A Commentary on

"A Common Foundation: Shared Principles for Work on Overcoming Poverty"

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As a people of faith, with varying theologies and traditions, we are convinced of a remarkable convergence on fundamental principles that call us to common work in combating poverty and walking with people living in poverty.

We American Christians are blessed to live in a time of both proximity and openness to faith traditions other than our own. The ecumenical movement of the past half-decade has brought Christians to a point of discovering far greater areas of agreement and commonality than differences. Increased interfaith dialogues and relationships have opened to us not only spiritual insights but also shared values. While not abandoning or compromising the truth claims of our own deeply held religious convictions, we have been led to be open to the possibility that the God we know in Jesus Christ may have revealed something of the divine nature in other religious traditions as well. We have discovered that our religious teachings have vast and profound commonalities in how we are to live.

The "remarkable convergence" our document speaks of is just that. The written witness of Scripture—the words of Jesus and the Old Testament prophets—makes clear that the truest measure of our devotion to God lies in the compassion we show to the poor, the outcast, and the stranger, the "least of these." Interfaith dialogue has shown us that same truth present in other traditions as well. Peace, justice, and compassion reside as universal values in the world's great religions. Islamic leaders were immediately insistent that the attacks

of September 11 and the work of religious extremists were a corruption of the teachings of Islam.

In this country, we have inherited the great tradition of the First Amendment, prohibiting the state from interfering in the world of religion or establishing and enforcing any one religion. It has helped keep the world of religion away from the corruption of temporal power. But an unfortunate side effect—itself a corruption of our religion—is the strong pattern of keeping faith out of the public arena, of not mixing religion with politics. For our own religious tradition, Lutheran Christianity, that separation is itself a serious error. Our faith is deeply personal, but never intended to be private. We proclaim a public faith for the world, both in witnessing to our belief in God's presence in our lives and in seeking to be advocates and builders of a human community that lives out these central values of peace, justice, and compassion. Ours is not an imperative to love only the neighbor who lives next door, but to exude the will for justice for the poor and outcast in every arena of life, both personal and public.

It's a fundamental human value we share with others in this remarkable convergence. Here is a sampling of what our faiths say about the care of those living in poverty:

From Hebrew Scripture

"I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-22, 24).

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

From Christian Scripture

"I was hungry and you gave me food. . . . I was a stranger and you welcomed me. . . . I was naked . . . sick . . . in prison. . . . As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. . . . As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." (Matthew 25:34-35)

"How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 John 3:17).

From Muslim Scripture

"Whoever saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind."

From Hindu proverb

"They who give have all things; they who withhold have nothing."

From the Sikh holy book

"Those who remember God generously help others." (Guru Granth Sahib)

From Buddhist writings

"An offering given from what little one has is worth a thousand times its value." (Buddha)

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We believe it is the Creator's intent that all people are provided those things that protect human dignity and make for healthy life: adequate food and shelter, meaningful work, safe communities, healthcare, and education.

The last 250 years of human history have seen the emergence of democracy as a form of government. There have been dozens of

revolutions in which people have thrown off the yoke of oppression by kings and dictators to govern themselves. The documents that have undergirded these movements have spoken of the inherent dignity and worth of every human being. Our own Declaration of Independence exemplifies this: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. . . ."

The noblest of leaders in history called their followers to recognize what we now call basic human rights and embraced the worth of each life. We live in a flourishing of those values, when equality is understood to be the birthright of every person regardless of race, gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, family status, language, or educational background. We in our faith tradition can claim it to be a flowering of our belief that we are all created in the image of God.

So what does it mean to take that idea, that value, from an abstract idea and put it into practice? We ascribe each person dignity and value, and in that we assume they have an inherent right to share in those things that make for healthy life:

- adequate food and shelter that provide for the basic needs of physical well-being;
- meaningful work that enables all persons to support themselves and their families and to be productive members of human society;
- safe communities that order our life together in ways that protect all from the harm or domination by others;
- health care that says the care of our bodies is not something for only the privileged;
- education that ensures all children have the chance to learn to live well in the world and develop their potential.

All these things together allow for each person to live as a valued member of the human community. Any of these things denied results in people unable to live with dignity as productive partners in the human family God has created.

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We believe we are intended to live well together as a whole community, seeking the common good, avoiding wide disparities between those who have too little to live on and those who have a disproportionate share of the world's goods.

Christians have in recent years rediscovered the richness of the Old Testament Hebrew word, "shalom." We translate it as "peace," but its meaning suggests much more than a simple absence of conflict or war. Shalom points to wholeness, a proper balance, and harmonious fitting together of people and creation, a reflection of God's intent. While many themes in Scripture point to the battle between good and evil and call the people of God to triumph over forces of evil, such triumph is never for the purpose of dominance of one over another, for the amassing of power for personal gain or influence. Self-indulgence that leads to massive personal wealth and power unfailingly leads to strong condemnation because it upsets the balance of all lives having worth, violates the dignity of persons, and tears at the rich interweaving of the fabric of human community.

