

# *From Poverty to Hope:* An Introduction

We know it's out there. We know poverty exists. Sometimes we see it but often we don't. We know we are called to minister as Jesus Christ did – to be among the poor and help as we can – but poverty is a huge problem. It's hard to understand how we can really make a difference – how we can really be the presence of Christ among the poor. Yet we know we are called – to get past our frustrations, our anger at injustice, our apathy, our guilt – and minister.

This resource about poverty is different. It's about a new way to minister – a way that acknowledges how Christ sees the poor and wraps all other ministry efforts around that notion. It's about seeing the poor as valuable children of God, who have something meaningful to offer to their community and world. It's about forming friendships, listening to people and learning from them and with them. It's about addressing poverty at its root causes. And it's about sticking with people, not just being an occasional visitor but a genuine presence in their lives. But most of all, this resource is about you – about your understanding of Christ's call and a new way to minister. It's time to move past fretting about injustice, accepting complacency and feeling guilty. This resource is about following Jesus, taking the Bible seriously, and doing something to address poverty.

This resource will be a journey of faith. Addressing poverty in a meaningful way will stretch your perspective, your preconceived notions and your compassion. It may be hard. It may be slow. But it may be a journey that changes your life.

In the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, that transformation is happening. In 2001, the Fellowship began a journey to do what it could to alleviate poverty. Leadership wanted something concrete, something long-term, something that might actually lead to transformation. And so Together for Hope began as a ministry in 20 of the poorest counties in the United States, which happened to be in rural areas. Its goal was to minister with local people and not for them, to help local people realize their dreams, and to stick with them for a long time. It was a new way, learned in part from community development experts and transplanted in a ministry setting. A 20-year commitment was made for this ministry experiment, but leaders could not have imagined that Together for Hope would capture the hearts of so many.

We've learned a lot of lessons through Together for Hope about what it means to minister with the poor. It is a journey filled with ups and downs, joy and sorrow, success and failure. But we think this new way of ministry is working. The first two chapters of this resource offer a preview and a foundation for understanding this new way of ministry. Read, learn, explore and prepare for a journey that could change lives.

## *Chapter 1*

# From our perspective to Christ: How does Christ see the poor?

### **Who are the poor, and what is poverty?**

The poor are all around us. Sometimes we notice them – the homeless lying on the street, people begging for money, or a person whose last meal seems like it was days ago – and we are troubled; maybe our hearts ache with compassion. But sometimes we don't notice the poor around us. Too caught up with the details of our own lives, we miss the small clues that someone is struggling. We may miss that a child has been wearing the same outfit for a week. We may miss hearing that the reason our neighbor is moving is because he or she can't afford to pay bills. We may miss that one of our co-workers has resigned because he or she can no longer pay for the gas it takes to get to work. If we listen to people and we take notice of the people around us, we will see poverty. It may vary depending on where we live and how diverse our acquaintances are, but poverty is all around us – whether it's someone begging on a street corner or a friend we don't realize is on a financial brink.

People become poor in many ways, and they may be poor in many ways. There are people with plenty of money living miserably without the wealth of family or community. There are people with barely enough money to survive who have many friends and seem happy. We typically recognize financial poverty when we notice lack

of something, whether it's food, clothing, shelter, or something else. That "deficit," as Bryant Myers calls it, though, is only one part of poverty. Poor people also deal with entanglement, lack of access to social power, and lack of freedom to grow.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, many poor people end up as the disenfranchised of society. David Bosch said, "The poor are the marginalized, those who lack every active or even passive participation in society; it is a marginality that comprises all spheres of life and is often so extensive that people feel that they have no resources to do anything about it."<sup>2</sup>

The poor are clearly a specific concern in the Bible. Repeatedly, widows, orphans, and 'strangers in the land' appear as primary interests of God and God's representatives. They were financially disabled because of their circumstances. Both the Old Testament and New Testament stake claims that behavior toward such disenfranchised people is a clear indicator of whether the faithful are faithful. While many Bible verses also probe the essence of poverty and wealth, our focus is on persons struggling with financial poverty.

Even in terms of financial inadequacy, however, poverty has many definitions. Jeffrey Sachs distinguishes between "three degrees of poverty:"<sup>3</sup>

- Extreme - unable to meet basic needs for survival
- Moderate - basic needs are met, but just barely
- Relative - household income level below a given proportion of average national income

Poverty is often not a clear cut line or a designation between people who earn a certain amount of money a year and people who don't. David Shipler suggests, "'Poverty' is an unsatisfying term, for poverty is not a category that can be delineated merely by the government's dollar limits on annual income. In real life, it is an unmarked area along a continuum, a broader region of hardship than the society usually recognizes. More people than those officially designated as 'poor' are, in fact, weighed down with the troubles associated with poverty."<sup>4</sup>

## **Where do we see poverty in our world? Where is it hidden or overlooked?**

Media images show children with bloated bellies, adults with skeletal limbs, massive slums on city hillsides, and scenes of both human-made and natural disasters. Charitable appeals peer at us through the eyes of a hopeful child or those of a despairing

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<sup>1</sup> Bryant Myers, *Walking With The Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), 65-81.

<sup>2</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 436.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>4</sup> David Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), x-xi.

HIV/AIDS victim. Most of the international focus seems to be on extreme poverty, often described as persons living on less than one or two dollars per day.

And then there are the statistics. The broader poverty crisis is spread well beyond the scope of attention-grabbing headlines and mass media images. The death toll of 283,106 persons from the December 2004 tsunami<sup>5</sup> is overmatched an average of every six days by poverty-related deaths worldwide.<sup>6</sup> All we have to do is look at the numbers to see that poverty is arguably the greatest disaster of our lifetimes.

We see poverty in the organized attempts to fight it. Internationally, this is reflected in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.<sup>7</sup> Within the United States, there are examples of extreme, moderate, and relative poverty. The 2008 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services poverty guidelines indicate that a family of four with an income of under \$21,200 annually was living in poverty.<sup>8</sup> Many argue that it would take almost twice this standard for an American citizen to find adequate food, shelter, and healthcare. This sort of poverty may be best termed 'relative,' even though it has a definite impact on the ability of people to care for themselves and their families. The lack of access to resources or ability for upward mobility is often harder to observe and even harder to escape.

Poverty in the United States reaches far beyond the stereotype of adults who are homeless or are welfare recipients. Forgotten are the much greater numbers of the working poor and the children of the poor. This strand of invisible poverty is what we see only when we're observant enough to notice that there are people around us who can't afford to take their sick child to the doctor, who can't afford to go grocery shopping more than once a month, and who must bypass a better-paying job because they don't have or can't afford transportation to get there. There are many who live paycheck to paycheck just hoping and praying that no unscheduled expenses occur. There are those who would make more money on welfare than they could if they worked. These are the invisible poor – the "forgotten America" as Shieler calls it.

At the bottom of its working world, millions live in the shadow of prosperity, in the twilight between poverty and well-being. Whether you're rich, poor, or middle-class, you encounter them every day. They serve you Big Macs and help you find merchandise at Wal-Mart. They harvest your food, clean your offices, and sew your clothes. In a California factory, they package lights for you kids' bikes. In a New Hampshire plant, they assemble books of wall paper samples to help you redecorate."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> USGS, "Most Destructive Known Earthquakes on Record in the World," <[http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/world/most\\_destructive.php](http://earthquake.usgs.gov/regional/world/most_destructive.php)> (31 May 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The Reality of Aid, "Achieving the Millennium Development Goals within a human rights framework," <<http://www.realityofaid.org/roareport.php?table=roa2004&id=6>> (31 May 2006).

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/08poverty.shtml> (18 February 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Shieler, 3.

## **What impact does poverty have on a person's ability to fulfill his or her God-given potential?**

### *Common misconceptions about poverty*

Not all poor people want to be poor, asked to be poor, or are unwilling to work to earn a better life for their families. In the first place, most of the poor are children. In the second place, many of the poor work hard and long every day. Despite those realities, critics often give in to negative attitudes toward the 'undeserving' poor. They say poor people just need to get jobs, to manage their money better, or make better decisions. They often cite stories of how they or their parents pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps. But many times the factors are unequal. While they may have had the supportiveness of one or more benefactors, most people in poverty do not. While they may have had support from family or their community, many times people in poverty do not. A long-standing history of generations of poverty is often stronger than any one person's ability to escape poverty's grasp. When there is a dramatic story of a poor person becoming rich, the rarity is exactly what gives the story much of its drama.

Within the United States there is an older generation that lived through the Great Depression and the World War that followed it. Frequently, such a senior citizen will say, "We were poor, but we didn't know it." They refer to the shared circumstances they knew with other small farming households where they lived. The agricultural environment meant that many could raise much of what they needed to feed their family. The poverty was still real, but the neighbors were pretty much in the same financial situation.

