

Left out: Not everyone is prospering

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A rising economic tide lifts everybody's financial boat. Well, almost everybody's. Thanks to the country's unprecedented economic expansion, the great majority of Americans are better off financially than they were several years ago. Not only are the rich getting richer, but the middle classes too have seen a surge in income and wealth. The economic boom has even helped low-income families. According to data released in January by the Federal Reserve Bank, between 1995 and 1998 the wealth of families with annual incomes between \$10,000 and \$25,000 increased by 7 percent.

Left out of the picture, however, are the very poor—those families that earn under \$10,000. Their wealth actually decreased by 14 percent between '95 and '98.

How can the nation's prosperity be extended to these people and to the rest of the 13 percent of the population that still lives below the poverty line? It's disturbing that for all the economic growth of the '90s, the current poverty rate is the same as in 1989 and worse than the rate in 1969.

We don't have a simple answer to those questions, and we doubt there is one. But we do think the questions should be part of the political debate in this election year, especially at a time when the politicians are arguing about how to spend an estimated \$900 billion surplus over the next ten years, and when some want to use the surplus to finance tax breaks for the wealthy.

For the moment, economic growth has made the welfare reform act of 1996 look like a brilliant policy. Faced with tougher work requirements and limits on eligibility, millions of people have left the welfare rolls and most of them have joined the labor force. But a good many have simply disappeared from view. What is happening to them? And what will happen when the welfare payments run out for those who, even in these times of low unemployment, have been unable to find stable work? These are further questions that should be posed to the candidates.

One effect of the welfare reform act was to put the individual states in charge of implementing the often Byzantine complexities of welfare policy. Though in theory this means that decision-makers are in closer touch with citizens, it also means that the decisions that most affect poor people often get very little publicity. Press coverage in most state capitals is limited, and the machinations of state governments are even less well known than the intrigues of Washington. For that reason, Rebecca Blank of the Joint Center for Poverty Research at the University of Michigan suggests that church groups interested in advocacy for the poor have a special role to play these days in keeping track of policy decisions at the state level.

Beyond that, Blank says, churches continue to have an important role in providing child care and other services, and in supporting individual families struggling with unemployment. Especially in the case of families that face multiple obstacles, like poor education, physical or mental disabilities, a history of substance abuse, family difficulties and personality problems, churches can provide the everyday support that is crucial to their stability.

The church's primary calling, after all, is not to eliminate poverty or formulate welfare policy, but to love the neighbor in need. And only through contact with the neighbor in need will the churches know what to say about public policy.