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## For Our Sakes: An Incarnational and Systemic Approach to the Challenge of Poverty

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## **For Our Sakes: An Incarnational and Systemic Approach to the Challenge of Poverty**

Presented at the Adventist Theological Society, November 17, 2021

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### **A Challenging Dilemma**

It was a hot, dry day on the streets of Harare, Zimbabwe. The boy in front of me was a pasty mixture of sweat and dirt. “Please, Sir, I need food. I’m hungry.” His outstretched arm stuck out of a torn, bedraggled shirt that revealed his ribcage. I couldn’t say no, but as my hand reached into my pocket, they sprang from everywhere. Other boys, just like this one, running from sidewalks and begging stations, all screaming, “Please, Sir, me too. I need money too! I’m hungry! Please, Sir!” Suddenly, I was surrounded by a dozen hands, all eagerly reaching toward me. I quickly shoved my crumpled notes into the first boy’s hand, and backed off to see an ensuing scuffle, as the boys fought each other over my meager dollars. I later learned that many of these boys were actually working for older men, who would beat them if they didn’t come back with their allotted quota of money.

Poverty is both tragic and complicated. Our attempts to relieve it, like my hastily donated dollars, do little to solve the problem, and in some cases may make it worse. Yet the church, as a caring kingdom community, must do something to deal with the devastating effects of poverty.

According to some estimates, around 9.5% of the world lives in extreme poverty—more than double the population of the United States.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in twenty years, global extreme poverty has risen. War, climate change, and the global pandemic are pushing over 100 million additional people into poverty.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, the latest census data indicates that the poverty rate is 11.4% of the population, up one percentage point from the year before.<sup>3</sup> If the wealthiest country in the world has a

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1. “2021 Report on Sustainable Development Goal to End Poverty in All Its Forms Everywhere,” United Nations, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-01/>. The United Nations defines extreme poverty as living below \$1.90 a day.

2. Mahler, Daniel Gerszon et al, “Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Turning the corner on the pandemic in 2021?”

3. Shirder, Emily et al, “Income and Poverty in the United States: 2020,” United States Census Bureau, September 14, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>.

poverty rate above 10%, what hope do we have for countries like Burundi or Haiti, where all forms of poverty are rampant?

These questions are not incidental to the task of the church. “The work of gathering in the needy, the oppressed, the suffering, the destitute, is the very work which every church that believes the truth for this time should long since have been doing.”<sup>4</sup> Matthew 25 could be considered the “final exam” of the church, where pass or fail is based on how well we have looked after the “least of these” in the form of the naked, the hungry, the homeless, and the imprisoned.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Seventh-day Adventism has tended to grow in areas which are more impoverished, such as Africa, Latin America, and Southern Asia. We are a church that attracts and reaches the poor (although not consistently, for reasons which we will explore later). It makes sense for us to understand and assist the very groups we are bringing into the church.

More importantly, the church must reflect the mission of Jesus.

The corporate church in its various facets cannot ignore the issues of poverty and injustice and related matters. If Christ was in the healing business and made sure that the hungry were fed, so must the community that represents Him in this world. If Christ combined the preaching of the Word with acts of kindness and justice and was willing to be poor among those who were poor, so must the church that professes to follow Him as its Lord.<sup>6</sup>

We know that assisting the poor is part of our mission and our mandate, and yet, we don't seem to have a comprehensive plan for how we can effectively do this. As part of the research for this paper, I interviewed the vice-president for programming at the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) as well as the director of Adventist Community Services (ACS) in the North American Division. I was impressed at both the scope and the involvement of these two agencies. Yet, I also sensed that they tend to operate in their own stratospheres, parallel to the church's mission rather than an integral part of it. It made me question how seriously we, as the church, are taking our mandate to care for the poor.

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4. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, Volume 6, 276.

5. Matthew 25:31-46.

6. Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald®, 2009), 168.

For example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church operates over 1,000 hospitals, clinics and nursing homes, but officially operates only 15 orphanages.<sup>7</sup> We have a strong health component, but our poverty strategy is murkier. Another example is the recent move to create “centers of influence” in cities. Although this work is commendable, most of these centers are focused on restaurants, lifestyle education, and treatment rooms, rather than on alleviating poverty.<sup>8</sup> It is as if the church has delegated the work of poverty alleviation to ADRA, rather than making it an essential part of its mission. Indeed, many Adventist churches are not directly involved with caring for the poor, except for occasional acts of personal benevolence.

