

God is Still Speaking, about Children



For over forty years, the United Church of Christ has affirmed public policies that generate and distribute resources to provide all people—especially the most vulnerable, our children—with the potential to live full lives. Currently in the UCC many local churches are involved in the *God is Still Speaking* initiative. As we consider the needs of one of the most vulnerable segments of our nation, our children, it is imperative that we ask who is speaking for them. This resource has been designed to look at some of the critical issues facing our nation's children.

In a 1987 pronouncement, "Fulfilling God's Covenant With All Children," General Synod 16 called upon the UCC to intensify its long-standing commitment to economic and social justice through support of specific policies which help, empower and sustain all children, particularly those children most in need. This resource challenges you and your congregation to consider how God is speaking for children, to lift up aspects of their lives that continue to need our help and support

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. — Matthew 5: 5

as a community of faith, and to consider how we can lift our own voices to speak.

How do the needs of children impact us individually and corporately within our local churches? Consider a conversation with teachers in your congregation about how the *No Child Left Behind Act* has impacted them vocationally and the children they serve. With increases in the general poverty rate and homelessness, how has poverty affected families you know, families in your church, or perhaps families you have encountered in mission outreach opportunities? Issues related to child care and healthcare for families impact many in our faith family. As we consider the rise in unemployment and its effect on families, what opportunities for help, support and reform has your congregation considered undertaking? As adults we share the responsibility to ensure a just society for all including the most vulnerable among us, our children.

The information in this resource offers an opportunity for faith groups to study the critical issues confronting children today and encourages action within local churches. Perhaps most important, it calls us to consider the question, if *God is Still Speaking*, what is God saying and how well are we listening?

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A couple of years ago in Flint, Michigan, a six-year-old child was shot to death in a public school by another six-year-old. The single mother, a "success" of welfare reform was on a regular 80 mile bus trip for welfare mothers to two jobs in a shopping mall. She often worked 70 hours a week but still couldn't pay the rent for her apartment. So she doubled up housing with a relative who had an accessible hand gun. The mother had to leave early so she couldn't supervise her child's leave-taking for school.



Children and Poverty...

Since the passage of the new welfare act in 1996 (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families or TANF) the percentage of children in poverty decreased from about one-in-five to one-in-six. That decrease occurred in the late 1990's when the economy was good and the time limits had not run out on TANF. In the last few years the general poverty rate has increased significantly and, for example, there were 600,000 more children in poverty in 2002 than in 2001.

- Food Stamp rates are climbing rapidly again but TANF rates are stable or still dropping because time limits have run out, because states have made it difficult to qualify, and because in some states the benefit is so small and so time limited as not to be worth the effort. The number of families with no work and no benefits is rising. Health and Human Services officials have called this success.
- Housing costs continue to increase but budget resolutions passed by the House and Senate call for sharp decreases in Section 8 rental assistance. The phenomenon of homeless children which became dramatically apparent in the 1980's is going up again.
- In the late 1990's many more low-income children qualified for medical assistance through the expansion of Medicaid and the creation of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). A recent attempt to sharply cut Medicaid spending was defeated by an amendment to the Senate budget resolution, but it is unclear whether this victory will be sustained in later budget negotiations.

Consider this question...

Do you think that TANF policy is directed at parents or their children? What changes in federal and state policy would make it possible for our society to address child poverty?

Public Education...

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) is the January 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), originally passed in 1965 as a centerpiece of the War on Poverty. NCLB shifts the focus to hold schools accountable to high national standards without the federal government demonstrating the intention to fund educational opportunity for all the children being held to the same standards. Framed in the language of business, NCLB demands that public school teachers become increasingly efficient at producing better and more uniform

products — the students who demonstrate education "outputs" in their test scores.

- NCLB emphasizes performance accountability based on federally mandated standardized testing in grades 3-8 and sanctions for schools whose scores do not rise year after year on a tightly mandated schedule of required "adequate yearly progress."
- Unrealistic "adequate yearly progress" standards may soon brand the majority of America's schools as "failing." According to the *New York Times*, 26,000 of our nation's 91,400 public schools failed to make the required Adequate Yearly Progress for 2004.¹
- Although the 2005 federal budget proposal includes a \$1 billion increase in Title I funding, this figure is \$7.1 billion less for 2005 than NCLB authorized just two years ago.

Consider this question...

If we expect all children to pass standardized tests, how can we expect the poorest children to do as well as the children who have every advantage, unless we publicly invest more in the schools serving America's poorest children? NCLB simply demands that schools close the gap. What are the additional investments that must be made to ensure we stop leaving children behind?

