

A Cry For Justice For Our Children

Doing What God Requires

By: Marian Wright Edelman
—Guest Columnist—

On the third weekend in October, thousands of congregations of every denomination across our country held special Children's Sabbath services. The National Observance of Children's Sabbaths is an annual event coordinated by the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) that encourages people of faith to lift up the needs of children in prayer, song and worship, and then make long-term action commitments to help children and families through education, service and advocacy. Each year, congregations focus on an area of special need and concern for children and families. This year's Children's Sabbath emphasized justice.

As this critical election season ends, people of faith must keep crying out for justice for children. That's why CDF and nearly two hundred faith denominations and leaders held an interfaith service at the Washington National Cathedral on Oct. 28, just before Election Day, to ask what God required of us in seeking justice for children and the poor. Leaders of major Christian, Jewish, Islamic and other faith groups reminded us all that the God of the Prophets, Gospels and Qur'an requires us to give a preference to the poor and the weak, to the widow and the orphan, and to stand up for those who have no voice. And they reminded us that this meant people of faith needed to go out and vote for those who no vote; our children.

Recently, a group of these faith leaders held a news conference to talk about the Oct. 28 Interfaith Service for Justice for Children and the Poor and the massive non-partisan campaigns that were underway to register new voters in underrepresented communities and encourage all voters to go to the polls on Election Day. Rev. Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ; Rabbi David Saperstein, executive director of the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism; and Sayyid M. Syeed, secretary general of the Islamic Society of North America, all said their religious traditions require them to assure social justice for the weak, the powerless and children. Rabbi Saperstein said faith leaders around the nation endorsed this service because they want the leaders of the wealthiest nation in the world to recognize that there is still poverty here, and nine million of our children have no health insurance.

"We need to re-establish that bipartisan sense of commitment to the children of America, and that is part of what an ethical society is about," he said. "We want to be sure that, at a time when people are focused on Iraq and terrorism and record budget deficits, children don't get lost in this. A country that turns its back on its children will not make it in the long run."

Mr. Syeed said that it was fitting that the interfaith service was held in the middle of Ramadan, a month when Muslims fast from dawn to dusk and develop a sense of commiseration and compassion for those who must do without. "We have a core concern for the poor, the dispossessed and the weak," he said.

"Islam has made that central to its message."

The huge gathering of 2,200 members and leaders of all faiths at the National Cathedral—America's National House of Prayer for all People—was a potent symbol of a mobilization that cut across all religious and denominational lines. "We love the fact that the interfaith community is standing up, being recognized and speaking out on behalf of the poor—and especially the children of our nation and the world. This is about all political leaders taking this seriously. We believe that new priorities of focusing on the poor and caring for children are very critical for all of those elected officials to realize," Rev. Edgar stated.

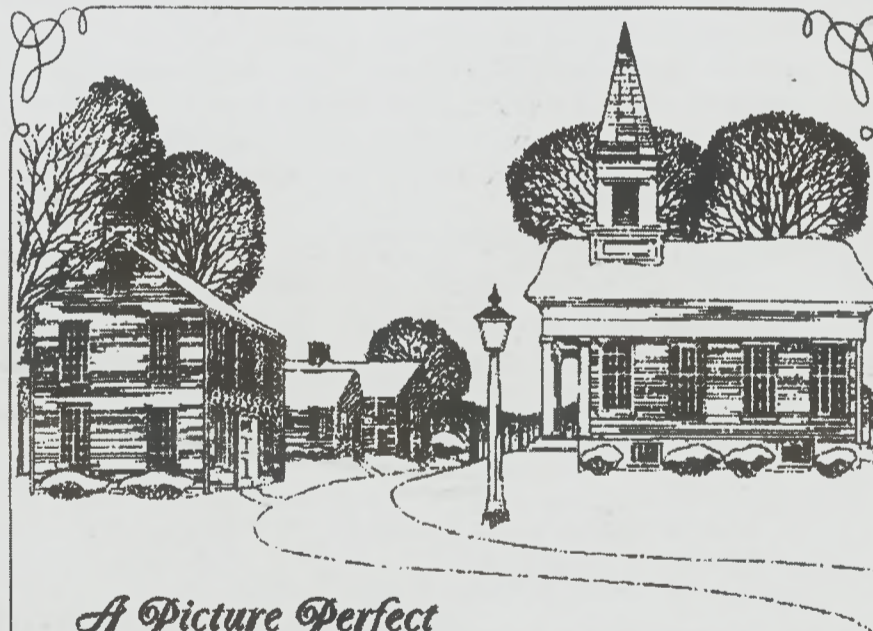
I am so grateful the faith community answered God's call for justice for children and the poor with such extraordinary speed. The point of our continuing efforts is that it is never too late for leaders on both sides to do the right thing.

On another recent conference call to encourage people of faith to support political leaders who share their concerns about children, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton said that she stands for children because she was taught in her Methodist upbringing that where our treasure is, there our heart will be, also. Many of us know that message from the Gospels. Our newly elected leaders will be making decisions that will affect children and the poor in our country for generations to come. Where is our treasure going to be?

The poor don't poll well, but there really is good politics in heaven and on earth in treating the poor justly. Tax cuts for the rich have drained our country of resources. All of us must hold our leaders accountable to address the dreadful, shameful facts of child poverty in this country.

And those of us who are people of faith and have heard the words in Proverbs that teach us to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves and for the rights of all who are destitute, and to defend the rights of the poor and needy, have a special obligation: We need to do what God requires.

(Marian Wright Edelman is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund and its Action Council.)



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