

A Vision for Overcoming Poverty

SESSION 2

A Covenant for a New America

- “A Vision for Overcoming Poverty,”
from *A Covenant for a New America*
- “A Policy Strategy for Overcoming Poverty,”
from *A Covenant for a New America*

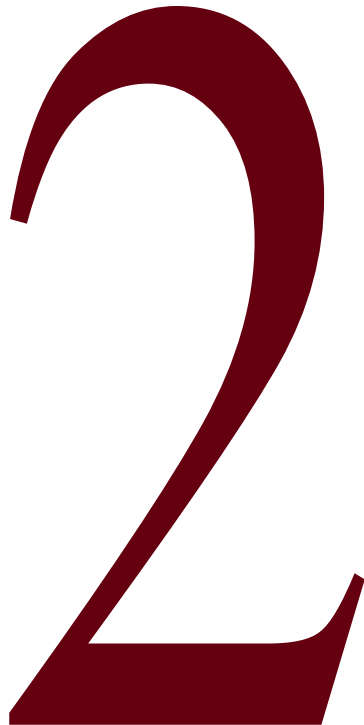
Sojourners/Call to Renewal has been bringing together Christians from across the theological and political spectrum to focus on effective strategies for ending poverty in America. Out of the process, *From Poverty to Opportunity: A Covenant for a New America* was created. The excerpts below explain the religious underpinnings of the Covenant and its concrete suggestions for making that vision a reality.

Questions to Consider

1. The verses from Isaiah 58 quoted at the beginning of “A Vision for Overcoming Poverty” describe an exchange in which the well-off provide for the poor, and God provides for the well-off. When have you observed or experienced such an exchange? When has God provided for you when you gave something away? When has another person provided for you when you were in need?
2. “Work must work,” states “A Vision for Overcoming Poverty.” How have you seen work fail to work? What are some ways your congregation can participate in efforts to make work work for people in poverty? What skills do members of your congregation have that could be taught to poor job-seekers?
3. “A Policy Strategy for Overcoming Poverty” names violence as a contributing factor to poverty, an association many of us do not make. Given the Christian vocation of peacemaking (Matthew 5), how might your congregation engage in peacemaking efforts in your neighborhood? In your city? In the world?
4. “Poverty,” says “A Policy Strategy for Overcoming Poverty,” “is best overcome through a combination of personal and social responsibility.” How does this statement challenge conventional liberal and conservative wisdom? How does it challenge your own assumptions about how social change comes about?

Resources

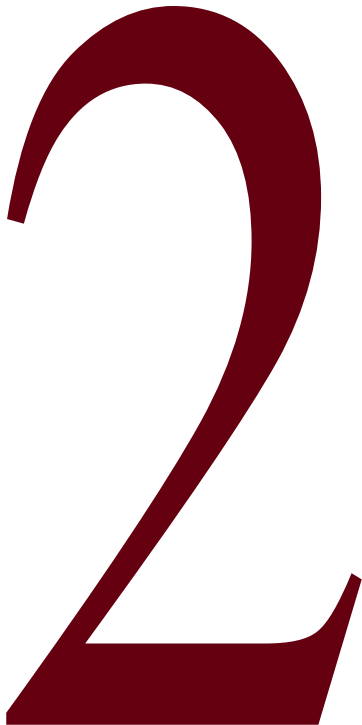
- Sojourners/Call to Renewal’s Covenant for a New America campaign offers resources to further disseminate the document’s ideas, including an organizer’s toolkit, a bulletin version of the Covenant, one page summary, links for media and elected officials, and online sign-on opportunities for individuals, churches, and regional or national organizations. The full text is also available online. (www.covenant-foranewamerica.org)
- “Working Hard, Falling Short: America’s Working Families and the Pursuit of Economic Security,” from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reveals how even families with employed adults are living in poverty in the U.S. as a result of low wages and



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few work supports and recommends ways to change this situation. (www.aecf.org)

- The U.S. Census Bureau offers recent information on the connections between income, health insurance, and poverty in a series of reports available on its Web site. (www.census.gov)



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“A VISION FOR OVERCOMING POVERTY”

from *A Covenant for a New America*

“If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” —Isaiah 58:10-12

Overcoming poverty requires vision and commitment. We believe our society should make three fundamental commitments as a promise to those in poverty:

1. Work must work and provide family economic success and security.
2. Children should not be poor.
3. Extreme global poverty must end.

