



**Changing the Wind:
Movements of Faith for Economic Justice**

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It was one of those warm spring days in the nation's capital when the fresh promise of new possibilities seems, just for a moment, to defy the entrenched ways of Washington. Surrounded by the impressive vista of monuments and museums on the Mall, I stood behind a rough lectern on a make-shift stage, looking into the eyes of 1000 low-income people—mostly single mothers who had been on welfare. My job was to speak and my topic was hope. In a city where the currency is power, these poor Americans seemed a bit out of place. Not used to having much clout in their political system, you could tell they were feeling the energy that comes from just being together. They had come on buses from urban and rural communities to “lobby” the Congress for a new welfare reform bill—one that would effectively help people like themselves to escape poverty and move to self-sufficiency. I told them a story.

I remember another group of people who wanted to change things meeting in a high mountain town in Mexico, 2,000 miles from Washington D.C. Two-hundred fifty Christian leaders from 50 countries (mostly from the Southern Hemisphere) were gathered for a whole week to ask how they could learn to do a new kind of “advocacy.” Having spent years doing service to the poor in their own countries, and now engaged in effective community development projects, they still saw the poor losing ground. So they had come from Latin America, Africa, and Asia to ask how they together might help change the rules of global trade and transform international economic practices enough to give poor countries and their people a fair chance to break the bonds of misery and deprivation. I told them the same story.

I've also told the story at Harvard University where I teach part-time. In my class at the Kennedy School of Government, the students wrestled with the question of what to do with their lives after graduation—trying to sort out the differences between career and vocation. Harvard graduate students are being groomed to literally run the systems of power that the poor mothers in Washington and the Christian leaders from the global south want to change. But they too are looking for some hope that some transformation might be possible.

I've told the same story at countless public gatherings and town meetings in hundreds of communities across the length and breadth of the United States, where people of faith, conscience, good will, and fragile hopes want to make a difference but are searching for how to do it. Maybe you are like some of the people I've talked to.

Here's the story.

I told the Moms on the Mall that I didn't want them to waste any valuable time while they were in Washington. Instead, I wanted them to be able to quickly recognize the Members of Congress whom they had come to see. They're the ones, I told them, who walk around town with their fingers held high in the air, having just licked them and put them up to see which way the wind is blowing. It's quite a sight—men and women walking all around the Capital grounds with their wet index fingers pointed at the sky. The political leaders are really very good at figuring out the direction of the wind, and are quite used to quickly moving in that direction.

It's not a matter of malice for most of them. In fact, I've met quite a few politicians, and many came to Washington because they truly wanted to do the right thing. But after a while, they get entrenched in Washington's ways, and change seems ever more distant. Power and wealth are the real governors here and people adjust to those realities. Even the ones who still really want to make a difference will tell you they can't without public backing, and they don't often find it.

Many of us believe that by replacing one wet-fingered politician with another, we can change our society. But it never really works, and when it doesn't we get disillusioned. We then get tempted to just grumble, withdraw, or give up altogether on ever changing anything. But that's where we make our mistake.

The great practitioners of real social change, like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, understood something very important. They knew that you don't change a society by merely replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change a society by *changing the wind*.

Change the wind, transform the debate, re-cast the discussion, alter the context in which political decisions are being made, and you will change the outcomes. Move the conversation around a crucial issue to a whole new place, and you will open up possibilities for change never dreamed of before. And you will be surprised at how fast the politicians adjust to the change in the wind.

I think that's what people of faith and conscience are supposed to be—"wind changers." People motivated by spiritual values that give them a real vision for change are not like those with their fingers up in the air. They already know the direction to head in, and they lead by example. Their commitments, skills, sacrifices, creativity and, ultimately, moral authority are what makes all the difference, and changes the wind. They also have the capacity to gather people around the vision and, in the terms that places like Washington can understand, they demonstrate that they have a critical constituency. But what they really demonstrate is a fundamental principle—that *history is most changed by social movements with a spiritual foundation*. Look at all the social movements that have made the most difference for social justice, and that is what you find.

