

Statement on Economic Justice

Wisconsin Council of Churches Policy
November 28, 2001 (Amended December 12,
2006)

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

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God's intention for all Creation

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

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

Our God knows each of us intimately (Psalm 139) and travels with us wherever we go. If we choose to emphasize our God-given individuality, God is with us. When we choose to bring our individuality into community as God created for us, God is

there as well. There is a tension that does and should exist between individuality and community. We can find full expression of self in community and we, as individuals, are responsible both to and as community. Yet in a society that places individuality and personal success in such high priority, the Wisconsin Council of Churches believes that it is the responsibility of the church, the body of Christ, to reinforce God's message of community, of stewardship, of mutual support for one another and for the environment.

The purpose of this statement

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

Indeed, God has always provided enough. As the people of God journeyed from the Garden of Eden through 40 years in the wilderness and on to the Land of Milk and Honey, God provided 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)

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

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

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

synonymous with justice, the act of being fair.

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

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

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

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)

Jesus' authoritative words turned the world around him upside down. Those people who are the least in the sight of human beings, culture and society, are the very ones he declares must and will be

helped the most. He contradicts the world's view of success. He turns the world upside down in order to get it right side up and calls upon his followers to do the same. Jesus deliberately identified himself with the poor as an act of loving compassion, therefore challenging the rest of us to respond in kind.

What are the causes of poverty?

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

The special responsibilities of the wealthy

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

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

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)

How wealth is to be apportioned

While we have come to think of property as our accumulated possessions, property in the Hebrew

scriptures refers to the land. Such property was a gift from God; it was sacred. Yet while it was a gift to God's people, they held it not as a personal possession but as stewards. God maintained ownership and the stewards of the land who were given dominion over it were to see that it was properly maintained in a way that it would provide not only for the family who tended it, but for the poor who would benefit from the family's tithe. Yet, today, wealth is held in the hands 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)

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

But there remains a chasm between those who have and those who have not. Farmers who for generations have considered farming not a business but a "way of life" find it difficult to survive in an economy that calls for cheap food at the expense of the producer and, at the same time, fails to provide food for those who need it the most. There are businesspeople who would, at the expense of their employees and the environment, seek higher personal profits for themselves without thought for the dignity and well-being of those who work for them. There are

those in public service who have bowed to high-powered interests and have advocated passed legislation that has been detrimental to or does not address at all the disparity between the rich and the poor.

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

Avenues of economic justice

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

- Continued efforts to reduce poverty;
- Opportunities in all forms for children, families, singles and elders so as to ensure the full potential and dignity of each person;
- Racial, ethnic, and gender equality in all sectors of the economy;
- Employment standards that are fair, where workers are paid a just and fair wage and where benefits are provided where possible (including the farm sector and with migrant workers), and, when unemployment occurs, access to public or private assistance for those people who cannot work or for whom there are no jobs available.
- The right of private and public employees to choose to organize and bargain collectively, so each and all may participate more effectively in decisions that affect them and protect the dignity and well-being of themselves and their families. Workers and employers are responsible for negotiating in good faith and considering how their decisions will affect the common good.
- Decent and affordable housing;
- Quality public education that is funded adequately and fairly, recognizing the needs of rural schools and those with large numbers of poor, students needing special education, and children for whom English is their second language; and that is protected against measures that are punitive and that undermine a public commitment to the common good;

- Access to basic health care that provides for the whole of the person, physical and mental;
- Sustainable agricultural practices, fair prices and income for farmers and farm workers, and ensuring a safe food supply for all of those who hunger and thirst;
- Environmental laws and regulations that ensure the long-term productivity and protection of the land;
- Taxation that gives relief to those who need it most and addresses the gap between the rich and the poor;
- Access to government through an open process and financing of elections that attracts those who would be our most able leaders, not just those who can afford to run;
- Reforms of the political process that will make our elected leaders more accountable to the people rather than to special interest money, and that will promote civic participation by assuring citizens that their votes count and that government can work fairly and effectively for the benefit of all;
- International trade systems and treaties that protect worker justice, human rights, environmental standards, and democratic process;
- Community development programs that uphold the integrity of our citizens and our environment.
- Immigration policies that prioritize family reunification, protect workers' rights, and enforce immigration laws with justice and compassion; and increased efforts to address the root causes of international migration in poverty, war, persecution, and environmental degradation.
- Increasing our nation's capacity to respond to the growing need for refugee protection, resettlement, and integration.

The church, its role, and the realities of the world

The church has remained silent on many of these issues, fearful of reaction from the people in the pews. We have shunned controversy. We share the guilt of those who have not worked for economic justice. In addition, the church is not exempt from the creation and maintenance of economic injustice and must take its own

responsibility for it. Therefore, we recognize several realities in our world:

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

Conclusion

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

When we doubt how much we can accomplish through personal change and through political change, we fail to give credit to the One who will use us to further the Kingdom of God. We need only to remember what the Lord requires of us: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

"Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil." (1 Thessalonians 5:12-22).