WORK MUST WORK AND PROVIDE FAMILY ECONOMIC SUCCESS AND SECURITY.

Those who work responsibly should have a living family income in which a combination of a family’s earnings, and supports for transportation, health care, nutrition, child care, education, housing, and other basic needs together provide a decent standard of living. This requires creative thinking about work supports, as well as an increased minimum wage, tax policies that reward work and family stability, ownership and asset creation, job training, and financial education. Of all working families, 9.2 million (27.4 percent) are low-income (earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold). Married couples head 53 percent of these families, while single women head 38 percent. More than 2.5 million working families are below the poverty line.

We should also support and foster jobs and job skills among people without children, and help make sure they have the tools they need to succeed in life. At the same time, those unable to work should be supported with dignity. Many people in our society face serious mental or physical disabilities or other circumstances that make it difficult or impossible for them to support themselves or their families without assistance for either short periods of time or permanently. Our churches and the government have an important role to play in meeting their basic needs.

A living family income must ensure a standard of living that fosters security and opportunity for children. This pro-family, pro-work framework represents a combination of personal and social responsibility that makes families both better and stronger.

They shall build houses and inhabit them: they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit: they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen will long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear their children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord.” —Isaiah 65:20-25

CHILDREN SHOULD NOT BE POOR. Making work work can help ensure that our children are more secure and healthy. But we also need specific and concrete commitments to brighter futures for our youngest and most vulnerable citizens. We will never end the cycle of poverty if we continue to allow lack of opportunity to be the formative aspect of a child’s life. We will never strengthen families and communities if children—especially poor children—do not benefit from public investments that allow them to mature into productive citizens.

Our nation should develop and commit to a plan that reduces child poverty by half over 10 years. The United Kingdom has made such a commitment and is making significant progress in meeting it. Such a plan would be a first step toward eradicating child poverty altogether.



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“A Vision for Overcoming Poverty” (cont.)

“And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”

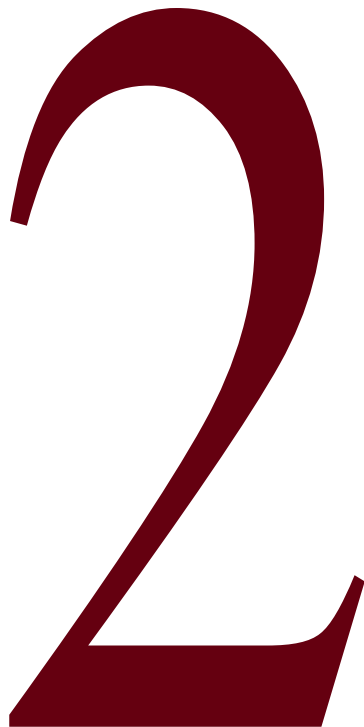
—Zechariah 8:5

EXTREME GLOBAL POVERTY MUST END. As we address the basic economic needs of our fellow citizens, we should also increase efforts to meet basic human needs around the globe. Core principles of dignity, moral conscience, responsibility, interdependence, and justice should compel the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world to help the billions of people suffering from extreme poverty. Our support for effective aid, transparency and good governance, basic education, health interventions, just trade policies, and debt cancellation would prevent most of the 30,000 child deaths worldwide each day due to poverty and disease.

U.S. international development assistance should be increased by an additional one percent of the federal budget. This would honor our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, which are designed to cut global poverty in half by the year 2015.