I told the low-income parents that only by uniting together and enlisting the moral authority of the churches could they and we change the wind in the American poverty debate. I told the Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian leaders from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, that they had both the faith and the critical constituencies to alter the discussions of global trade and economic policy—not by mere lobbying, but by changing the wind. I told the Harvard students that they could either run the systems of power, as expected of the best and the brightest, or they could really test themselves by offering their best energy and gifts to the causes that others deem hopeless, but could become successful initiatives. And I tell audiences around the nation and the world, virtually every week, that a real "faith-based initiative" is so much more than providing social services, it is rather to become the prophetic voice and force that can and has moved whole nations to turn in a different direction.

Living-wage Campaigns

In April 2001, a great moral drama unfolded at the world's most famous university. Harvard is the second richest non-profit organization in the world; the wealthiest is the Vatican. With a \$19 billion endowment, Harvard is arguably the most influential university in the world, priding itself in offering intellectual and moral leadership to the global community. So why wasn't it paying its poorest workers a living family wage?

Nearly forty Harvard students and community supporters conducted a three-week peaceful sit-in to ask that question. They entered the University's Massachusetts Hall, which houses the offices of the president and provost, with the simple demand that all Harvard workers be paid a living wage of at least \$10.25 an hour, with basic health benefits. A city living wage ordinance passed by the Cambridge City Council determined the amount.

The Harvard Living Wage Campaign began in the winter of 1999 when I was living in Cambridge for the year, and I talked often with the students involved. They questioned why this powerful academic institution was unwilling to pay its security guards, janitors, and dining-room workers a wage sufficient to support their families. Yet the University continued to outsource

jobs to private firms paying poverty-level wages. After several unsuccessful meetings with University administrators, the sit-in began.

As the sit-in went on, the support for their campaign grew to include national union leaders, politicians, Harvard alumni, families of the participating students, and similar living wage campaigns at other universities. Nearly 300 Harvard faculty signed a full-page ad in the Boston Globe in support of the student campaign, saying: “We believe Harvard, as a global leader in higher education, has a responsibility to lead by example in promoting economic fairness and human dignity.” I was one who signed, as an adjunct lecturer at the Kennedy School. Some of my students participated in the sit-in and called me on their cell phones from inside Massachusetts Hall.

Finally, three weeks later, the University agreed to create a new committee including students and union representatives to make recommendations on compensation policy, to begin new collective bargaining with the custodian’s union, and to declare a moratorium on outsourcing jobs. With that agreement, the student sit-in peacefully ended with a significant victory.

Living wage campaigns are good examples of making the vision practical, and they are one of the fastest growing movements in the United States. The movement has a simple assertion: people who work full-time should be able to support their families. The idea that people who work should earn a wage that allows them to support a family is not a radical one, at Harvard University or anywhere else. It is a fundamental moral issue.

In Los Angeles, a remarkable alliance between religious leaders, labor unions, and low-income workers produced one of the first historic victories in 1997. The Los Angeles City Council unanimously voted a living-wage ordinance that required city contractors to pay employees \$7.25 an hour if they provided health insurance or \$8.50 if they didn’t. It was the result of months of education and advocacy by community leaders and groups, including many local religious figures, who stood alongside low-wage workers and the unemployed to seek better wages and working conditions.

Attention was then turned to the city’s world-class hotels, which charge premium prices but pay extremely low wages to the almost invisible workers who make everything convenient and comfortable for their guests. Here was a clear campaign for justice and fairness in the lap of luxury. Some downtown hotels signed new contracts, but the posh Westside hotels held out. Methodist pastor Rev. James Lawson brought a wide range of churches to the effort and provided significant leadership, just as he had as a young civil rights activist in Memphis and a protégé of Martin Luther King, Jr. The Jewish community also joined in and mobilized to challenge the hotel owners.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment came with a Holy Week silent procession in Beverly Hills, with Christian and Jewish religious leaders in their full clerical regalia alongside hotel workers in windbreakers and jeans. One reporter said, “Shoppers froze in their tracks as they witnessed the colorful block-long procession of religious figures and laborers led by three workers carrying baskets containing Easter lilies, bitter herbs, a cup of milk, matzoh, and a charoset mixture of ground fruits and nuts.” Religious symbols were confronting economic injustice. On the sidewalk in front of one hotel, Rabbi Neil Comess-Daniels conducted a miniseder marking the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt—an obvious challenge to the wage slavery of the modern tourism industry, where workers toil for as long as twenty years in the same hotel without receiving any health or retirement benefits. Rev. Dick Gillett, a retired Episcopal priest, called on the hotel owners to sign new contracts with their workers to “signal to all of Los Angeles that hardworking people deserve better than perpetual poverty.” By mid-January, all fourteen hotels had signed an excellent contract that could serve as a model for