It is true that poor people, too, are victims of their own poor choices. Laziness can be a problem: "Do not love sleep, or else you will come to poverty;" (Proverbs 20:13). Poor health habits, such as the misuse of drugs and overeating can lead to poverty, too (Proverbs 23:21). But it's not just people in poverty who make poor choices. Middle class people and wealthy people are victims of their own poor choices, too. Everyone fouls up (Romans 3:12), but poverty is often not as simple as one person's poor choice.

Generational poverty should not be easily dismissed as an individual's bad decision-making or laziness. The causes of poverty can be deep and many. Some people experience poverty for a relatively short time possibly caused by a divorce, a death of a family member, an accident, or a crippling illness. This type of situational poverty is different from generational poverty, where a family experiences poverty for two or more generations. However, situational poverty can often lead to generational poverty.

Many of us have not recognized that with generational poverty come class distinctions. Children born into poverty often grow into adults still living in poverty. It's how they were raised. It's the only world they know. Ruby Payne said, "An individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised. Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many of the pattern of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, etc., remain with the individual."<sup>10</sup>

The rural communities where Together for Hope ministers are plagued by generational poverty. Ministry partner Toni Buffalo of the Cheyenne River reservation in South Dakota wrote:

People in poverty face challenges virtually unknown to those in middle class or wealth. Challenges from both obvious and hidden sources. The reality of being poor brings out a survival mentality and turns attention away from opportunities taken for granted by everyone else. Poverty is not just a condition of not having enough money. It is a realm of particular rules, emotions, and knowledge that override all other ways of building relationships and making a life.

This generational poverty is something that has been forced upon us as Lakota people and we are struggling today to deal with the devastation that the effect of oppression has been on our people. It is not just about not having enough money and finding ways to address that.<sup>11</sup>

The ongoing poverty of a whole community calls for an examination of root causes. Poor individual decision-making can be a cause, as well as poor group decision-making, whether it's as local as a school board, national as Congress, or international as an oil corporation.

While it's true that most of the U.S. population live in urban areas and most of the poor are in urban areas, poverty in rural areas often impacts a greater percentage of the community. Rural Compassion is a national initiative with statistics from rural Missouri that are duplicated in small communities scattered throughout the United States. For example:

- Only one among the poorest 50 counties is a metropolitan county.
- With the development of the global economy, loss of manufacturing jobs has impacted rural communities the greatest.
- One in six children (2.5 million) living in rural regions of the United States are trapped in deep poverty, suffering from poor education and health care. Unless something is done, we will see the emergence of a permanent underclass in rural America.

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<sup>10</sup> Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, Texas: aha! Process, Inc., 1996), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Toni Buffalo, e-mail, 9/27/07.

- Rural children are 50% more likely than their urban peers to lack health insurance.
- The rural poor are more likely to live in chronic poverty than poverty populations in urban areas.
- The rural working poor are more likely to be economically insolvent and yet unsupported by welfare than their urban counterparts.
- A rural 8th grade student is twice as likely to have experimented with amphetamines, than his/her urban peers<sup>12</sup>

There are misconceptions about race and poverty, too. While race is often a factor in poverty, poverty is no respecter of race. One of the most surprising facts with Together for Hope is the ethnic component of 20 of the poorest U.S. counties. Making a commitment in 2001 to the counties that had the highest percentage of their total population with income below the federal poverty line, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship found those 20 counties were in five distinctly different regions. Poverty had a different ethnic 'face' in those regions: Appalachia – Anglo, Deep South -- African-American, Rio Grande Valley – Hispanic, and High Plains – Native American.

Age can also be an overlooked factor. The poverty of the elderly is often missed. Pride causes many of them to hide it, but a debilitating disease or gradual inflation in the economy are among the factors that lead to an older person becoming counted among the poor. Sometimes unkempt lawns and flaking paint are signals of financial poverty having overtaken the persons behind the doors.

Misconceptions can stem from unconscious attitudes of those who are not poor, or even those who are poor. "Selfishness, love of power, and feelings of ordained privilege express themselves in god-complexes. Loss of hope, opportunity, and recognition mar the identity of the poor. Racism, ethnocentrism, and ostracism erode the intended blessing of having many cultures."<sup>13</sup> Contributing to this aspect are the spiritual conditions within the larger community - rich and poor. Myers is right in observing, "Fear of spirits and belief in gods that cannot save obscure the offer of the God who desires to save. At the end of the day, the causes of poverty are spiritual."<sup>14</sup> We can add fear of the opinions of others and class distinctions, too.

*What did Jesus do about poverty? What should we do?*

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<sup>12</sup> Rural Compassion, "Rural Poverty," <[http://www.ruralcompassion.org/joomla/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=4&Itemid=9](http://www.ruralcompassion.org/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4&Itemid=9)> (30 May 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Myers, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

We can't forget that **Jesus seems to have been somewhat poor himself.** Jesus, though he was in the form of God, gave it up to take the form of a human. Born into a carpenter's family, he had a feed trough as his first bed. Shepherds attending their 'flocks by night' were among the poorer people of Israel, and they were the first invited to meet him there. Later, at a peak in his adult popularity, Jesus said in response to a scribe who offered to follow him: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20) Even his body had to be laid in someone else's grave.

And so we must ask ourselves this question - Is it even possible follow Jesus without dealing with poverty? Chuck Poole offers a suggestion about how we handle this quandary. He was wrestling with two particular statements by Jesus:

- "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." (Matthew 5:42)
- "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Luke 12:33)

Poole thinks that sayings like these "have been placed, by the church, in a special category, the 'radical' gospel. But the truth is, what Jesus said about the poor is not the voice of 'the radical Jesus.' Rather, those are the words of the ordinary, everyday Jesus, the only Jesus we have. It's just that they sound so radical to our ears because they call us to actually live in ways that don't fit with our culture. So we turn from Jesus to Paul, where we can debate justification and sanctification and spiritual gifts all day without changing how we spend and who we help. Jesus gets edged to the side as radical, in favor of the somewhat more manageable Paul—which leaves one to imagine that Paul himself would be more than a little bewildered by the prominence he sometimes now enjoys over, of all people, Jesus."<sup>15</sup>

What Jesus said also showed that **he was concerned about justice.** Visiting the synagogue back home in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30) he read from a scroll of Isaiah's writing (Isaiah 61:1-2). It featured good news to the poor, release to captives, sight for the blind, and relief from oppression. It reflected the common good and justice intended in relation to the Sabbath and the Jubilee. The Sabbath was intended for people to rest on the seventh day, and this was extended to the land to lie fallow on the seventh year, indicating a kind of crop rotation. It was about rest, re-creation, rejuvenation, and even environmental concern (respite for the earth). The Jubilee was about relief and second chances. It was the fiftieth year, sort of a Sabbath of Sabbath years, that redistributed wealth among the people of Israel. It included forgiving debt, releasing slaves, and

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<sup>15</sup> Chuck Poole, "Paul and Jesus," Baptist Studies Bulletin, August 2005.

restoring land to former owners (Leviticus 25). The root issues of environmental stewardship, economic resources, and mutual responsibility come to the fore. Jesus was encouraging justice, justice in all its dimensions. And those in Nazareth who heard him that day would know the context of that particular passage in Isaiah. Just a few lines further, Isaiah had written, "For I the Lord love justice,..." (Isaiah 61:8).

**Jesus directly aligns himself with prophetic tradition and with the Law in dealing with poverty.** Jesus' concern for the poor seems to get overshadowed in popular Bible study and preaching. The part about addressing poverty gets lost, or at least it's so low on the priority list that it seems to be lost. This could be because we get accustomed to the familiar, dazzled by the sensational, or devoted to building walls of security. Perhaps Jesus would challenge our legalistic self-satisfaction just as he did with his own local religious authorities: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others." (Matt 23:23)

Jesus' references to Isaiah are significant. Isaiah and his contemporaries, such as Micah, Hosea, and Amos, expressed much frustration with poor judgment in the faith practices of God's people. It seems that the religious priorities of the day were off base. In one sense, they were overdoing it! The offerings, festivals, solemn assemblies, songs, incense, prayer, and instrumental music didn't make believers always faithful. They were good, but they missed the mark if they weren't accompanied with justice.

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matt 5:17) It was a message and a call not liked by all. In Luke 4, Jesus was run out of town for taking God's call to justice seriously. While today we may not be entirely ostracized, there are still risks associated with taking the gospel seriously. For most of us it would mean living a life different than the one we have now. It's something that would be noticed. It's something that might require significant, sacrificial changes that we may not want to make. So the tendency becomes that we don't take Jesus' teachings seriously – that we pick and choose how, when, and to what degree we will follow Christ. We worry ourselves with what the neighbors would think. What would friends think? What would family think? And lost among the qualms might be the only question worth asking: "What would God think?"