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” —Matthew 25:40

This article is an excerpt of From Poverty to Opportunity: A Covenant for a New America (www.covenantforanewamerica.org), released by Sojourners/Call to Renewal in June 2006.



“A POLICY STRATEGY FOR OVERCOMING POVERTY”

from *A Covenant for a New America*

“Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” —Proverbs 31:9

We intend to work together to help shape social policy on the critical issues of American life. Our role is not simply to make government more efficient but to make America more just. In our preaching and advocacy, we will raise the common moral values that should undergird our society and insist that the principle of the common good be the standard that guides public policy.

We are not committed to any particular ideological method or partisan agenda to achieve these policy goals; we are committed to achieving them. We must be accountable to results that actually reduce poverty. Partisan divisions have for too long prevented real solutions to poverty, and it is real solutions to which we must all commit ourselves. Political disagreements can no longer be allowed to justify public inaction while those in poverty continue to be neglected. Overcoming poverty is our goal. We must together focus on how best to accomplish that goal, but how we get there is less important than getting there.

We believe that government at all levels—local, state, and federal—has an important role in developing, promoting, and implementing public policies and partnerships with the private and nonprofit sector that can help in overcoming poverty. Our country desperately needs political leaders who are community conveners and builders dedicated to bringing our diverse peoples together for the common good.

We pray that political leaders will adopt this vision by supporting policies that foster both social and personal responsibility. We lift up the following needs as places to begin the dialogue about solutions for overcoming poverty.

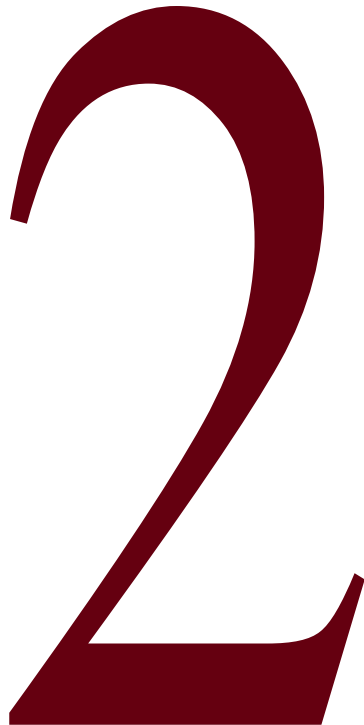
SOCIAL AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY. It is time to end the bitter debate between big or small government, by committing ourselves to good and effective government.

HEALTH CARE. Nearly 46 million Americans do not have health insurance; 31 million of those are in families with a full-time year-round worker. Roughly 8 million children younger than 18 in the U.S. have no health insurance—and nearly 90 percent of them are part of working families. Health care is a human right, not a commodity available only to those who can afford it. All who work and those unable to work should be assured of quality health care. There are a variety of ways to achieve this goal, and we have a moral obligation to achieve it.

HUNGER. In America, 13.5 million households (11.9 percent of households) have difficulty providing enough food for all their family members due to a lack of resources. While nearly all churches are involved in charitable feeding programs, federal nutrition programs provide about 20 times as much food to needy people as all the charitable programs in the country combined. By investing roughly \$7 billion more each year in federal nutrition programs—about 7 cents per American per day—we could cut U.S. hunger and food insecurity in half by 2010.

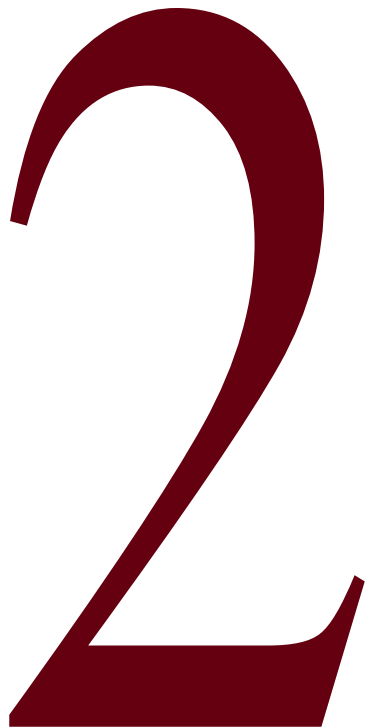
EDUCATION. Students in America deserve a high-quality, publicly financed education, beginning in a child’s earliest years—even before kindergarten—and continuing through high school. We must prepare graduating students to succeed in their next step, whether going to college or beginning a career. They deserve the financial help necessary to attend high-quality colleges and universities. Quality education will result in stronger communities and citizens, and this requires elimination of racial and economic disparities.