So how does the church tackle the problem of poverty? There are two aspects we must consider. The first is the spiritual-theological dimension of poverty. Unless we understand poverty from a biblical perspective, we will interact with it in ways that are humanistic and ultimately damaging. The second aspect is the social dimension. Understanding how poverty works in real-world communities is vital to confronting it effectively. The church needs both a theological and a sociological understanding of the causes and treatments for poverty.

### **A Theological Perspective on Poverty**

In this paper, I am proposing a *grace-based approach* to dealing with poverty. One verse particularly exemplifies this approach, and in it, we find three important themes critical for our theological hermeneutic. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”<sup>9</sup>

“For you know the *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Although the context of this verse is the need to generously care for the poor Christians in Jerusalem, Paul is speaking about much more than material

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7. Seventh-day Adventist World Church Statistics, 2020. <https://www.adventist.org/statistics/seventh-day-adventist-world-church-statistics-2020/>. It should be noted there are numerous other orphanages run by lay-led organizations that work in partnership with the Adventist Church. However, the lack of oversight and investment by the official church is concerning.

8. “Centers of Influence,” Mission 360, Interview with Gary Krause, <https://am.adventistmission.org/360-centers>.

9. 2 Corinthians 8:9, English Standard Version.

poverty here.<sup>10</sup> Paul frames the discussion about poverty in terms of the riches of Christ's grace. The problem is a lack of money in Jerusalem. The solution is to look at what Christ has done for us, and thereby inspire the generosity needed. This brings us to our first important theological understanding: poverty is about more than a material deficit. It is a broken condition that can only be solved by the grace of Christ.

“Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.” Paul then demonstrates how grace works in terms of a dramatic contrast. There is the *πλούσιος* (abundant wealth) of Christ which he gave up to enter into the *πτωχέω* (beggarly nature) of his human existence. Christ, who had all the fabulous riches of his pre-existence, lays that aside and utterly abases himself into becoming a beggar, stripped of all his praise, glory and wealth. This is not just a reference to the incarnation, but to the complete state of *humiliation* that ultimately led to the cross.<sup>11</sup> Here is a second point that will help us to understand how to relate to poverty. Christ's grace causes him to embrace poverty. He incarnates himself into the reality of poverty with an attitude of humility and powerlessness. He identifies with the broken poor. He becomes one with them.

“So that you by his poverty might become rich.” Finally, the passage ends with transformation. Our goal must be the transformation of those who are poor, into those who are rich. But we have to remember that the poor are *us!* The Corinthians, who are being asked to give generously, are transformed by the grace offered to them. And when they give, that same grace will transform others. The aorist is used to denote the expected outcome—“you *may actually* become rich!”<sup>12</sup> We cannot be satisfied with

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10. David Garland notes in his commentary on this verse, “To be consistent, an economic interpretation would imply that through Christ's material poverty others were made materially rich. This hardly applies for the Macedonians. The riches therefore can only be spiritual riches which make one's material possessions irrelevant.” *2 Corinthians: New American Commentary* (B&H Books, 1999), digital version.

11. 2 Corinthians 8:9, *Lenski Commentary on the New Testament*.

12. As Lenski notes, “The aorist should be rendered ‘may become’ (‘might’ in our versions is too potential). This ingressive aorist = may actually become; it is effective as well as ingressive, an aorist for that reason.” *Ibid.*

simply putting a Band-Aid on poverty. The goal is to help those who are poor—and that includes us—to experience the fulness of the abundant life that Christ offers.

I will unpack each of these three elements in terms of how they practically impact on poverty. We will first define poverty as a condition in need of grace. Next, we will explore how a humble and incarnational approach to poverty is more effective than methods we have traditionally used. Finally, we will examine approaches that lead to transformation rather than to dependence.

### **Defining Poverty**

What is poverty? Unless we know what it is, how can we solve it? Most people see poverty as a *deficit*. It is not having something, such as food, shelter, or clothing. If poverty is seen from this materialistic perspective, then the answer to poverty must be to supply the deficit. The result of this thinking is the idea that we can fix poverty with a handout, a house, or a job.