hotels around the country. The new alliance between religion and labor is now turning to the plight of Los Angeles garment workers.

A living wage, simply put, is an hourly wage that allows a person working full-time to pay for the basic necessities of life—food, shelter, clothing, health care, transportation, child care, and so on. Our current federal minimum wage barely provides enough money for a single person to live above the poverty line, let alone a family with children. Living-wage campaigns simply assert that people who work full-time ought to be able to support their families. There is a political argument as well: the more a working family makes, the less that family turns to public subsidies such as food stamps, subsidized housing, child care, or other government assistance. In the midst of a political ethos emphasizing “personal responsibility” and leading to “welfare reform,” many campaigns argue that enabling working families to support themselves is a logical political platform. Each living-wage initiative is specific to its location, goals, organizing capacity, and political climate, yet there are common elements. Living-wage campaigns focus on passing local ordinances that require private businesses that benefit from public funds (in any form, including grants, loans, subsidies, or tax breaks) to pay their employees a living wage.

Another interesting side effect of these campaigns is the renewal of discourse about labor relations. Many campaigns have moved beyond negotiating about an hourly wage and now include such issues as greater accountability in hiring practices, incentives to hire economically disadvantaged employees, and obligation of the corporation to invest in the community. Living-wage campaigns are growing exponentially across the country.

Living-wage campaigns make the moral argument that people who work hard and full-time shouldn't be poor. But there are honest questions concerning the living wage, such as how it impacts small business owners or nonprofit organizations dealing with a city. Some ask whether business should pay the whole bill to move people out of poverty. Fair enough. But if we affirm the moral principle that someone who is working hard and full-time shouldn't be poor, or unable to support a family, some alternative approaches must be found. One idea is the “living income.” This would be a combination of the best wage that can be attained and targeted government supports like an expanded Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income families (originally a Republican idea to help working families that now has broad bipartisan support). It would also include providing health care, child care, transportation, and food stamps where necessary; these are also critical for bringing families out of poverty, as is a public commitment to affordable housing.

There are some basics, such as food, medicine, shelter, and education, that ought to be assured for the nation's poorest children. Guaranteeing them would finally provide a “floor” beneath which people shouldn't fall if they abide by certain responsibilities. Most Americans don't mind helping children and families that are working and trying to escape from poverty. It is hardly something for nothing. A new combination of a “living wage” and a “living income” might be just what is needed to assist a family's efforts to build a better life for their children. It's a proposal that could gain support across the political spectrum.

Jubilee

For the first time in history we have the information, knowledge, technology, and resources to bring the worst of global poverty virtually to an end. What we don't have is the moral and political will to do so. And it is becoming clear that it will take a new *moral energy* to create that political will. I believe the religious communities of the world could provide the “tipping point” in the struggle to eliminate the world's most extreme poverty. Faith communities could provide the crucial social leadership the world desperately needs; and I don't see where else that prophetic leadership might come from.

In a 2004 speech to a conference of mostly faith-based development agencies in the UK, British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, gave a sobering report on how the world was failing to keep the promises of the Millennium Development Goals in the crucial areas of education, health, and targeted poverty reduction. Despite the commitments made by 147 nations to cut extreme poverty in half by the year 2015, global progress was significantly behind schedule. As to the causes of the 30,000 infant deaths which still occur each day in the poorest parts of the world, Brown pointed to our moral apathy, “And let us be clear: it is not that the knowledge to avoid these infant deaths does not exist; it is not that the drugs to avoid infant deaths do not exist; it is not that the expertise does not exist; it is not that the means to achieve our goals do not exist. It is that the political will does not exist. In the nineteenth century you could say that it was inadequate science, technology and knowledge that prevented us saving lives. Now, with the science, technology and knowledge available, we must face the truth that the real barrier is indifference.”

