

"Practical Theology as Method for the Bishops Initiative on Children and Poverty and The Bishop's Role as Teacher"

Practical Theology Working Group

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## **AN EPISCOPAL INITIATIVE: DEFINITION AND PURPOSE**

An episcopal initiative seeks to articulate a vision for the church in response to a critical need and the biblical and theological mandate. It is an exercise of the teaching office of the episcopacy as the bishops attempt to inform, inspire, and mobilize The United Methodist Church to be a sign, foretaste, and herald of God's reign in the midst of a suffering world. Through an episcopal initiative, the bishops do practical theology by confronting a critical reality in the world in the light of a new heaven and new earth envisioned and being brought into being by the Triune God.

After three years of study, prayer, and discernment, the United Methodist bishops approved in 1995 an Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty. The Initiative began with a serious study of the reality of poverty and the state of the world's children. Then attention turned to what the enormous suffering by the children and the poor say about the church and how the Bible and our Wesleyan tradition inform the church's response to the children and poverty.

One conclusion is that the United Methodist Church, especially in North America, has been shaped more by the gods of consumerism and individualism than the God made known in creation, the Exodus, and supremely in Jesus Christ. We have all but ignored a dominate theme of the Bible: God hears the cries of the poor, God defends the 'orphans, widows, and immigrants', and that in Jesus Christ God came in poverty and vulnerability. Further, John Wesley's ministry and life among the poor has been at best minimized by contemporary heirs of Wesley.

The Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty has three goals: (1) the transformation of the church in response to the God who is among the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized; (2) evangelization, the proclamation in word and deed of the good news of Jesus Christ to and with all people; (3) provide resources for the church as it seeks to be in ministry with children and the poor.

## **BISHOPS AS PRACTICAL THEOLOGIANS**

The episcopal initiative is one expression of the teaching office of the bishops. In reality, everything the bishops do teaches. Much of the power of the episcopacy is lodged in symbolism. How bishops spend their time, where their offices are located, which invitations are accepted, subjects of their writings, focus of their preaching, to whom they are accessible, the items on their calendars--all testify to priorities, understandings, visions, and commitments. They are all expressions of the bishop's theology. Without firm theological grounding and persistent struggle with the questions who is God? What is God doing in the world? and What are we to do in response? bishops become captive to pragmatic institutionalism. Other disciplines meant to be

instrumental become foundational--sociology, psychology, management philosophy.

The office of bishop has been shaped in recent years more by administrative and management images than by theological ones. The bishop is the CEO of the conference, whose schedule is dominated by meetings, institutional promotion, personnel problem solving and crisis management. Bishops are not expected to be strong preachers, effective teachers, and substantive theologians. They are expected to be skilled administrators, masters at parliamentary processes, informed interpreters of church law.

How can bishops maintain theological focus when the demands and expectations of the office do not seem to support such a goal? As one bishop, I can only confess the difficulty, offer a few of my own efforts, and ask for assistance in being held accountable for theological leadership. The following are some of the ways I seek to fulfill the teaching office through theological leadership.

1. Make clear to the conference that theological reflection and grounding are priorities of the bishop. This is done through regular writing and speaking on theological issues, consulting with conference leaders, especially the Committee on the Episcopacy, and seeking to bring to bear the language and insights and practices of the faith on every issue.
2. Sharing in teaching/listening days with clergy and laity on an annual basis, focusing on theological foundations.
3. Shaping the agenda of annual conferences around worship, biblical/theological study, and acts of mercy, justice, and compassion.
4. Accepting writing/speaking assignments which force me to study, reflect, and struggle theologically.
5. Consulting with theologians and scholars.

## CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most pressing issue confronting bishops in practical theology is how bishops can be shaped theologically in an institutionally focused episcopacy. The Episcopal Initiative on Children and Poverty is one avenue by which transformation may be possible as bishops are shaped by the God who hears the cries of the poor, in Jesus Christ comes to deliver, and through the Holy Spirit incorporates us into God's saving acts.