



Wisconsin Council of Churches

Public Policy Statements

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1 **Statement on Economic Justice**

2 *November 28, 2001 (Amended December 12, 2006)*

3 ***God's intention for all Creation***

4
5 From the beginning, it has been God's intention for human beings to live in fellowship with
6 God and one another and in harmony with Creation. As is told in the book of Genesis, God
7 created human beings in the image of God. God gave them everything they needed to live
8 including a garden to cultivate and tend (Genesis 2:15). With these human beings, God also
9 created community (Genesis 2:18, 22). They were given loving responsibility for all living
10 creatures and stewardship of the land. God directed humans to care for it all in a way that the
11 earth and all that live on it would thrive. In God's Creation we find abundant resources to feed,
12 house, and clothe ourselves. God continues to bless us with these resources. Our concern as the
13 Council of Churches is that without proper management, those resources are being depleted and
14 are not reaching those who need them most. Millions of people who are hungry, who do not have
15 adequate clothing and shelter, who are sick, who are dying, who are held under bondage, are
16 being deprived of God's gifts. Not everyone has even basic necessities.

17 ***The tension between the separateness of the person and the oneness of the community***

18
19 Our God knows each of us intimately (Psalm 139) and travels with us wherever we go. If we
20 choose to emphasize our God-given individuality, God is with us. When we choose to bring our
21 individuality into community as God created for us, God is there as well. There is a tension that
22 does and should exist between individuality and community. We can find full expression of self in
23 community and we, as individuals, are responsible both to and as community. Yet in a society
24 that places individuality and personal success in such high priority, the Wisconsin Council of
25 Churches believes that it is the responsibility of the church, the body of Christ, to reinforce God's
26 message of community, of stewardship, of mutual support for one another and for the
27 environment.

28 ***The purpose of this statement***

29
30 This statement on economic justice, then, is based on our belief that God's intention for us
31 to live in harmony, in fellowship and with respect for one another and the earth is one that has not
32 changed since the beginning of time. In order for us to live that way, everyone must have enough
33 resources; each person should have according to his or her need.

34 Indeed, God has always provided enough. As the people of God journeyed from the Garden
35 of Eden through 40 years in the wilderness and on to the Land of Milk and Honey, God provided
36 for their needs:

"Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper.

You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you."
(Deuteronomy 8:2-10)

37 With this statement, the Wisconsin Council of Churches recognizes that the church must
38 determine how to properly be in the world, yet resist being of the world. We, as God's people,
39 have not allowed ourselves to be used as God's instruments to care for brothers and sisters in
40 need. With the needs of so many increasing so greatly, the church cannot work in a vacuum and
41 expect to address the ills of society. The church must take responsibility for change and be willing
42 to work through social structures like government in order to achieve social and economic justice
43 for those whom Jesus calls us to serve the most. It is the responsibility of the church to work to
44 transform the priorities of society from the trust of wealth to the trust of God.

Then someone came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "I have kept all these; and what do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Matthew 19:16-22)

45 ***God's directive to provide for "the least of these"***

46
47 Throughout the Old Testament and in Old Testament history there is great evidence of
48 voluntary acts of charity as a priority in Israel's corporate life. Yet, the very word "charity" has
49 connotations today that it did not have in biblical times. We tend to think of charity as something
50 that we give or do at a given point in time. But biblically, charity is intended as an attitude, a way
51 in which we operate on a daily basis. It is, in fact, synonymous with justice, the act of being fair.

52 In the book of Exodus (chapters 21-23), God lays down a directive to restore social,
53 economic and religious well-being to those who are in need; a directive to be charitable. Those
54 who have sold themselves to others as a result of economic need are to be freed in the seventh,
55 or sabbatical year. The land was to rest, to regain its strength to produce, also in the sabbatical
56 year. The poor, the resident aliens, the widows and orphans were not to be exploited or
57 oppressed. The poor were to be given due process, or proper justice, in legal matters. Anyone
58 who hurt the poor would have to answer to God:

59 "If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; and my wrath
60 will burn...." (Exodus 22:23-24a).

61 But perhaps nowhere is Scripture more instructive relative to those who ignore the plight of
62 the poor than those words from the mouths of the eighth century (before Christ) prophets Amos,
63 Isaiah, and Micah. They condemn those who not only ignore the poor but those who make laws
64 that have ill effect on the poor:

"Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right What will you do on the day of punishment. . . ?" (Isa. 10:1-3a) and "They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. Therefore thus says the Lord: Now, I am devising against this family an evil From which you cannot remove your necks; And you shall not walk haughtily, For it will be an evil time." (Micah 2:1-3)

65 Indeed, the New Testament also draws attention to the needs of the poor. Jesus Christ proclaims:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To let the oppressed go free, To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

66 Jesus' authoritative words turned the world around him upside down. Those people who are
67 the least in the sight of human beings, culture and society, are the very ones he declares must
68 and will be helped the most. He contradicts the world's view of success. He turns the world
69 upside down in order to get it right side up and calls upon his followers to do the same. Jesus
70 deliberately identified himself with the poor as an act of loving compassion, therefore challenging
71 the rest of us to respond in kind.

72 ***What are the causes of poverty?***

73

74 Many people are born into poverty and some find themselves forced into poverty as a result
75 of other circumstances. Racism, gender discrimination, lack of education, political strife, and
76 government corruption are factors that lead to poverty around the world. Poverty can also be the
77 result of mismanagement of money and power by individuals, churches, businesses,
78 governments and other institutions.