Point by point, the Chancellor went through the alarming facts and statistics showing how these once hopeful goals had already fallen far short. “If we let things slip,” he predicted, “the Millennium Goals will become just another dream we once had, and we will indeed be sitting back on our sofas and switching on our TVs and – I am afraid - watching people die on our screens for the rest of our lives. We will be generation that betrayed its own heart.” He ended his speech with a passionate appeal to the non-governmental organizations and the faith communities in particular; and by quoting the prophet Isaiah

“I appeal to NGOs and faith groups: to hold us accountable, to be the conscience of the world, to be the voice that guides us at this crucial crossroads, to work together with no one ever subordinating their own objectives but recognizing that each of our objectives can be better realized if we can agree the financing to underpin them. In 2015 we cannot look back and say: ‘It was not us who acted, it had to be left to the next generation. It was not now, but some other distant time in the future.’ That is not good enough. When the need is urgent and our responsibilities clear; and even when the path ahead difficult hard and long, let us not lose hope but have the courage in our shared resolve to find the will to act. And let us say to each other in the words of Isaiah ‘though you were wearied by the length of your way, you did not say it was hopeless – you found new life in your strength.’ The strength together to fight poverty, remove destitution, end illiteracy, cure disease. The challenge for our time and for our generation. And let us achieve it together.”

On an earlier occasion, Gordon Brown said to me, “The most important social movement in Britain since Wilberforce was Jubilee 2000. Without that campaign, led by your church people, our government simply would not have cancelled the debts of the poorest countries.” Wilberforce, the 18th century British Parliamentarian who was converted in the Wesleyan revival, became the political leader of the historic anti-slavery campaign, which was sparked by spiritual renewal. Brown led the Labor government of Tony Blair in their decision in 2000 to cancel the bi-lateral debts to Britain of the world’s most impoverished nations, and Jubilee 2000 was the church-initiated movement for debt cancellation. “It’s obviously only a start to completing this process of debt relief and poverty reduction,” Brown said, “but it is the important start that I think everyone is looking for.” And it serves as perhaps the best modern case study of what a faith-based initiative can do.

On a trip to London in 1999, I was amazed when I saw the words “Jubilee 2000” emblazoned high atop the millennial countdown clock at Piccadilly Circus - the closest thing central London has to Times Square. I knew the grassroots campaign begun by religious and secular poverty activists in Britain to cancel the debt of the world's poorest nations had been

having remarkable success, but I didn't expect to see its name in London's lights on the way to a theatre in early January.

Over an Indian meal with our friends Peter and Dee Price, my English wife Joy and I discussed the extraordinary success of Jubilee 2000. Peter had just become a new bishop in the Church of England and was a staunch supporter of the campaign. He told us about the humble beginnings of the effort. Too radical a pipe dream, said most. Sure, forgiving the crushing debt of the world's poorest nations would probably do more than anything else to begin to make poverty reduction more possible. But how could you ever convince the world's wealthiest countries, their banks, and the World Bank and IMF (International Monetary Fund) to ever forgive those debts. Even the biggest international aid and development groups like Christian Aid and Oxfam were skeptical of the idea at first.

But at the beginning of the new millennium, Jubilee 2000 reported enormous progress in moving the world toward a cancellation of the poorest nation's debts. In Britain, where the movement began, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown and Prime Minister Tony Blair had already announced their goal to end the debt of the world's poorest countries by the end of the year and called upon other nations to follow suit. President Bill Clinton also announced his desire to cancel the debt owed to the United States, and bipartisan support was growing in Congress. The G-7 countries had begun to take some positive steps toward debt relief, and even the World Bank and the IMF were exploring how the crushing debt of the world's most impoverished nations might indeed be relieved, and the money saved used most directly to reduce poverty in those countries.

It was extraordinary that the biblical principles of "Jubilee" had become part of the international economic discussion. World Bank president James Wolfensohn and the leaders of the IMF now knew what Leviticus 25 says! They have been discussing the implications of such biblical texts with religious leaders, and must cope with an international grassroots campaign that has enlisted supporters from U2's Bono to the Pope. Did anybody really think that Bill Clinton and Tony Blair would be calling for debt cancellation without such international pressure from a movement that began with religious imperatives?