Our society celebrates the freedom and worth of the individual. Such a value on individualism reminds us that no institution or individual should amass power to trample others. An economic system that gives free reign to the efforts of individuals can result in the uneven amassing of wealth in the hands of a few, leaving the many struggling for basic needs. Adam Smith, recognized as the founder of free market capitalism, was a moral philosopher, not an economist. At the center of his thinking was the existence of "the invisible hand," the moral force that would restrain the flow of capital into a concentration that would eat away at the fabric of the whole of society.

We flirt with that moral danger today. Creation of wealth lifts the standard of living for all people, and this country has demonstrated an economic vigor that is the envy of other countries throughout the world. But such economic vigor has not necessar-

ily made us admired around the world. The rest of the world is not sharing in this accumulation of wealth. Several years ago the Global Policy Forum published some disturbing statistics about these disparities ("Statistics on Poverty and Inequality," Jeff Gates, *Shared Capitalism Institute*, May 1999, viewed at www.globalpolicy.org/socecon/inequal/gates99.htm):

- The wealth of the three most well-to-do individuals exceeds the combined GDP of the forty-eight least-developed countries.
- In 1968, the people in well-to-do countries were thirty times better off than those in countries where the poorest 20 percent of the world's people live. In 1996 the gap was sixty-one times better off. In 1998, eighty-two times better off.
- The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) calculates that an annual 4 percent levy on the worlds 225 most wealthiest people would suffice to provide the following essentials for *all* those in developing countries: adequate food, safe water and sanitation, basic education, basic health care, and reproductive health care.
- In the United States: the wealth of the nation's top 1 percent was greater than the bottom 90 percent.

God's vision for human community calls us to act more justly and distribute the world's wealth more equitably, recognizing that the goal of all these efforts is not simply maximizing individual wealth and power, but maximizing the dignity and potential of every member of the human community God has created.

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We believe we are all called to work to overcome poverty, and that this work transcends both any particular political theory or party and any particular economic theory or structure. We believe that overcoming poverty requires the use of private and public resources.

Zeal and energy over issues related to poverty have been wasted in false arguments. Slogans such as "bleeding-heart liberal" or

"compassionate conservative" do not further the discussion. The flip assumption that "anyone concerned about the poor must be a liberal" both insults conservatives and fails to hold liberals and conservatives alike accountable for their decisions.

As people of faith, we are called to fight against poverty. Period. Whether one is a Democrat or Republican, capitalist or socialist is not the point. The challenge for people of all political persuasions is to demonstrate how their theories and their policies advance the fight against poverty.

It is a false argument to fight over whether the poor are to be the concern of the private or public sector. People of faith must move in both arenas. If the living out of our life values puts us in a position of action on behalf of the poor, as it should, then such work will be expressed in both the public and private arenas.

For people of faith, any political party, any economic theory, and any sector of society must be judged on its effectiveness in contributing to a whole and healthy human community, especially as that community finds within it a place for the dignity and health of the poor. No sector, no party, no economic theory stands isolated from the person of faith seeking those ends.

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We believe we are called to make alliances within the faith community and with others in society who share the commitment to overcome poverty.

Our own distinctive faith commitment is not diminished when we find convergence with others around any particular point. To find ourselves serving in a soup kitchen with Muslims leads us to discover the breadth of our concern for the hungry. To advocate for better social services with a group of disabled veterans or for special education funding with groups of immigrants reminds us of how fundamental these concerns are. In each case, we catch a glimpse of the vast presence and activity of the God who has awakened such

commitments in us, also finding ways to awaken these commitments in others as well.

I remember years ago going to work on a Habitat house during Jimmy Carter Work Week. Cars parked for blocks meant I had to walk a distance, and I started noticing bumper stickers. I could not remember being anywhere that had seen such rich evidence of the full spectrum: politically conservative and liberal; pro- and anti-war; pro-choice and pro-life; school stickers from inner city and far-flung suburbs. All these people drove to the work site because of a shared commitment that people living in poverty ought to live in decent homes. A remarkable convergence. I think God was smiling.

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We believe that overcoming poverty involves both acts of direct service to alleviate the outcomes of poverty and advocacy to change those structures that result in people living in poverty.

A story that surfaces in the course of church-based community organizing goes something like this: Someone living in a village along a river noticed the body of a person floating down river past the village and swam out to bring the person in. He and others gave medical care and began the path to healing. The next day, two more persons were found floating down river and again were rescued. This repeated itself each day, with the numbers growing.

It finally dawned on the people of the village that there was need for them to do something more than simply rescue and care for these people; they needed to move upriver, find and stop whatever it was that was causing the steady stream of dying victims. Their level of activity in seeking to rescue the people in the river was necessary and commendable, but so was the need to correct the conditions that produced the victims.