79 ***The special responsibilities of the wealthy***

80

81 Neither the Hebrew scriptures nor the New Testament object to wealth nor convict the
82 wealthy for what they have attained (unless by unscrupulous methods).

83 However, there is great danger lurking in wealth: greed. Knowing that, God also made it
84 clear that inherent in the blessings of wealth is God's directive to use that wealth to meet the
85 needs of the poor:

"Give liberally [to your brother or sister] and be ungrudging when you do so, for on
this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake."
Deuteronomy 15:10

86 Wealth is intended by God to be shared, not hoarded, not accumulated:

"The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one
who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up
your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is
able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of
everything, you may share abundantly in every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

87 ***How wealth is to be apportioned***

88

89 While we have come to think of property as our accumulated possessions, property in the
90 Hebrew scriptures refers to the land. Such property was a gift from God; it was sacred. Yet while
91 it was a gift to God's people, they held it not as a personal possession but as stewards. God
92 maintained ownership and the stewards of the land who were given dominion over it were to see
93 that it was properly maintained in a way that it would provide not only for the family who tended it,
94 but for the poor who would benefit from the family's tithe. Yet, today, wealth is held in the hands
95 of a very few and land is but one symbol of wealth.

The Apostle Paul adds light to that discussion:

"As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to

set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." (emphasis added) (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

96 The Wisconsin Council of Churches recognizes that wealth comes in varying degrees and
97 forms. We know that all believers are given gifts of the Spirit to be used for the building of the
98 Church. We know there are conscientious businesspeople and corporations who strive to be
99 responsible by producing quality products that also provide jobs and benefits for their employees.
100 We celebrate those who have used their wealth for charitable causes and who provide the solid
101 fiscal foundation from which philanthropy and job creation can take place. We know there are
102 many people who have taken up public service as a career, from teachers to government
103 workers, to elected officials, and who are striving to find ways to resolve discrepancies in wages
104 and class and property.

105 But there remains a chasm between those who have and those who have not. Farmers who
106 for generations have considered farming not a business but a "way of life" find it difficult to survive
107 in an economy that calls for cheap food at the expense of the producer and, at the same time,
108 fails to provide food for those who need it the most. There are businesspeople who would, at the
109 expense of their employees and the environment, seek higher personal profits for themselves
110 without thought for the dignity and well-being of those who work for them. There are those in
111 public service who have bowed to high-powered interests and have advocated passed legislation
112 that has been detrimental to or does not address at all the disparity between the rich and the
113 poor.

114 The plain fact of the matter is that since God provides all that we need and yet there are
115 people who do not have enough to eat or drink or a safe place to sleep, then we can only
116 conclude that there are some who have too much and who have not adequately shared what they
117 have been given.

118 ***Avenues of economic justice***

119
120 Specifically, the Wisconsin Council of Churches declares our intention to seek economic
121 justice through such avenues as:

- 122 • Continued efforts to reduce poverty;
- 123 • Opportunities in all forms for children, families, singles and elders so as to ensure the full
124 potential and dignity of each person;
- 125 • Racial, ethnic, and gender equality in all sectors of the economy;
- 126 • Employment standards that are fair, where workers are paid a just and fair wage and
127 where benefits are provided where possible (including the farm sector and with migrant
128 workers), and, when unemployment occurs, access to public or private assistance for
129 those people who cannot work or for whom there are no jobs available.
- 130 • Decent and affordable housing;
- 131 • Quality public education that is funded adequately and fairly, recognizing the needs of
132 rural schools and those with large numbers of poor, students needing special education,
133 and children for whom English is their second language; and that is protected against
134 measures that are punitive and that undermine a public commitment to the common
135 good;
- 136 • Access to basic health care that provides for the whole of the person, physical and
137 mental;
- 138 • Sustainable agricultural practices, fair prices and income for farmers and farm workers,
139 and ensuring a safe food supply for all of those who hunger and thirst;
- 140 • Environmental laws and regulations that ensure the long-term productivity and protection
141 of the land;

- 142 • Taxation that gives relief to those who need it most and addresses the gap between the
143 rich and the poor;
144 • Access to government through an open process and financing of elections that attracts
145 those who would be our most able leaders, not just those who can afford to run;
146 • Reforms of the political process that will make our elected leaders more accountable to
147 the people rather than to special interest money, and that will promote civic participation
148 by assuring citizens that their votes count and that government can work fairly and
149 effectively for the benefit of all;
150 • International trade systems and treaties that protect worker justice, human rights,
151 environmental standards, and democratic process;
152 • Community development programs that uphold the integrity of our citizens and our
153 environment.

154 ***The church, its role, and the realities of the world***
155

156 The church has remained silent on many of these issues, fearful of reaction from the people
157 in the pews. We have shunned controversy. We share the guilt of those who have not worked for
158 economic justice. In addition, the church is not exempt from the creation and maintenance of
159 economic injustice and must take its own responsibility for it. Therefore, we recognize several
160 realities in our world:

