

Ending Poverty: A Christian Social Contract for Our Times



The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

“Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” ~ 2 Samuel 12:1-7

In a world richly blessed by God, tens of millions of people in the United States and billions around the world lack basic necessities and encounter unfair policies and unjust institutional structures as they seek to improve their conditions. People of faith are called to stand together against this injustice, for we are sisters and brothers to one another. Historically, in our creeds and resolutions, we have declared our desire to overcome poverty. Let us now recommit ourselves to a Christian social contract for the 21st century and to the eradication of poverty.

In the United States, one in seven people lives in poverty. Over 50 million people lack health insurance, one in every six.¹ Some 44 million receive food stamps² of whom 40 percent live in households with at least one worker.³ One in four adults must try to get a job despite having history of an arrest or conviction.⁴ More than one in five children live in poverty, and concentrated poverty now overlays racial segregation in America’s biggest cities, where many children of color are trapped in generational poverty and where their schools are unable to eradicate achievement gaps. These are not good times for tens of millions of Americans.

Like David, we rise up in righteous anger at the unfairness, because we believe that human beings are entitled to live healthy, secure lives. We forget that each of us is accountable for the poverty in our world and we must work to eradicate it.

Disregard for the human condition and lack of accountability have led us to near economic collapse. Our failures cross all aspects of civic life, from commerce to education, from health care to care for the environment, from public safety to adequate housing. Our legal system in particular has become a machine that grinds out poverty. With one of every 31 adults in the United States currently under judicial control—in prison or jail or on probation or parole—we have disabled wage-earners and removed their children to foster care or friends and family, placing tremendous burdens on people already in distress. Like others who are cast into poverty, former prisoners and their children face a series of barriers to overcoming destitution.

The problems in the United States are mirrored, in greater or lesser form, throughout the world. Of the world’s 6.5 billion people, 40 percent live on less than \$2 a day. Many lack the most basic necessities. Nearly one billion people do not have enough to eat.⁵ Over a billion people have no access to clean water and about half the population in the global South (some 2.6 billion) lack even a simple ‘improved’ latrine.⁶ Inadequate sanitation makes hundreds of millions of people sick each year and kills over a million. In 2008, 67 million primary-school age children did not attend school.⁷

Like David, we rise up in righteous anger at the unfairness, because we believe that human beings are entitled to live healthy, secure lives. We forget that each of us is accountable for the poverty in our world and we must work to eradicate it. People living in the United States who, by the world’s standards, are very wealthy, must share the cost of providing everyone with the basic necessities of life — food, shelter, water, sanitation, education, and health care. Each of us has much to contribute.

Even though billions live in poverty, the world is richly endowed by God with enough for all. Consider the United States, an enormously wealthy country. Over the past 40 years, total household income⁸ has grown by nearly 30 percent. But these gains have gone primarily to the top one percent of households that have seen their incomes rise three-fold, from an average of \$379,021 to \$1,137,684 (adjusted for inflation).⁹ Among the bottom 90 percent of households, some incomes have risen and others have fallen but the average is slightly *lower* than 40 years ago. If the gains had been equally shared, income in each of these households would have been nearly 30 percent higher today.

A just society and the eradication of poverty rest upon public institutions and policies that have fairness built into them... As Micah proclaimed, God's vision is for all to sit under their own vines and fig trees (Micah 4:4). In a good society, all have the opportunity to care for themselves, to make their own contributions to the whole.

[documents/udhr/index.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml)). Poverty violates the right to fullness of life, liberty, and security of persons. It hinders the human right to be defended before the law or to escape degrading treatment and punishment. It places people into overt or covert forms of servitude. It destroys opportunities for healthy rest and recreation.¹⁰ Poverty prevents children from realizing their promise and blocks opportunity for people of all ages. Poverty, unconscionable inequality, and lack of opportunity bar individuals from becoming the people God created them to be. These unjust conditions are a violation of human rights. They are also a violation of God's vision for our world.

There is, however, enough for everyone if no one has too much. For example, there is plenty of food. World agriculture produces 17 percent more calories per person today than it did 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. We could provide 2,720 calories a day to each person, but the land is used for other purposes (or is not used at all).¹¹ And while some progress is being made — between 1990 and 2004 1.2 billion people gained access to clean water¹² and, over the 2000's, primary school enrollment rates rose by one-third¹³ — nonetheless, billions lack basic necessities. Their lives and opportunities are stunted by the conditions in which they live.

In a rich nation, in a world richly blessed with God's abundance, there is enough for all. What is lacking is a commitment to sharing God's resources equitably. Those who have do not share with those who have not. We fail to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As David learned from Nathan, *we* are the men and women who bear the responsibility and have the opportunity to change this deplorable, sinful situation.

