

## COMMISSION REPORTS

**Report of the Commission on Christian Action**

The Belhar Confession proclaims:

We believe that God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people; that God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged; *that God calls the church to follow him in this*, for God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry [emphasis added].

The confession goes on to announce that God frees, restores, supports, protects, helps, blocks, and “wishes to teach the church to do what is good and to seek the right” and that the church “must stand where the Lord stands.” The Belhar asserts what disciples of Jesus have learned since the beginning: that in following Christ, we are called to action. In endeavoring to faithfully carry out the mandate given to it, the Commission on Christian Action hopes to “inform and advise the church concerning current social issues and the scriptural and Christian principles by which critical evaluation may be exercised on those issues and proper action taken” (BCO 3.I.5.2.b).

The Commission on Christian Action met October 16-18, 2008, and January 29-31, 2009, in Chicago, Illinois, working on substantive materials preparing for both General Synod 2009 and 2010.

**Poverty**

Following is the statement of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A., an ecumenical organization of which the RCA is a part.

**CHRISTIAN CHURCHES TOGETHER STATEMENT ON POVERTY**

As Christian leaders in the wealthiest society on earth, we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The gospel and our ethical principles place our service of the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.

Our common faith compels us. Christ our Lord teaches us that when we serve and stand with “the least of these,” we serve and stand with Him. Our Bible teaches us in hundreds of places that the God we worship has a special concern for the poor. God judges individuals and societies by how they respond to the needs of the poor. As leaders in Christian Churches Together, we believe that a renewed commitment to overcome poverty is central to the mission of the church and essential to our unity in Christ. Therefore in order to obey our God, respect the dignity of every person, and promote the common good of society, we must act. Our focus here is domestic poverty, but we reaffirm our commitment to overcome poverty all around the world.

Widespread and persistent poverty challenges us to action. The painful truth is that about thirty-seven million people in our country live below the poverty line. Tragically, 18 percent of all our children struggle in poverty. The sad reality is that millions in our nation work hard and still cannot escape poverty. We lament this ongoing poverty.

Our faith in Christ who is the truth compels us to confront the ignorance of and indifference to the scandal of widespread, persistent poverty in this rich nation. We must call this situation by its real names: moral failure, unacceptable injustice. Our faith in Christ drives us to call our churches and our society to a more urgent, united response.

We are grateful for the vast array of ways our churches are already helping millions of struggling people. We want to build on these efforts, learn from each other, and collaborate more closely. But we can, we must, do more.

We also recognize and encourage leaders in community, economic and public life who seek justice for poor people in our land. But we can, we must, do more. Our goal must be the elimination of poverty in this land.

As we as Christians renew and strengthen our efforts to overcome domestic poverty, we will seek to work with people of other faiths and all persons of good will in this urgent task.

Unfortunately, partisan and ideological divisions too often promote one-sided solutions and prevent genuine progress. We believe substantial success in reducing domestic poverty requires an overall framework that insists that overcoming poverty requires both more personal responsibility and broader societal responsibility, both better choices by individuals and better policies and investments by government, both renewing wholesome families and strengthening economic incentives. We believe that genuine success in reducing American poverty will require greater commitment and concrete action by all four of the following: churches, neighborhoods, communities, and faith-based and other organizations; government that implements better public policy at local, state, and federal levels; individuals and families; the market and private sector (employers, unions and other economic actors).

We are leaders of the Christian community, not an interest group. We have no partisan political agenda. We are conservatives and liberals, Independents, Republicans and Democrats. Together we believe that our faith demands and the people of this land yearn for concrete proposals that transcend divisive political divisions.

We give thanks to God for bringing together at one Christian table in Christian Churches Together for the first time in our history representatives of almost all the families in Christianity in the United States: Evangelicals/Pentecostals, Catholics, Racial/Ethnic, Orthodox and Historic Protestants. As a united voice of Christianity in this country, we pledge to strengthen our efforts to end the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation in history.