- 161 • The globalization of the economy has changed the face of the way business is done in
162 the world, even to the extent of concentrating power and money in private corporations
163 that exceed the size of some entire countries.
164 • The political arena is made up of political parties and people in them whose beliefs span
165 a continuum and often find themselves polarized in their positions rather than finding
166 common ground.
167 • There is an unrecognized tension between freedom and equality, between rights and
168 responsibilities. The more some have of one, the less others have of another. Sometimes
169 freedoms must be sacrificed for the common good.
170 • Our church members are among those who are voting for and serving as elected officials.
171 It is not a matter of us vs. them.
172 • The role of government is to seek justice for all people and to uphold the common good.
173 But justice cannot be achieved when the democratic process is not just and fair for all.
174 Economic justice is challenged and compromised when money from special interest
175 groups influences the choice of candidates for public office, the redrawing of legislative
176 districts, and the conduct of election campaigns. The influence of money in campaigns
177 for public office undermines democracy and feeds cynicism concerning public integrity
178 and the validity of elected leadership.
179 • The role of the church is one of a voice crying in the wilderness, a prophet for those with
180 whom we live and work. At the same time we must also seek progress in small steps and
181 compromise and celebrate every time diverse minds come together to empower those
182 who can least provide for themselves. The church must be a model for open and healthy
183 dialogue, respectful of a vast array of opinions, seeking common ground, and open to
184 compromise in a legislative process that often demands that small steps be taken on the
185 road to reform. Compromise must not sacrifice our prophetic voice; it can be a means to
186 let that voice be heard.

187 ***Conclusion***
188

189 On that day by the Sea of Galilee when a young boy handed over his five barley loaves and
190 two fish to Jesus, even Jesus' disciples were skeptical of how far so little could stretch. Yet the
191 Master was able to feed a crowd of five thousand men and with them the women and children.
192 They were not only satisfied, there was enough left over to fill 12 baskets. (John 6)
193 When we doubt how much we can accomplish through personal change and through

194 political change, we fail to give credit to the One who will use us to further the Kingdom of God.
195 We need only to remember what the Lord requires of us: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and
196 to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)
197 "Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers,
198 encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you
199 repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray
200 without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
201 Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to
202 what is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:12-22).

1 **Statement on Nonviolence**

2 *April, 2002*

3 ***Introduction***

4 Violence is an ever-present reality in our society. Every day the media confronts us with reports of
5 spouse and child abuse, attacks on women, minorities and gay and lesbian people, ethnic
6 cleansing, terrorism and war. These occurrences inflict incalculable suffering on millions of people
7 all over the world and create an environment of fear that terrorizes millions more.

8 Faithfulness to its mission requires the Church to speak out against violence, minister to its
9 victims and work tirelessly to reduce the level of violence in society. To do this effectively it is
10 necessary to identify and address the causes of violence. One of the most important, most hidden
11 and least understood of these is structural injustice.

12 **What is structural injustice?**

13 Structural injustice is the oppression and exploitation many people experience, because the
14 social structures and policies that affect their lives are controlled by and benefit disproportionately
15 elite groups at the expense of the masses.

16 Structural injustice is perhaps most obvious in the economic sector of society. In unregulated,
17 free market economies maximization of profit is the main motivation for economic enterprise.
18 Large corporations, the main economic actors in such economies, have enormous power, which
19 they often use to keep wages and corporate taxes low and to lobby against government
20 regulations such as laws protecting workers or the environment. These corporations produce an
21 abundance of the goods and services people with buying power want, but for economic reasons
22 they often ignore or address inadequately the needs of poor people and of society as a whole. Bill
23 Gates, one of the world's most successful capitalists at the turn of the third millennium,
24 acknowledged these inadequacies of the free market when he gave one billion dollars to fight
25 AIDS in Africa. He said that although there was an urgent need for this work, the market would
26 not respond to it because it wouldn't be profitable enough.

27 Structural injustice, which many see as a form of violence, may be most easily recognized in the
28 economy, but it is present in all other sectors of society as well, including religion. The Church,
29 itself, is not free of it. Indeed, the Church has sometimes supported or even employed overt forms
30 of violence. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, the burning of "witches" in
31 medieval Europe and colonial Massachusetts, the torture and execution of heretics by both
32 Protestants and Catholics at the time of the Reformation, and the centuries-long persecution of
33 Jews are dramatic examples of this. It grieves us deeply that religiously motivated violence and
34 violence in the name of religion are continuing and even growing problems in our world. For that
35 reason we rejoice that Pope John Paul II began the Third Millennium on an honest and hopeful
36 note by publicly acknowledging and repenting of these acts and calling the Church to a more
37 consistent and faithful practice of nonviolence. We also rejoice that, although extremist groups
38 still engage in acts of overt violence in the name of Christ or the Church, these acts are no longer
39 officially endorsed or legitimated by the institutional Church.

40 Structural injustice, however, remains more common. When growth and profitability become the
41 Church's major goals, structural injustice is often the result, because these goals can easily lead
42 the Church away from Jesus' injunction to make the well being of "the least of my brothers and
43 sisters" a priority. When this happens, the Church, pursuing success as the world understands it,

44 organizes its life around the preferences of affluent and powerful groups. It adopts more-or-less
45 uncritically the culture of these groups and starts new parishes primarily among them while
46 abandoning many poor, inner-city congregations. This is an example of structural injustice in the
47 life of the Church, because, through these practices, it serves the powerful while neglecting the
48 needs of poor and marginalized people.

49 Jesus calls the Church to be concerned about the well being of the earth and all its inhabitants
50 and to minister to the victims of violence. It does this through Word and Sacrament, pastoral care,
51 social services, and worldwide humanitarian programs. Through faith-based public policy
52 advocacy it also urges governments to seek alternatives to violence in addressing social
53 problems and resolving social conflicts. The Church's inspiration for this work is the gospel of
54 Jesus Christ.