A just society and the eradication of poverty rest upon public institutions and policies that have fairness built into them. It is not enough that good-hearted people try to correct injustices after they are created. Not only is charity woefully inadequate in a nation of over 300 million people and a world of billions, but it is also demeaning to its recipients. The works of mercy will always be necessary, but God's vision for God's people is not a widespread network of wonderful soup kitchens. The Church is called to make soup kitchens unnecessary. As Micah proclaimed, God's vision is for all to sit under their own vines and fig trees (*Micah 4:4*). In a good society, all have the opportunity to care for themselves, to make their own contributions to the whole.

Today for justice to flow like waters (*Amos 5:24*) requires accountable, efficient, well-funded government. We fund government through taxes. Taxes enable us to care for each other collectively and build and maintain the framework for

Inequality, with the rich getting richer and everyone else getting a few crumbs, has been worsening not just in the United States but in most countries around the world. As described in *2 Samuel*, the lambs have been taken from the poor.

Poverty is destructive of the human spirit. With inadequate income to purchase necessities and with shrinking social programs to rely on, millions of people in the United States and billions around the world are denied their basic human rights, rights that were endorsed in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (<http://www.un.org/en/>

“Just as the churches responded to the harshness of early 20th Century industrialization with a prophetic ‘Social Creed’ in 1908, so in our era of globalization we offer a vision of a society that shares more and consumes less, seeks compassion over suspicion and equality over domination, and finds security in joined hands rather than massed arms.”

—*The Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century*
The National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA

a just society. Essential for a well-functioning government are engaged, vocal, active, and committed citizens who ensure that our public institutions and policies embody justice for all.

The UCC and other churches, synagogues, mosques, and communities of faith have long felt called to meet the needs of the poor, near at home and around the world. In 1908 the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) adopted a “Social Creed for the Churches” (<http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/1908-Social-Creed.pdf>) calling for the abatement of poverty, a living wage, security in old age, and other social benefits and protections.¹⁴

The Social Creed was reaffirmed and modernized in 2007, in “The Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century” (<http://www.nccusa.org/news/ga2007.socialcreed.html>) when the National Council of Churches declared, “Just as the churches responded to the harshness of early 20th Century industrialization with a prophetic ‘Social Creed’ in 1908, so in our era of globalization we offer a vision of a society that shares more and consumes less, seeks compassion over suspicion and equality over domination, and finds security in joined hands rather than massed arms.”

The 2007 Social Creed called for the:

- “abatement of hunger and poverty, and enactment of policies benefiting the most vulnerable,”
- “tax and budget policies that reduce disparities between rich and poor, strengthen democracy, and provide greater opportunity for everyone within the common good,” and
- “adoption of simpler lifestyles for those who have enough; grace over greed in economic life,” and other provisions.¹⁵

The UCC General Synod has also spoken to these concerns. In a 2005 resolution entitled, “For the Common Good,” (<http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Resolution-for-the-Common-Good.pdf>) General Synod 25 calls the UCC to make a commitment to community, seek the common good and move beyond individualism. It reaffirms, “the obligation of citizens to share through taxes the financial responsibility for public services that benefit all citizens, especially those who are vulnerable, to work for more equitable public institutions, and to support regulations that protect society and the environment.” The resolution draws from *Matthew 25: 34-45*, where Jesus tells us that nations will be judged by how they care for the most vulnerable. In Jesus’ day, basic human needs included food, water, clothing, healing, compassion, and hospitality. The 2005 resolution defines today’s basic needs: full employment; jobs with living wages; health insurance; affordable housing; well funded public schools; a system of affordable, quality child care; and regulations to protect the environment and discourage residential and institutional segregation by race and class, as well as compassion and hospitality.

Article 7 All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

Article 23 Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 25 Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Article 26 Everyone has the right to education.

—Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Today, in a time of deepening poverty and widening inequality, God is calling the Church to action—as individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination. As Christians living in this rich nation, we are called to commit to ensuring that all have the opportunity to live in the fullness of life and be the persons God created them to be. Let us follow Jesus—lifting our voices, joining our hands, and contributing our treasure and talents—to confront the structures and institutions that trap so many people and to reweave a strong safety net. May God bless and strengthen us for this work.