However, seeing poverty as a deficit is problematic in two ways. Firstly, it tends to create cycles of dependence rather than empowerment. If money is available from somewhere and it fixes my problems, then I will go back to the source of that money when I next run into a deficit problem. It teaches the economically poor to embrace the donation rather than the harder work of finding an enduring solution.

The second problem with seeing poverty as a material deficit is that it negatively impacts on the identities of both the recipient and the giver. Jayakumar Christian describes the economically wealthy as often having “god-complexes.” They often have an unconscious sense of superiority about the wealth they have achieved, and believe that they are best suited to decide on the path forward for low-income people, whom they regard as inferior.<sup>13</sup> The recipients tend to internalize this view of themselves, further marring their identity. Corbett and Fikkert in their book, *When Helping Hurts*, state that “one of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that their design and implementation exacerbates

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13. Jayakumar Christian, *Powerlessness of the Poor: Toward an Alternative Kingdom of God Based Paradigm of Response* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary Ph.D. thesis, 1994).

the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame.”<sup>14</sup>

By way of illustration, Corbett and Fikkert describe a community church that delivered carols and Christmas presents to low-income apartments. The apartment children smiled, the mothers were grateful, and the members felt like they had made a difference. However, over time the church members became frustrated. Where were the men? Why did they never come to the door? Why didn't they find jobs? Why were the families trapped in poverty year after year? The answer was surprising. When these unemployed men saw the well-meaning members lining up with their gifts, they felt embarrassed and hid in the back rooms in shame because they couldn't provide for their families. Rather than empowering these men, such giving emasculated them, highlighting their feelings of inadequacy and making them even less likely to get a job.<sup>15</sup>

So, how should we view poverty, if it is not simply a deficit? According to the passage we just examined, Paul sees poverty as a state of being apart from Christ. Poverty is a fundamental brokenness. This brokenness is why *both the materially poor and the materially rich are alike spiritually poor*. We are all in need of the grace of Christ, for “until we embrace our mutual brokenness, our work with low-income people is likely to do far more harm than good.”<sup>16</sup>

Bryant Myers, a professor of development at Fuller who worked for thirty years with World Vision International, gives an excellent definition of poverty: “Poverty is about relationships that don't work, that isolate, that abandon or devalue.”<sup>17</sup> Myers points to the original *Shalom* that God intended for us and concludes that the Fall brought about broken relationships in four different ways. Our relationship with God was broken, resulting in self-centeredness rather than living for God. Our relationship with self was broken, resulting in a marred identity. Our relationship with others was broken, resulting in abusive

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14. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 62.

15. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

16. *Ibid.*, 61.

17. Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 27.

forms of power. And our relationship with the environment was broken, causing us to see ourselves as owners rather than as stewards.<sup>18</sup>

When we realize that all of us suffer from broken relationships, it changes how we relate to poverty. We will ask, “How can this activity that I am doing help the poor to build their relationship with God, restore their identity, connect with others in their community, and become effective stewards of their environment?” This means seeing the poor as people, rather than as just a label. They are people, like us, in need of grace.

Two examples come to mind. One is when I was a theology student in South Africa. We were operating a soup kitchen in a squatter camp about twenty minutes from the college. We regularly got donations from the church to hand out to the impoverished community. One time we received a large stash of clothes. One of the students suggested we sell the clothes. We were indignant. That wouldn't be right! The clothes had been given to us for free. “No,” the student insisted, “when we sell the clothes and they pay for them, we restore their dignity. They don't feel like it's a handout. They feel like they have something to contribute.” The idea stuck, and we labeled each piece of clothing with a small price. On a sunny afternoon we opened up our makeshift bazaar. At first, we were nothing but a curiosity, then one of the women stepped up with a child of about ten years of age, looked at the clothes, saw the prices and started muttering. We thought we had made a mistake, until we finally heard what she was saying. “These foolish boys, they're selling the clothes for nothing. Quick, go tell your auntie to come and get a bargain before everybody finds out!” The whole community did “find out,” and we “sold” almost all our clothes. The people kept their dignity, and only took what they needed. It was a valuable lesson in empowering people rather than simply giving them a handout.

