

Caring for the Poor

2000 Annual Conference Statement

- Whereas:** The 1996 Welfare Law is instituting dramatic changes and reductions in the social safety net for the poor; and
- Whereas:** many in our country say that the poor need to assume more responsibility for their financial well-being; and
- Whereas:** many in our country are saying that churches, not the government, should pick up the responsibility for the poor; and
- Whereas:** the scriptures, including such passages as Deuteronomy 15:7-11 and Matthew 25:31-46, do mandate that people of faith respond generously to the needs of the poor; and
- Whereas:** Barbara Howell of Bread for the World has estimated that the 350,000 churches in the United States would each have to contribute \$150,000 a year to make up for the government cuts for the care of the poor; and
- Whereas:** the Church of the Brethren has urban and other congregations serving in poor communities and these congregations carry a disproportionately high share of the responsibility in the denomination of caring for the poor, often with woefully inadequate resources;

Therefore, we the members and friends of the First Church of the Brethren, Harrisburg, Pa., gathered in church council on April 22, 1997, ask Annual Conference through the Atlantic Northeast District for prayerful guidance, regarding the following:

1. What role should we be calling the government to play in alleviating poverty in our country?
2. What responsibilities should the church be assuming in regard to the care of the poor, especially in light of the new political climate of our time?
3. What responsibility should the denomination and districts assume in supporting the ministries of our urban and other congregations serving in poor communities?
4. And to what extent should ending poverty be seen as the responsibility of the poor individual and to what extent is it a corporate responsibility?

Approved by the First (Harrisburg, Pa.) Church of the Brethren congregation at their council meeting on April 22, 1997.

Wayne Eberly, Moderator
Bridget Albin, Clerk

Action of the Atlantic Northeast District Board: The Atlantic Northeast District Board, meeting on May 31, 1997, passed the query on to the Atlantic Northeast District Conference, to be held on October 11, 1997.

Robert Hess, Board Chair
Bonnie Hutchinson, Clerk

Action of the Atlantic Northeast District Conference: Passed the query on to Annual Conference, Church of the Brethren, by the Atlantic Northeast District Conference, meeting on October 11, 1997 at Elizabethtown, Pa.

Nancy W Wile, Moderator
Bonnie E Hutchinson, Clerk

Action of the 1998 Annual Conference: Steve Mason, a Standing Committee member from the Shenandoah District, presented the recommendation from Standing Committee that the query be accepted, that a three person study committee be elected, and that the committee report back to the 1999 Annual Conference. *The delegate body adopted the recommendation of Standing Committee.* Forrest Collier, Orlando Redekopp, and Roberta Rinker were later elected to serve on the study committee.

1999 Progress Report

The Caring for the Poor study committee, appointed at the 1998 Orlando Annual Conference, has met once and requests an extension until the Annual Conference 2000 to complete its work.

We met to look at the query as approved by Annual Conference, to develop some biblical and theological mandates for this concern, and then agreed that the best way to respond to it was to begin with the gathering of some information: firstly, we sent out a survey to the districts to ask them about the extent of their congregations' responses to the needs of the poor; secondly, we sent another survey to urban and ethnic churches, (i) to understand the impact of denominational restructuring on congregations composed of and serving many poor people, (ii) to discover what these churches are doing now that restructuring is a reality, an (iii) to understand how these churches are dealing With welfare reform.

Our initial discussions reminded us that there are at present no programmatic or moral supports for congregations deeply engaged with the poor. Therefore, we will have a "listening post" at the Milwaukee Annual Conference as an opportunity to share what we have gathered so far. The surveys also have not been returned in time for us to suggest or formulate creative strategies towards caring for the poor, either at local or denominational levels.

Therefore, we request an extension until the 2000 Annual Conference.

Orlando Redekopp, chair
Forrest Collier
Roberta Rinker

Action of the 1999 Annual Conference: The progress report was presented by Orlando Redekopp, chair of the committee. *The delegate body voted to receive the progress report.*

Report of the Committee

Introduction

The committee has carefully explored the issues presented in the query from the Atlantic Northeast District. We have considered various ways to respond to the concerns of the query. We have surveyed the district offices to get a grass roots response, identifying current practices and establishing areas of concern as congregations and districts become more actively engaged with the poor. An additional survey conducted among urban/ethnic congregations produced valuable information from their unique perspective. Also, our Study Committee Listening Session at the 1999 Annual Conference provided insights that guided the committee in its response to the query.

After reviewing the data received and after much deliberation, it became clear to the committee that its report must be a report of encouragement and challenge to the congregations of the Church of the Brethren. There is abundant literature addressing the causes and resolution of poverty. Biblical studies and curricula inspire a Christian response to the problems of poverty. There are massive amounts of statistical data and program reports. We have listed some of the more useful resources in the bibliography. However, the committee strongly feels that the essence of "caring for the poor" is in the doing, not the study; hence our call to action. In this, the Year of jubilee, we are called to practice jubilee at home.

Discussion

The strategy of the committee, "the purpose of the report," is to call our congregations to the first or next steps in extending themselves in engagement with the poor. It is our observation that assessment of causation has limited usefulness, while openness to personal and congregational involvement is essential.

