

Gospel Manifesto 2014: **Every Child Counts**

Christians are called to help their 'neighbour' and do so willingly on a person to person basis according to the teachings of Jesus. But in an election year, Christians have a special responsibility to challenge each and every political party to show how they will care for the poor with appropriate, workable national policies. Continuing with the present ones will just see more and more families swept way to become the flotsam and jetsam at the margins of society. A badly structured economy where desperately poor people need foodbanks and loan sharks to survive, means churches and other NGOs become overwhelmed in meeting basic needs. This leaves too little time for the church's key role of nurturing the spiritual growth of families and helping to strengthen relationships and build cohesive communities.

Politicians must say how they will make sure that all low income families, especially the most marginalised, those supported by benefits, have enough money to survive on and to prevent the damaging effects of poverty on their children.

Current policies for families have been driven by a focus that has made paid work, of any kind, society's ultimate goal and source of value. Families on benefits have become the new pariahs in a judgemental, punitive and uncaring society. A mother's unpaid work of nurturing her children has been rendered invisible and treated as of no worth.

The welfare system does not allow parents to supplement their benefits in meaningful ways and the tax system is punitive. Another cruel policy is adding GST at 15% on to all the basics families must have, like food and electricity. Policies such as Working for Families, Paid Parental Leave, and early childhood care and education subsidies are discriminatory, badly designed and inadequate. With high costs for school fees, uniforms, daycare, school trips, doctors' visits and medicines for over 6s, many children have blighted and restricted childhoods. But worse, a regime of benefit sanctions is now tipping the most vulnerable into an abyss from which they may never recover. In an election year these policies must be challenged by Christians.

Christians understand the need for inclusion and the power of redemption. No-one deserves to be shut outside, let alone innocent children. For the past three years we have been told by the Ministry of Social Development that 175,000 of our children live in families where the disposable income after housing costs is less than 50% of the median household income adjusted for family size. This line is impossibly low and these families have nothing in reserve, hence the growth in foodbanks and debts to loan sharks and hospital admissions for third world diseases.

We should remind our politicians that shocking as 175,000 of our children in significant hardship sounds, we were actually misled. After correcting for Treasury's major blunder in counting, we now know that as many as 205,000 children are below the 50% line. Many are well below.

Can our politicians please pledge to treat all children equally, to change policies such as Working for Families to give the proper support to all of the worst-off children, to see all work as valuable, and to treat those who cannot work with respect?

- **Susan St John** Associate Professor of Economics, University of Auckland