The reemergence of people of faith into the public arena has come about because of the rediscovery of the need for both kinds of involvement. People of faith, acting on their values of compassion and

service, have long given care to the suffering. Before the recent emergence of health care conglomerates, many if not most of the hospitals in this country traced their roots to people of faith. Lutheran Services in America is the largest network of social-service providers in the country. We Lutherans have a long and proud history of direct service. The recent strategic planning process of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America called on us to "step forward as a public church that witnesses boldly to God's love for all that God has created."

Increased advocacy in the public arena ought not be undertaken with the arrogance of exclusive claims to knowing God's will for specific legislation, but should be undertaken with the boldness of knowing that the call for us to love our neighbor is a call that inexorably draws us into that public arena, especially on behalf of those who have little voice.

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We believe government is neither solely responsible for alleviating poverty, nor removed from this responsibility. We believe government is the vehicle by which people order their lives based on their shared vision. We believe society is well served when people of faith bring their values into the public arena. It is this remarkable convergence around issues of poverty and the common good that leads people of varying faith traditions to unite in calling on government to make a critical commitment to overcoming poverty.

The political mood in recent years has swung toward a diminishing role for government and a desire to increase the responsibility of the private sector. Politicians have recited a mantra of tax freezes or cuts. Public confidence in government has declined. Many people in all sectors have heard the call for the government to get out of the social service business and leave it to churches and charities.

In a large and complex age, however, the problem of scale emerges. Several years ago, an analysis of the effect of the proposed tax cuts for that year alone showed that every church budget in the

country would have to double, with every new dime going for social services, just to cover the cuts proposed that year alone. Only the government can fill some of our needs. We do not leave our country's military security to churches and volunteer groups because the need is too great. If it becomes a shared value that people ought not to live imprisoned by poverty, then it becomes a shared value to use all means at our disposal—including government, but not government alone—to live out that value.

Politics is nothing more or less than the process by which we shape our life together. We choose what kind of people we want to be. In a democracy, we elect people to help create that kind of community. Legislators give shape to the morality that we wish to express and the way we want to live together. If our morality says we value all persons equally, then we shape a public life that does not give favor or privilege to a few, but enhances the dignity of all. If our values lead us to believe that each is entitled to life's basic needs, that children should be valued highly, or that recent immigrants deserve dignity, then politics is the means by which we become that kind of people.

Taxes are not inherently good or evil; they are simply the means we use to pool our resources to be who we wish to be as a people. When lawmakers consider whether to raise or lower taxes, they ought to first consider what we want to do and become. We first make decisions about the kind of people we want to be, the kind of place we want to shape for our common life. Then we make decisions about how to use our financial resources to shape that common life. We seek to help people at critical times in their lives. We recognize the needs of people who find themselves in circumstances where they need the help of others—the very young, the elderly, the poor, the immigrant, those thrust into crisis. It is both compassionate and enlightened public policy and—for those of us in the faith community, a God-pleasing thing to do—to see that such assistance is in place.

We do it as a moral people, both through our government—of, by, and for the people, after all—and through all other sectors of society where we have a voice.

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We believe the desire to overcome poverty is not simply a human idea, but is the desire of our Creator, and that the work to create a more just and whole society will be empowered by the Creator's presence.

God's presence and mission is not simply in religious rites carried on in religious buildings. It is in the world. Nehemiah heeded the call to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. William Pitt took the battle against slavery into the British Parliament for decades. Martin Luther King Jr. answered the call to march for equality in the streets of Birmingham. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was martyred for seeking to end Hitler's evil acts. Holy work is work in the world.

But because it is in the world does not make it any less holy, nor any less connected to the God who is, after all, creator and Lord of both heaven and earth, not just heaven and church. And in searching for God's intent for the shape of human community, nothing comes clearer than God's desire that humanity reaches out to its poorest members to end the withering grip of poverty. This is holy work.

We live in an age of shrill "wedge issues" that tear at the fabric of church and society alike. Abortion, sexuality, war—the pressures that divide are powerful, and the challenge to rise above the divisions is great.

Poverty presents another possibility. Working to end poverty has powerful potential to be a convergence issue. In the summer of 2005, just prior to the G-8 Conference on global poverty in Gleneagles, Scotland, I was part of a group of religious leaders who met in London. British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown met with a group of two dozen religious leaders from the United States and the United Kingdom—Archbishop of

Canterbury Rowan Williams; American evangelicals Jim Wallis, Geoff Tunnicliffe, Richard Cizek, and Ron Sider; Catholics and mainline Protestants; and the presidents of Bread for the World and World Vision.

Chancellor Brown spoke of the Millennium Development Goals and suggested that the rich nations of the world now have the means to end hunger around the globe. "We have the means," he said. "What we lack is the moral will." Looking straight at us, he said, "That's your job."

Of course it is! Isn't it crystal clear that it is, as Micah said, "what God requires of us?" Unlike wedge issues, there is no argument here. This is not just our idea. It is God's idea. Crystal clear. And it is God's work, God's mission. So we ought not to be surprised as we set about this holy work to find the power of God sustaining us at every turn.