

Covenant for A New America

Poverty solutions that transcend ideology.

Last fall, Hurricane Katrina opened a window of awareness about the extent of poverty in America as the breached levees of Louisiana revealed the breaches in our society. We are painfully aware of the many Americans still living in poverty, the persistent connection of race and poverty, and the power of a political ideology that has eroded the idea of the common good. As Christians, we are called to be “the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in” (Isaiah 58:12).

Yet, as the months have gone by, the attention of politicians and the media has shifted to other issues and events. The need remains for a positive and comprehensive vision and policies that could truly begin to reduce poverty.

In response, the annual Call to Renewal roundtable in November became a “Faith Summit on Poverty.” More than 50 leaders and policy experts from denominations, faith-based organizations, and community

POLITICS

organizing networks met to discuss a “Covenant for a New America.” This policy platform is intended to move beyond the debate between left and right by seeking to create a common commitment to identify, pursue, and bring about real solutions to poverty.

The Covenant lifts up both personal and social responsibility with policies that address the individual decisions and social systems that trap people in poverty. It identifies policies that move beyond looking solely to charity or only to government. It acknowledges that budgets are moral documents and budget priorities can help or hurt poor people—and that negative family and cultural values also impact low-income people.

A combination of policies are proposed in four major areas:

A living family income for all who work. People who accept the responsibility to work must be supported by policies that combine minimum wage/living income regulations with the Earned Income Tax Credit and other low-income tax credits and provide targeted help with health care, child care, food, transportation, and housing. Low-income families also need the opportunity to create wealth and assets through such means as Individual Development Accounts and higher education.

Rebuilding neighborhoods and communities. We seek safe and healthy communities with economic security, environmental integrity, participation in decision-making, and quality of life for all. We will promote housing policies and community programs that end social isolation and concentrated poverty, support home ownership, and protect families from predatory business practices. We must protect and equip our children to be

successful by investing in quality education, community formation, and empowering community leaders.

Strengthening families and renewing culture. We will also address personal decisions and the negative role they can play in economic and family stability. We support policies to reduce teen pregnancy, strengthen marriage and family formation, encourage responsible fatherhood, and prevent domestic violence. The collapse of healthy moral values in our society must be addressed—the culture of violence, materialism, and consumption; the ever-more crass products of the entertainment and advertising industries; and a divisive political culture. The role of race, and the structural racism of the criminal justice system that removes an increasingly large number of African-American men from their families, must be addressed. Immigration policies, and their effect on undocumented workers and their families, are increasingly critical.

Ending extreme global poverty. As we recommit ourselves to reducing poverty in our own country, we must also recommit ourselves to ending extreme global poverty. All of humanity is interconnected as children of God. We have the knowledge, information, technology, and resources to end extreme poverty; what is lacking is the moral and political will to do so.

The Covenant for a New America has its public launch in January, offering a positive vision of how our nation could begin to overcome poverty, along with an action plan for its use as an educational and organizing tool. We have asked our local partners to deliver it to congressional district offices around the country.

Thirty-seven million Americans—including 13 million children—living in poverty is morally unacceptable. We must act and pray together for a society where “all sit under their own vines and fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid” (Micah 4:4).

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