This *Christian Social Contract* calls us to advocate faithfully for our society to:

- **Create jobs** so that everyone who wants one has one; ensure that every job pays a living wage; uphold the right of workers to form and join unions; strengthen workplace protections and enforce them; end discrimination in hiring, pay, and promotion; and require all jobs to provide paid sick days and paid vacation.
- **Provide a strong network of income and social supports for children and adults** who need them to survive and thrive, and build and rehabilitate affordable housing.
- **Work faithfully to educate our people**, providing universal access to free, high quality public education and fair opportunities to learn regardless of standing or background; work for accessible, affordable, enriched child care for all families; and recognize that education is a gateway out of poverty and at the same time know that eradicating poverty is necessary for greater opportunity at school for children who live in over-crowded and dangerous conditions or whose teeth ache, or who are hungry or homeless.
- **Provide health care that is universal** and health-promoting; provide comprehensive care for the mentally ill; ensure care for all without regard to status or ability to pay; and work for coordination of services and research to eradicate diseases that are the scourge of nations and that disproportionately affect the poor.
- **Seek fair justice policies that offer opportunities for restitution, restoration, and alternatives to prison** and that focus the practice of incarceration on circumstances that physically endanger others in the community; work diligently to end the practice of state execution; and build bridges and opportunities that enable those in our midst who have been incarcerated to work and support their families.
- **Support the building and rebuilding of public infrastructure**; adequately fund public transportation; boost energy efficiency and renewable sources of energy; provide transportation options for those without cars; and weatherize existing residential structures.
- **Protect and restore the natural world**; work to ensure clean water, air, land and environmental conditions that are health giving; and stand with poor people and especially vulnerable people of color to eradicate existing environmental hazards that threaten their communities.
- **Reduce the financial and human costs of war at home and abroad** by cutting duplicative and unnecessary military spending and by supporting diplomacy, economic development, and humanitarian assistance.
- **Fully fund and meet all eight Millennium Development Goals** (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>) by 2015, especially the goal of cutting in half the number of people suffering from hunger and those living on less than \$1 a day.
- **Reform international financial structures and practices** to allow developing countries to determine their own economic policies and have a greater voice in these institutions; and eliminate illegitimate debts owed by poor countries, freeing up money for investments in clean water, education, health care, and effective economic development.
- **Support fair trade and investment policies** that protect workers in all countries and the environment; level the playing field between multinational and local corporations, and between workers and corporations; and allow all peoples and nations to determine their own agricultural and food policies.

For current information about these issues, legislation being considered, and actions your church can undertake to reweave the social contract, see this web page: <http://www.ucc.org/justice/poverty/>. This document, with endnotes, is also posted online (<http://www.ucc.org/justice/poverty/Social-Contract-with-footnotes.pdf>) along with questions to stimulate group discussion and discernment.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Bureau of the Census, Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2009, September 2010. Table 8.
- 2 In February 2011, 44 million people out of roughly 290 million were potential recipients, or 15% of the population. US Department of Agriculture, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/34SNAPmonthly.htm> accessed through USDA <http://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/snapmain.htm>. Accessed May 31, 2011.
- 3 US Department of Agriculture, CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM HOUSEHOLDS: FISCAL YEAR 2009 SUMMARY, October 2010. Accessed /20/11. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ora/menu/Published/snap/FILES/Participation/2009CharacteristicsSummary.pdf>
- 4 National Employment Law Project, “Criminal Records and Employment.” Accessed May 31, 2011. http://www.nelp.org/site/issues/category/criminal_records_and_employment/ .
- 5 Food and Agriculture Organization, “Global Hunger Declining, but Still Unacceptably High,” <http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/al390e/al390e00.pdf> September 2010. World Food Program Hunger Stats, <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>. Accessed 4/15/11.
- 6 World Health Organization, Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target : The Urban and Rural Challenge of the Decade. http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/jmpfinal.pdf . Accessed 6/14/11.
- 7 UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011, <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/gmr2011-facts-figures.pdf> .
- 8 Adjusted gross income on U.S. federal income tax returns.
- 9 Analysis of IRS Tax Data by Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez for the years 1970 and 2008 (includes capital gains), Table A6, <http://emlab.berkeley.edu/users/saez/piketty-saezOUP04US.pdf> .
- 10 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, http://www.wunrn.com/reference/pdf/univ_dec_hum_right.pdf.
- 11 Food and Agriculture Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development, World Food Program, “Reducing Poverty and Hunger, the Critical Role of Financing for Food, Agriculture, and Rural Development,” 2002, p.9. <http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/Y6265e/y6265e00.htm>
- 12 World Health Organization, WHO Meeting the MDG Drinking Water and Sanitation Target : The Urban and Rural Challenge of the Decade, p. 10. http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/jmpfinal.pdf . Accessed June 14, 2011.
- 13 UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011, <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/gmr2011-facts-figures.pdf>.
- 14 The Creed ended with these moving words, “To the toilers of America and to those who by organized effort are seeking to lift the crushing burdens of the poor, and to reduce the hardships and uphold the dignity of labor, this council sends the greeting of human brotherhood and the pledge of sympathy and of help in a cause which belongs to all who follow Christ.” See <http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/1908-Social-Creed.pdf>.
- 15 National Council of Churches, “A Social Creed for the 21st Century.” <http://www.nccusa.org/news/ga2007.socialcreed.html>.