A second example comes from a set of low-income apartments in Chattanooga. Students from Southern Adventist University (Southern) who visited there noticed that the elevator stank of urine, and there was graffiti everywhere. They got together a group and scrubbed, washed and painted until things

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18. Ibid. Chapters 2 and 4 unpack these concepts in greater detail.



looked ten times better. The residents smiled and appeared grateful, but in a few weeks the urine and graffiti were back. So the students decided to take a different approach. They started going from apartment to apartment making friends. They discovered apathy, because the residents felt that no one cared about their lives. The students decided to simply care. One day, the students walked in to discover a group of residents cleaning one of the elevators. “We didn’t want you to have to come to our rooms in that smelly elevator!” one of the residents grinned. The students began cleaning alongside the residents, and the elevators largely stayed clean after that. When poverty is seen as broken relationships, then the solution to poverty becomes relationship-building.

Indeed, when we operate from a grace perspective, we acknowledge that we also are poor. “Our perspective should be less about how we are going to fix the materially poor and more about how we can walk together, asking God to fix both of us.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Identifying with the Poor**

What is remarkable about how the gospel intersects with poverty is the manner in which Jesus came to solve it. “He became poor.” He humbled himself into this state of existence. To identify with the poor is to enter into their existence, to see things from their perspective, and to bring grace from the vantage point of an insider, rather than an outsider. While the poverty of Jesus is not simply material, it does have a material aspect to it. Jesus could have chosen a palace, but instead, he chose a manger.

As part of a young family forced to flee for their lives in the middle of the night from the soldiers of a murderous king, Jesus was a refugee, escaping across a border under cover of darkness, then seeking to build a new life in a foreign country. As a member of the rural Galilean minority in the Jewish nation dominated by the armies of Rome, Jesus knew what it was like to live on the margins of society, under constant threat of violence. As a peasant worker and then poor itinerant preacher, Jesus lived with the vulnerabilities of poverty and even homelessness. As a teacher who did not fit with the dominant religious culture, he knew what it was to be persecuted. As a victim of the violent and powerful, Jesus experienced the worst of human injustice, torture, and brutality; he was left a horrifically disfigured body barely recognizable to his human family. His disciples saw what was being done to Him and fled, hiding out in fear of this gross injustice and horrific violence.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Corbett and Fikkert, 75.

20. Nathan Brown, *For the Least of These* (Nampa: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2019), 61.

Such identification is so radical that it challenges how we relate to poverty. Does this mean that we become homeless (because Jesus was), give up all our goods (there are certainly examples of that), and court injustice in order to serve Jesus? I know one lady who refused to take hot showers because she had read Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and felt guilty for having the simple pleasure of hot water when others didn't have roofs over their heads.<sup>21</sup> What does it mean to "become poor"? Does it mean to give up wealth and literally descend into physical poverty?

As Corbett and Fikkert explain, "There is no place in the Bible that indicates that poverty is a desirable state or that material things are evil. In fact, wealth is viewed as a gift from God. The point is simply that, for His own glory, God has chosen to reveal His kingdom in the place where the world, in all of its pride, would least expect it, among the foolish, the weak, the lowly, and the despised."<sup>22</sup> The goal is not poverty, but seeking to be Christlike and to give God glory. Christ became poor because he knew that this was the best way to bring glory to God and to reach those who were the most open to the gospel—not because poverty itself is the ideal.

However, I think Jesus' gracious descent into humiliation points to something radical. To identify with the poor is to give up our power. It is to give up on that sense of superiority that says we know best, and that seeks control. Carnal approach to power is rooted in a concept of entitlement and control. As Christopher Wright says, "The effect of the fall was that the desire for growth became excessive for some at the expense of others, and the means of growth became filled with greed, exploitation and injustice"<sup>23</sup> (Wright 1983, 81).

When we become poor, we give up on this power grab and, like Jesus, decide to live without power, prestige and wealth as the dominating drivers of our existence. A grace-based approach empties

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21. Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978, 2015).

22. Corbett and Fikkert, 42.

23. Wright, Christopher J. H. *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 81.

itself of all self-importance and glory, and humbly enters into the world of the other. After all, poverty is, in some sense, redeemed by Christ's identification with it. Ellen White gives this perspective.