There currently exist too many inequities resulting from both long-standing disparities in educational resources and systemic flaws. Creating a sense of community, connectedness, and



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“A Policy Strategy for Overcoming Poverty” (cont.)



empowerment in schools is critical to motivating students and teachers to do their best work. New ways of thinking and acting should focus on parental involvement, respect teachers more, emphasize neighborhood schools, provide accountability to the community, offer and test a variety of options, and ensure a quality education for all.

HOUSING. A decent place to live is essential to ending poverty in the world. Rapidly rising house prices, utility costs, taxes, and insurance, especially in the U.S., have plummeted more and more full-time workers into poverty. For many, the result is homelessness: 44 percent of homeless people are employed. Work-force housing is less and less available. Too often, the only housing available for low-income workers is not near places of employment, adding higher transportation costs. Decent housing is imperative to strategies for ending poverty.

All sectors of society—public, private, nonprofit, faith-based, organized labor, foundations, individuals—must create the will to develop the policies and resources to provide decent housing. While for most, the dream still is homeownership, until that opportunity is possible for all persons, we must demand the policies and resources to provide decent affordable housing for all, be it by fostering homeownership or creating rental housing by various means, done in ways that develop mixed-income communities.

TAX POLICY. Low-income people can benefit from targeted tax policies that are pro-work and pro-family. The bipartisan Earned Income Tax Credit should be expanded, with accelerated marriage penalty relief. The Dependent Care Tax Credit should be made available to every parent (single or two-parent families) so as not to penalize poor families with one parent staying home. The Child Tax Credit should be increased, and it and the Dependent Care Credit should be made refundable. Without refundability, these tax credits do not help those who do not pay income taxes.

IMMIGRATION. Immigrants—both legal and undocumented—are more likely to live in families with incomes below the poverty level, with children of undocumented immigrants especially at risk. Therefore, immigration issues are also poverty issues. We need immigration policies that are both compassionate and just. It is important to make our borders secure and enforce our nation’s laws, but we should do so in humane and realistic ways. We should not establish penalties for humanitarian and church groups helping undocumented immigrants.

Immigration policies should establish a dignified guest worker program that can lead to citizenship. Those individuals and families who are already living in the U.S. and working hard should have the option to apply for permanent legal status and citizenship if they choose to do so, by meeting specific application criteria. We must transcend a narrow debate about walls and fences to foster better dialogue about the root causes of immigration. Comprehensive immigration reform can be pro-work and pro-family, and create opportunities to strengthen the common good of families and employers and the vitality of America.

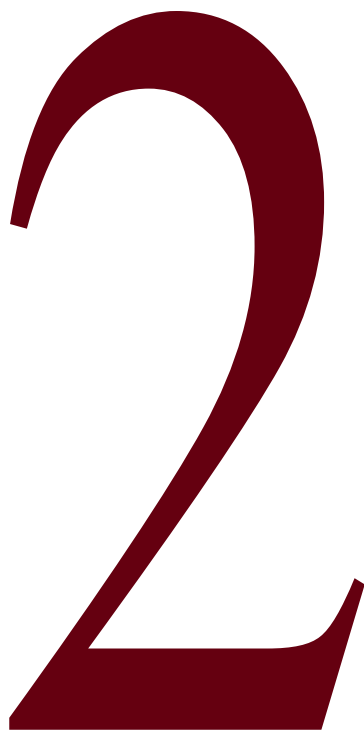
VIOLENCE. Cycles of violence are not only caused by poverty, family breakdown, youth trouble, and gangs, they also perpetuate these negative factors. An increasingly violent society is intimately related to our growing prison population, to the illegal drug industry, and to family abuse. Violence correlates with the lack of hope and opportunity prevalent in the lives of so many poor youth in urban and rural areas.