While there is much left to do to definitively cancel all that debt (especially the multi-lateral debts held by international bodies like the World Bank and the IMF), an enormous amount of progress has already been made. Jubilee 2000 was up in lights! Just shows you what a grassroots campaign can do.

On the day that all the U. S. newspapers carried stories on the third presidential debate in the election year of 2000, another front-page article appeared in The New York Times. That story started with the headline "Congressional Leadership Agrees to Debt Relief for Poor Nations," the Times reported an agreement to fund \$435 million for the U.S. part of the Cologne initiative for debt cancellation (where the G7 nations decided to act). The amount would now be included in the final appropriations bills moving through Congress.

Rep. Sonny Callahan (R-AL), ranking member of the House committee that controls the foreign aid budget, was quoted in the story: "The debt relief issue is now a speeding train. We've got the pope and every missionary in the world involved in this thing, and they persuaded just about everyone here that this is the noble thing to do." How did debt relief come to be such a "speeding train"? The Times reporter noted this "is a sign that street protests and parish activism about the problems of globalization have had an impact on Congress...." And President Clinton proclaimed, "It's not often we have a chance to do something that economists tell us is a financial imperative and religious leaders say is a moral imperative."

In an impassioned Congressional debate in the House of Representatives, Republican Congressman Spencer Bachus of Alabama and a leader in the struggle for debt reduction, said,

"Debt relief is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end. It is not a total solution to poverty, to hunger, to disease; but it is the first step. It is where the journey should begin to free these countries of the burden of debt, the chains of poverty, and the shackles of despair, to enable them to minister to the economic and social needs of their people, of their children."

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, tells the story of how Rep. Bacchus came to this belief. A laywoman in Alabama got their church's hunger committee involved in Bread for the World. They invited Bacchus, their member of Congress, to a dinner at which Beckmann spoke. During the dinner, they urged Bacchus to cosponsor Bread's anti-hunger legislation. He had never before sponsored such legislation, but he called the next evening and said, "I doubt that this will win me many votes, but I don't want to be responsible for even one child going hungry."

At the time the Jubilee 2000 network was getting organized, Bacchus had become chair of the international committee of the House Banking Committee, where congressional action on debt relief would have to begin. When the Committee held a hearing on poor-country debt, Bacchus declared, "If we don't write off some of this debt, poor people in these countries will be suffering for the rest of their lives. And we'll be suffering a lot longer than that." He held up a statement from Pope John Paul II and said, "I haven't read much by Catholics before, but I don't know how any Christian could read what the pope is saying here and not agree that we need to do something about the debt of these countries."

According to Beckmann, "Bacchus lobbied his conservative colleagues, including the Republican leadership of the House, for U.S. participation in international debt relief. Bacchus says that he had come to see the world differently because of the church people back home that had approached him about Jubilee." Beckmann concludes the story by reminding it was the grassroots activism of those two women in Alabama along with thousands of others across the country that led to the passage of debt relief.

Several weeks earlier, the diversity of the debt relief coalition was on display at a White House meeting as televangelist Pat Robertson and U2 lead singer Bono appeared at a press briefing with the president to urge passage of the appropriation. Following a meeting with Bono, even archconservative Sen. Jesse Helms has gotten on board the train. In a New York Times interview, Bono said: "When I met with Sen. Jesse Helms, he wept. I talked to him about the biblical origin of the idea of Jubilee Year, the idea that every 49 years, you were supposed to release people from their debt and slaves were supposed to be set free. It's very punk rock for God, but I think it's in Leviticus. He was genuinely moved by the story of the continent of Africa, and he said to me, 'America needs to do more.' I think he felt it as a burden on a spiritual level." The New York Times story concluded by calling this, "a victory for a coalition of rock stars, religious figures, and charity groups that have made debt forgiveness a moral touchstone for wealthy nations." Jubilee 2000 stands as an example of how a movement of concerned and active people, grounded in moral and religious beliefs, can "change the wind" to accomplish what only a few short years ago seemed impossible.