By consecrating Himself to a life of poverty He redeemed poverty from its humiliation. He took His position with the poor that He might lift from poverty the stigma that the world had attached to it. He knew the danger of the love of riches. He knew that this love is ruinous to many souls. It places those who are rich where they indulge every wish for grandeur. It teaches them to look down on those who are suffering the pressure of poverty. It develops the weakness of human minds and shows that notwithstanding the abundance of wealth, the rich are not rich toward God.<sup>24</sup>

This is why Jesus' identification with the poor in Matthew 25 is so remarkable. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, *you did it to me*. For *I* was hungry and you gave *me* food, *I* was thirsty and you gave *me* drink, *I* was a stranger and you welcomed *me*, *I* was naked and you clothed *me*, *I* was sick and you visited *me*, *I* was in prison and you came to *me*."<sup>25</sup> Jesus is the poor, the naked, the homeless, the sick, and the imprisoned. The musician Bono puts it in contemporary terms, "God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunities and lives, and God is with us if we are with them."<sup>26</sup>

How does this identification with the poor impact our attempts to alleviate poverty? We might make two points here. Firstly, we recognize that the poor are rich because Jesus is among them. Anyone who has worked with the materially poor knows that Jesus was there long before we arrived. "A significant part of working in poor communities involves discovering and appreciating what God has been doing there for a long time! This should give us a sense of humility and awe as we enter poor communities, for part of what we see there reflects the very hand of God."<sup>27</sup>

I remember traveling with a pastor in Africa. His car appeared to be a complete junker, but he managed to get it started, and we were on our way. Predictably, on the way to our destination, the car

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24. Ellen White, Manuscript 22, 1898.

25. Matthew 25:40, 35-36.

26. Bono, *On the Move: A Speech* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 18.

27. Corbett and Fikkert, 57.

made strange noises and ground to a halt. I immediately jumped out of the car, opened the hood and began tinkering with the engine. I needed his help and was frustrated that he wasn't there, until I came around the side of the car to find the pastor kneeling next to the car and praying for God to bring it back to life. His lack of experience and poverty made him so much more dependent on God than I, who had grown up in a home where we owned multiple vehicles.

There is a rich and deep faith in many poor communities, made all the richer by the constant struggle for daily existence. This is not to celebrate poverty, as we have already mentioned, for poverty can be devastating in so many ways. It is simply to point out how grace can thrive, even in very difficult circumstances. We must value the poor because Jesus is among them and identifies himself with them.

In addition to seeing Jesus in the poor, we need to enter into the world of the poor to truly understand their circumstances. This means truly listening to communities rather than just offering them handouts. They have much wisdom to teach us. After all, the people in those communities have learned to survive. They know what works and doesn't work, and it makes more sense to hear their solutions than to give our own.

Robert Chambers, a development expert from the University of Sussex, led a team of researchers to listen to over sixty thousand of the world's poorest people in a project called *Voices of the Poor*. The results were surprising. While the poor desired basic necessities like beds, food, shelter, and safety, they were able to be content with very little. What mattered to them was "well-being." When asked to describe what "well-being" meant, they said they wanted to be able to live in harmony with their family and friends, and to help others in need. They also said how they struggled with a lack of respect and dignity. Many expressed how important spiritual life and religious observances were to them.<sup>28</sup> These relational, psychological, and spiritual factors were surprising to some of the researchers (although not to Chambers). They had expected that economic development was the surest way out of poverty. But the

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28. Narayan-Parker, Deepa, Robert Chambers, Meera Shaw, and Patti Petesch. 2000. *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*. New York: Oxford University Press for the World Bank, 26-27, 32.

poor themselves were looking for something more than what the Western aid agencies were offering them.

When we listen to the poor, we discover that they are neither ignorant nor stupid. In fact, we quickly learn that they have a remarkable survival intelligence that the materially non-poor do not possess. Even when a poor person appears to act in ignorant or stupid ways, this may be “part of the strategy of lying low, a stance necessitated in the face of officials who demand obsequious behavior.”<sup>29</sup> It is often more likely the non-poor who are lazy and stupid, for if the poor are lazy and stupid, they live so close to the margins that they simply do not survive.<sup>30</sup>

Valuing the poor and listening to them is part of how ADRA approaches development projects. The Vice President for Programming at ADRA, Imad Madanat, describes this approach.

