

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY ACT AMENDMENTS OF 1967 2893

will be required. As voluntary groups functioning in a free society, churches should be prominent among the agencies engaged in this war on poverty.

In view of the magnitude of the task and the experimental nature of the program, mistakes are bound to occur both in the conception and the implementation of national policy. While fully exercising their duty of responsible criticism, the Church and church people should resist tendencies to condemn the whole effort because of occasional false starts, set-backs, errors of judgment or corruption.

MAXIMUM FEASIBLE PARTICIPATION BY THE POOR

The Economic Opportunity Act authorizes the funding of "General Community Action Programs" and includes in its criteria of acceptability under this title (Title II) "a program . . . which is developed, conducted, and administered with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served."

Although EOA is only one of a number of poverty-combatting programs currently in operation by the Federal Government, this provision for the inclusion of the poor themselves in planning and execution of programs reflects deeper ethical insight in anti-poverty efforts. Two principles are involved which commend themselves to the Christian conscience: One is the recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of every human being regardless of his social or economic circumstances. The other is recognition that in a democratic society every person is entitled to a voice in shaping the decisions and policies which affect his life.

We commend the Congress for incorporating this concept in the original Economic Opportunity Act, and encourage the Office of Economic Opportunity to continue its efforts to embody the concept in actual structures and programs in the field.

Participation by the poor themselves in planning and decision making may be threatening to the political and economic power structures of many communities. Resistance to this concept and attempts to circumvent these provisions of the Act are predictable. We affirm that the principle of inclusion of the poor in anti-poverty program planning is morally sound and practical. We urge the churches to support this principle in all public anti-poverty programs and to embody it in their own anti-poverty efforts.

ORGANIZED EFFORT BY THE POOR

Essential to the effective involvement of the poor in community-wide and church programs is the creation of a supportive atmosphere for the self-organization of the poor. The history of the human struggle for justice and equity reveals few instances in which the establishments of this world have voluntarily transferred power to the powerless or of their own free will granted redress of grievances to the exploited and the dispossessed. For the contemporary poor, as for other disadvantaged groups in history, self-organization for countervailing power is an essential ingredient of any successful war against poverty.

These indigenous organizations may often adopt unconventional modes of expression and action. In evaluating such activities account must be taken of 1) the lack of access to conventional channels of communication on the part of these groups, and 2) the tremendous hidden power of the beneficiaries of the status quo to defend their positions of privilege merely by inaction or by mobilizing the political, legal, and communications channels which they control.

Meaningful, effective, and lawful counter-activities of the organized poor deserve the understanding support of the churches. If occasionally such activities violate the law, the churches have an obligation to understand and interpret the basis of such protests, and to participate in a re-appraisal of the laws, customs, institutions, and traditions which provoke the reaction of the poor. The Church also has a continuing ministry to perform in the establishment of meaningful communication and responsible relationship between those living in poverty and the more affluent in church and society.

LOCAL INITIATIVE

Another concept deeply embedded in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 is the principle of local initiative. This is found particularly in Title II of the Act which provides for Community Action Programs. Communities are challenged to survey their own poverty needs, problems and conditions, to develop their own