Anne is a third grade teacher in a school deemed "failing" because not enough students passed last year's state proficiency test. Anne's principal has been told his job is on the line if the school fails to make Adequate Yearly Progress, and he has told Anne that she must cut out her every-morning "community meeting" and the "drop everything and read" hour right after lunch to make time for additional math drill, because math is this school's weakness. Anne grieves for the loss of opportunity for connectedness in her class, and she worries that children won't learn to love reading by finishing a lot of good books in the third grade. She worries she will have to give up what she believes in or be rated a failure herself.

¹Sam Dillon, "1 in 4 Schools Fall Short Under Bush Law," *NY Times*, January 27, 2004.

Leah says she is “almost twelve.” When her parents separated, she and her mother became homeless. They lived with a friend for three months, and then with Leah’s grandmother, before entering a transitional housing program in Wheaton, Illinois. Leah says, “Even though my Mom was working, we didn’t have enough money to get our own place. I knew my mom felt bad that she couldn’t get stuff for me that I needed for school. We had no money for extras or sometimes even for food. I know there’s lots of homeless people out there that don’t have it as good as me. I feel sad for them. I just want to tell them to hang in there. God has made us all for a reason and He will help them get out of their situation. We need to take care of people in our own country, not just at the holidays, either. People need a place of their own to live.”¹

Family Unemployment...

As the number of Americans unemployed for more than six months has tripled from 2002 to 2003, economic stress is hitting American families hard. The number of single mothers losing jobs is growing. The number of Americans living in poverty has risen for two years in a row, with the most significant increase among children.² Long-term unemployment is soaring — rising fastest among families with young children. Lost earnings are being made up by neither welfare³ nor unemployment insurance. In 2003, more than a million children were in working poor families that experienced unemployment but did not receive unemployment insurance.

- In the first two months of 2004, unemployment benefits ran out for 760,000 workers.
- America is experiencing the highest number of unemployed who have exhausted their benefits since record-keeping began in 1971.
- Many have given up looking for work, including 392,000 people in just one month (February, 2004).⁴

Consider this question...

As unemployment grows and benefits shrink, a growing number of children are impoverished. Look at Leah’s words of hope about God’s concern for her and others without permanent housing. How does God “help them get out of their situation?” What might you do to be part of a solution?



¹ National Coalition for the Homeless, www.nationalhomeless.org/experiences/leah, March 15, 2004.

² Children’s Defense Fund, “Number of Poor Children in America Rises Second Straight Year,” September 26, 2003.

³ Children’s Defense Fund, “Report: Single Mothers Losing Jobs,” March 27, 2003.

⁴ Isaac Shapiro, *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, quoted by the *Akron Beacon Journal*, “Benefits Exhausted, Jobless Need Help Now,” March 9, 2004.

Juvenile Justice...

The international community continues to call the United States to account for our inhumane subjection of human beings to sentences of death or life without parole for crimes they committed as children. Nearly as notable is the dramatic growth in the number of children incarcerated in adult and juvenile facilities. What is less well known is that our children are the most likely of all US residents to be the victims of violent crimes, generally by people they know and trust, and that an enormous and growing number of children are victimized by the extended imprisonment of their parents, whose lives after prison will be hampered by policies that will keep them and their children in chaos and poverty.

- Children are twice as likely as adults to be victims of the violent crimes of homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. They are three times as likely as adults to be victims of simple assault. Juvenile victims of violent crimes know their offenders, who are most likely to be relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Only about 36% of victimizations are by strangers.¹
- The total population of juveniles in residential detention (excluding those placed in adult prisons) is approaching 150,000. The incarcerated juvenile population has increased steadily from 108,750 in 1995, to 125,800 in 1997, and 124,000 in 1999 (the most recent year for formal Department of Justice statistics). In that year, for every 100,000 non-Hispanic Black youth, 1,004 were incarcerated in a juvenile residential facility, compared to 485 Hispanic youth and 212 non-Hispanic White youth.²
- In 1999, approximately 1.5 million minor children (under 18 years) in the US had a parent in prison, an increase of more than half a million children since 1991. This population continues to grow.³

Consider this question...

What are the ethical considerations for society and the responsibilities for the church that arise from extensive incarceration of juveniles and parents?

