

## **Principles of Welfare Reform**

As people of faith and religious commitment, we are called to stand with and seek justice for people who are poor. Central to our religious traditions, sacred texts, and teachings is a divine mandate to side with and protect the poor. Thus the scripture says: However, there should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today. If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. If one refuses to help the needy, the scripture continues:

"He may then appeal to the Lord against you, and you will be found guilty of sin . . . Give generously to him [the poor] and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deuteronomy 4-5 and 7-11, NIV).

We share a conviction, therefore, that welfare reforms must not focus on eliminating programs but on eliminating poverty and the damage it inflicts on children (who are two thirds of all welfare recipients), on their parents, and on the rest of society.

We recognize the benefit to the entire community of helping people move from welfare into the job market when possible and appropriate. We fear, however, that reform will fail if it ignores labor-market issues such as unemployment and an inadequate minimum wage, and important family issues such as the affordable housing affordable childcare, pay equity, access to health care, and the economic value of care-giving in the home. Successful welfare reform must address these concerns as well as other issues, such as pay equity, affordable housing, and the access to health care.

We believe that people are more important than the sum of their economic activities. Successful welfare reform demands more than economic incentives and disincentives; it depends on overcoming both biased assumptions about race, gender, and class that feed hostile social stereotypes about people living in poverty and suspicions that people with perspectives other than our own are either indifferent or insincere. Successful welfare reform will depend ultimately upon finding not only a common ground of policies but a common spirit about the need to pursue them for all.

The following principles neither exhaust our concerns nor resolve all issues raised, but these principles will serve as our guide in assessing proposed legislation. We hope they may also serve as a rallying point for a common effort with others throughout the nation.

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church adopts "Principles of Welfare Reform," and directs them to be sent to the President of the United States, the speaker of the United States House of Representatives, and the United States Senate majority leader. In addition, annual conferences are asked to send this statement to appropriate state officials.

### **A Statement of Shared Principles of Welfare Reform**

The goal of Welfare Reform must be to lift people out of poverty, thus requiring systemic changes.

On February 8, 2006, the President of the United States signed legislation authorizing the Work Opportunity and Personal Responsibility Act, commonly known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Act. Originally signed into law in 1966, the new provisions will shape the nature of America's welfare policies through 2010. Addressing the needs of the most vulnerable of our citizens, particularly women and children, should be the aim of any welfare program. The TANF reauthorization heightens the work mandate as a condition to receive benefits, without ensuring adequate family supports such as child care or reducing medical and/or mental health barriers to employment.

As states now consider the challenge of meeting Federal requirements, we must continue to advocate for policies that:

1. insure that poverty reduction is a central goal. All welfare policies must work together to enable recipients and their families to leave poverty and achieve self-sufficiency. For example, cash benefits combined with wages and supportive services must be sufficient to allow each family to meet its basic needs.
2. provide sufficient federal and state funding. Funding for welfare should at a minimum be indexed to the rate of inflation. Continuation of state maintenance of effort should be required.
3. acknowledge the dignity of work, eliminate barriers to employment and provide training and education necessary for unskilled workers to get and hold jobs. Participation in post-secondary education should count as work. Supportive services provided should include childcare, transportation, and ancillary services to make participation possible and reasonable.
4. continue and encourage public/private partnerships to train workers and help them find jobs. If public jobs are created, they should lead to family-sustaining wages, comply with workplace protection laws, and not displace current workers. States should provide means by which employment programs can be evaluated at the local level for effectiveness and fairness and allow welfare recipients to retain a substantial portion of wage earnings and assets before losing cash, housing, health, child care, food assistance or other benefits. In no case should former welfare recipients receive less in combined benefits and income as a result of working than they received while they were on welfare.
5. be available to all people in need. Immigrants should have access to the same benefits that are available to citizens. Those who receive benefits should receive them according to their needs and for as long as the need exists.
6. do not impose time limits on people who are complying with the rules of the program. It is the state's responsibility to assure access to counseling, legal assistance, and information on eligibility for child support, job training and placement, medical care, affordable housing, food programs, and education.
7. acknowledge the responsibility of both parents and government to provide for the well-being of children. Welfare should insure that children benefit from the active and healthy participation of parents-whether custodial or not-in their lives. The barriers to participation by married parents in federal programs should be removed. There should be no family caps and no full-family sanctions. Children should benefit from successful state efforts to collect child support assistance from noncustodial parents through increasing the amount of collected child support that children receive.
8. address the needs of individuals with special situations. People who have been victims of domestic violence or stalking must be protected and have their privacy maintained. Some with disabling conditions may need extended periods of time to become employable; and it must be recognized that some people cannot or should not work under any circumstances.

9. uphold and affirm every person's value, whether employed or not. In compassion, we recognize that a small proportion of people on welfare may never be in a position to work outside the home. Exemptions should be offered for people with serious physical or mental illness, disabling conditions, or responsibilities as caregivers who work at home. States should have the option to use federal funds to help families to cope with multiple barriers to employment.

## **Call to Action**

Therefore, we call on annual conference boards of church and society or their equivalents to urge their state and county governments to create programs that assist current and former welfare recipients in making the transition from dependence to economic health, including: training, public sector job creation, child care, and resources for parenting.

We urge local churches to familiarize themselves with the issues regarding welfare reform. As states develop changes to TANF regulations, we urge local churches to work with community organizations, local advocates, and state officials to protect the right of all people to dignity and well-being, to improve education and training opportunities, and to ensure a safety net for the most vulnerable among us.

ADOPTED 1996

AMENDED AND READOPTED 2004 and 2008

resolution #160, 2004 Book of Resolutions

resolution #147, 2000 Book of Resolutions

See Social Principles, ¶ 163E.

*From The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church - 2008. Copyright © 2008 by The United Methodist Publishing House. Used by permission.*