Robert Lupton asks the question, "What Does Jesus Say?" As keynote speaker at a Bible college, he found himself in a classroom in dialogue with upperclassmen. He asked their perception of the number one mandate for followers of Christ. "Evangelize!" they said. He pressed, "But what did Jesus *say* was top priority?" After a pause, some responded with "Make disciples." Lupton pressed harder: "...but what did Christ *actually say* was that most important mandate for His followers?" After a moment or two of puzzled silence, a student in the back of the classroom ventured a

hesitant response: "You mean 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, mind, soul and strength and thy neighbor as thyself? Is this what He said was number one?' [Lupton] continued to push. There were head-nods and another student added: 'On this hang all the law and the prophets.'"<sup>16</sup> Lupton observed, "These young people had their scripture down well."<sup>17</sup>

Lupton helps us to reflect on the approach that the only answer to poverty is the personal transformation that comes with a profession of faith and being 'born again.' The rationale is that saving one person at a time leads ultimately to the salvation of that person's family, neighborhood, and society. It's a one-by-one approach, and there's much to be said for it. It includes getting people to heaven, and that's no small matter. However:

Proclamation alone, apart from any social concern, may be perceived as a distortion, a truncated version of the true gospel, a parody and travesty of the good news, lacking relevance for the real problems of people living in the real world. On the other end of the spectrum, exclusive focus on transformation and advocacy may just result in social and humanitarian activism, void of any spiritual dimension. Both approaches are unbiblical; they deny the wholeness of human nature of human being created in the image of God.<sup>18</sup>

One of the realities of doing justice and addressing poverty is that it has a lot to do with evangelism. "Once we recognize the identification of Jesus with the poor, we cannot any longer consider our own relation to the poor as a social ethics question; it is a gospel question."<sup>19</sup> We can build on the strength of individual soul freedom to join Jesus in caring for the world, for the community, for the common good, and for the Kingdom of God.

**Jesus affirmed giving to the needs of the poor.** "So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matt 6:2-4) He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Lupton, *And You Call Yourself a Christian* (Chicago: Christian Community Development Association, 2005), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Heldt, quoted by Christopher J. H. Wright, "The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative," *Mission Frontiers*, Vol. 29, No. 5, September-October 2007, 21.

<sup>19</sup> David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991), 437.

will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Luke 14:12-14)

One of the most misused statements of Jesus is the quotation about the poor always being with us. Rather a statement of resignation, it's a reminder of the responsibility described in Deuteronomy 15:11 - "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

The quotation is within the story of the woman spreading expensive perfume on Jesus' feet. It is found in Matt. 26:6-12, as well as in the Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:1-8 accounts. Matthew's context is interesting because the prior chapter talks about the final judgment and Jesus' identifying with 'the least of these.' It's likely that Jesus was challenging his disciples to be truly attentive to the poor on an ongoing basis, rather than their expressing frustration with the extravagance of the special occasion the woman was commemorating.

**Jesus condemned those who oppressed the poor.** As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." (Luke 20:47)

**Jesus warned that following him might lead to poverty.** Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions--and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Mark 10:28-31)

**Jesus encourages his disciples to identify with the poor.** He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, giving them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics." (Mark 6:7-9) Luke has Jesus addressing the disciples with "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money--not even an extra tunic" (Luke 9:3) and "Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.'" (Luke 6:20-21)

**Jesus warned against the dangers of wealth.** The danger for the wealthy is to lose sight of God's priorities and the opportunities for sharing their blessings as they

deal with amassing and securing their riches. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt 6:19-21) "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." (Matt 6:24 & Luke 16:13) "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mark 8:36) See also Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-25 Luke 6:24-25, 12:15-21, 16:19-31, 18:22-25.

**Jesus acknowledged the expressed generosity of wealthy persons.** Jesus affirmed transformational opportunities with the rich. He was pro-generosity, and his confrontation with Zacchaeus is an example of a personal transformation affecting the poor: "He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.' (Luke 19:1-10)

**Jesus' life and ministry highlight the significance of the poor.** Chuck Poole wonders: How did we get from a Jesus who said, "I have come to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:16) to churches that long to relocate to neighborhoods that are too far for the car-less poor to get to? How did we get from a Jesus who said, "Sell your possessions, give the proceeds to the poor" (Luke 12:33) to churches that expend millions on acquiring and accumulating? How did we get from a Jesus who sent his disciples out with instructions to travel light (no purse, no bag, no extra sandals) (Luke 10:4) to churches that can't imagine existing without "operating reserve funds?"

How did we get this way? Many fine Christians would say that all this accumulation and acquisition is a good thing. They would decry the suggestion that we need to work our way back to the Jesus of the gospels, and instead would affirm the power and possessions of the institutional church as a sign of "church growth." We must remember that the last time we saw Jesus he was

headed in the other direction, away from consumerism, materialism and institutional protectionism.<sup>20</sup>

**Jesus used the theme of poverty in clarifying his mission.** When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matt 11:2-5) John the Baptist had similar instructive comments: "In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'" (Luke 3:11-14)

The often-quoted drama of the final judgment has the theme of relating with the poor and marginalized of society: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'" (Matt. 25:31-35; - 46).

Jesus made a habit of tending to the marginalized in his society, including beggars, the physically impaired, children, and women. He included those in need of food, water, a home, and a thrift store. By 'sick,' could he have been referring to those without health insurance, who wait for hours in emergency rooms, those who cannot afford the medicines prescribed, or those who cannot read the labels on medicine containers? Jesus identified with these people. For Jesus, the poor weren't an afterthought. They were central to his mission, and he expected and expects his followers to act accordingly.

## **How does understanding the poor as valuable, loved, and gifted by God change the way we minister?**

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<sup>20</sup> Chuck Poole, "Jesus Headed in the Other Direction," Baptist Studies Bulletin, October 2004).

We don't wait for the poor to come to us. We go to them. We 'come alongside' them as Jesus did. We listen to them. In a sense, following Jesus and taking the Bible seriously exemplifies listening. Following Jesus includes listening to what others have to say. Jesus listened to:

- Dreams such as a mother's ambition for her sons and a tax collector's desire to find personal salvation
- Complaints of illness, death, taxation, and more
- Questions such as those from Nicodemus, Pharisees, disciples, and others
- Petitions for healing and for hope

Contemporary community development experts advise that we should listen, especially to local persons affected by the challenges of their environments. Listening to others makes a critical difference in doing justice and in following Jesus. In this act of truly listening, we find ways to identify with the poor ourselves. Along these lines, Simon Tugwell offers a unique perspective on Jesus' excitement about an offering of two coins:

Our Lord is sitting by the Temple watching all the people coming and going, putting their offerings into the box. Some of them were making quite a show of it, no doubt, so that everyone would know how much they had put in. But there, among them all, was a little old lady, rather shabbily dressed, who slipped in her two pence half-penny when no one was looking. But the Lord saw her. And he got terribly excited about it. 'She's put in more than all the rest put together!' he exclaims.

This little old lady did not realize that she was doing anything spectacular; nothing could have been further from her mind. She did not want to draw attention to herself, because she knew that what she was giving was not worth very much, it was not going to repair the Temple rook or get them a new organ or even pay for the Boy Scouts' Annual Outing. The Temple authorities might well think it was a confounded nuisance having to count all the small change put in by people like her. But she had given all she had, knowing that it was not much, knowing that she was not going to solve anyone's problems. And surely the Lord recognized in her a kindred spirit. She was doing the same kind of thing that he was doing. He was not solving the world's problems in any sense that the world could understand, he was not reforming society or abolishing poverty - 'the poor you will always have with you' was his comment on that (Mt. 26:11) - he was not doing any of the things some modern Christians think he should have been doing. And many people considered him a nuisance. But he was giving himself, he was giving all he had got, he was giving his very life.

Blessed are the poor! How easily we take that always to mean somebody else. Yet if we want to be with God, we must learn to hear it as 'blessed are we who are poor', we who have not got anything very impressive to give to anybody, whose giving may very well be rather a nuisance, but who still have not given up giving. Who knows? Our giving of ourselves in all our poverty

may one day bring some joy to somebody else who is poor, who is not calculating, not trying to repair a church roof. God invites us into this conspiracy of the poor, making himself its head, giving himself in poverty and weakness, knowing that if we will only receive that humble gift of his, it will transform everything. If we are prepared to be poor enough to learn and to appreciate the manner of God's giving, we shall find in that poverty the seed of all perfection.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps we need to reflect on our own poverty, even as we consider the challenges of others' poverty. Surely following through on God's compassion for the poor requires our going beyond token or minimalist charity. That's not the Jesus way, is it? It's not just about getting by to fulfill a minimal obligation so that we can be free of guilt. And it's not enough to tell ourselves that we at least did something.