At the annual meetings of the IMF and World Bank, supporters of debt relief are now always present – both in the suites and in the streets. Partly because of that pressure, even the World Bank now argues that economic growth alone is not sufficient to overcome poverty as long as existing political and economic systems favor the rich over the poor. The director of one Bank study noted, "in order to increase poor people's share of this growth, we're going to have to address inequalities." Jubilee 2000 is now the Jubilee Network and its supporters still call on the World Bank and IMF to cancel 100 percent of the debt owed to them. Along with street demonstrations, there are also meetings with top officials of the institutions and even public dialogues between critics from a variety of NGOs and financial leaders. Former Jubilee 2000 UK

Director Anne Pettifor has said, "It's very seldom you get powerful people listening to civil society."

At one World Bank/IMF meeting, Bank President Wolfensohn noted the demonstrations in his speech: "Outside these walls, young people are demonstrating against globalization. I believe deeply that many of them are asking legitimate questions, and I embrace the commitment of a new generation to fight poverty. I share their passion and their questioning." That continual questioning must go on, because the full debt cancellation needed has yet to be accomplished at the World Bank and the IMF. But U.S. Congresswoman Maxine Waters, a supporter of the effort, noted especially the role played by Jubilee 2000: "This is really a spiritual movement. And I want you to know it could not have been, had it not been for Jubilee 2000. They have been able to organize religious organizations all over the world to come together with nongovernmental organizations and to really move this issue forward. It would not have happened without them."

The Micah Challenge

In the fall of 2003, I attended a meeting of several hundred evangelical leaders in the Mexican industrial city of Queretaro. The participants were from Christian relief and development organizations around the world, and they had a big and bold idea. From more than 250 agencies in 50 countries, these evangelical poverty fighters from mostly Africa, Asia, and Latin America (with allies from the U.K., Europe, and a few from the U.S.) were calling themselves the "Micah Network." Inspired by the ancient Hebrew prophet to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God," they were ready to issue a challenge to their own churches and to the government leaders in each of their countries, right out of the prophetic biblical tradition. They are calling it, appropriately, "The Micah Challenge," and are directing it straight to the heart of globalization and its impact on the poor. The backdrop of failed trade talks at a recent World Trade Organization meeting in nearby Cancun, Mexico, was clearly on people's minds. I was there to speak, to the "prophetic call" of Micah, and to strategize with these brothers and sisters about what a global campaign might look like.

No longer willing to just "pull the bodies out of the river," these evangelical Christians, mostly from the southern hemisphere, were ready to "go upstream and find out what or who was throwing them in!" Having worked in poor communities for many years (and won great credibility in doing so) these community development agencies had decided to now turn to advocacy as well - prophetic advocacy on behalf of the poor. And they had entered into a clear partnership with the World Evangelical Alliance (comprised of church associations in 120 countries). That partnership would unite evangelical churches around the world (now comprising 200-400 million Christians) with their evangelical relief and development organizations in the common cause of biblical justice.

The Micah Challenge mission statement begins with a clear declaration that will warm the hearts of people across the world who long for justice. It reads simply, "The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and the Micah Network are creating a global evangelical campaign to mobilize Christians against poverty." Their strategy was to promote "integral mission," where the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel are deeply connected, so that evangelism and social justice both have clear consequences for the other. Then they would prophetically call upon the political leaders of the world and seek to influence them to seek justice for the poor and rescue the needy as the Bible instructs.

The Micah Challenge is taking direct aim at the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, agreed to by 147 nations, to cut extreme global poverty in half by 2015. The

Micah Network believes that achieving those goals will indeed require a "spiritual engine" that provides both moral energy and political accountability. They intend to raise a strong "evangelical voice" to political decision-makers in their own countries, in the wealthy nations, at the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and other international bodies. Their advocacy will be local, national, and global, holding the nations accountable to what they have already said and agreed to. The Micah Network is ready to collaborate with others, whenever possible, but their strong appeal will be to and from evangelical Christians. Given the amazing growth of evangelical Christianity around the world, especially in the global south, the emergence of the Micah Challenge could be of great significance. As one delegate from a developing nation remarked quietly and prayerfully after the morning session on the vision of Micah for today's world, "We could be starting history in this room." Indeed.