#### **Four Objectives**

CCT will promote its commitment to overcoming domestic poverty by inviting all Christians and all people, especially our leaders in public life, to embrace and implement the following objectives:

1. to strengthen families and communities; because they are essential bulwarks against poverty;
2. to reduce child poverty; we seek to cut child poverty by 50 percent in the next ten years;
3. to make work work; by combating racism and guaranteeing that full time work offers a realistic escape from poverty and access to good health care;
4. to strengthen the educational system in our country with particular attention to the public schools; because access to quality education offers perhaps the best way out of poverty.

In January 2009, Christian Churches Together (CCT) came together to further reflect implementing the four above objectives. They reaffirmed “that our service to the poor and our work for justice are ‘at the center of Christian life and witness.’ And we agreed to renew our prayers to understand and live in faithfulness to our Lord’s teaching that when we serve ‘the least of these,’ we truly minister to our Lord Himself” (from a report titled “Implementing the Call to Cut Poverty in Half,” from the January 2009 annual meeting of CCT). CCT then went on to lay out further principles and ideas:

### Principles

To reduce poverty, we call on churches, government, businesses, communities and families to:

#### A. Strengthen Families

1. Recognize that financial stress exacerbates family instability and abuse, and family brokenness places families at risk of poverty.
2. Ensure that all families have access to resources for strengthening families and safeguarding child safety.
3. Ensure that all families have access to the basic needs of food, health care, and housing.
4. Correct racial disparities and structural injustices that undermine families, especially in low-income communities.
5. Affirm the central importance of healthy families to strong communities, and reinforce parents’ responsibility for their children.

#### B. Strengthen Communities

1. Identify, support, nurture and retain local community leadership.
2. Promote together in our congregations the need to address both the results and the causes of poverty in our communities, offering resources and models.
3. Support the efforts of community organizing which empowers local communities in their efforts to overcome poverty.

#### C. Make Work Work

1. Affirm that a full-time job should keep people out of poverty, not keep people in it. People who are able and willing to work full-time should not be poor. People unable to work should be supported and treated with dignity.
2. Affirm that a living family income should include a combination of family earnings and supports for transportation, health care, nutrition, child care, education, housing, and other basic needs to provide a decent standard of living.

#### D. Improve Education

1. Family, community, and schools must share responsibility for strengthening education.
2. All children have the right to a physically and emotionally safe school environment.
3. School funding must result in equitable education for all.
4. Because everyone is created in the image of God, the inequities and segregation in public education which result from economic and racial injustice must be corrected.
5. It is important to assure access to early childhood education for all children in poverty.

### Concrete Ideas for Church and Society

While Christian Churches Together does not endorse or promote specific public policies, the commission encourages church and societal leaders to consider these specific ideas to reduce poverty:

#### A. Strengthen Families

1. Strengthened national child-nutrition programs, with funding to meet the growing need.
2. Universal access to health care, especially for children in poverty.
3. Assistance to families at risk of losing housing due to the mortgage crisis, including protections for tenants.
4. Comprehensive immigration reform that protects the dignity and unity of immigrant families.
5. Subsidies that provide access to resources for strengthening families, such as pre-marital and marital counseling, parenting skills, mental health care, conflict resolution, financial management skills, and other services to prevent family crises and restore healthy family relationships.

#### B. Strengthen Communities

1. Investment in low-income communities and families should be a part of the economic recovery package (more resources for job creation, food stamps, a fully refundable child tax credit, and education for everyone from pre-kindergarten to adults).
2. People who are poor should be a part of the decision-making process of the recovery proposals.

#### C. Make Work Work

In order to protect and uplift vulnerable families, there must be the right mix of the following: an increase in the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit; a just minimum wage; expanded coverage of food stamps, increased unemployment insurance; and other proven investments that reward work.

#### D. Improve Education

1. Mentoring programs to students in pre-school through grade 12 should be provided using the trained voluntary efforts of college students, church members and others.
2. Research should be undertaken to identify safe school models that can be observed as part of a comprehensive program to assure safety for students and staff in all publicly funded schools.
3. Present state/local formulas that depend too much on local property taxes for school funding must be corrected.
4. Funding and/or provision for early childhood education should be a joint effort among government agencies, religious organizations, community groups, and private contributors.

