

# The Durham News

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## **Viewpoints**

### **How will you help Durham's children?**

BY THE REV. MEL WILLIAMS

On May 6, nearly 80 members of Durham's faith community came together during National Day of Prayer to learn how they can support young children and their families. This event, "Faith and Our Future: Congregations and Birth to 5," was the first public gathering hosted by Durham's Partnership for Children and End Poverty Durham as part of our joint project, the Early Childhood Faith Initiative.



Many of us have worked "behind the scenes" for a few years to develop this initiative. With the help of tireless volunteers, like Ann Stock, the group surveyed nearly 50 congregations about how they were supporting early-childhood initiatives, especially families with young children. The findings were published in 2008. With funding from the A.J. Fletcher Foundation, the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation and support from individual congregations, the group hired a coordinator and is working to engage faith leaders, those who work with children and families in our congregations.

"We're here today because we know a child's early years are the foundation to future success," said Partnership executive director Marsha Basloe. "Research tells us that the earliest experiences develop the hard wiring in the brain for academic, social and life success."

While Durham County has a rich tradition of diversity and academic excellence, it is, at the same time, a community that reflects the great divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in our society. Young children, birth to 5, are one of the largest groups in Durham affected by poverty. More than 21 percent of Durham County young children live in poverty.

Poverty can destroy potential. Many children live in homes overwhelmed with stress from family conflict, neighborhood violence, parents' depression, and parents' economic worries. Studies conducted by Harvard University and other academic institutions show that this stress can get in the way of healthy brain development. Supporting parents in dealing with their stress is actually supporting the brain development of their growing children.

End Poverty Durham formed in 2005 with a group of interfaith representatives, to meet monthly to struggle with the nagging poverty in our community. We quickly decided that collaboratively we could work toward the elimination of poverty in Durham over the next 25 years. We've made progress, but we still have a long way to go.

As Marian Wright Edelman has put it so eloquently, "If we don't stand up for children, we don't stand for much." I'd like to ask Durham's faith community to stand with me and support the needs of young children and their families in the early years.

For more information on the Durham Early Childhood Faith Initiative or to request a speaker at a faith-related event contact Winnie Morgan, early childhood faith coordinator, at [winnemorgan@juno.com](mailto:winnemorgan@juno.com).

***The Rev. Mel Williams is co-founder of End Poverty Durham and pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church.***