Call to Renewal

Sometimes I've been able to help bring various efforts together or help people find common ground they didn't believe was possible. I've helped facilitate both gang peace summits and religious roundtables that brought warring factions to the table. The "table" has been a constant metaphor and tactic for me, a place to form new connections, ideas, and partnerships. Always asking the question of how to put faith into action can land you in some unusual places and circumstances. In the early 1990s, for example, I became involved in supporting some of the gang "truce" movements that were emerging. One Sunday morning, in 1993, I found myself sitting in a black Baptist church in Kansas City, Missouri, after a weekend "Gang Peace Summit." In a congregation that included a couple of hundred former and current gang members from all over the country, I was reminded of how far I had traveled from the white suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. But on that morning, there was nowhere else in the world I would have wanted to be; I felt privileged to be there "at the table."

I'll never forget what happened that morning. Two young rival street warriors, who had been trying to kill each other all that past year, dramatically dropped their gang "colors" in the pulpit and resolved from then on to walk together on the road to peace. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. My tears were also for churches who couldn't or wouldn't come together for the sake of their communities, the way these young men and women were doing. It was that morning when the idea came to attempt a similar "truce" between the churches. If some "Crips" and "Bloods" can do this, why not the evangelicals and liberals, the Catholics and Protestants? Just like the young gangsters, the churches would need a reason to come together, after years of acting like gangs themselves in their battles over turf, money, and power. Everyone knew the churches "ought" to have more unity, but as was the case with the street gangs, it would take a crisis to provoke a new coming together, one that people would feel deeply.

That crisis and opportunity came when Congress and the White House virtually ended the nation's sixty-year-old social welfare system in the fall of 1996. Most everyone agreed the old welfare system wasn't working very well, and certainly wasn't overcoming poverty. But the politicians ended it without first putting alternatives in place. That caused a shudder in the religious community, which, as a historic and major service provider, was now afraid that too much of the burden would fall on it. But at the same time the churches were sensing fresh responsibilities and even a new commitment.

Several colleagues and I decided to take a risk, by calling together a summit of our own. Almost sixty church leaders gathered together at a new roundtable and for nine hours talked and prayed through the issues. After one of the most remarkable days any of us could remember, a

new unity began to be forged. A vision of partnership began to emerge, first for the churches and then for other organizations and leaders in local communities. It was a unity for the sake of poor people who were facing a potential crisis greater than any in years. It seemed that the poor were bringing the churches together.

With the old welfare system gone, a whole new set of questions was now being asked. One was how to create the necessary alternatives before all the welfare cuts were put into place. That effort would take the involvement of the whole community—the churches, nonprofit organizations, businesses, unions, and government officials. Our guiding principle was that every group should do its part, and each do what it does best. The solutions we needed now wouldn't conform to the old categories of liberal and conservative, Left and Right. Instead, we committed ourselves to forge a new kind of moral and community politics where values would be more important than ideology. One of our central affirmations was that the way to find common ground is to move to higher ground. We named the new effort Call to Renewal to indicate that the task would be as spiritual as it is political.

I agreed to be the convener of this new federation of faith-based organizations—churches and religious groups with faith at their center—who are trying to overcome poverty. We began to organize town meetings and roundtables around the country, where new questions and challenges were creating new partnerships. The two hundred town meetings we did in the first two years convinced me that a new era of multisector cooperation is indeed possible, with pastors and nonprofit organizations coming together with elected officials, police chiefs, and leaders in the business community and labor to create strategies and to mobilize resources for community change.

Call to Renewal has now become the broadest ecumenical Christian table working together to overcome poverty. We include denominations and organizations across the political and theological spectrum: Catholics, Evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Historic Black Churches, Latino and Asian, Pentecostal and Historic Peace Churches. And we remain united around a mission:

Call to Renewal is a national network of churches, faith-based organizations, and individuals working to overcome poverty in America. Through local, regional and national partnerships with groups from across the theological and political spectrum, we convene the broadest table of Christians focused on anti-poverty efforts. Together we work to influence local, state and national public policies and priorities, while growing and developing a movement of Christians committed to overcoming poverty.