55 **Jesus' proclamation of God's reign**

56 Although there are numerous, troubling passages in the Bible itself that legitimate violence, at its
57 heart the biblical message is about a God who is full of compassion and who ceaselessly works
58 to transform the world through love. In this transformed world, peace and justice will kiss each
59 other (Psalm 85:10), poverty will be no more (Deuteronomy 15:4) and war between nations will
60 be a thing of the past (Isaiah 2:4). The Hebrew scriptures use the word "shalom" to describe this
61 New World which God is bringing into being. Shalom is the total well being of the whole world and
62 all its inhabitants. The Bible portrays Shalom as God's will for the world and pictures God as
63 relentless in pursuit of Shalom.

64 Christians believe and the Church teaches that in Jesus of Nazareth God's work in behalf of
65 shalom reaches a new intensity. Jesus announces and initiates the Reign of God on earth. The
66 Reign of God is the New World, the world of Shalom that God is bringing into being among us.

67 Jesus' proclamation of God's reign brings him into conflict with the powerful who control the social
68 structures of his society. He boldly exposes the oppressive role these structures are playing in
69 communal life and shows how incompatible many of their present practices are with life in the
70 Kingdom of God. Jesus is particularly critical of his society's religious structures and practices. He
71 breaks the Sabbath and purity laws as they were understood and applied by the religious leaders
72 of his society. These laws regulated relationships between "the Righteous" and women, poor
73 people, lame people, blind people, people with leprosy, prostitutes and others considered unclean
74 by the religious elite.

75 Jesus also challenged in a unique way the political structures of his time and the beliefs and
76 values on which they were based. When his disciples argue about which one is the greatest, he
77 says to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are
78 called Benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the
79 youngest and the leader like one who serves." (Luke 22:25-26) To understand the political
80 undertones of this saying, it is important to know that Benefactor is one of the titles of Tiberius
81 Caesar, Jesus' emperor.

82 Both in his time and in our own, those who hear and understand Jesus' message realize that he
83 threatens the status quo by calling individuals to radical repentance and also by calling for radical
84 change in the way society is organized and functions.

85 **God as Abba**

86 Jesus' experience of God is the inspiration for his message about God's Reign as a reign of love.
87 For Jesus, God is not a distant, condemning and wrathful sovereign waiting to punish everyone
88 who makes a false move.

89 Jesus experiences God as "Abba." Abba is the affectionate, intimate name that a little child calls
90 a loving father whom she knows loves her, whom she can trust, with whom she knows she is safe
91 and whom she knows wants the best for her. For Jesus, the transcendent Holy One is Abba, the
92 Lover of humanity, who longs to draw all people into the beloved community.

93 Jesus' teaching and ministry reflect the universal love and welcome that he experiences from
94 God. Like God, Jesus welcomes all, especially those usually excluded--people with leprosy,
95 handicapped people, poor people, beggars, thieves, and prostitutes--in other words those whom
96 righteous, religious and important people consider of no account. "Tax collectors and prostitutes
97 are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you," Jesus told the chief priests and elders of the
98 people. (Matthew 21:31). It should come as no surprise that these leaders, as well as the Roman
99 authorities with whom they collaborated, thought Jesus was dangerous and felt they had a
100 responsibility to eliminate him before he undermined the social systems they administered and in
101 which they found their security.

102 **Gospel nonviolence**

103 Jesus is aware of their plot, but he responds in an extraordinary way. On the one hand, he
104 refuses to be intimidated. He continues to preach and live God's reign of grace and unconditional
105 love in spite of growing opposition and danger. On the other hand, he will not use violence to
106 defend himself or the Reign of God that he came to initiate on earth. He trusts God, his Abba, and
107 commends himself to God's care. Most remarkably, he continues to love his enemies, even after
108 he is aware of their plot to kill him. When the disciples tried to defend him in the Garden, Jesus
109 told them to put their swords away. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword," he said.
110 (Matthew 26:52). As he hung on the cross, dying and in pain, Jesus prayed for his executioners,
111 "Abba, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Jesus asks God to
112 include in the Kingdom even those who are killing him. Christians believe that God raised Jesus
113 from the dead, demonstrating that his nonviolent, suffering love is the most powerful reality in the
114 universe, more powerful even than death.

115 **The call to discipleship**

116 Jesus calls us to share in his ministry and way of life. His vision of the Reign of God is our
117 inspiration and guide. We are to resist evil and oppose violence, but not by evil or violent means.
118 We are to love our enemies, even those who seek to destroy us, and pray for those who
119 persecute us. This is a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural mandate. Millions of years of
120 evolution and millennia of social conditioning have programmed us not to love enemies who
121 threaten our lives, but to flee from them or to destroy them before they can destroy us. It is
122 impossible for us to change ourselves. But the Spirit of God, dwelling within us, can transform us.
123 The Spirit can open our hearts so that we begin to understand the beauty and joy of nonviolent
124 life in the Reign of God, embrace it, however haltingly, in our personal lives and relationships and
125 work to make it a reality in the world.

126 **Nonviolence in the history of the Church**

127 Nonviolence was a very important part of Christian life and witness in the early Church. The most
128 often quoted saying of Jesus in the first centuries was his teaching that we should love our
129 enemies. All Christian writings from the first 300 years that have survived, if they speak about the
130 subject at all, describe Christians as people who refuse to participate in violent activities such as
131 war, gladiatorial games or public executions. These words of Lactantius, a theologian who lived
132 around the year 300, express well the early Church's consensus about the incompatibility of
133 violence with Christian life.

