

Faithful Citizenship: **A Response to the Scandal of Poverty in Wisconsin**

We who have signed on to this letter are people of faith, faiths which inform our view of the world and the very meaning of our individual and collective lives.

We are not a stereotype. We come from different faith traditions and different cultures. We are urban, suburban and rural, from across Wisconsin. We are different races, ages, genders, political views and lifestyles. This letter transcends difference and identifies key matters of agreement.

We are shocked and scandalized by the depth of poverty in Wisconsin: One in ten of us lives in poverty; in the best-off counties the rate is only half that -- one in twenty lives poverty.* Poverty is more visible in our cities, but it is everywhere in Wisconsin. Poverty is closely related to racial disparities. It is closely related to our unacceptably high rate of incarceration. Poverty's greatest cruelty is that the poor live in the midst of plenty, and in a time when the wealthiest have more than ever before.

We are saddened and angered to learn that the fastest-growing group of poor people are children, increasing 12% between 2010 and 2011.* No society that hopes to have a prosperous and civilized future can give up on so much of its next generation.

Our many faith traditions teach us that we cannot place all the blame for poverty on the poor. All of us are responsible for each other, and the primary obligation of those with power and resources is to look out for the well-being of the most vulnerable.

But we are not just shocked and saddened: We are motivated, motivated to speak and act for change. And that change should come from individuals, from our communities, and from the institutions of our democracy.

We believe that faith communities have the responsibility to care for the poor and the marginalized, a responsibility with many dimensions. Many of our individual members, congregations and denominations dedicate great effort and resources to feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, teaching and guiding children and youth, helping to connect people with employment, and more. Some of our communities are even involved in community development efforts, to create opportunities for people to succeed. All of these efforts are important and should be increased to meet the growing need.

We challenge ourselves, and all members of the larger faith community, to reach out to build respectful relationships with people who live in poverty. Caring about and donating to the poor are just the necessary beginnings -- we each need to get to know the *people*. Our congregations need to build real relationships with congregations

* <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/faqs/faq4.htm>

populated by people whose lives are so different from ours. We must recover the sense that we all share a common humanity.

Our responsibility as people of faith goes beyond providing social services, however. We have an obligation to “speak truth to power.” **In the tradition of the prophets, we have the duty to challenge systems that create, sustain or ignore human suffering.** We are called to speak out against policies and practices that create poverty, or that do less than possible to alleviate it. While faith communities are not called to partisan politics, we must bring our values to the public debate about decisions that affect the poor. Those with the power to act must be called to account.

We believe that one of government’s fundamental responsibilities is to play its important role in combating the evil of poverty. Government, in a democracy, is a way we put our values into practice. Only government can ensure that the rules are fair and can protect the vulnerable from the greedy who would prey on them. For example, governments across the country are setting the minimum wage at a level that allows families to live in dignity.

Government creates the structures that allow poverty, and government can marshal the resources necessary for the infrastructure needed to create opportunities for people to escape poverty. We reject claims that our prosperous society cannot afford to provide pathways out of poverty. We have plenty of resources; the issue is one of priorities. Investment in education, transitional jobs, health care, and alternatives to incarceration can create pathways for many people. So the conversation about poverty cannot be held in purely theoretical terms. It must include very concrete discussion of the minimum wage, eligibility for BadgerCare and other health care, school nutrition programs, transitional jobs, tax policy, transit and criminal justice policy. We cannot let these conversations be polarized to "liberal vs conservative" but instead to "just vs. unjust."

We believe that our faith has meaning when it is expressed in real actions that can reduce human suffering and promote the dignity of every person. So we must challenge our elected officials and community and business leaders to build real, mutually respectful, relationships with people in poverty. We encourage those in power to visit prisoners, central city youth and others – not just for public relations purposes, but to listen attentively to the stories of those who are struggling to get by in our society.

In this election year, we encourage all people of faith to make poverty a priority issue when they vote. We encourage faith communities to question those who would lead us about their plans to provide real, concrete help and opportunity for the poor – especially the children. We cannot consider only our own narrow self-interest when we engage in politics or business. Every decision must be evaluated according to the effect it will have on those in poverty, today and in the future.

To receive a link to add your name e-mail faithfulcitizenwi@gmail.com