We just held our eighth national mobilization two weeks ago. It was attended by over 300 local and national leaders and faith-based activists from around the country, and , included a keynote speech by Bill Moyers and remarks from The Hon. Alphonso Jackson, Secretary U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) from the Democratic Platform Committee, on behalf of the Bush and Kerry campaigns.

But the highlight was when we gathered in the Washington National Cathedral for a “Service of Unity to Overcome Poverty.” Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., Senior Pastor of Riverside Church, delivered a powerful sermon. Then, one-by-one, Evangelical, Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, Black, Latino and Asian national church leaders and heads of faith-based organizations signed a statement of unity on overcoming poverty during a powerful and moving ceremony on behalf of the 35 million people in the U.S. who are poor. The leaders present were representative of nearly 50 total signatories of the unity statement.

"The Washington National Cathedral service will go down as an historic milestone in the churches' efforts to overcome poverty," said Rev. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, General

Secretary of the Reformed Church in America and Chair of the Call to Renewal Board of Directors.

Unity Statement on Overcoming Poverty
How good and pleasant it is when the people of God live together in unity!
May 24, 2004

As Christian leaders in the United States, we recognize that we live in a time when political and social issues threaten to divide the church. Although there are issues on which we do not agree, we come together to affirm that justice for those in our society who live in poverty is, for all of us, a deeply held religious belief on which we are firmly united. We affirm God's vision of a good society offered to us by the prophet Isaiah. His words are as relevant today as they were 3,000 years ago, and show us the way forward. Isaiah envisions a society where:

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live a lifetime...They shall build houses and inhabit them: they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit: they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen will long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear their children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord...." (Isaiah 65:20-25)

In America, people who work should not be poor, but today many are. We must ensure that all people who are able to work have jobs where they do not labor in vain, but have access to quality health care, decent housing, and a living income to support their families. The future of our country depends upon strong and stable families that can successfully raise their children. We must also ensure that those who are unable to work are cared for by our society.

We therefore covenant with each other that in this election year, we will pray together and work together for policies that can achieve these goals. We will ensure that overcoming poverty becomes a bi-partisan commitment and a non-partisan cause, one that links religious values with economic justice, moral behavior with political commitment. We will raise this conviction in the public dialogue, and we will seek to hold all our political leaders accountable to its achievement. In our work together, we will "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:3)

A New Movement?

I noted at the beginning that *history is most changed by social movements with a spiritual foundation*. I believe we are on the verge of a spiritually based movement for true economic justice. I'm using that word "movement" deliberately, even daringly. For too long we've been afraid to speak of a movement, ever since the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The "movement question" came up in a conversation I was having with about fifty Denver civic leaders about the relationship between faith and public life. The woman who posed it was a veteran of many social and political campaigns. "I remember my early days and the feeling of being part of a movement," she said. "But we lost that and seem to have gotten very scattered. I'm wondering if the time has come to refocus our energies, to come together around something. Is that possible?" Her question was deep and heartfelt. The nodding heads from around the room suggested that it was everyone's question, not only people of her generation but young people eager to commit their lives to something that would make a difference.

The question we must all ask is: Is there anything worth changing our lives for? That's what a social movement is all about—when enough people decide that there is. As I travel the country today, I hear people asking those questions again. The answers to the questions will have a lot to do with our future.

Perhaps the most powerful thing about a movement is that anybody can be a part of it. It's not just for leaders and certainly not only for politicians, pundits, and the politically correct. I put the stress on ordinary people because they are who finally make a difference in real social movements. People come as they are, participate as they can, and at any level they are able. Some people in the civil rights movement gave their lives, others risked what they could, many marched, more supported them in other ways, even more spoke out in their own places where they had some voice, and more still decided to act and vote in different ways. That's what a movement is.

Movements are built on statements of faith. So I'll end by making one. I believe we are on the verge of a new movement for economic justice, led in large part by communities of faith. To make such a prediction today is certainly a faith statement. But that's how movements begin.

(Portions of this paper were excerpted from *Faith Works*, Random House, 2000.)