

Why Should Churches Serve Children in Poverty?

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Since the Great Recession, poverty in America has become an increasingly visible and challenging issue on our conscience. Roughly 50 million people in the United States are living in poverty.¹ While there have been great movements to eradicate poverty in the past, rates of poverty are getting higher and the gap between the wealthy and the poor is widening. The picture of poverty is grim. Children, the elderly, and the disabled are the ones that suffer from the political gridlock. And, according to the National Poverty Center, children make up 36 percent of the nation's poor.² For a nation of great wealth, it is unacceptable to have so many children living in such difficult socio-economic situations. You can tell a lot about a country and a community by how they treat the most vulnerable.

Two of the greatest social institutions in the United States are the public schools and the church. Most communities have a school and a church, usually several. Churches and schools are consistently used places of socialization, learning, and growing. It makes sense that these two great institutions work together to improve communities.

Churches and schools should make efforts to partner where they are able, especially for children that live in difficult socio-economic or living situations. The church should also seek to serve vulnerable populations where they have the human and capital resources available, and partner with the school whose mission is to improve the education and ultimately the quality of life of the child. The church should seek to protect those who cannot protect themselves, in this case, children.

Schools also tend to be microcosms of the greater community; by working with local staff, families, and children, churches and congregations can learn more about their community and seek ways to be more relevant and engaged in the work of community development.

Education is a means of development, perhaps the best means of development in a country where public education is a right for all children. A quality education has a direct impact on a child's quality of life and future prospects. We must put resources into our children. Education is an investment in the future; this is especially so for children who live in poverty.

Church-school partnerships are theologically warranted. As the body of Christ today, we must articulate a theology with justice and compassion as core values. This is centered in the life of Jesus Christ, whose character, humanity, and love were in full display and remain in action today through the Gospel stories and the body of Christ. "Christian theology is language about the liberating character of God's presence in Jesus Christ as he calls people into being for freedom in the world."³ The entirety of Scripture proclaims God's love for freedom and justice, as proclaimed by the prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Pauline stories of the sacrificial giving of the Macedonians to the Christians of Jerusalem.

Christ chose to dwell with the poor and lowly. The foundation of our works of love, mercy, and justice is rooted in our love for God and our love of neighbor, which Christ called us to do.

¹ Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us* (New York: Smiley Books, 2012), 64.

² *Ibid.*, 118.

³ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 8.

