

KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
POLICY STATEMENT: CHILDREN IN CRISIS
Program Unit on Peacemaking/Racism
Adopted by the 47th Annual Assembly, October 20-21, 1994

THE CURRENT PROBLEM

In our time, many children in our own Commonwealth of Kentucky, in the United States, and around the globe are in dire shape; some suffer from poverty, disease, malnourishment, random violence and political upheavals, family abuse, racism and sexism. One of every four children in Kentucky lives in a household whose income falls below the poverty line. Other children whose families appear to be financially stable or even wealthy suffer from parental neglect and abuse, lack of direction and encouragement, and some have too much freedom.

The following facts of one day in the lives of children in the U. S. A. are cited in the excellent resource book, Welcome The Child: A Child Advocacy Guide For Churches:

- * 17,373 women get pregnant
- * 2,781 of them are teenagers
- * 1,115 teenagers have abortions
- * 329 teenagers miscarry
- * 1,340 teenagers give birth
- * 636 babies are born to women who have had inadequate prenatal care
- * 145 babies are born at very low birthweight (less than 3 1/4 pounds)
- * 63 babies die before one month of life
- * 101 babies die before their first birthday
- * 27 babies die from poverty
- * 3 children die from child abuse
- * 14 children die from guns
- * 135,000 children bring guns to school
- * 6 teenagers commit suicide
- * 8,400 teens become sexually active
- * 480 get syphilis or gonorrhea
- * 202 children are arrested for drug offenses
- * 340 children are arrested for drinking or drunken driving
- * 2,255 teenagers drop out of school
- * 7,945 children are reported abused or neglected
- * 1,234 children run away from home
- * 2,350 children are in adult jails
- * 3,325 children are born to unmarried women
- * 2,860 children see their parents divorce
- * 100,000 children are homeless

In the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Kentucky Youth Advocates reports the following facts about Kentucky's children, drawn from the 1990 census data and 1992 vital statistics data:

- * 25% of Kentucky's children live at or below the poverty level of family income
- * 18.8% of Kentucky's children live in single parent families, compared with 14.3% in 1980
- * 28.2% of Kentucky's youth did not graduate from high school
- * 3,300 babies were born to mothers under age 18, in 1992
- * 16,821 children were reported abused in 1992
- * 5,730 children were reported to have experienced sexual abuse
- * 43.3% of Kentucky's children received free or reduced price school lunches

“It is a human and moral travesty,” says Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children’s Defense Fund writing in the preface to Welcome The Child (Friendship Press, 1994) “that more than 14.6 million U.S. children are poor and 8 million lack health insurance in a nation blessed by such abundance and riches. What are the true values of a wealthy, democratic nation that lets infants and toddlers be the poorest group of citizens? We know that poverty makes children more likely to be born too small, to die, be sick, hungry and malnourished, to fall behind in school and drop out, and to cost their families immeasurable suffering and taxpayers billions in later remedial costs and lost productivity. How do we reconcile rampant national child neglect and preventable suffering with the biblical warning that from those to whom much is given, much is expected?” (Edelman, Preface, Welcome The Child, p.v)

THEOLOGICAL BASIS

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!”

--Matthew 18:1-7

Scripture and Tradition admonish the faithful that one of their responsibilities to God is the care and nurture of children, just as God has cared for and nurtured human beings as our Holy Parent. The Bible proclaims through story, poetry, liturgical words, and history the belief that God is our loving parent. As Christians, we affirm that in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, God’s promise became even more personal, so that we feel ourselves to be joint heirs with Christ, the adopted brothers and sisters of the Word made flesh in the Son of God.

We trifle with God’s love for us as God’s children when we neglect to make the health, growth, nurture, and education of all children a priority. It is God’s intention that all children should, like our brother Christ, “increase in wisdom and in years, and in divine human favor.” (Luke 2:52 NRSV) Christ himself said that as we welcome children we welcome him (allow him a kindly reception in our lives).

The Kentucky Council of Churches was born from ecumenical roots established in the American Sunday School movement. The Sunday School movement had its genesis in Great Britain in the 1780s as an effort by churches and Christian people to give aid, life opportunities, and nurture in Christian beliefs and values to the orphans and child-workers employed for long hours in slave-like conditions in sweat-shop factories during the Industrial Revolution. The Sunday School movement affirmed the worth of children for their own sake, not as an additional worker in the family business or on the farm. It encouraged the development of public education in America. In America, the Sunday School movement was one of the first ecumenical projects and provided much impetus for later ecumenical developments.

The nature and quality of children’s lives indicates the health and strength of a community or society. How we value children reflects our stewardship of God’s manifold gifts in creation and our faithfulness to God’s covenant with us. Jesus clearly told his followers to welcome children and warned those who caused children to “stumble”. In our time, we need to hear Christ’s instruction about children in fresh ways. The condition of the world’s children confronts us with a pressing need to refocus our attention on children and their needs in our public programs for the common good, in our churches, and in our families.

Declaring that “the United States is afflicted by a poverty of riches unleavened by enough justice”, Marion Wright Edelman, President of the Children’s Defense Fund asserts that “the religious community must take the lead in guiding the nation away from the sin of child abuse and neglect and toward God’s intended creation of compassion and justice. The religious community must renew and deepen its own commitment to faithful child advocacy. ...Every person of faith has a special obligation to help the poor and the powerless and to seek justice. ... The deepest and most enduring truth is that we must take better care of all children because it is the right and moral thing to do. Just as Christ’s model of ministry sought justice for the most vulnerable and marginalized, so too must we minister

with compassion and seek justice for the most vulnerable and marginalized children, until each has the opportunity to develop to her or his God-given potential.” (Edelman, Preface, Welcome The Child pp. v-vi)

RESOLUTION

THEREFORE, believing that children, their lives, welfare and nurture are a priority concern for our churches, it shall be the policy of the Kentucky Council of Churches:

1. To make the well being of children a high priority on its legislative and public policy advocacy agenda. The Council will support legislation which aims to alleviate the suffering of children caused by poverty, disease, abuse, racism, sexism, lack of provision of adequate medical treatment and inadequate educational opportunities. The Council will oppose public policies and legislation which will result in more suffering or create more problems for children and youth.
2. To encourage its member communions and their churches in every community across the Commonwealth of Kentucky to embrace all children of their community as their own. We challenge churches and individual Christians to find at least one project in the coming year (1994-1995) which will benefit the children of their community. We further challenge the churches of our member communions to undertake a survey of the problems and needs of children in their communities, and to become politically active on behalf of children and youth.
3. To encourage the congregations of our member communions to participate in the nationwide celebrations of Children’s Sabbaths, which are held annually in mid-October during the national “Peace With Justice” week.
4. To challenge the churches of the member communions of the Kentucky Council of Churches to develop programs of character education for all age groups in their congregations and family life education for the children of their church and community before they drift into paths where pregnancy and parenthood, drug use, and dropping out of school “just happen.”
5. To challenge one another within the Kentucky Council of Churches to renew, strengthen, and develop programs in their communities which will better educate children youth and adults, on matters of violence prevention, conflict resolution, and social and economic justice. We encourage churches to provide formative experiences to deepen Christian values and Christian character as a leaven for justice in our nation with its “poverty of riches unleavened by enough justice.”