#### **R-53**

**To direct the General Synod Council to make the Christian Churches Together poverty objectives a priority; and further,**

**to widely share the Christian Churches Together Statement on Poverty and subsequent principles and ideas with congregations and encourage congregations to take active steps in confronting poverty in the community. (ADOPTED)**

**Extension of Dialogue on Homosexuality**

The decision of the Reformed Church at the 2005 General Synod to enter into a period of dialogue on the issue of homosexuality is now ending. The value of that time and the concentrated efforts that the denomination has invested have begun to bear fruit in open conversations among individuals, congregations, and assemblies around the topic. Aspects of the dialogue process have led to an open exchange of viewpoints and honest conversation. Furthermore, the dialogue process has revealed both the seriousness and integrity of conviction with which Christians of various perspectives approach these issues, areas of continued struggle and perplexity, and a wish for loving and faithful witness of the gospel on the part of all involved. In light of the denomination's experience thus far, the Commission on Christian Action perceives that the valuable fruit of dialogue has yet to become fully manifest, and that the process itself is beneficial to the health of the denomination.

R-54

To affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality within the church, to state that our dialogical and discerning work is not done, and that legislative and judicial steps that wound the body of Christ and seek to coerce conformity are not helpful at this time; and further,

to affirm and extend the decisions of the 2005 and 2006 General Synods to reject disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints on this controversial issue; and further,

to recommend that officeholders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of the earlier statements of General Synod on ordination and relevant state laws on marriage, with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all involved.

The advice of the Advisory Committee on Overtures and New Business was to amend the recommendation:

To affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality within the church, to state that our dialogical and discerning work is not done, and that legislative and judicial steps ~~that wound the body of Christ and seek to coerce conformity~~ are not helpful at this time; and further,

to ~~encourage assemblies to refrain from~~ affirm and extend the decisions of the 2005 and 2006 General Synods to reject disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints on this controversial issue; and further,

to recommend that officeholders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of the earlier statements of General Synod on ordination and relevant state laws on marriage, with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all involved.

Reasons:

1. The amendment eliminates unnecessary, inflammatory language.
2. The advisory committee was unable to locate in the 2005 and 2006 General Synod minutes references to decisions rejecting disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints.

VOTED: To amend R-54.

A motion was made to further amend R-54 as follows (additions underlined, deletions stricken):

To affirm the value of continued dialogue and discernment on the topic of homosexuality within the church, to state that our dialogical and discerning work is not done, and that legislative and judicial steps are not ~~helpful~~ a preferred course of action at this time; and further,

recognizing the appropriate authority of assemblies, to encourage assemblies, when possible, to refrain from disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints on this controversial issue, to be monitored by the GSC, for report to the 2011 General Synod;

VOTED: To amend R-54.

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**recognizing the appropriate authority of assemblies, to encourage assemblies, when possible, to refrain from disciplinary proceedings as a way of dealing with minority viewpoints on this controversial issue, to be monitored by the GSC, for report to the 2011 General Synod; and further,**

**to recommend that officeholders and ministers avoid actions in violation of the policies of the earlier statements of General Synod on ordination and relevant state laws on marriage, with sensitivity to the pastoral needs of all involved. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)**

## **Report of the Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship**

The Discipleship Team of the RCA has defined discipleship as “the practice of following Jesus Christ, becoming more like him in all we think, say, and do, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the very presence of Christ in a lost and broken world so loved by God.”

The Commission on Christian Education and Discipleship describes discipleship as “deep” and “rich.”

- Discipleship is deep when it is transformational at personal, communal, and institutional levels.
- It is deep when it is incarnational, that is, when the gospel is not simply known intellectually but embodied and lived out in daily life.
- Discipleship is rich when it is both educational and missional, when the movement is both inward and outward.
- It is rich because it is relational, involving all generations teaching each other and learning from each other.