

Children in Poverty Initiative
American Baptist Churches USA



She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel. (Luke 2:7, Peterson)

You thought Christmas was over, didn't you? I want to keep its spirit alive all year long.

Mary and Joseph did not pick Jesus' place of birth and first crib. There was no room. Christ was born and took his first nap among the animals because humans made no room.

Poor and excluded persons around the globe find comfort and blessing in the facts of Christ's birth — born in a state of exclusion, sleeping in a feed trough. This says something remarkable about God.

Does it surprise us? One of the earliest stories in Scripture tells of God's concern for another firstborn of unsavory origin. Hagar and Ishmael were driven from the tent of Sarah and Abraham — no place for them in tent or hearts. Alone, in the wilderness, Hagar prepared to die. But "God heard the boy crying." (*Genesis 21:8-21*)

Isaiah compared God to a comforting mother. (*Isaiah 66:13*) Our Lord said, "Whoever welcomes (makes space for?) children welcomes me." (*Mark 9:36-37*) Children, the most vulnerable, are God's special concern.

That vulnerability, especially close to home challenging our self-image, startles us. The Springfield, Ill., *State Journal-Register*

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recently did a front page report on homeless school children in Springfield. As a parent, a pastor, and a volunteer substitute teacher I felt no surprise. I know that many children have "no place" in our culture.

One out of every 35 public school students in Springfield has experienced homelessness (*"placelessness"*). These children shuffle from one living place to another—last week at a motel, this week with a relative, next week in a shelter, sometimes on the sidewalk.

Don't kid yourself that only big cities have this problem. Rural areas share the same realities. Imagine the impact of *placelessness* on children. Visualize yourself in that condition: inadequate family and social relationships, social development gone awry. Educational progress is nearly impossible.

Enmeshed in a culture of despair, poor choices lead to drug use, criminal activity, violence and incarceration.

God cares about these children. American Baptists have called attention to children in poverty. Harvard Park Baptist Church, in Springfield, Ill., has participated in programs to insure that school children have the educational supplies they need to succeed. Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in St. Louis, Mo., has an extensive and demanding after-school tutoring program. My point is: We don't have to put away the spirit of Christmas along with the decorations. The time when we remember Jesus' birth and resting place among the animals, because there was no room, is a good time for us to remember children without a place. So is any other time of year.

How can your church respond and honor God's concern for children?

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