

A Letter from Marian Wright Edelman

“How Long Must I Cry for Help?” Bending the Arc toward God’s Vision of Justice for Children

Dear Faithful Friend of Children:

Fifty years ago, on March 21st 1965, I traveled from Mississippi to Selma, Alabama to join Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and thousands of fellow citizens marching the 54 miles to the steps of the state’s capitol in Montgomery. As millions of Americans now know, thanks to the movie *Selma* and the recent 50th anniversary celebration, Selma was the site of a courageous voting rights campaign by Black citizens which was met by brutal Southern Jim Crow law enforcement and citizen violence. The nation was shocked two weeks earlier when John Lewis and Reverend Hosea Williams set out on a nonviolent march with a group of 600 people toward Montgomery to demand their right to vote and were brutally attacked by lawless state and local law enforcement officials at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The televised images of “Bloody Sunday” and the savage beatings of the marchers — including Congressman Lewis whose skull was fractured — were a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement and in America’s struggle to become America. It provoked the thousands of us (ultimately about 25,000) who came together later to finish the march, safer thanks to Federal District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.’s order that we had a right to peaceful protest and with National Guard protection. And we were buoyed by President Johnson’s March 15th, 1965 address calling on Congress to pass what became the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



When we at last reached the state capitol, Dr. King addressed the courageous but weary crowd of children, women, and men spanning race, religion, age, and geography who had united to complete the march from Selma to Montgomery. He said, “I know you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ Somebody’s asking “How long will prejudice blind the visions of men?’ I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again. How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow....How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice....Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer [God]. Be jubilant, my feet. Our God is marching on.”

Fifty years after that turning point in the Civil Rights Movement, some of us are asking “How long will it take?” Still deeply pained by the killing of Trayvon Martin, with fresh anguish over the killing of unarmed Black boys in Ferguson, Cleveland, and countless other cities and towns across our land, we’ve heard this year the collective question, “How long will racial prejudice blind our vision, how long until we affirm and act like precious Black lives matter?”

Fifty years after President Johnson’s war on poverty, some of us are asking “How long will it take? How long will it take until we end the child poverty that traps one in five children — one in two Black babies and one in three Hispanic babies? It is a national moral disgrace that there are 14.7 million poor children and 6.5 million extremely poor children in the United States of America — the world’s largest economy. It is also unnecessary, costly, and the greatest threat to our future nation, our economic and military security. And soul.

Our cry “How long” echoes the cry of the Hebrew prophet Habakkuk who asked God in anguish, ²*O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?* ³*Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. ⁴So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.”*

The answer the prophet received? *“Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. ³For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. ⁴Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.”*

God’s answer came to and through Habakkuk and to and through that other prophet, Dr. King: How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever. How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.

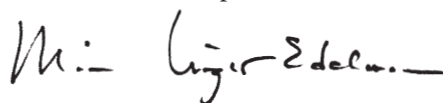
So ours is the task, now is the time, to write the vision and make it plain: every child matters and no child deserves to live in poverty. We can and must end child poverty now. Not only does child poverty cost far more than eliminating it would, we have so many better choices that reflect more just values as well as economic savings. We believe that food, shelter, quality early childhood investments to get every child ready for school and an equitable education for all children should take precedence over massive welfare for the rich and blatantly excessive spending for military weapons that do not work. We cannot let our leaders spend \$246 billion, without offsets, to repeal the estate tax, which benefits only the wealthier 0.2 percent of Americans with estates worth over \$5.4 million for an individual. How can we then say we cannot afford to ensure every child is housed and fed?

Ours is the task and now is the time to help bend the arc toward God’s vision of justice for children. We can start by ending child poverty now and here in our rich nation. How? CDF’s recent report, *Ending Child Poverty Now*, outlines steps that we can take to make a huge down payment on ending preventable, costly, and immoral child poverty in our wealthy nation. By investing an additional 2 percent of the federal budget into existing programs and policies that increase employment, make work pay, and ensure children’s basic needs are met, our nation could reduce child poverty by 60 percent and Black child poverty by 72 percent lifting 6.6 million children out of poverty immediately. We are urging every place of worship that participates in the Children’s Sabbath this year to hold a study session to learn more about how we can end child poverty now. You can download the CDF report, *Ending Child Poverty Now*, and the study session outline in the Children’s Sabbath Action Section.

Ours is the task, now is the time to help bend the arc toward God’s vision of justice for children by uniting with places of worship all across the nation on the Children’s Sabbath weekend. Together, we will hear the cries of our children and respond through service and action not only on the Children’s Sabbath weekend but throughout the year to come.

Thank you for your commitment to living your faith in action with and for children, to help bend the arc toward God’s vision of justice. Together we can and will make a difference.

With faith and hope,



Marian Wright Edelman