca Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, suggests that Jonathan Edwards was responsible for the concept’s cultural consciousness in the United States. Josiah Royce used the phrase in his later writings about the church as the body of Christ, principally in *The Problem of Christianity*, which was originally published by The Macmillan Company in 1913. John M. Cartwright, in the article “Martin Luther King and the Beloved Community,” in *Fellowship*, magazine of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, December 1980, suggests that the clue to understanding King’s conception of the Beloved Community is the influence upon him of Walter Rauschenbusch’s interpretation of the kingdom of God and its relationship to the ideal of an inclusive human community.
- 3 Ephesians 5:1.
- 4 *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative—Biblical and Theological Foundations*. © 1996 by the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church.
- 5 *Community With Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative*. © 2001 by the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church.
- 6 *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative*.
- 7 *Hope for the Children of Africa: Relief, Reconciliation, and Rebuilding—Biblical and Theological Foundations*. © 1998 by the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church.
- 8 *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative*.
- 9 John 13:34.
- 10 “The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness,” address delivered by The Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., to the Golden Anniversary Conference of the National Urban League, New York, NY, on September 6, 1960. Printed in the *YWCA Magazine*, #54, December, 1960, pages 4–6.
- 11 Sermon 28, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” by John Wesley.
- 12 “The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness.”
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 *Community With Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative*.
- 16 *Community With Children and the Poor: A Guide for Congregational Study* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 2003) is available from Cokesbury (800-672-1789).
- 17 *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative and Community With Children and the Poor: Renewing the Episcopal Initiative*.
- 18 Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher, presidential address to the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church on April 28, 2003, in Dallas, Texas, USA.
- 19 (1) To reshape The United Methodist Church in response to the God who is among “the least of these” and the evaluation of everything the church is and does in the light of the impact on children and the impoverished. (2) To provide resources for understanding the crisis among children and the impoverished and enabling the church to respond. (3) To engage in evangelization: the proclamation in word and deed of the gospel of God’s redeeming, reconciling, and transforming grace in Jesus Christ to and with children and those oppressed by poverty. (4) To engage the church in biblical and theological reflection for the purpose of articulating its mission for this new millennium and for reshaping the church in the image of Christ.
- 20 *Children and Poverty: An Episcopal Initiative*.
- 21 “Advice to a People Called Methodist,” by John Wesley.
- 22 Apostolic Blessing from “A Service of Word and Table,” in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. Copyright © 1972, 1980, 1985, 1989 by The United Methodist Publishing House.

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