It is a partnership with the community, rather than a charity model. We do a needs assessment first to look at the unique context of that community. We try to ascertain what is the underlying cause of poverty. For instance, do they own the land, or was it inherited? What does land ownership even mean within that community? We dialogue with heads of households and ask them questions. ‘How do they cope? What do they see as threats?’ Then we provide solutions based on their contexts. The community leaders have to be part of the solution and they need to shape the understanding of where the project is going.<sup>31</sup>

Doing a needs assessment is often strangely missing at the local church level, where members are most directly connected with their communities. This may be because we assume we know already what the community needs. I founded a program at Southern called SALT (Soul-winning and Leadership Training). Part of our outreach into the community each year involves students going door-to-door to conduct a community assessment survey. We ask what the community needs instead of assuming we know what it wants. However, recently my view of even this has been challenged.

Corbet and Fikkert suggest that even community assessments when based on *needs* can be discouraging and devaluing for poor communities. Asking, “What is wrong? How can I fix you?” feeds into the superior-inferior cycle and creates a donation-dependence mindset. Instead, they suggest an

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29. Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (London: Longman Group, 1983), 106.

30. Ibid.

31. Zoom Interview on October 21, 2021.

“asset-based community development” approach (ABCD).<sup>32</sup> When we ask, “What is working well in this community? What assets do you have for helping others?” we show respect for the strengths and internal wisdom of the community and teach them to use their own resources.

As a result of this insight, our community assessment surveys now include the questions, “What do you appreciate about this neighborhood?” and “What skills do you have that could be helpful to others in need?” If we take seriously the poor and choose an incarnational approach, then we will follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who not only tries to help us, but truly values us. “He became poor” translates into, let us step into the shoes of the poor, listen to them, and value them.

### **Holistic Transformational Development**

This brings us to our final concept. For poverty alleviation to really work and be effective, it should aim at more than alleviation. It should provide transformation. When Christ gives us grace, it is not merely to alleviate our poverty, but to make us rich! His goal is to supply our deepest lacks, to take us out of our spiritual poverty, and make us rich with every spiritual blessing.

A grace-based approach to poverty will therefore aim at the transformation of both the individual and the community. For Bryant Myers, the term *shalom* describes this goal very well. Drawing on the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, he sees *shalom* as “just relationships.” He elaborates, “Justice, harmony, and enjoyment of God, self, others, and nature; this is the shalom that Jesus brings, the peace that passes all understanding. Shalom is the biblical ideal for human well-being or flourishing.”<sup>33</sup>

In a similar vein, Madanat of ADRA describes their philosophy, “We are moving from a charity to a prosperity perspective.”<sup>34</sup> It’s not about hand-outs, it’s about well-being. Likewise, the Director of Adventist Community Services for the North American Division, Derrick Lea, points to the importance of

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32. Corbet and Fikkert, 119-120.

33. Myers, 97. See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 69-72.

34. Madanat Interview. It should be noted that in this interview, not many aspects of spiritual development were discussed. ADRA’s funding model makes it harder to bring the spiritual aspects in.

holistic ministry.<sup>35</sup> “We are not simply providing material goods – we are providing for all aspects of their lives.”<sup>36</sup>

The reason for a holistic approach is that poverty is systemic. As Myers points out, “We cannot separate people from the social systems in which they live.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, he argues, “The poor are poor largely because they live in networks of relationships that do not work for their well-being.”<sup>38</sup>

Since a whole system of reasons is responsible for a person’s conditions, it will take a whole-system response to enable them to climb out of the ditch. Why is a man homeless? The answer is likely complex. He may have come from a broken home with bad influences. He may have lacked an education. He may have then fallen into hard times through no fault of his own. Along the way, he may have made bad choices. As a result, he might lack an education, family resources, and medical resources. Money may not fix these problems, and in the case of addiction, it will likely make things worse.