While we must have safe streets, it is important that we provide the most effective mental health, drug, and other treatments both to prevent people from becoming criminals, and to get troubled young offenders back on the right track. We must ensure that policies establishing responses to acts of violence are based less on vengeance, and more on that which truly promotes the future safety of our communities. That includes effective drug and mental health treatment for offenders, when appropriate, rather than often counterproductive harsh prison sentences.

PERSONAL AND COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY. Poverty is best overcome through a combination of personal and social responsibility—both are crucial to success. People have to be personally motivated to break the bonds of poverty while getting the necessary social sup-

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“A Policy Strategy for Overcoming Poverty”



port to do it. It is time to expect more of individuals and families by fostering greater and wider ownership of personal security and community growth.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY. Steps to strengthen marriage and families are anti-poverty measures. Personal decisions and the negative role they can play in economic and family stability cannot be ignored or underestimated. There must be commitments to education and action on reducing teen pregnancy, strengthening marriage and family formation, in-home parenting coaching and support, encouraging responsible fatherhood, and preventing the abuse and neglect of children. As abused women are much more likely to find themselves in poverty, we need a strong commitment to reducing and preventing domestic violence.

ASSET CREATION. The wealth gap is even greater than the income gap, especially among minority families. Families should be assisted in asset and wealth creation that provides security and freedom through such means as Individual Development Accounts, proposals that provide newborns with a match-eligible savings account, and other proposals that match individual effort with additional funds.

JOB TRAINING. In an increasingly complex marketplace, the will to work must be accompanied by desirable skills. As more technologies are adopted in the performance of entry level jobs, new employees and those needing to progress in careers will need training. This includes basic education and spiritual formation about a work ethic along with the specific knowledge and skills needed to compete for employment.

GOVERNMENT AND RELIGIOUS PARTNERSHIPS. Faith-based groups will continue to play a critical role in meeting both material and spiritual needs of low-income individuals and families. They will also continue helping families and communities deal with major emergencies such as hurricane damage to the Gulf Coast. Government and religious partnerships should be entered into with a respect for the law, and safeguards to prevent use of direct government funding for spiritual activities should be in place. Faith-based service providers should not be expected to replace the role of government in addressing social needs. Efforts of religious groups can be strengthened if given greater public respect, resources, and a place at the decision-making table in the planning and implementation processes.

NEIGHBORHOODS. Healthy communities with economic security, environmental integrity, participatory decision-making, and quality of life for all are critical for preventing and reducing poverty. There should be more support for community-based policing, after-school programs, and Community Development Block Grant funding. Further, we must change environmental practices that disproportionately impact the health, safety, and standards of living for people in poverty, especially people of color.

RACIAL JUSTICE. Dignity is denied when African-American, Latino, Asian-American, Native American, and other neighbors are discriminated against, whether intentionally or due to systemic structures. We need a more honest discussion about policies that foster or ignore racial inequality.

We need reconciliation with one another and greater respect for basic human rights. The role of race in the persistence of poverty, and the structural racism in the criminal justice system, in particular, that removes an increasingly large number of African-American men from their communities, must be urgently addressed.

CIVIC AND BUSINESS PRACTICES. It is time to reverse the divisions, conflict, and individualism defining our society and hurting our families, communities, nation, and the world. Government, business, and religious leaders can transform our culture of violence, materialism, and consumption, the negative influences of the entertainment and advertising industries, business practices—such as predatory lending—that take advantage of disempowered low-income people, and the corruption of our political culture. Only effective partnerships can take on such big challenges. ■

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