Without guidance or nurture, many charitable ministries are treated only as acts of relief. Relief, like charity, is good, and it can be very good as a first step toward recovery. But relief becomes a part of the problem if it is repeated on an ongoing basis without addressing root causes. The story is told in different ways, but it's like pulling drowning people from a river day after day, week after week. The rescuers feel good about their being such fine rescuers. A lot of good is being done for those who are rescued. Finally, someone has enough compassion for the stream of victims or exasperation with the situation to suggest going upstream to find out what can be done to keep people from getting into the river in the first place. Going upstream is a major step beyond relief and toward recovery.

A similar story is told about finding people with their bodies broken and bruised from falling down the face of a high cliff. Would you suggest building a hospital at the bottom of the cliff or installing a fence at the top?

Even in searching to address root causes, we must begin to know personally these individuals and families who struggle with financial disenfranchisement. According to Lupton, Jesus "shows us that cure without care is not the Kingdom way. Knowledge and even self-sacrifice, unless accompanied by love, are of little worth in His economy. He invites us to slip in a little closer so we can see for ourselves that the darkness of sightless eyes is not as intense and the despair of the soul of one who is discarded."<sup>22</sup>

Instead of our only thinking about being members of Christ's body, we might consider our behaviors if Jesus were an active member in our local churches. How would he vote on the budgets? Would he most readily identify with those who demonstrate concern for the poor? Most of our churches have such compassionate members. Often they are simply tolerated as they scratch and claw to get more funding for their preferred charity. While they carry the freight for congregations and

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<sup>21</sup> Simon Tugwell, *Prayer*, quoted in Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, eds., *A Guide for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1983), 293-4.

<sup>22</sup> Lupton, 19.

communities with their personal commitment to soup kitchens, Thanksgiving dinners, homeless shelters, relief efforts, and other church priorities, such as new buildings or higher salaries frequently take precedence. Charity becomes a line item in a budget, and sometimes not even a line item, but subsumed in the missions committee's line item.

There are byproducts of the compartmentalizing of American life that insulate us from contact with persons who are different from us or 'our kind.' Sadly, our very desire for security leads us to avoid those who are not like us. Suburbs foster a kind of homogeneity. Even church growth advocates extolled the virtues of homogeneous congregations. This only intensifies the inability to deal with the challenges of a pluralistic society, and it fosters the class-ism of 'haves' and 'have nots.'

When our culture traded front-porch neighborhood life for private backyard patios, when we succumbed to the seduction of individualism and lost touch with our next-door neighbors, a void was created in the spirit of our people that chat rooms cannot fill. The commuting church, with its scattered members buzzing in and out of the neighborhood, is one more troubling reminder of what we have lost. A community-starved society, by its protests, is calling the church back to its historic mandate: to be the exemplar within the community of both love of God and love of neighbor.<sup>23</sup>

There is at least one other long-term challenge for the individual follower of Jesus. It's not only how we spend our time and with whom we spend it. It's also about how we prioritize and spend our money. Personal budgets reflect private systems of stewardship, and that includes personal consumerism (purchases are integrated with perceptions of fair trade, worker justice, the environment, etc.). Arthur Simon wrote, "Unfortunately, the word stewardship has been monopolized in Protestant circles by those who have responsibility for raising money to support the church...But in trust, our stewardship involves the whole of life - anything and everything that has been entrusted to us."<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Following Jesus means actively caring for people in poverty and actively protesting behavior that oppresses them. He must be pleased with present day efforts to 'make poverty history,' especially when it comes to extreme poverty. Addressing poverty, whether it is extreme, moderate, or relative, is a basic responsibility for all who take Jesus and the Bible seriously.

If we intend to follow Jesus, we must consider how our purchases and lifestyles affect local and international economies, including environmental impact. It means

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<sup>23</sup> Lupton, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Simon, 40.

sharing our wealth and simply remembering that we live in community with the poor. We also must invest in efforts that go beyond relief and contribute to building capacity and development.

Kyle Reese once speculated on how God chose to invite the whole world to join in following Jesus. Apparently, it was through incarnation. Now it's our turn to be that incarnational reality - the presence of Christ. God is near us, even within us, so we are not alone. Neither are the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the strangers in our land.

# *Chapter 2*

## **From Charity to Transforming Ministry: Alleviating Poverty at its Root**

### **Why charity doesn't change enough**

When U2 singer and human rights activist Bono spoke to President George W. Bush's National Prayer Breakfast in 2007, he said:

Here's some good news for the President. After 9-11 we were told America would have no time for the world's poor. America would be taken up with its own problems of safety. And it's true these are dangerous times, but America has not drawn the blinds and double-locked the doors.

In fact, you have doubled aid to Africa. You have tripled funding for global health. Mr. President, your emergency plan for AIDS relief and support for the Global Fund – you and Congress – have put 700,000 people onto life-saving anti-retroviral drugs and provided 8 million bed nets to protect children from malaria.

Outstanding human achievements. Counterintuitive. Historic. Be very, very proud. But here's the bad news. From charity to justice, the good news is yet to come. There's is much more to do. There's a gigantic chasm between the scale of the emergency and the scale of the response. And finally, it's not about charity after all, is it? It's about justice.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> DATA, [http://www.data.org/news/press/Bono\\_RemarksNationalPrayerBreakfast\\_020206.html](http://www.data.org/news/press/Bono_RemarksNationalPrayerBreakfast_020206.html) (2 June 2008)

Charity is good. It alleviates human suffering, can make an immediate change in the life of another person, and can literally save a life on the brink of starvation, thirst or other human ailments. But while charity and other forms of relief are good and can be life-saving, it is only a beginning. This may be a new concept to some who think that charity is all we can do or should do to help people in need. Many of us may admit that we don't know another way. We give money and resources to charity, but after our wallets run dry we often don't know what else to do. We need to change our giving, moving from just the giving of resources that alleviate human need to the offering of ourselves to eliminate the need. Charity often doesn't change things significantly or prevent a crisis from recurring; transformation is the necessary component to long-term change.

Charity or relief is a lot like throwing a life ring to drowning people. It's helpful when it's long enough and strong enough to pull them to safety. It can save lives, but help doesn't always come in time. What is more valuable is teaching people to avoid being in the predicament again. And the principle applies to people in other crises – those who don't have clothing, food, or shelter. It's transformation – their learning how to access resources or becoming educated for jobs that will enable them to afford life's necessities – that can impact lives for the long-term. Each step beyond throwing the life ring is a move toward transformation. In Bono's terms, it's a move from charity to justice.

Occasional or even regular acts of charity may keep recipients in a perpetual state of need. If a person knows that someone else will provide for their needs, they have less motivation to provide for themselves. So while charity can help in the short-term, hand-outs don't usually transform lives; they often make lives dependent on hand-outs. Givers might have a sense of duty done, perhaps a degree of personal gratification, and maybe even an assuaging of guilt. A kind of paternalism emerges that does not foster true community but rather makes the giver superior to the receiver. Sometimes charity is all we can do, but in most cases, it is only the beginning of what we can do.

Micah 6:8 talks about acting justly. He talks about 'doing' justice, not just 'receiving' justice. He means we must perform justice, produce just actions, and deal with injustices around us. We all have to start *somewhere*, not only in our search for justice but also for our role in doing justice. We may start with taking offense at someone's behavior, whether it's an insult to us, another person, or even the environment. What do we do when our sense of fairness or justice is offended?

In dealing with poverty-related issues, many want justice from the other person. It seems to be more about expecting justice from 'them,' than expecting justice from 'us.' It's not that the expectation for others to do justice is wrong. It's also that we need to do

justice ourselves. When we examine ourselves and find ourselves in the wrong, do we begin to change?

Micah 6:8 requires loving kindness and walking humbly, too. Unfortunately, these may get overlooked when we get serious about doing justice. We may become so frustrated by injustice that we become angry, embittered people for whom kindness becomes uncommon. We may become so enthralled with fighting for justice that we become judges of others who are not as motivated for the quest as we are. Learning to exercise good judgment is an ongoing key to 'doing' justice, as is learning to love kindness and show humility. Micah doesn't say choose one of the following: justice, love, or humility. He doesn't say to apply them to specific audiences differently. For Micah, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God is a whole package.

Bryant Myers wrote, "We must take great care that we point, not to our own sacrifices or professionalism, and not the effectiveness of our development technology, but the fact that the good deeds that create and enhance life in the community are evidence of the character and activity of the God of the Bible, the God whose Son make a continuing invitation to new life and whose Spirit is daily at work in our world."<sup>26</sup>

Our acts of 'doing' start with intention. How can we begin living out Micah's whole message? Where can we begin to act? Can we commit to pursuing Godly justice on behalf of the poor in the world?

