

KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES  
POLICY STATEMENT ON WELFARE REFORM  
Commission on Justice Ministries  
Adopted by the 47th Annual Assembly, October 20-21, 1994

BACKGROUND: THE CURRENT SOCIAL PROBLEM

1. In the United States, “welfare” has become a system of bare existence assistance for the poor and differently abled which does not provide true relief from the difficulties of their lives or enable them to “fare well” through their life’s journeys. Although the average welfare recipient stays in the system only 24 months, there are many families who remain on welfare generation after generation.

Welfare, as we know it in most of America, does not provide adequate support for those who truly need welfare assistance, and for a significant number of people, the current welfare system fosters dependency. There is little to encourage the poor to try to get off the welfare rolls. Attempts have been made in recent years to enable recipients to leave the welfare rolls through such programs as the JOBS effort. New attempts are being developed to force welfare recipients to work or to be engaged in job training, within two years or be cut off from assistance.

2. Those in need of society’s organized efforts to enable them to become contributing, interdependent members of a community cannot be narrowly and prejudicially defined. Poverty in America is caused by a complex web of factors which must be addressed in a wholistic manner. Among the factors contributing to a perpetual and regenerating group of poor people are:
  - the difficulty of moving out of the culture of poverty with its known support systems rather than face the fears of the unknown;
  - the lack of universal health care coverage by and for every American;
  - problems within our educational systems which fail to meet the learning styles and needs of possibly as many as one-third of our nation’s children, thus contributing to their being unprepared to be financially self-supporting adults within our economic system;
  - lack of access to appropriate education, training, and physical environments which would be conducive to enabling the differently abled to use their abilities in a interdependent manner;
  - the nature of our economic system which, in order to function productively for the majority, means that there will always be a certain number of unemployed persons;
  - a culture of values gone awry in which winning at any cost, material possessions, outward success, and/or sex as a substitute for mutual love and respect have become more important than character and personal integrity, honesty, compassion, self-control, self-reliance, respect for the worth of every person, and responsibility.

All of these factors are interwoven into the fabric of poverty and the lives of persons in need of assistance from others.

Furthermore, perhaps to teach us that we human beings will always need each other, there may always be a population of innocents among us whose contribution to the common good will be their need for total assistance and care from others.

3. From both a political and spiritual perspective, responsibility to meet the needs of the poor and vulnerable cannot rest on any one entity in society, such as the federal or state government. True welfare reform will require the participation of many organizations, institutions, and persons in the society. Religious and educational institutions, especially, must speak out and act to redress the current culture of inadequate education for the values formation of our children and youth.

## THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

*You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry....*

--- Exodus 22:21-23

*Speak out for those who cannot speak for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

--Proverbs 31:8-9

*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

--Isaiah 58:6-9a

*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*

--Matthew 7, 12

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet; and any other commandment are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

--Romans 13:8-10

The passages of scripture cited above represent only a small portion of the exhortations to people of faith concerning the well-being of their neighbors, and especially the "widows and orphans" -- or in our modern parlance, the poor, the needy, the destitute of hope and opportunity. One of the marks of faithfulness, in both Hebrew tradition and the Christian gospel, is the way which believers treat, care for, and respond to the stranger or foreigner, the beggar, and children. Always, we are enjoined to treat the stranger, the poor, and even our enemies as if we ourselves are they, because, at one time, Israel was in slavery, Israel was a sojourner and an alien, Israel was poor. By virtue of Jesus Christ, we have been grafted onto the vine of Israel.

We begin therefore, with a basic belief that assistance for those in need is not optional, but a fundamental principle of Christian behavior and Christian values. Yet the nature of aid for the vulnerable and needy depends upon two other core Christian assumptions:

1. We are created for communion, for *koinonia*, for interdependence with God and one another.
2. Every person has worth, not because of what he or she does or is able to do, but because each is loved first by God. Every person is a gift to the whole creation, and is made in the image of God. G.K. Chesterton has said: "The glory of God is the human being fully alive."

Thus, help which does not enable persons to move from dependence to interdependence, from taking to giving continues their debilitation. Similarly, aid which does not empower persons to be "fully alive" and responsible, contributing members of community, diminishes the glory of God within them that gives them their worth in the first place. God's nature, and therefore, our nature, is to create, to give, to build up, to nurture the gifts and love which God has given to each person, no matter what that person's physical or mental capacities might be.

The word "*welfare*" originally meant: "the state of doing well, especially in respect to happiness, well-being, or prosperity." A second definition, too often used with disdain and prejudice, says that *welfare* is "the organized

efforts for the social betterment of a group in society, or relief.” From a theological perspective, aid and assistance which enables persons to “fare well” in their daily lives, to be healthy, to prosper emotionally, mentally, physically, as well as economically should be the appropriate aim of the organized efforts within a society to relieve the suffering of the poor and marginalized members of the community.

Jesus fed the hungry, straightened the bent-over backs of the oppressed, brought the dead back to life, and cured the sick, the blind, the mentally and physically disabled persons so that the sin of their repetitive *dependence* could be transformed into responsible contributions for the good of all, into *interdependence*.

## RESOLUTION

THEREFORE, be it resolved: that the Kentucky Council of Churches will engage in advocacy within religious, political and economic arenas to achieve true welfare reforms.

1. The badly needed reform of the current welfare system requires us to give close attention to current legislative efforts, at both the state and national levels, to insure that any such reforms will not be punitive and will allow the system to be more effective in its efforts to relieve the many causes of poverty and suffering.
2. We believe that there will always be a need for some form of public assistance. As long as there is an inequitable distribution of wealth and opportunity, there will be individuals and families who cannot support themselves, even with full-time jobs.
3. We will work for welfare reform that encourages the creation of jobs that will pay a just wage and that have the prospect of stable, long-term employment.
4. We will work for expanded funding for childcare so that low-income persons who are working or going to school can retain more of their benefits.
5. We will endorse welfare reform which will create a system that will allow those who cannot work outside the home to live in dignity and decency.
6. Because each family’s situation is different, and, to be successful at helping people become self-supporting and interdependent members of the society, we advocate a welfare system flexible enough to allow them to meet their family needs.
7. We will continue to work for universal health care access and health care coverage, believing that universal health care coverage should be one of the essential components of welfare reform.
8. We will encourage efforts to end the current bias against two-parent families. Moreover, we affirm that both parents have responsibility for their children and agree that changes in child support enforcement laws are necessary, although we are troubled by absolutist requirements to establish paternity in order for a mother to receive Aid To Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) support.

As churches we commit ourselves to support efforts consistent with church teachings to prevent teen pregnancy through educational programs which encourage the abstinence from sexual intercourse until marriage and which would lift up the sanctity of sexuality and marriage.

As churches, we will engage in more programs within our own congregations, and support programs sponsored by other groups within our commonwealth (so long as these programs do not violate our religious convictions) which enable persons to form and develop character and personal values of self-reliance, honesty, compassion, respect for others, personal integrity, tolerance of diversity, self-control, non-violence, justice, and commitment to the value of work.