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Re-examining Our Vision for the Poor

by Jeff Cook, D.Min.

More Christians are seeing the needs of the poor in their communities but may wonder how to treat poverty in effective and meaningful ways.

ANURAH ZHENKETEY / ISTOCKPHOTO

It has been exciting to see in recent years the increasingly widespread mobilization of evangelical Christians in the United States who believe that engaging challenging social issues such as injustice and poverty is a biblical and integral part of the call of the Church. After decades of focusing primarily on spiritual ministry while carefully avoiding social concerns like poverty, it is significant that the pendulum is swinging back toward a more holistic, biblically balanced approach to

ministry. If people are indeed spiritual and physical beings who exist in social communities in a fallen world, then as individuals and communities they have needs and challenges at multiple levels, all of which the Church is called to engage in the name of Jesus.

First, Do No Harm

But how exactly do we go about “helping the poor”? As we seek to answer this question, we should remember the often-overlooked precept

every first-year medical student learns as the primary rule of medicine: “First, do no harm.” Experienced professionals, both in medicine and ministry, know the devastating impact of unintended consequences, which result from actions made by sincere but uninformed people.

Consider a short-term missions team that traveled overseas to do construction in an impoverished country. While the volunteers were motivated with hearts to serve, more people might have been helped had the team donated their travel funds for the on-site ministry to hire poor, local workers desperately in need of daily wages. And with the best of intentions, Christians in the name of Jesus have sometimes reinforced irresponsible or self-destructive behavior by handing out money (or other things that can be quickly turned into money) to those panhandling on the street.

In our eagerness to help, we sometimes fail to accurately assess how our activities actually affect the contexts and people on the receiving end. Rather than sincerely yet blindly attacking symptoms of poverty, we must engage wisely and redemptively. Understanding the three levels of social need will help form our responses as we reach out to the poor.



Haitians receive water at an aid distribution point in Port-au-Prince after a catastrophic earthquake demolished much of the city.

Relief

First, hurting people in crisis need emergency relief. Whether it is a local house fire that destroys a family home, a hurricane that sweeps across New Orleans, or an earthquake that devastates Haiti, the willingness of Christians to

give immediately and sacrificially to those in desperate need has a positive and redemptive impact for Jesus. The Church excels in this kind of circumstance.

Such open-handed, sacrificial giving is helpful, though, only when it is relatively short-term. When continued too long, the very relief intended for good can foster long-term dependency and rob people of dignity as they become accustomed to being identified and treated as charity cases. It is possible to be sincere but sincerely wrong in one's actions. We must evaluate the differences between needs that result from crisis and those that are chronic. Chronic challenges demand a different kind of response.

Development

The Church must adjust its response to people who are trapped in cycles of poverty by empowering them to change their circumstances. Supporting people this way is by nature more difficult and more time-consuming than simply dispensing relief because we are helping people develop themselves and building relationships with them. Nevertheless, this is the kind of ministry that helps people escape the cycle of poverty; it prompts them to transition from perpetual dependence to self-sufficiency. This type of development might include, for example, providing education or skill training to enable people to conquer their own chronic problems and preserve their dignity.

The Church can be a powerful force to minister in the name of Jesus and help people conquer chronic poverty. Developmental assistance can take many forms including:

- parenting classes
- student mentorship programs
- after-school tutoring
- adult education
- computer skills training
- job interview coaching
- English as a Second Language training
- high school completion classes
- basic finance management training
- home ownership classes

- entrepreneurial development
- job transportation

Churches can begin the pursuit of development ministry by determining how God has positioned and equipped them by assessing their strengths and limitations, finding out what the real needs of the community are, building relationships with people in the community, discovering other ministry models, and evaluating what they do.

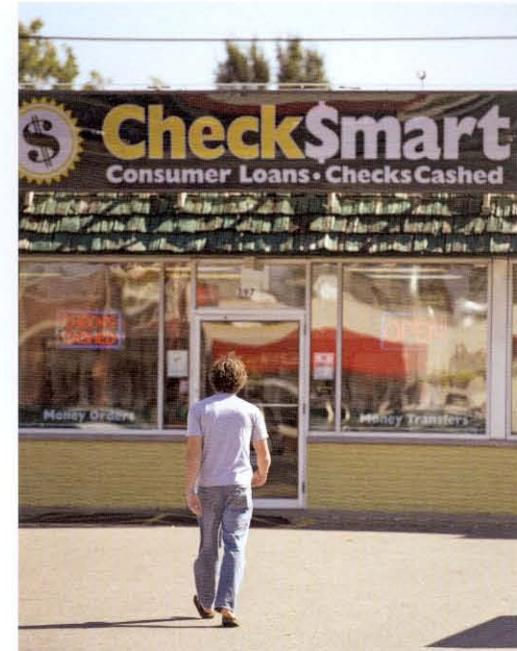
Structural Change

Sometimes environmental or systemic problems plague people and limit their access to opportunity. When this is the case, development alone is not sufficient to overcome injustices and obstacles that keep people trapped in the cycle of poverty.

Sin is not just personal; it is also structural. The sinful decisions of people with power get embedded in the structures of society, favoring the powerful at the expense of the powerless. In the Old Testament book of Esther, for example, Haman didn't just hate Mordecai personally; he made a law based on that hate, which affected all Jewish people — a whole strata of society.

Poor educational systems, predatory lending, injustice in zoning laws, and disinvestment in communities by financial institutions are all problems faced by urban poor, which collectively become monumental hurdles to overcome.

When confronting structural injustice at this level, it is often best for churches to partner with organizations that are experienced in engaging systemic issues in society, thereby blending their presence and influence with others to confront unjust power. On a larger scale, for example, churches may want to work with and support organizations like International Justice Mission. On the local level, they may want to work with those organizations that are at the forefront of movements to address injustices in their communities. The mobilization of churches last year in Ohio, for example, played a significant role in restricting unjust interest rates (up to and exceeding 500 percent) charged on loans at cash advance



Recently churches and voters in Ohio worked together to restrict the exorbitant interest rates that cash advance businesses were charging on loans.

businesses, which are typically located in poor communities.

Much of the contemporary Church genuinely wants to engage a hurting world. But it can become confusing and intimidating when we are challenged to make a difference in the face of such overwhelming needs. Just as a doctor first determines a patient's problem in order to prescribe a helpful course of treatment, the Church must also learn to diagnose social needs to determine the appropriate response. ■

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