## **Root causes of poverty and how to address them**

Answers lie in understanding that poverty, especially ongoing, generational poverty, is a systemic issue. It deeply affects and limits people. Few people in poverty wish to live that way, and if getting out of poverty was easy, many would have succeeded and already made the condition far less of a global concern. But the fact is that poverty is deep-rooted with significant causes, including what might be called private and public matters -- individualism, religion, culture, economics, health, gender, race, education, class, and environment to name a few. Sometimes those living in poverty are victims of their own bad decisions, but public policy decisions and other factors beyond their control affect them, too. These complex causes challenge individual, church, and societal choices.

### *Individual Choices*

We often forget that individual choices affect societal realities, just as societal realities affect individual choices. Living out our faith is about translating intentions

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<sup>26</sup> Bryant Myers, *Walking With The Poor* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), 244.

into actions and moving from thoughts to deeds. While speaking is an action, and even a desirable prophetic function, the Bible repeatedly warns that words themselves are not enough to get to the full import of deeds. As 1 John 3:18 says, "...let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."

Bill Hoffman has addressed poverty in truth and action in the Mississippi River Delta region of the United States. As he and his fellow believers learned about poverty conditions in Tensas Parish, Louisiana, they found that local prisons, along with agriculture and public schools, were the largest local industries. As they learned about prison conditions, they became concerned for the prisoners' families and that the prisoners might find hope like one man did: "One man's tattoos depicted a large chain wrapped around his entire upper body," Hoffman said. "As this giant of a man was trying to squeeze into the livestock water trough that serves as our baptistery, he told me that though he was still in prison, he had been freed from the bonds of sin and evil that had shackled his life."

Louisiana prison baptism represented just one of nearly 1,500 professions of faith resulting from Together for Hope ministries within a two-year period. Loving in truth and action led to words of faith, as well as baptisms.

Similar movements of God have occurred among poor Hispanic families in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, where a father entered a community center in tears. His family had not eaten for three days, and he had finally given up on finding a way to provide for his family. Jorge Zapata, a Buckner Border Ministries employee who works with Together for Hope, was called by a staffer at the center. Zapata picked up the father, bought some groceries for the family, and took the father home to a house that was barely standing. A few months later Zapata had a missions team repair that desperately damaged house. By Thursday of that week, the father asked Zapata why the team was doing this. Zapata told him it was because of the love of Jesus Christ. The father professed faith in Jesus, and the entire family came to believe. Later that year, their small house was the site of a block party in the local neighborhood. The house's painted light-green wall was an ideal screen for showing *The Jesus Film*. Thirteen people made professions of faith that night. Among those 13 was a childhood friend of the father - a man that Zapata discovered was a capable mechanic who just needed a chance. Today, the father owns his own mechanic shop and has two employees. In this way, a new follower of Jesus became a resource for economic justice.

Even though Hoffman and Zapata did not start with the intention of bringing people to Christ, they did start with acting on the call of God to respond to the needs of the world. They didn't wait for anyone else to act. Their intention was to be the presence of Christ, and they were. This is not as easy as it may seem. It takes thought -- awareness, listening, and a new kind of intention.

Christians can make a similar impact in their own communities and even on short-term missions projects. Long-lasting impact seems to be best left when Christians

serve 'alongside' and 'with' those in poverty instead of 'doing for' them. Short-term missions team members can promote local volunteerism and prompt trust and deeper relationships by continuing to return, or perhaps become a long-term presence by relocating to the impoverished community.

Alleviating long-standing poverty takes a long-term effort, which is rapidly advanced and deepened through the long-term presence of a minister. Christians are needed who are willing to relocate to impoverished neighborhoods and who can realize that ministry is not something that is completed after the workday is done. Lifestyles can be powerful ministries. Personal ethics and competencies are witnesses to neighbors and to co-workers. It's a matter of Christians hearing the call to these areas and committing to use their God-given gifts and resources for the transformation of communities and lives. Even small businesses willing to operate on lower profit margins can improve rural, poor economies by having more shared profits with workers.

John Perkins, founder of the Christian Community Development Association, has offered this challenge: "You've heard that you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. You teach a man how to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. That's a lie! You've got to teach him how to 'own the pond,' or he can't even go fishing." Sacrificial volunteerism, charity, and relief are all helpful, but something is missing unless there's movement toward self-sustainability. That is the element of transformation that is so often missing and so often the most important aspect of a move toward justice.

Justice requires a persevering kind of shared ministry to build toward a sustainable future. Without ongoing commitment and building capacity for community transformation, there is the danger of dependency on outside volunteers, just as with outside funding. Another danger is compartmentalization. Occasional short-term trips to minister among the poor should not be to alleviate guilt or assuage consciences. Short-term missions trips should awaken Christians to the challenges of their own nearby neighborhoods. Lessons learned in serving alongside those in poverty need to be taken back home. This balance between local efforts and distant efforts can be a difficult balance to discern, but it is necessary.

These individual choices do not suggest a 'salvation by works,' but rather a 'salvation that works.' Our personal conversions in becoming disciples are just the beginning of our lives in Christ and being the presence of Christ in the world. We have faced God's justice and found mercy. Saved by grace, we are freed to do justice ourselves with love and humility. In fact it is our newfound freedom that makes the love and humility more possible to express. And others need the same opportunity. As Myers wrote, "Only changed people can change history. If people do not change, little else changes in the long term."<sup>27</sup>

## *Church Choices*

When it comes to fighting for justice, one person can make a difference. Without growing numbers of individual commitments, however, social movements never gain enough momentum to demand, incite, or realize change. And amid these voices calling for compassion and justice should be the voice of the church, speaking with fervor and confidence that Christ would have called for the same change in the world. But often speaking and working on behalf of the poor and oppressed is something that takes lower priority for many churches. For churches like that – who struggle with a balance on inward and outward focus – Chuck Poole, a Baptist minister, offers a biblical challenge:

And since, for Baptists, the Bible is the ‘rule and guide for faith and practice,’ here’s a modest proposal for Baptist ministers, deacons, committee members and church-folk in general: The next time the suggestion that the church should be spending less on its own institutional advancement and more on the needs of the poor is met with the popular rejoinder that ‘The church is not a social-services agency,’ you might want to share Bono’s finding that the Bible mentions the poor about 2,000 times. And since, for Baptists, the Bible is the church’s Book, that means that churches must give themselves to the poor in generous and loving ways, not because we want to be social service agencies, but because we want to be churches.<sup>28</sup>

Poole’s words are a challenge to all churches that claim the Bible as their Book. It’s a challenge to take the Bible seriously. Since we are people of the Book, we must recognize that a serious commitment to following the gospel of Christ will mean a serious commitment to the poor and oppressed in the world. Christ ministered among the poor, showing today’s Christians their role in modern-day human rights crises like poverty. And many churches have done something to fight poverty. Churches have donated money, stocked food pantries and clothes closets, and fed the hungry. But as good as these acts of charity are, they alone rarely lead to transformation of communities and lives. It doesn’t mean churches shouldn’t do charitable works; it means that churches shouldn’t do only charitable works.

In Texas, Jorge Zapata fights poverty in both word and deed. These acts of charity – done in the name of Christ – build relationships that have resulted in spiritual transformation, but they don’t seem truly evangelistic to some. Zapata had a pastor friend whose church was struggling, running 15-20 in attendance. He had resisted Zapata’s requests for involvement in community ministries among the poor. He argued that his ministry was ‘spiritual,’ and that Zapata’s ministry was ‘carnal.’ Zapata finally persuaded him to show up at a community block party and to extend the invitation to

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<sup>28</sup> Charles E. Poole, “Bono Speaks to Baptists,” *The Baptist Studies Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 3, March 2005, <<http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/bulletin/2006/march.htm##Bible>> (30 May 2006).

faith at the end of the showing of *Jesus Film*. After 13 people came forward to become Christians that evening, he asked Zapata's forgiveness. Then, continuing as a bi-vocational pastor, he became an intern with Zapata in community ministries supported by Together for Hope. His church began to grow. His service in the community was fostering more trust and more relationships. His church has not only grown to more than 200, but it has two missions, including one in Mexico.

In another poor community, so many people were becoming Christians through Zapata's ministry that a church was started. It began with five people. Within two years, the 65-seat church had started three worship services so they could have enough seating for everyone. The pastor was ministering with hundreds of people weekly and started a food pantry to serve the community.