So, if we would be like Jesus, we must provide grace to the whole person. After all, Jesus’ mission was holistic. He preached, healed, and cast out demons. But it is not just the way of Jesus. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God created systems to help the vulnerable. He provided a way for the poor to glean from the fields of the rich. He provided a way for strangers to receive hospitality. He told them about true religion. Is it not “to loose the bonds of wickedness... to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house?”<sup>39</sup>

This holistic, system-based approach to dealing with poverty was a significant part of the early Christian Church. While we find hints of it in Acts 2 and throughout the New Testament, we see it more fully developed in the next few centuries. Writing to a pagan priest in the fourth century, Emperor Julius complained, “The impious Galileans [speaking of Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.” Commenting on this practice, British historian

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35. This is also part of the ACS mission statement, “ACS serves the whole person, a concept known as holistic ministry whose mission is to ‘serve communities in Christ’s name.’”

36. Zoom Interview conducted on November 12, 2021.

37. Myers, 63.

38. *Ibid.*, 15.

39. Isaiah 58:6-7, New King James Version.

Paul Johnson notes that Christians had created “a miniature welfare state in an empire which for the most part lacked social services.”<sup>40</sup> The idea of a miniature welfare state helping the poor is far more extensive than we have often thought of.

However, all this may seem overwhelming and somewhat idealistic for a local church that is trying to simply help the poor in their communities. They don’t have the infrastructure and resources to impact the entire system. Corbett and Fikkert provide a helpful framework that can guide our approach to this. They talk about the difference between relief, rehabilitation, and development. Relief is when immediate assistance is needed due to a crisis. Rehabilitation is getting the person back on their feet and helping them to return to the state they were in before the crisis. Development is helping the person to move beyond where they are into a new state of flourishing, that brings them into a right relationship with God, self, others, and the environment.<sup>41</sup>

Obviously, when a disaster strikes, we should engage in relief. But Fikkert notes that relief should generally be “seldom, immediate, and temporary.”<sup>42</sup> Rehabilitation then begins once the immediate crisis has been dealt with. Development is a longer-lasting goal and that is only achieved with the direct effort and guidance of the people involved. Unfortunately, it is much easier to settle for doing relief, when development is the task really called for. Our attempts to give relief may even cause harm. Ellen White warns us, ““In trying to help the needy we should be careful to give them the right kind of help.”<sup>43</sup>

Director of ACS, Derrick Lea, describes visiting a church with a food bank. The lines for the free distribution of food stretched around the block. Over three hundred people are fed every week. Lea asked how long they had been doing this. The answer was five years. He appreciated the work done but wondered about its impact. For five years they had fed the community, but had they empowered them?<sup>44</sup>

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40. As quoted in Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 75.

41. Corbett and Fikkert, 100.

42. Ibid.

43. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Volume 6, 227.

44. Interview with Lea.



In many ways, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is remarkable. For instance, during the pandemic, we operated over 1,500 food banks. During a disaster, we are part of a cooperate arrangement called Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD). Our specific role is warehousing. According to Lea, other organizations are envious of our structure. “Our structure is God-inspired!” People look to the Adventist Church because we have “boots on the ground” in almost every location and an infrastructure that can quickly get to work.<sup>45</sup> The fact is, from an organizational point of view, we are good at relief. But can we do better at rehabilitation and development?

ADRA International does provide a model for this. They do not only disaster relief, but also development. Imad Madanat explains the process they work through. “We look at all the different aspects of a society. How do we integrate all that we do so that it helps the community? We focus not just on the individual, but the whole household. When we deal with education, we look at not only literacy but vocation. When we deal with food we ask, can you both grow it and sell it? Is it nutritional?”<sup>46</sup> I appreciated this perspective, but then I wondered if it was enough. It wasn’t clear how this was different from other humanistic organizations that do the same work. It seems we need not only relief, rehabilitation and development, but also something more – grace.

### **A Grace-Based Approach**

I have argued in this paper for a grace-based approach. Christ’s rich grace transforms poor sinners. It teaches us that we are valuable despite our brokenness. It is sacrificial love that chooses a cross over a crown. It is willing to become poor so that others might be rich. It streams down into the caverns of our hearts and awakens our dull senses to our true potential as sons and daughters of God. It turns paupers into princes. It is this “amazing grace” that saved a wretch like me. And because I am saved, I in turn, will generously, sacrificially enter into the poverty of others. I will identify with them, listen to them, and then offer them the healing ministry of Christ, so that his grace might transform them also. He did all of this for our sakes. Now, let us do the same for others, for their sakes, and for His.

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45. Ibid.

46. Interview with Madanat.