134 "When God prohibits killing, he not only forbids us to commit brigandage, which is not allowed
135 even by the public laws, but he warns us not to do even those things which are regarded as legal
136 among men. And so it will not be lawful for a just (person) to serve as a soldier, since justice itself
137 is his military service-nor to accuse anyone of a capital offense, because it makes no difference
138 whether you kill with a sword or with a word, since killing itself is forbidden. And so in this
139 commandment of God, no exception at all ought to be made to the rule that it is always wrong to
140 kill a (human being), whom God has wished to be a sacrosanct creature." (John Ferguson, *The*
141 *Politics of Love*, p. 61.)

142
143 Although this teaching of the early Church never completely died out, after Christianity became
144 the official religion of the Roman Empire it was pushed to the margins of the Church. The
145 theological tradition that became dominant after 300 and remains so today teaches that God
146 might call saints like Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa to embrace a nonviolent way of life. But,
147 according to this later tradition, nonviolence is not a part of the ordinary Believer's calling and has
148 very little if any relevance for the institutional life of society. This later tradition also teaches that
149 social systems and institutions cannot function without violence and that effective leaders cannot
150 consistently act nonviolently. Nor, according to this tradition, did Jesus ever intend his nonviolent
151 teaching and example to apply to society.

152 **Rediscovery of gospel nonviolence**

153 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several Christians, including the novelist, Leo
154 Tolstoi, rediscovered Jesus' nonviolence. However, more than anyone else it was the Hindu,
155 Mohandas K. Gandhi, who explored its meaning for society. Gandhi applied the nonviolence he
156 claimed to have learned from Jesus in new and revolutionary ways. Through his "experiments
157 with truth," he disproved the idea that Jesus' teaching on nonviolence can have no relevance for
158 society or that it is reserved for special saints. He brought Jesus' ethic of nonviolence into the
159 Town Square and even the battlefield. His commitment to nonviolence was religious. He believed
160 in nonviolence not because it was successful but because it was right. But he also tried to prove
161 that a courageous, fierce but loving nonviolence like that of Jesus, when practiced on a mass
162 scale by committed and courageous people, is a powerful method of social transformation.
163 Gandhi repeatedly acknowledged that Jesus, particularly his Sermon on the Mount, was the chief
164 inspiration and guide for his work.

165 Gandhi's experiments with nonviolence inspired many others to take up this work. Among the
166 best-known are Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Desmond Tutu, and Dorothy Day.
167 Corazon Aquino, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela and many other
168 leaders of the nonviolent revolutions that swept through the Philippines, South Africa, Eastern
169 and Central Europe, the Soviet Union, and Central America in the waning years of the twentieth
170 century are also among the disciples of Gandhi. Some of these leaders do not reject violence
171 absolutely but are proponents of the Just War theory, which has played such an important role in
172 Church history. This theory is often misused as a justification for war, but when responsibly
173 applied, it is only a short step from Gospel nonviolence. Those who espouse and responsibly
174 apply it remind us that, while Jesus calls us to a life of nonviolence, we still confront situations in
175 the world which are ambiguous and confusing. In light of this ambiguity, some Christian leaders,
176 although agreeing that violence is always both tragic and sinful, have concluded that there are
177 extreme situations that justify the use of limited violence against evil when all other possibilities
178 seem to be exhausted. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an example of such a Christian.

179 **Our commitment**

180 Nonviolence both as a personal way of life and as a way of transforming society is rooted in and
181 inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus. It was affirmed and nurtured by the early Church.
182 Therefore the institutional Church today has a particular responsibility to support and promote it.
183 As Church leaders, we confess that we have often failed in this responsibility. We repent of our

184 failure and ask God to forgive us and give us the courage we need both to embrace nonviolence
185 in our personal lives and relationships and also in our work for social justice and peace in the
186 world. In the spirit of repentance and hope, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, a community of
187 churches that proclaim the Triune God as revealed in Jesus Christ, commits itself, as opportunity
188 and resources allow, to:

- 189 • Urge member Churches to examine their policies and practices for instances of
190 institutional violence and work to eliminate any they discover;
- 191 • Encourage Christian leaders to lift up Jesus' vision of nonviolence in their preaching,
192 teaching and liturgical ministries;
- 193 • Support the United Nations Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the
194 Children of the World (2001-2010) by sponsoring educational events, making resources
195 on nonviolence available and promoting training in nonviolence;
- 196 • Work to reduce and eventually eliminate weapons of mass destruction and land mines;
- 197 • Advocate for the dignity and civil rights of all persons and groups and speak out against
198 expressions of hatred or acts of violence directed against persons or groups because of
199 their race, nationality, culture, ethnic group, religion, political position, gender or sexual
200 orientation;
- 201 • Seek common ground among all those concerned about the problem of unwanted
202 pregnancies so people who take different points of view will be able to work together both
203 to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions and to promote the welfare
204 of all children;
- 205 • Support efforts to reduce violence in the media;
- 206 • Advocate restraint in defense spending;
- 207 • Advocate legislation that keeps guns out of the hands of unstable or dangerous persons;
- 208 • Cooperate with groups working nonviolently for economic justice and peace when their
209 work is compatible with the faith and values of the Wisconsin Council of Churches and its
210 member churches;
- 211 • Work nonviolently in behalf of the goals outlined in the Wisconsin Council of Churches'
212 statement on economic justice;
- 213 • Support efforts to end domestic violence and provide safe haven for abused spouses and
214 children;
- 215 • Advocate in behalf of adequate legal services for all, alternatives to incarceration for
216 nonviolent crimes and a criminal justice system that strives for restorative justice,
217 restitution, rehabilitation and reconciliation rather than retribution. This includes continued
218 opposition to the death penalty and other cruel and unusual punishments such as
219 prolonged solitary confinement and sensory deprivation.

