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Addressing the Issue of Poverty

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It's all right to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and [God's] children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the 21st century, where individuals and corporations have net worth and assets totaling in the billions of dollars, poverty remains a reality in the world. Specifically in the United States, the 2009 American Community Survey (ACS) conducted by the US Census Bureau, found that 14.3 percent of the U.S. population had income below their respective poverty thresholds. The number of people in poverty increased in 2009 to 42.9 million people.¹ Moreover, 31 states saw increases in both the number and percentage of people in poverty between the 2008 and 2009 ACS; no state had a statistically significant decline in either the number in poverty or the poverty rate²

Poverty is oppressive. It causes extreme stress and strain on individuals and families who struggle simply to survive from day to day. It impedes people from receiving the proper health care they need when they are ill. Poverty hinders a child from obtaining an exceptional education that enables

him or her to make positive contributions to society. It demoralizes the self image and lowers the self worth of the one who is unable to live in safe, clean, and affordable housing. Essentially, the oppressive titanium chains of poverty prevent people from living the healthy and holistic life that God intends for all of humanity.

The prevalence of poverty in the U.S. and abroad should be a clarion call to the Church universal that the world is desperately in need of divine intervention. How does God involve God's self in the lives of those living on earth? Through God's creation, i.e., through people of faith. Specifically, as members of the body of Christ, Christians are called to replicate Jesus' ministry of liberation and restoration that he declared as his mission in Luke 4:18:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Thus, like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had a deep sense of religious vocation and fervently believed that people of faith have public responsibilities, we must dedicate ourselves to the elimination of poverty in the U.S. and abroad. Our mission must be to work toward economic equality as we seek to empower all of God's children to live the healthy and fulfilling lives that God desires for all of humanity.

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,300 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.

¹ Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/acsbr09-1.pdf>

² *ibid.*