These Rio Grande churches weren't satisfied with just giving hand-outs. They wanted to make a real difference by transforming lives and bringing hope. And this justice work resulted in new churches and church growth much like the Micah Challenge has suggested:

God by his grace has given local churches the task of integral mission. The future of integral mission is in planting and enabling local churches to transform the communities of which they are part. Churches as caring and inclusive communities are at the heart of what it means to do integral mission. People are often attracted to the Christian community before they are attracted to the Christian message.<sup>29</sup>

Churches that want to engage justice issues must make a commitment to look and care beyond the walls of the church building. While much difference can be made in the lives of those within a congregation, the world needs the Church to look beyond itself. In *The Externally Focused Church*, Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson suggest four characteristics of externally focused churches:<sup>30</sup>

- Convinced that good deeds and good news cannot and should not be separated
- See themselves as vital to the health and well-being of their communities
- Believe that ministering and serving are the normal expressions of Christian living
- Are evangelistically effective

One way U.S. churches can begin making a difference is through political advocacy. So much of the globe's rampant poverty has to do with public policy. Unjust trade, low minimum wage, and farming subsidies are just some public policy decisions

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<sup>29</sup> Micah Challenge, "Micah Declaration on Integral Mission," 2001, <[http://micahchallenge.org/global/christians\\_poverty\\_and\\_justice/96.html](http://micahchallenge.org/global/christians_poverty_and_justice/96.html)> (3 June 2006).

<sup>30</sup> Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson. *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, Colorado: Group Publishing, 2004), 24-29.

that have kept people in poverty. The problem of poverty is systemic and far-reaching, which means a solution must address these systemic causes.

Many churches and Christians have been reluctant to engage government for fear of clouding the boundary between church and state. That wall of separation is not meant to keep people from expressing the ethical implications of their faith. Religious liberty is not freedom from representing the marginalized in our society, nor is it a concept that is meant to water down justice or undercut the guidance of the Bible. Separation of church and state does not free Christians from prophetic responsibility for justice, truth, and righteousness.

Obviously, churches must exercise wisdom as they deal with public systems. There are definitely improper ways to get involved in addressing public policy -- such as advocating election of specific persons, using more than 5 percent of a nonprofit organization's total budget to lobby, or getting too involved with a specific piece of legislation. But U.S. laws make it clear that churches and nonprofit organizations can address issues even when it may not be easy. In fact, it can be dangerous. Lesslie Newbigin challenges us:

The public square will be a place of conflict where one can be wounded.... To claim that the Gospel is public truth is to enter into a struggle in which we can expect to be wounded. But these wounds are the authenticating marks of the missionary church.<sup>31</sup>

Much of the debate may center on the role of the church. In many cultures, persecution has caused churches to focus almost exclusively on belief as a private matter. In other cultures, churches have become affluent and are hesitant to engage in public matters. In either case, there may be over-accommodation to society and undermining of the power of the Good News. When this is done, everyone loses. Churches must wrestle within their respective cultures to proclaim Good News to the poor (Luke 4:18) and minister with the 'least of these' as to Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46).

With humility and love, churches can learn that doing charity as usual must grow into addressing root causes of endemic poverty. It is necessary for transformation of communities and individuals struggling with poverty. And the transformation begins with the church and individual Christians:

We must start with ourselves, addressing our own spiritual poverty, for we are fellow beggars of God's grace, pointing other beggars to the one who has provided for us so generously with unmerited love and forgiveness.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "The Gospel and Our Culture: The Gospel as Public Truth," Documents of a National Consultation for the British and Foreign Bible Society, the Hayes, Swanwick, UK (11-17 July 1992), quoted by George R. Hunsberger in "The Missional Voice and Posture of Public Theologizing," *Missiology: An International Review*, XXXIV:1 (January 2006): 26.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Simon, *How Much Is Enough? Hungering for God in an Affluent Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 44.

Doing justice is about whole lives and a whole evangelism. Personal decisions in consumer purchases and personal prayers, as well as congregational decisions in worship and outreach, are affected because doing justice is about transforming us, too. Brian McLaren in *A Generous Orthodoxy* wrote that in an earlier book he had referred to the church's mission as producing "more and better disciples," but in revising it, he changed it -- "To be and make disciples....in authentic community....for the good of the world."<sup>33</sup> McLaren goes on to affirm that Jesus created the church as a missional community to join in God's mission to save the world.

Faithful followers of Jesus can address poverty through community transformation and not only produce revitalized churches and neighborhoods but also attract more persons to follow Jesus. The Micah Challenge declaration on integral mission affirms that "...in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ."<sup>34</sup> This is not a 'social action only' version of the Good News. It is the whole Good News, proclaimed in word and demonstrated in action, without apology and in obedience to the lordship of Jesus.

We can take one hungry father to a store at a time. We already are, and we should. We can rebuild one shack at a time. We already are, and we should. We can help humanity one person at a time. We already are, and we should. But there is more to do to get to justice. There is more we can give of ourselves. What seems to be complex may be a simple reminder that we are invited to live whole lives within the love of God. Living whole lives is not common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where persons often compartmentalize responsibilities and experiences in order to manage rapidly-paced life. But salvation is near and offers an integrated wholeness in the peace of God. This understanding of the wholeness and interdependency of life is necessary for transformation of individuals, local communities, and the whole world that 'God so loved.'

### *Societal Choices*

The world involves an incredibly broad range of societies with a myriad of standards. Those standards, or norms, generally reflect cultural values in some form. These may be in tension with an individual's or a private group's preferences. People in poverty are usually victims of their society's poor choices, as well as their own poor choices. Ruby Payne wrote, "Either/or assertions have not served us well; it must be recognized that causes of poverty are a both/and reality. Poverty is caused by both the

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<sup>33</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 106-8.

<sup>34</sup> Micah Challenge, "Micah Declaration on Integral Mission," 2001, <[http://micahchallenge.org/global/christians\\_poverty\\_and\\_justice/96.html](http://micahchallenge.org/global/christians_poverty_and_justice/96.html)> (3 June 2006).

behaviors of the individual and political/economic structures – and everything in between.”<sup>35</sup> To achieve justice in addressing poverty, followers of Jesus Christ must learn more about causes of endemic poverty.

Informally, the effect of social norms can be seen when parents don’t want a daughter to go to college so she won’t act ‘uppity’ or ‘above her raisin.’ It might be harder for us to see when we ourselves are conforming to social norms. Rather than God’s presence, we may be more aware of the presence of benevolent and malevolent authorities that are more obviously present to us – parents, elders, teachers, police, judges, social elite, and other bullies. Of course, social norms are not just unwritten rules. They show up in institutional design and function, including government, economics, hunger and other health issues, education, and environment. They are reflected in laws and the systems that make and enforce the laws.

**Government.** Governments are the most obvious of public systems. David Shipler, with a focus on the U.S. working poor, wrote: “The entire society needs governmental tools to help those working at the bottom of the economic hierarchy – both to lend them a hand in what they cannot do alone and to assist them in developing the capacity to do what they can ultimately do themselves. No dichotomy exists here between societal help and self-help. Government can be neither absent nor all-encompassing.”<sup>36</sup>

Legislative and judicial processes must be part of the systems solutions, but they can also worsen the plight of the poor. Corruption is a major issue for governments to address. It takes on many guises. One World Bank paper noted that in Malawi poor fishermen complained about the government’s fishing company having less strict standards than those for the poor.<sup>37</sup> In Nigeria, there was a military takeover of farmlands and lakes.<sup>38</sup> In India, poor women spoke of having to bribe forest officers for each bundle of firewood they collected.<sup>39</sup> Other forms of crime stalk those in poverty-ridden neighborhoods. In fact, a surprising discovery of the World Bank’s study “...was the extent to which poor people experience police as a source not of help and security, but rather of harm, risk and impoverishment.”<sup>40</sup> Isaiah has a strong word for government authorities: “Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil and that you may make the orphans your prey!” (Isaiah 10:1-2)

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<sup>35</sup> Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, Texas: aha! Process, Inc., 1996), 166.

<sup>36</sup> David Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 290.

<sup>37</sup> Deepa Narayan, Robert Chambers, Meera Shah, and Patti Petesch, “Global Synthesis: Consultations with the Poor” Draft for discussion, Poverty Group, World Bank (20 September 1999), 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid..

<sup>40</sup> Narayan, 18.

There is a movement, though, of individuals and organizations that want to see the world changed. There is a movement that wants to see stronger countries help weaker countries and that wants every country to not deny its citizens basic human rights. In 2000, the 191 member governments of the United Nations set eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be fulfilled by 2015. The goals, which many Christian organizations have affirmed and committed to work toward, can be achieved but not without advocacy efforts encouraging governments to keep these eight promises:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a Global Partnership for Development

These represent the complexity of acting justly to address the multifaceted global poverty crisis. Jeffrey Sachs, special advisor on the MDGs to the U.N.'s secretary-general, advocates a strategy for ending extreme poverty, "...including a system of governance that empowers the poor while holding them accountable."<sup>41</sup> Governments have a crucial impact on addressing root causes of poverty.