220 April 2002

1 **Reconciled in Christ with Creator and Creation:**

2 **The Worshipful Work of Caring for the Earth and People**

3 Wisconsin Council of Churches Policy Statement, Adopted December 12, 2006.

4
5 + + +

6 *A note about this statement: Policy statements of the Wisconsin Council of Churches express the biblical,*
7 *theological, and ethical grounds for the Council's work and witness regarding matters of concern to God's*
8 *people in the world. They are not binding on member churches, but provide direction and guidance for the*
9 *Council's education, and worship, advocacy and programming. We hope that they may also be helpful and*
10 *inspiring to anyone who seeks to think and live as a Christian disciple in the public realm.*

11 + + +

12
13 *As members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches "We pray and work together for . . . the*
14 *healing and reconciliation of the world." "The world" includes the natural environment, and our*
15 *care for creation is a matter of praying as well as working – it is "worshipful work." Thus, this*
16 *statement reflects a pattern familiar in our traditions of worship: Invocation, Confession and*
17 *Repentance, Proclamation, Response, and Sending Forth.*

18
19 **I. God, Humanity, Nature**

20
21 From Genesis through Revelation, scripture repeatedly affirms that the whole earth is God's good
22 creation, filled with the divine glory and mirroring God's wisdom, mystery, and majesty (Is. 6:3;
23 Rom 1:20).¹ All creation is a gift. By God's grace this planet is a life-sustaining home for us and
24 for all earth's creatures (Gen 1, Ps 104). The whole creation depends on God, to whom all things
25 belong (Ps. 24:1). God loves the world, the *kosmos*, (John 3:16-17) and we cannot love God
26 without loving what God loves.

27
28 Daily we receive God's gifts through the complex, interdependent ecological web into which our
29 lives are woven: gifts of physical and mental health, beauty, material resources, the shared basis
30 for community, and a diverse environment. Study of the natural world gives us knowledge that is
31 useful and that deepens our awe and appreciation for the Creator and the creation.

32
33 We are human creatures, dependent on the rest of creation. While we have great abilities to
34 transform matter and energy, we can create neither. We are fellow creatures with all that God
35 has made, sharing with them a common origin and destiny (Gen 1, Rom 8, Rev. 22). As divine
36 images reflecting God's gracious love and care, we have been given the special vocation of
37 caring for creation, and special gifts for appreciating, understanding, cultivating, and protecting it
38 (Gen 1:28, 2:15).

39
40 **II. A Threatened Creation**

41
42 Arrogance, greed, and ignorance, however, have distorted this calling into a domination that
43 exploits and degrades both human beings and the natural world. Social injustice and ecological
44 destruction are manifestations of sin (Isa.5:8-10, 24:4-7).

45
46 The consequences of this distortion of our calling are many: global climate change; biodiversity
47 loss; air and water pollution; environmental health hazards; urban sprawl; loss of forests, rivers
48 and farmland; the loss of natural beauty; loss of contact with the natural world, and much more.

49
50 Locked in a vicious cycle with these environmental problems are hunger, war and preparations
51 for war, poverty, and injustice. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a
52 single garment of destiny."² The poor and vulnerable suffer the most from environmental

53 degradation. Poverty and insecurity, in turn, lead people to over-exploit their local environments,
54 which contributes to political and armed conflicts that cause further destruction and displace
55 people from their land. The more affluent among us consume more than a fair share of the earth's
56 resources, often in ways that undermine creation's integrity and harm our human neighbors. But
57 benefiting economically from the abuse of earth and people diminishes us morally and spiritually.
58

59 Our political and economic policies take too little account of the consequences of our actions.
60 Industrial civilization is on a collision course with environmental limits – if we have not already
61 exceeded them. Future generations will reap a bitter harvest from the seeds we sow (Hos. 8:7).
62

63 We must change our ways. Our means of producing energy, food and other necessities must
64 become more just and sustainable. Responsible economic development can meet human needs
65 over the long term while maintaining ecological integrity.
66

67 **III. Repentance and Commitment**

68
69 As citizens of Wisconsin, we have enjoyed the beauty and the bounty of our state and wish to
70 preserve it for all who live here and for those who come after us.
71

72 Past and present generations have not always treated the land, the waters, their inhabitants, and
73 our neighbors with care or respect. Yet we are grateful for the legacies of the native peoples of
74 Wisconsin, and for Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Sigurd Olson, Gaylord Nelson, Philip Lewis, and
75 many others who have sought to show a better way to inhabit the earth.³ We know that change is
76 urgently needed if we and our descendants are to continue to enjoy the blessings of this gifted
77 land.
78

79 Because of the extended reach of technology, trade and communications, our actions have global
80 consequences, and events far away affect our own communities. Our responsibilities are
81 national and global as well as local.
82

83 As members of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, we call ourselves and our fellow citizens to
84 repentance and to a renewed commitment to responsible living in our part of Creation. As
85 Christian communities, we have a responsibility to lift up the ethical and spiritual values that must
86 guide our behavior as members of earth's household.⁴
87

