

## May 14, 2007 Topic: *“Child Poverty in America”*

Speech delivered at the Kiwanis Prayer Breakfast in New Holstein, WI

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Let's begin by looking at a real person in a real situation, right here in this great country of ours. Our country of opportunity and abundance. I will read it verbatim by taking an excerpt from Jim Wallis' book: *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*.

*“She was working the drive through window at 4:00 in the afternoon. But whenever there was a lull between orders, the young woman kept returning to a table in the corner of the restaurant. Three kids were sitting there, with schoolbooks, papers, and pencils all spread out, doing their homework. And Mom was helping as best she could while keeping straight the orders for Whoppers, fries, and chicken nuggets. Given her low wages, this single mother was no doubt balancing more than fast food and homework -- but also deciding between paying the rent, going to the doctor and affording prescriptions when somebody gets sick, or buying winter boots for her kids. She has become an icon for me. I call her Burger King Mom.*

*In election years, the pundits talk often about Soccer Mom and how she will vote. Both the Democrats and the Republicans court her. Since the president went to Daytona, there is a new electoral icon; he's called NASCAR Dad, and his support is crucial, especially for Republicans. Also, in the 2004 election, attention focused on Security Mom.*

*But who will speak to or for Burger King Mom? She exists in both the red and blue states, but neither party is much interested in her or her family's issues.”*

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Let me qualify something here at the outset: I do not come to you this morning with a political or ideological agenda. I do not represent either of the major political parties in this country. Although I am a regular voter, I do not place a

great deal of faith in any one party. I do not come to you as a Democrat, or as a Republican, or as a Green Party Member, or any other such label.

I *do* come to you this morning as a Baptized believer in Jesus Christ; Christ crucified and Risen. I also come as a fellow citizen and tax payer of our country, the United States of America. It is the former that informs how I live, and it is the latter that informs my gratitude for *where* I live.

I love our great country and what it stands for. For me, that includes an honest acknowledgement that sometimes there are elements in our country that need to be fixed. I would like to bring to the forefront one of those elements.

The official motto for Kiwanis International is “*Serving the children of the world.*” In one brief sentence, that expresses the noble purpose with which your noble organization carries out its mission.

In the case of this particular chapter of Kiwanis here in New Holstein, you are a compassionate and generous group of people who regularly have given of yourselves to address the issue I bring to the table this morning: Child poverty in America.

While the scope of Kiwanis is worldwide, let’s take a look at just our own country. For all that we hear about America being the richest (or one of the richest) country in the world, there are still 12 million children in the U.S. who live below the poverty line. (\$20,650 for a family of four; \$17,170 for a family of three, etc.) That 12 million figure accounts for approximately 17% of all children in the U.S.

Source: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University. 2007.

Let’s go local: Here in the state of Wisconsin, it is estimated that between 15-19% of all Wisconsin children below the age of 6 -- live in poverty.

How can this be? The way I was raised, I grew up believing that as long as a person works hard.....keeps busy.....goes the extra mile for their employer.....as long as we play by the rules of a good work ethic, that we will be rewarded with a reasonable and secure standard of living. That’s the way it should be, right?

Yes, perhaps that’s the way it should be, but that isn’t the way it *is*. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, a think tank out of Columbia

University, most low-income parents are employed full-time (55%). Another 15% are employed full-time for part of the year, and 11% hold down part-time jobs. Only the remaining 19% are not employed at all.

Many of these are the Burger King Moms, such as the one that Jim Wallis described for us. And there are others out there: the young man who stocks shelves in the early morning hours at K-Mart. The 50-something woman who cleans people's houses. The father who moonlights at a convenience store after he finishes working the second shift at a factory. The young woman who suffers from arthritis as she is up to her elbows in cold meat every morning. The waitress at any restaurant. The nighttime security guard at a construction site.

These are people who work hard, who play by the rules.....and still lose every time.

The vast majority of these folks who work for \$6-\$8.00 an hour are mothers and fathers who have young mouths to feed, young bodies to clothe and shelter, and young illnesses to treat -- when they go back to the nest.

What does it say about us as a nation, when we *say* that we value labor -- but that doesn't translate into how we treat those who perform the labor? In our country we have long sung the praises of honest labor, but talk is cheap.

Since the year 2000, the unemployment rate in this country has steadily dropped. More and more people are working than ever before. Unfortunately however, the average household income has also declined -- and declined substantially. That doesn't say much for how "honest labor" is valued in our country.

And it is the children of workers who are paying a heavy price.

There is absolutely no rational reason for any child in America or in the world for that matter, to go without the necessities for a reasonable quality of life. But many do -- even with working parents.

What can be done? What *should* be done? In the private sector alone, much is being done already.....and has been getting done for years. Our own Lakeshore Interfaith Hospitality Network (LIHN) is an excellent program that helps people get back on their feet. I mention that here because it is this local chapter of Kiwanis that has played an important part in that.

I am fully aware of the great commitment that you have made, giving up time and resources to get involved hands-on in serving these families in need. My colleague at St. Peter's, Rev. Judine Duerwaechter, she very gleefully described to me how some of you have provided transportation to LIHN's guest families.....how you have prepared and served meals.....and one of my favorites: how one of you was spotted sitting on the floor, playing Monopoly with a 5-year old!

As a representative of St. Peter's, and as a member of the Kiel and New Holstein area clergy, I commend each of you for the ways that you have volunteered in LIHN and for your role with Kiwanis International, "Serving the children of the world."

But here's the rub: the private sector alone cannot alleviate poverty. The private sector by itself does not have the resources or the legal clout to bring about real and lasting change that lifts children and family out of poverty and into self-sufficiency. Rather, it is our overall *system* that needs to change. Government has to play a role in this as well.

Understand that I am not advocating for socialism. My wife grew up under socialism in Hungary, and it is NOT a good way of running things. Most of it is enforced by the tip of a bayonet. However, I do believe that even in our system of free markets, we can adopt a more just and humane public policy. And we need to!

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Some of the things that can be done are:

***-- federal laws that mandate the paying of a living wage, combined with tax relief for employers who pay their employees a living wage.***

***-- a reconsidering of the foreign aid packages that we dole out to other countries. There is some "rebuilding" that needs to be done here at home!***

***-- other countries stepping up to the plate and committing more of their military resources to overseas conflicts, rather than us always having to commit ours.***

***-- a restructuring of the federal budget to fund more domestic-related concerns. (NOT an increase in the federal budget!)***

***-- placing strong limitations on medical malpractice suits, which is the prime culprit of rising health care costs.***

***-- a general reduction of the federal income tax.***

I'm not running for President, by the way. It's way past time for our national civil war to end. Not the war between the Blue and the Gray, but rather, the war between liberals and conservatives. Between Democrats and Republicans. This internal war of ideologies has been going on for years -- and nothing has been accomplished. Burger King Moms and Warehouse Dads continue to pound away at jobs that do violence to their dignity...and violence to their families.

On this occasion of your prayer breakfast, may we pray for our national conscience. May we pray that God would raise up a new crop of leaders who are more interested in doing what's right for their country, than in getting themselves elected. May we pray that we would become a righteous nation, not merely in our rallies, but in our enacting of policy.

We owe it not only to Burger King Mom and her children, but to every other child as well.