Thinking about public policy issues can bring up political tension, and public policy involves more than national and international issues. It is also local. Don and Doris Littrell, retired University of Missouri professors with community development expertise, wrote: "Often when we think about public policy, we think of statewide, national or international situations. In fact, the most important public policy that impacts our everyday life is local public policy. It's what determines our educational system, justice system, streets, housing, sewers, water supply and other basics of life."<sup>42</sup>

**Economics.** Justice in economic practices is as basic as an employer paying a fair wage and as complex as the technologies that drive globalization. One piece of the economic solution is fair trade, which involves helping producers in poor countries have a fair price for their goods (cost of production plus a living income), the security of long-term contracts, and access to education that will enhance their business practices.

The Equal Exchange Interfaith Program is one such solution. It works with small farmer cooperatives owned and controlled by the farmers themselves. The program uses their purchasing power to help the farmers care for the land and make long-range

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 243.

<sup>42</sup> Don Littrell and Doris Littrell, "Dealing with the 'Isms'," paper for annual meeting of the Together for Hope leadership team, Harlingen, Texas, 6-9 September 2005, 1.

plans together with sustainable practices. It pays the farmers extra (beyond guaranteed Fair Trade prices) for organic crops and also assists with marketing.<sup>43</sup>

Realizing the importance of economic justice, the U.N.'s MDGs includes a focus on developing "...an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system."<sup>44</sup> While complex, this idea is made more achievable through individual purchasing decisions. Fair trade is supported by individual purchases of coffee and other fair trade items. Everyday decisions contribute to international realities. Martin Luther King said, "Before you've finished your breakfast this morning, you'll have relied on half the world." The anti-hunger organization Oxfam explains further: "An interesting thought. And a depressing one, when you realise that those people you've relied on for your coffee and muesli are almost certainly being exploited and oppressed by the unfair power balance in world trade."<sup>45</sup>

**Hunger Issues.** Dealing with hunger involves food production and availability. Food shortages may come from natural disasters, such as droughts or floods. They may also result from war, civil strife, or general health problems. Then there are the matters of adequate money to have access to, buy, and use food (i.e., how it is prepared to eat and the body's ability to absorb the nutrition). "If a family in Ethiopia receives rice from the U.S. Agency for International Development, but has no water for cooking, the rice is virtually useless."<sup>46</sup> It will take more than charity to respond to the six million children worldwide who are dying of hunger-related causes each year. Increased food productivity would help, but transportation and communication networks and export opportunities must be in place.

It will also take more than isolated acts of charity to stomach the fact that in the United States 13.9 million children were in 'food insecure' households in 2004; that's 1.9 million more than in 1999. Arthur Simon wrote, "In 2000, eight million Americans were classified as hungry, and another twenty-three million as at risk of hunger, which meant that they had to skimp on food or skip meals."<sup>47</sup> Having a job does not mean that a person is able to escape poverty, either. Books like Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, and David Shipler's *The Working Poor* exposed that minimum-wage jobs can actually keep a person in poverty, making their work ethic and initiative futile attempts at bettering their condition. Shipler focused on the United States but his observations have applications for other nations. In his observation:

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<sup>43</sup> Equal Exchange, "Welcome," <<http://www.equalexchange.com/index.php>> (30 May 2006).

<sup>44</sup> Micah Challenge, "Millennium Development Goals," <[http://micahchallenge.org/millennium\\_development\\_goals/](http://micahchallenge.org/millennium_development_goals/)> (30 May 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Make Trade Fair, "Fair Trade and You," <<http://www.maketrade4fair.com/en/index.php?file=25032002111113.htm&cat=4&subcat=1&select=1>> (30 May 2006)

<sup>46</sup> Susan Bunch and Daniel Martin, "Hunger Basics," *Are We On Track To End Hunger? Hunger Report 2004* (Washington: Bread for the World Institute, 2004), 22.

<sup>47</sup> Simon, 108.

“When grievous wrongs are done or endemic suffering exposed, when injustice is discovered or opportunity denied, watch the institutions of government and business and charity. Their response is an index of a nation’s health and of a people’s strength.”<sup>48</sup>

**Health.** Health issues beyond hunger often deepen an individual or community’s poverty condition. Sick people may be incapable of working, which could limit their ability to buy or farm for food. Impoverished people often don’t have access to adequate health care or potentially life-saving medications.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has devastated Africa’s rural communities. By 2001, roughly seven million agricultural workers had died of AIDS, and a total of 27 million farmers may die from the disease by 2020. There are good strategies for combating HIV/AIDS, even in the absence of a cure or vaccine, but they require financial commitments from the international community to Africa and increasingly to other poor regions as well. Anti-retrovirals (ARVs) are effective HIV medications that can keep people feeling well and extend their lives by years, and their cost has come down considerably. It is urgent that these medications be made available to poor people who need them...In addition to programs that target HIV/AIDS directly, rural families need crops and technologies that are less labor-intensive as fewer healthy farmers are available.

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Poor people are often ill-informed about public health issues and how diseases spread, or they don’t have the resources to prevent a health crisis. In Africa and other developing areas, mosquito nets have helped prevent life-threatening cases of malaria, but many poor countries can’t afford this resource or wouldn’t have this resource without outside donations. The same countries often have poor sanitation and little or no access to clean water. “It has been estimated that poor environmental quality contributes to around 25% of all preventable ill-health in the world today, the majority of which is poverty-related.”<sup>50</sup>

**Education.** In many cultures, the public system of education must deal with literacy, or illiteracy, issues in order to do justice in addressing poverty. Charles Wade, former executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas put it this way: “Matthew 25 is important, but do you know the best way to help people not to be

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<sup>48</sup> Shipler, 298.

<sup>49</sup> Todd Post and Michele Learner, “Strengthening Rural Communities in the Developing World,” *Strengthening Rural Communities: Hunger Report 2005*, (Washington: Bread for the World Institute, 2005), 75.

<sup>50</sup> WHO, “Health and Sustainable Development,” Summary Report to Meeting of Senior Officials and Ministers of Health, Johannesburg, South Africa, 19-22 January 2002, <[http://64.233.187.104/u/who?q=cache:i4S2es6wgKQJ:www.who.int/mediacentre/events/HSD\\_Plaq\\_02.7\\_def1.pdf+Annual+death+toll+of+poverty-related+causes&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=2&ie=UTF-8](http://64.233.187.104/u/who?q=cache:i4S2es6wgKQJ:www.who.int/mediacentre/events/HSD_Plaq_02.7_def1.pdf+Annual+death+toll+of+poverty-related+causes&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=2&ie=UTF-8)> (31 May 2006)

hungry, not to be thirsty, not to be sick, not to be a stranger? Help them read!”<sup>51</sup> Grover Whitehurst, director of the Institute of Education Sciences within the U.S. Department of Education said, “Reading failure for nearly every child is not the child’s failure; it’s the failure of policy makers, the failure of schools, the failure of teachers and the failure of parents.”<sup>52</sup>

Changes in education eventually mean changes in society. Jim Trelease wrote, “Change the graduation rate, and you change the prison population -- which changes the entire climate of America. The higher a state’s high school graduation rate, the smaller its prison population. So common sense should tell us that reading is the ultimate weapon – destroying ignorance, poverty, and despair before they can destroy us. A nation that doesn’t read much doesn’t know much. A nation that doesn’t know much is more likely to make poor choices in the home, the marketplace, the jury box, and the voting booth. And those decisions ultimately affect an entire nation – the literate and the illiterate.”<sup>53</sup> Trelease’s assertion is reinforced by the facts that children who are not reading by the end of the third grade are most vulnerable to dropping out and that 80 percent of prison inmates in the United States are school dropouts.<sup>54</sup> A former Texas prison chaplain said that the state planners used third grade literacy rates as a predictor of future prison needs.

**Environment.** A number of environmental factors contribute to ongoing poverty, particularly isolation. “The poor frequently are disadvantaged by where they live due to geographical isolation; marginal land; ill-health; discomfort; lack of transport, sanitation, water and other services....; and the ‘area stigma’ attached to residents in remote areas which deters potential employers.”<sup>55</sup> In the United States, it has surprised many to discover that so many of the poorest counties are rural. Four such counties are in South Dakota and include Native American reservations that are distanced from major highways, thus hindering economic development. “In rural areas in many countries, the poor are pushed onto the most marginal land and often live in remote isolated areas disconnected from markets and towns.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Carol Prevost, notes on address by Charles Wade during the 2005 Conference for International and Literacy Ministries, Waco, Texas, 9 June 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Children of the Code, “A Social Education Project,” < <http://www.childrenofthecode.org/> > (30 May 2006).