The average child with a parent in prison is eight or ten years old, and on average, parents are imprisoned between six and nine years. The number of children with an imprisoned father increased by 58% between 1991 and 1999, while the number of children with a mother in prison increased by 98% in the same period. Black, non-Hispanic children were 9 times more likely, and Hispanic children 3 times more likely, to have a parent in prison than White, non-Hispanic children. When released, parents can expect to face significant barriers in finding work and housing, two fundamental factors in reestablishing family units. Their children are at significantly high risk for poverty and future involvement in the justice system.⁴

¹ *Statistical Briefing Book*, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

² *Statistical Briefing Book*, OJJDP, www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

³ Bureau of Justice Statistics, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/press/iptc.pr, NCJ-182335

⁴ Bureau of Justice Statistics, www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/press/iptc.pr, NCJ-182335

"Health care for every child should be a fundamental right, and not just in emergency situations. Every child should have a medical home where a physician can provide consistent, comprehensive care including annual physical exams, vaccinations, comprehensive diagnostic and therapeutic interventions and referrals to a specialist when required. Without access to important preventive and comprehensive health care, children are unnecessarily at risk of life-long health problems and catastrophic illness."

E. Stephen Edwards, M. D. , President, The American Academy of Pediatrics



"Karinna Fermin was barely scraping by on the \$250 she makes a week as a home health aide. Now she doesn't know how she'll pay the bills. Because of budget cuts, Fermin's 2-year-old daughter, Adryanna, lost her free slot at an E. 13th St. day care center. 'Right now I make \$250 a week, and I spend about \$125 a week on baby-sitters,' Fermin said." (New York Daily News, 10/28/03).

Consider this question...

Now that two thirds of American women with young children work outside the home, and now that welfare reform laws require poor women to work at least 30 hours per week, what is society's role in providing for the needs of the children?

¹Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 214.

²Children's Defense Fund, "Robin Hood In Reverse: Bush Administration Budget Choices Take from Poor Children to Give to the Rich," February 6, 2004, p. 3.

³Jennifer Mezey, "Child Care Programs Help Parents Find and Keep Jobs: Funding Shortfalls Leave Many Families without Assistance," Center for Law and Social Policy, February 10, 2004, p. 3.

⁴Jennifer Mezey, et al, "Reversing Direction on Welfare Reform: President's Budget Cuts Child Care for More than 300,000 Children," Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Center for Law and Social Policy, February 10, 2004, p. 2.

Children's Health Care and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)...

The latest figures show that more than nine million children under the age of 19 lack health coverage. Health coverage is vitally important for ensuring that every child has a healthy start. Children need to feel well, see well, and hear well in order to do well in school. Yet uninsured children are far less likely to receive medical and dental care when they need it.¹ Enacted by the U S Congress in August 1997, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) was designed primarily to help children in working families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid and too low to afford private family coverage. Despite the program's steady growth, there are still many children uninsured who live in families with incomes below the SCHIP eligibility level, set at 200 percent of poverty in most states. Unfortunately, the 2005 federal budget has proposed a \$2.2 billion cut to Medicaid, which threatens to increase the number of uninsured children. The federal budget strategy gives states the option of receiving their Medicaid and SCHIP funds in the form a combined block grant, which will limit or cap their allotment.

- The federal cap on funding would shift cost to the states, hindering states' ability to respond to the growing and changing healthcare needs of their residents.
- Children in states that elect the block grant could lose benefits currently guaranteed.
- The 2005 federal budget does not extend SCHIP funds. Without this extension, funds are likely to expire and revert to the federal Treasury, causing states to run out of SCHIP funds by the end of fiscal year 2005.²

Consider this question...

Making sure that children stay healthy is an important goal for all segments of society, because they are our future. What strategies and new approaches are needed to better ensure healthy outcomes for our children?

¹Children's Defense Fund, Action Council. *Key Facts on Children's Health*, December 2001.

²Children's Defense Fund. *Robin Hood In Reverse: Bush Administration Budget Choices Take From Poor Children to Give to the Rich*, February 6, 2004 and Families USA. *The Bush Administration's Fiscal Year 2005 Budget: Analysis of Key Health Care Provisions*, March 22, 2004.

Head Start and Child Care...

Nearly all families with children have come to need quality, enriched child care. Without affordable child care, poor mothers and their children cannot easily survive. Employment outside the home grew from 6 to 64 percent between 1940 and 1999 among women with children under the age of six, and workforce participation increased from 11 to 79 percent among women with children ages 6-17.¹ Since welfare reform in 1996, three of every four poor children now live in working families.²

- Head Start, originally designed to involve and educate parents and to serve children in poverty with enrichment as well as social and medical services, now reaches only three of five eligible preschoolers. Head Start is flat-funded in the 2005 proposed federal budget, and it is now being converted to an academic readiness program that incorporates standardized testing.
- Former welfare recipients with child care assistance are 82 percent more likely to be employed after two years than those without assistance.³
- It is estimated that if current federal funding trends continue, 447,000 children currently being served will lose their child care assistance and be cut from the rolls.⁴