

No. 9720

(Sense-of-the-Assembly)

CONCERNING THE LEAST OF THESE...BROTHERS AND SISTERS

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

WHEREAS, the Church of Jesus Christ has a mandate to care for "the least of these. . . brothers and sisters;" historically the People of God have heard God's word spoken through the prophets with regard to the treatment of "the widows and orphans," and have had the commandment of hospitality to strangers and care for "the sojourner in the land" and

WHEREAS, the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has spoken through resolutions (as in 1963) about our responsibility for "caring for the sick, the poor, the troubled, the lame, the blind, since the beginning of the Christian movement;" we have, as a church, declared that every person in need has every right to call upon the resources of the community without embarrassment and without being assigned second-class citizenship. Services are not favors to be bestowed, but resources on which anyone in need should have a rightful claim; and

WHEREAS, reductions in funds for church programming have meant that some of the organizations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which have traditionally been watch-dogs and conscience for us in many of these matters have been victims of down-sizing at general and regional manifestations of the church; and

WHEREAS, congregations, regions and general units are still very much involved with programs concerned with issues of justice and compassion, such as sponsorship of refugees, Mother-to-Mother programs, literacy and tutoring programs, homelessness and housing, health clinics, food and hunger programs, such as food pantries, Bread for the World, and Heifer Project International. Such involvements continue to affirm the church's mandate to a ministry of justice and compassion and offer valuable experience and models for still wider participation on the part of the church; and

WHEREAS, recent years have seen great enthusiasm in many sectors of our society for welfare reform. This has included a wide spectrum of opinion and action, from efforts on economic grounds to cut costs, and reduce benefits of health care or public assistance, or shorten periods of eligibility, to efforts to cut benefits entirely to whole classes of persons, "illegal" and sometimes even legal immigrants, including persons who have received asylum or special medical evacuation from war-torn regions of the world. Generally there has been a movement to take health and human services from the U.S. federal government and return them to the states, with a reduction in funding. Some states and regions have even moved to curtail opportunities for public education, and deny such services to "illegal" alien families; and

WHEREAS, studies on poverty point out the growing numbers of women and children who are pushed into poverty and dependence on public support and assistance, increasing the feminization of poverty. Also, efforts continue from many sides to penalize mothers and their children for their plight. In our own community we have seen the increase in numbers of women and children needing shelter in our Homeless Shelter programs, and the pressures on refugees to get employment before they have had an opportunity to secure the necessary language skills to ensure adequate and ongoing employment; and

WHEREAS, we have seen a rising tide in the U.S. society of xenophobia, fear of the foreigner, and many attempts to place blame for perceived worsening of conditions in the society on the "outsiders." Some critics of the U.S. welfare systems have suggested that churches take over the responsibility for services currently provided by the government. Policy studies, such as those done by the Washington, D.C. based Bread for the World show that a complete transfer of present programs from government to church-based organizations would mean, for every congregation of every denomination (store-front church to magnificent cathedral or temple!) an additional average annual cost of \$171,000! Currently many church-operated programs, while providing services at less cost than similar government or publicly funded programs, depend in large part for portions of their funds from government grants and subsidies or reimbursement. It is simply not possible to cut public spending and support for health and human services programs and pass the costs and responsibility along to the churches and their members.

We commend the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Office of Refugee and Immigration Ministries and its staff in continuing to represent the needs of ministry and mission in regard to the ongoing plight of refugees and immigrants from many parts of the world, and their efforts to work with congregations who will sponsor refugees and immigrants, and we encourage them to expand their efforts.

We commend our Office of Family and Children's Ministry in calling the church to commitment and care for children and their families and care-givers, as welfare reform and economic pressures push more parents to seek employment which requires quality care for their children in order for them to be able to work. We urge this office to continue to resource the congregations and help us develop a stronger ministry and witness in the area of care for the children.

We commend our Director of Reconciliation in pushing the church to address at every level of its life the continuing sin and problem of racism, which has created structures of injustice and barriers to full participation in our society, and urge our Director of Reconciliation to continue to lead us to repentance and transformation.

Finally, we commend those regions and congregations throughout the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who are engaged in study/action efforts related to our social responsibilities as Christians. Sometimes they are unsung heroes, and we urge them to help share their stories of

their efforts, through local and regional and denominational publications.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), meeting in Denver, Colorado, July 25-29, 1997, urge our church's general units, regions and congregations to monitor welfare reform in the United States, and especially their effects on refugees and immigrants, children and their families and care-givers, and those most vulnerable to the loss of support and services as a result of welfare reform. We urge the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), at every manifestation of its life, to facilitate cooperative efforts, provide leadership and materials for study and action, and expand the network among our congregations of persons concerned with the issues of racism, poverty, homelessness, hunger, health care, immigration and refugee issues, unemployment and under-employment -- all those social conditions which adversely affect the quality of life. We urge these units to help congregations study what proposed cost reductions, and transfers of program responsibility mean at every manifestation, general, regional and local; what happens to the care for "the least of these...brothers and sisters;" and equip all Disciples to become advocates of public responsibility and models of responsible care for those in need.