<sup>53</sup> Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xxv.

<sup>54</sup> “Parent Awareness of Literacy” <http://www.sarasota.k12.fl.us/Sarasota/paraware.htm> (2 January 2008); Shir Haberman, “Lynch wants kids in school until 18,” *Portsmouth Herald* <http://archive.seacoastonline.com/news/03172006/news/92997.htm> (17 March 2006); ERIC: ED323358, “Education Histories of Incarcerated Male Felons...” < [http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?\\_nfpb=true&\\_ERICExtSearch\\_SearchValue\\_0=ED323358&ERICExtSearch\\_SearchType\\_0=no&accno=ED323358](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED323358&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED323358) > (2 January 2008).

<sup>55</sup> Narayan, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Two of the parishes in Louisiana with the highest percentages of population living below the federal poverty line were chosen as locations for significant prisons, partly because of their greater isolation. Other poor U.S. rural counties, desperate for a source of income, become home for the waste dumps of others as is the case in other countries. "In Bangladesh, some rural areas are cut off for six months in a year; in urban slums in Dhaka, shanties of bamboo have been constructed on raised platforms over a big ditch, which is used for all sorts of waste disposal."<sup>57</sup>

The United Nations Environment Programme prefers the term 'ecosystems' to 'environment' and has identified determinants<sup>58</sup> as essential for improving well-being and reducing poverty. They include being able to:

- live in an environmentally clean and safe shelter
- have adequate and clean drinking water
- have clean air
- continue using natural elements found in ecosystems for traditional cultural and spiritual practices
- cope with extreme natural events including floods, tropical storms and landslides
- make sustainable management decisions that respect natural resources and enable the achievement of a sustainable income stream

Healthy environments are essential to the well-being of all people, rich or poor. Adverse circumstances, though, have a greater impact on those who do not have the resources to offset the environmental challenges.

For example, the rich can buy clean water or the technology to filter and purify water if it is contaminated. The poor, on the other hand, have limited resources to pursue these options and usually have no choice but to depend on natural water systems and/or public water supply systems, many of which do not meet the minimum standards for human consumption, especially in developing countries. Another example is the smog crisis in many urban areas. The rich are able to isolate themselves from the smog by buying air conditioners, air cleaners, special surgical masks, etc. Poor people -- especially the young -- are less able to escape exposure to the full impact of the smog with disastrous effects on their health.<sup>59</sup>

These briefly visited issues (government, economics, hunger, health, education, and environment) remind us that we are all in this together. Our individual and local

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Anantha Kumar Duraiappah, *Exploring the Links* (Winnipeg: United Nations Environment Programme and the International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2004), <[http://www.unep.org/dpdl/poverty\\_environment/PDF\\_docs/economics\\_exploring\\_the\\_links.pdf](http://www.unep.org/dpdl/poverty_environment/PDF_docs/economics_exploring_the_links.pdf)> (30 May 2006), 5.

<sup>59</sup> Duraiappah, 10.

choices affect national and global realities. Martin Luther King bears repeating because he was right on target with: “Before you’ve finished your breakfast this morning, you’ll have relied on half the world.” For some reason, it takes prophets to shake us out of our comfort zones regarding poverty. Root causes call for responses as individuals and churches in taking responsibility to do justice locally and globally.

Root causes become root causes when we find ourselves insulated from the suffering of others. That insulation may be on purpose, such as choosing to live in homogeneous, apparently secure, suburbs or gated communities. We become accustomed to status, to belonging to a group, to being one of the ‘haves,’ to not ‘rocking the boat.’ In fact, we often think of those as different from us as lacking something essential or willfully being against what is ‘right’ – at least, what we and our kind think is ‘right.’ The insulation may be a byproduct, though, of other personal choices that are oblivious to the cultural blinders all people wear. Those blinders may come off when we become less ‘business as usual’ and more intentional. As we thoughtfully, purposefully make choices to please God, we may find ourselves challenging expectations of our economic class, local church, neighborhood, or society at large.

Author and pastor Rick Warren touched many of us when he observed that he didn’t know how he had gone to a Bible college and two seminaries and earned a doctorate but had somehow missed God’s compassion for the poor.<sup>60</sup> He is not alone in missing this as a major concern of the Bible. It is easy for most of us to get into comfort zones within our cultures. Warren’s use of compassion echoes a prophet-related statement by Walter Brueggemann:

Jesus in his solidarity with the marginal ones is moved to compassion. Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness. In the arrangement of ‘lawfulness’ in Jesus’ time, as in the ancient empire of Pharaoh, the one unpermitted quality of relation was compassion. Empires are never built or maintained on the basis of compassion. The norms of law (social control) are never accommodated to persons, but persons are accommodated to the norms. Otherwise the norms will collapse and with them the whole power arrangement. Thus the compassion of Jesus is to be understood not simply as a personal emotional reaction but as a public criticism in which he dares to act upon his concern against the entire numbness of his social context.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, “Purpose Driven in Rwanda,” *Christianity Today*, Volume 49, Number 10 (October 2005): 34.

<sup>61</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1978), quoted in Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, eds., *A Guide for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1983), 163.

## Conclusion

What seems to be individual or personal has a public impact. Social systems overlap one another and are all affected by actions of individuals. The movement toward community transformation recognizes complexity in pursuing justice, is undaunted in starting small, and perseveres for the long haul. It faces the systems realities that contribute to poverty, including human arrogance toward God's creation and inhumanity to fellow human beings. The sinfulness of humankind is a root cause of poverty. Each changed life is a singular movement toward community transformation. Each changed person affects society and can challenge public systems.

Personal actions include challenging others, but also challenging lifestyles. Justice in addressing poverty is not just about macro-issues, such as national or international politics and economic policies. If the U.S. national budget is a moral document as Jim Wallis and Call to Renewal suggest, then so are our church budgets and our personal budgets. Personal budgets reflect private systems of stewardship, and that includes personal consumerism. Should we support businesses that don't pay a livable wage, that damage the environment, or don't treat employees justly? Arthur Simon wrote, "Unfortunately, the word stewardship has been monopolized in Protestant circles by those who have responsibility for raising money to support the church....But in trust, our stewardship involves the whole of life - anything and everything that has been entrusted to us."<sup>62</sup>

We all must start somewhere. It may start with intention, but it becomes really good news when the determination to do justice is in combination with love and humility in obedience to the Lord. Abraham Heschel offers helpful counsel in moving from intention to action: "The world needs more than the secret holiness of individual inwardness. It needs more than sacred sentiments and good intentions. God asks for the heart because He needs the lives. It is by lives that the world will be redeemed, by lives that beat in concordance with God, by deeds that outbeat the finite charity of the human heart. .... God asks for the heart, and we must spell our answer in terms of deeds."<sup>63</sup>

Be generous with those in poverty - not just in giving resources you have, but in the giving of yourself. Give them the benefit of the doubt you may have. As early as Deuteronomy 15:11, God's people are commanded, not just encouraged, to be openhanded with the poor. And that's possibly part of what Jesus was referring to when he noted, "The poor you will always have with you,..." (Matthew 26:11). Rather than isolated and random acts of kindness, there can be the ongoing building of capacity through the intentional kindnesses of nurture, patience, and love. To move people in

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<sup>62</sup> Simon, 40.

<sup>63</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, quoted in Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, eds., *A Guide for Ministers and Other Servants* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1983), 133.

poverty toward self-sustainability is a challenge. Robert Lupton wrote: “It is a long journey from soft-hearted, one-way charity to reciprocal, interdependent relationships.”<sup>64</sup> Repeating relief over and over again may accomplish good, but moving toward self-sustainability in even the smallest of steps is doing better.

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<sup>64</sup> Robert Lupton, *And You Call Yourself a Christian* (Chicago, IL: Christian Community Development Association, 2005), 59.

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### *Transformational Development*

Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing It Together & Doing It Right by John M. Perkins (editor)

Who's Reality Counts? by Robert Chambers

Building Communities from the Inside Out by John Kretzmann & John McKnight

Faith Works by Jim Wallis.

### *Poverty*

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America by Barbara Ehrenreich.

The Working Poor by David K. Shipler

A Framework for Understanding Poverty by Ruby K. Payne

Breaking the Cycle: Issues Affecting Poverty by Cathy Butler

### *General*

The Next Christendom by Philip Jenkins

Christian Manifesto by Ernest T. Campbell

The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture by Wendell Berry

Clues to Rural Community Survival by Vicki Luther & Milan Wall

### *Ethnic*

Robert G. Clark's Journey to the House by Will Campbell

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee by Dee Brown

Pagan Prophets and Heathen Believers by Adrian Jacobs

Black Elk Speaks as told through John G. Neihardt