88 **IV. Having The Mind of Christ**

89
90 As Christians, our pursuit of a just, sustainable, and life-sustaining world is energized and guided
91 by our faith in Jesus Christ. We see Christ's face in all people, especially the "least" among us
92 (Mt. 25:31-46). We desire to have the mind of Christ, who in the Incarnation took the form of a
93 servant (Phil. 2:5-8), and who in his life and ministry challenged the structures of imperial and
94 religious domination of his day (Mt.20:25-28). Today, the voiceless and vulnerable victims of
95 domination we are called to serve and defend include future generations and the natural world as
96 well as the poor.
97

98 **V. Principles for Witness and Discipleship in Public Life**

99
100 Christian witness and discipleship is lived out in public as well as personal life. The Wisconsin
101 Council of Churches is committed to the following principles in our advocacy for environmentally
102 responsible policies in national and state government, businesses, churches, and other
103 organizations:
104

105 *Respect for the whole earth community.* As we provide for ourselves and our human neighbors,
106 we must also provide for the survival and well-being of our fellow creatures in their habitats.
107 Following the principle of the Sabbath, we must recognize creation's limits and its need for
108 rhythms of rest and recuperation: we cannot press creatures to produce for us in ways that violate

109 their integrity (Ex. 23:10-12). Remembering the story of Noah we realize that all creatures –
110 “clean and unclean” – are valued by God regardless of their usefulness for human beings.

111
112 *A comprehensive view of the common good.* Peace, justice, and sustainability are
113 interdependent. Each is essential to the common good of life in all its forms. Environmentally
114 unsustainable practices undercut our efforts to achieve justice and peace for all persons; violence
115 and injustice undermine sustainability. Nor is a violent, unjust, and ecologically impoverished
116 society the sort of society we wish to sustain.

117
118 *Sustainable sufficiency for all.* Over-consumption of natural resources by a relative few is a major
119 cause of environmental degradation. At the same time, many have barely enough to survive. A
120 more equitable and sustainable sharing of the earth’s bounty will require more efficient
121 technologies for meeting human needs, as well as a reduced consumption and increased
122 conservation ethic by those who already have more than enough.

123
124 *Environmental rights for all persons.* All human beings have the right to a safe and healthy
125 environment as well as access to essential natural resources such as food, water, and energy.
126 They also have the right to the material and social conditions for contented and dignified lives;
127 and for rich and rewarding relationships with one another and with the natural world. The needs
128 of the most vulnerable and marginalized people must be given special attention.

129
130 *Responsibility for the future.* The beauty, integrity, and diversity of the earth, as well as its
131 material resources, are an inheritance from the past that we hold in trust for future generations.
132 The decisions we make now will affect their well-being. We must not foreclose their opportunities
133 by exhausting nonrenewable resources, causing major long-term or irreversible global
134 environmental changes, or diminishing the continued fruitfulness of the earth by overexploiting
135 renewable resources.

136
137 *Democratic participation.* Effective environmental policymaking requires well-informed
138 participation by members of the community in the decisions that affect them. Democracy must
139 serve the good of all, rather than the desires of a powerful few who stand to benefit in material
140 terms from the destructive exploitation of people and the earth. As we are all sustained by the
141 resources and life-support systems of this planet, so we also share a common responsibility for
142 conserving, protecting, and restoring them.

143
144 *Prudence.* There are limits to our ability to predict, control, or defend ourselves against the
145 consequences of our actions. We do not have the luxury of certainty, but when the best available
146 evidence and interpretation indicate that a particular course of action – or inaction – could
147 jeopardize future well-being, prudence requires us to respond appropriately, even if that means
148 making challenging and far-reaching changes in our way of life.

149
150 *Support for stewards of the land.* As fewer of us are directly engaged in making our living from
151 the land, we depend on farmers, farm workers, and others who help us to meet our needs from
152 creation’s bounty. We must seek justice for them while encouraging environmentally healthy and
153 sustainable forms of agriculture, forestry, and fishing. We especially owe smaller family farmers a
154 just livelihood so they can support themselves, their families, and their communities while acting
155 on our behalf as good stewards of the land.

156 157 **VI. The Charge to the Church**

158
159 The Holy Spirit calls the church, as Christ’s body in the world, to reflect in word and action God’s
160 intention to reconcile the whole creation (Col. 1). This calling is not an optional activity to be
161 relegated to a congregation’s social ministry committee, but belongs to the whole worshipful work
162 of every congregation. Therefore, the Wisconsin Council of Churches is committed to the care of
163 creation as integral to its mission:

164

- 165 ☉ In doxology – Offering praise, honor, and gratitude to the Creator by celebrating and
 166 appreciating the Creation;
 167 ☉ In confession – Facing the truth of our situation without complacency or despair, and
 168 accepting our own complicity in Earth’s distress;
 169 ☉ In teaching – Forming disciples who accept their responsibility to care for creation in their
 170 community and the world;
 171 ☉ In service – Protecting and restoring creation and helping others to have livelihoods of
 172 sustainable sufficiency;
 173 ☉ In advocacy – Reminding the government, private enterprise, and the public of their
 174 responsibility for the common good, and speaking out on behalf of the voiceless;
 175 ☉ In daily life – Actively redefining the “good life” in contrast to the culture of materialistic
 176 consumerism, and as based on abundant life in Christ Jesus, who offers to all the
 177 inexhaustible and infinitely renewable gifts of love, grace, justice, and peace.
 178

179 *December 2006*

180
 181

ENDNOTES

¹ See www.nrpe.org and www.creationcare.org for collections of biblical references on creation and creation care. See www.nccecojustice.org and www.nrpe.org for collections and excerpts of related denominational statements.

² Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.”

³ **Aldo Leopold** (1887-1948) was Professor of Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the author of *A Sand County Almanac*. He wrote that our ethics must include concern for the health of the land as an interdependent community of living things, to which human beings belong. (www.aldoleopold.org)

John Muir (1838-1914) emigrated to Wisconsin from Scotland as a child. A naturalist, writer, and pioneering conservationist with a deep and ecstatic love for creation, he campaigned vigorously for wilderness preservation and founded the Sierra Club. (http://www.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/)

Gaylord Nelson (1916-2005) served Wisconsin as Governor and Senator. A champion of landmark environmental legislation including the Wilderness Act and the National Environmental Education Act, he is best known as the founder of Earth Day. The Nelson Institute of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin – Madison is named for him. (<http://www.ies.wisc.edu/>)

Sigurd Olson (1899-1982) writer and conservationist, grew up in northern Wisconsin. He was instrumental in establishing the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Olson and Nelson were keynote speakers at a 1971 conference at Northland College, Ashland, WI, which led to the founding of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute. (<http://www.northland.edu/soei/>)

Philip H. Lewis, Jr., landscape architect, inventoried Wisconsin’s natural areas and promoted their protection. He described his approach to environmentally sensitive land use in *Tomorrow by Design: A Regional Design Process for Sustainability* and continues his research and practice at the Marshall Erdman Academy of Sustainable Design in Madison, WI.

⁴ *Oikos*, the Greek word for “household,” is the common root of “ecology,” “economy,” and “ecumenism.”

1 **Breaking the Cycle of Violence: Living As Images of God**

2
3 Wisconsin Council of Churches Statement Adopted February 6, 1995
4

5 Although the violence so prevalent all around us today frightens, angers, and outrages us, we
6 oppose the reintroduction of the death penalty in Wisconsin. We believe there are more humane
7 and effective options for addressing the problem of violence, and that these options enjoy
8 significant public support. *

9
10 Our opposition to the death penalty is based, first of all, on our faith.

11
12 We believe and teach that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and
13 that even the most perverse behavior cannot obliterate that image or destroy the worth of the
14 person who bears it.

15
16 We believe that God is love and that, through the prophets, Jesus and other messengers, even to
17 our own time, God teaches us to love and respect every human person as an image of God.

18
19 We understand ourselves as people called to follow Jesus, who rejected the law of retribution
20 ("an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth") and, by teaching us to love our enemies, broke the
21 cycle of violence and death once and for all. Our opposition to the death penalty is an expression
22 of our desire, as Jesus' disciples, to do what we can to bring this cycle to an end.

23
24 We believe that vengeance belongs to God alone, and that the God we adore is not vengeful but
25 gracious and merciful.

26
27 We also oppose the death penalty because of serious and unavoidable problems in its
28 implementation.

29
30 The record shows that innocent people have sometimes been executed. Because of human
31 imperfection, such mistakes are unavoidable. Unlike other forms of punishment, a mistaken
32 execution can never be corrected. **

33
34 Numerous studies have failed to prove that capital punishment deters homicide more effectively
35 than imprisonment. ***

36
37 Demographic studies have shown that the death penalty is imposed disproportionately on poor
38 people and people of color. ****

39
40 We know that there are many thoughtful differences of opinion about the death penalty among
41 the members of our churches. In the coming months, we urge the people in our congregations to
42 share these opinions with one another and to study and reflect together on this issue from the
43 perspective of their Christian faith, opening their hearts and minds to one another and to the
44 guidance and illumination of God's Spirit. We also urge those who come to a decision on this
45 issue to communicate their position to the governor and legislators of our state.

46 47 48 Footnotes

49 * A national poll conducted in 1993 by the polling firms of Greenberg/Lake and the Tarrance
50 Group revealed that more Americans favor life without parole, coupled with restitution, than favor
51 the death penalty. (Sentencing for Life, Americans Embrace Alternative to the Death Penalty,
52 1993).

53 ** A 1987 Stanford Law Review article found 349 people wrongfully convicted of crimes
54 punishable by death from 1900 to 1985. Of these, 139 received the death penalty and 23 were
55 executed.

56 *** For example, a study by Amnesty International revealed that between 1976 and 1986 the
57 average murder rate in states without the death penalty was 5.3 per million and in states that had
58 executed someone, it was 10.6 per million. (The Milwaukee Journal, October 29, 1994).
59 **** For example, nearly 90% of these executed for the crime of rape since 1930 have been
60 African Americans. (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Capital Punishment,
61 1981).

1 **Gambling Statement**

2 The Wisconsin Council of Churches is unalterably opposed to any governmental sponsoring of
3 organized gambling in any form, whether by Federal, State, Tribal or County governments.
4 Organized gambling is a burden to society.

5 At the same time, the Wisconsin Council of Churches totally supports the principle of Tribal
6 Sovereignty. The government of the State of Wisconsin has no right to interfere in the internal
7 decisions of tribal governments, any more than it does in the decisions of other States.

8 The State does have an obligation to cooperate with tribal governments in order to address the
9 issues which compel those governments to look to gambling to provide an economic base for
10 their citizens.

11 Wisconsin Council of Churches Board of Directors Statement-December 2, 1997