Survey of District Executives

The findings from the district survey include stories and examples of congregational initiatives in response to specific needs. Disaster relief, construction, and material aid were mentioned most frequently. There were few district-level initiatives described. There was no indication of any advocacy-type response to governmental policy or legislation affecting the poor. The surveys also supported a strong request for creative models of engaging ministries with the poor and for suggestions of resources for church groups to use as they develop their own ministries. We recognize that there is no single formula or program that can be implemented to successfully address the needs of the poor. Our call for personal engagement reflects our belief that each congregation's sense of mission will develop and emerge through the programs they operate.

We have responded to these findings and requests in our recommendations. Our recommendations propose some specific actions and suggest a mechanism to gather and maintain a magazine of activities and resources for use by congregations as they develop their unique

form of ministry. In some congregations, this may be a supportive ministry from afar. Other congregations will find a direct, hands-on ministry near home to be their next step.

Survey of Urban/Ethnic Congregations

The urban and ethnic survey reveals that these congregations have few external - denominational, governmental and private - resources. The resources are also quite disparate: one or two congregations have substantial ministries, but most feel overwhelmed.

Most of these congregations are situated in impoverished communities; poverty is therefore not an "out-there" problem, but an "everywhere" problem. Despite these minimal resources, many congregations struggle as best they can to respond, often through informal ministries supported by the local church.

Recommendations

1. In the firm belief that experience helps beget mission, we recommend that each congregation develop at least one direct, hands-on ministry with the poor or develop one new activity that will undergird the congregation's commitment in ministry with the poor.
2. We recommend that congregational study experiences be used to discover and explore our faith basis for ministry with the poor. Bible studies and our denominational heritage provide strong motivation for an active, caring ministry with the poor. The bibliography includes a variety of study options.
3. We recommend that congregations use their experience in ministry with the poor to inform themselves of the legislative and political issues having impact on the poor and speak to those issues with their legislators at local, state, and national levels.

The Biblical witness and our own experiences as a community of faith suggest that there is a corporate or societal responsibility to deal with the problems of the poor, such as the Year of Jubilee. This extends beyond personal, hands-on responses and includes advocacy on behalf of the poor.

4. Congregations are encouraged to partner with urban/ethnic congregations of the Church of the Brethren in shared ministries, including fellowship, finances, and joint programs. Congregations may also find meaningful relationships with congregations of other denominations strategically placed in their own communities that will create strengthened shared ministries with the poor. These partnerships may be especially helpful as congregations begin their ministries with the poor.
5. Congregations are encouraged to contact their local social service agency office. What gaps in service or absence of resources do they see as persons prepare to enter the workforce? Can they link the congregation with organizations they can partner with in specific ministries with the poor?
6. The committee recommends that each District Conference annually include at least one insight-sharing session in which congregations can share their experiences in ministry with the poor. This forum would provide opportunity to share examples, concerns, resources, and encouragement and truly build up the body of Christ.

7. We recommend that three to five slots be reserved annually in the Ministry Summer Service Program for participants to serve in urban/ethnic congregations and that adequate financial resources be appropriated to accomplish this. These opportunities would increase the awareness of the problems of the poor in individuals considering a career calling in ministry. Such firsthand knowledge is essential as we develop our ministries with the poor,
8. We recommend the development of anti-racism training on a regular basis for boards and field staff reportable to Annual Conference. This training could then become a part of each new employee's standard orientation. This recommendation recognizes racism as one enduring structural factor related to poverty in the United States and seeks a method to increase staff capacity to respond. Other areas of concern might also be highlighted, e.g., rural isolation and poverty.
9. We recommend that the Cross Cultural Ministries Team be authorized to provide counsel and advice to our district executives and congregational life team leaders as these goals are implemented over the next five years and to prepare a progress report to be presented to the 2005 Annual Conference.
10. Congregations need support as they begin or expand their ministry with the poor. We recommend that the Church of the Brethren develop a "Magazine" of resources, one that includes examples of what has worked well for different congregations, descriptions of programs and activities, and sources for congregational exploration as churches develop ministries with the poor. We recommend that this responsibility be assigned to the Congregational Life Team program and that support be provided that will enable this resource to be updated routinely and be reflective of ministries appropriate to all congregational sizes and settings. This resource might become a routine part of the "in our midst - congregational resources."

Bibliography

Books

- Beckmann, David and Simon, Arthur. *Grace at the Table: Ending Hunger in God's World*. Paulist Press.
- Caes, David. *Caring for the Least of These. Serving Christ Among the Poor*. Herald Press.
- Johnson, Jan. *Cups of Cold Water*. David C. Cook Publishing.
- Kinder, Gloria, and Ross Kinsler. *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*. Orbis Books.
- Kroloff, Charles A. *54 Ways You Can Help the Homeless*. Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Ronsvalle, John and Ronsvalle, Sylvia. *The Poor Have Faces: Loving Your Neighbor in the 21st Century*, Baker Book House.
- Schlabach, Gerald W. *And Who Is My Neighbor? Poverty, Privilege, and the Gospel of Christ*. Herald Press.
- Sider, Ronald. *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. Inter-Varsity Press.
- Sider, Ronald. *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America*. Baker Book House.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. Vintage Books.

Video

- Mennonite Central Committee. *More Than a Job*.

Orlando Redekopp, Chair
Forrest Collier
Roberta Rinker

Action of the 2000 Annual Conference: The report of the study committee was presented by Orlando Redekopp with Forrest Collier present. *The delegate body adopted the report with two amendments which have been incorporated into the text.*

Committee Expenses for travel, lodging, meals, and misc.

July, 1998 to June, 1999	\$648.00
July, 1999 to June, 2000	<u>264.91</u>
Total Committee Expenses	\$912.91