

Supplement for the 2012-2013 Poverty Study

Ministry with the Poor: Creating the Beloved Community

by Mary Beth Coudal

The chief officer of United Methodist Women, Harriett Olson, joins her church's Saturday neighborhood meal as often as she can. She has been "impressed by the amount of community that develops even over a short period of time," she said. She has been enriched by conversations with her neighbors, many of whom come to the church for their one meal of "real food, good food" on that day. In one such conversation, Olson learned from a former transit worker about the air-conditioning systems in the New York City subways, a solution to the sweltering summer heat. At these suppers, conversing with neighbors and seeing strangers as potential friends, Olson has found community, solutions to entrenched problems, and a place to share her own story, including her vulnerabilities.

"In times of economic hardship, people have a renewed sense of their vulnerabilities," said Olson. "We can expose our vulnerabilities as fragile humans as well as realize systems that don't take into account our human vulnerabilities."

She explained, "Our charitable impulse drives us to act. The learning is to ask more questions, to try to help people be their own solutions, rather than to sail in and fix things or fix people."

It seems, though, we have much to fix. The rate of Americans living in poverty, about 15 percent, has changed little in the past few years. Except for the top 1 percent, the income of the overall population has stayed flat or decreased.

As in most economic downturns, women and children have suffered the most in this recent recession. In the United States, 23 percent of children, who are among the most fragile members of society, live in poverty, according to UNICEF.

Asking the Big Questions

In this year's mission study on poverty, edited by Jack A. Keller Jr., members of United Methodist Women ask questions and plan actions to alleviate poverty, all from a faith perspective. As United Methodists embark on a campaign to be in ministry with the poor, what exactly does that



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mean? What would Jesus do? What should I do? What should we do together?

One avenue may be to simply talk with and create a caring community with poor people in our cities and neighborhoods. According to Pew Research, the racial and ethnic groups most likely to live in poverty in the United States are Hispanics and Latinos. About 26 percent of Hispanic and Latino families live in poverty in the United States, but poverty, of course, is not exclusive to these groups.

As United Methodist Women seeks to build communities through friendships, spiritual support, and social justice advocacy, there are times when, as individuals and as groups, we favor autonomy over community building. In our church communities, study groups, and United Methodist Women circles, a guiding principle is to seek to create and embody a “beloved community.” As Pamela D. Couture, author of Chapter 4, “Poverties in the United States,” discusses, this can be tricky:

When a group of Methodists gather to study “poverty” or “poverties,” the tendency is to refer to the poor as “them,” as if the church belongs to “us,” the dominant middle and upper-middle class. How will you, in your study group, create language that recognizes that poor people may be among you at the same time respecting the group’s privacy about their personal circumstances, regardless of income levels? (p. 43)

Ministry with “is all about relationship, being with people, getting rid of ‘us/them,’ not judging,” said Mary Ellen Kris, who works with United Methodist agencies to focus on systemic issues of poverty. One urgent issue she sees is the lack of affordable housing in cities. “Love others as well as you love yourself,” Jesus said. Compassion is the rule.

Becoming More Compassionate

As United Methodists, building a beloved community means following the path of people we may know in our lives as well as that of celebrated peacemakers, such as Martin Luther King Jr., who often spoke of beloved community.

“Our Christian faith invites each of us to become agents of God’s compassion and healing in a wounded world,” said Keller. “The capacity for compassion, *feeling with* the other person, makes all the difference.”

So as we come together to study the impact of poverty, we feel with and minister with. As members of United Methodist Women, we embrace a theological grounding that is set by the example of Jesus Christ, who walked with and loved all, especially those considered outcasts by society.

In dozens of passages, the Bible gives examples of Jesus’ ministry with people who are poor:

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. (Matthew 25:35-36)

There are, of course, times when Jesus uses the term *poor*, as in *poor in spirit*, a metaphor for those who may lack not material things but openness to God’s abundant grace.

United Methodist Women's Mission Institutions Address Poverty

Many of the nearly one hundred mission institutions connected to United Methodist Women provide clothing, after-school programs, and educational resources for families and children. Many also seek to mobilize the community to address the challenges of poverty, leveling the playing field for rich and poor, bringing people who are poor, or poor in spirit, into the beloved community. One such center is Tacoma Community House in Tacoma, Washington.

Liz Dunbar, executive director of Tacoma House, emphasized that people need many types of resources, including the support of the community, to lift themselves out of poverty.

At Tacoma House “we provide education and employment services, and we see those as key to give people literacy, ESL, or basic reading and math skills,” said Dunbar.

Over the past several years, Dunbar has seen the amount of funding from the government decrease while the needs of people and the poverty rates overall have increased. “People of color and immigrants are disproportionately affected,” said Dunbar. In particular, she said, Latinos have little protection, as they often work “for low wages and are taken advantage of.” And Latinos, she noted, “may have a larger family size to support on a lower wage.”

Dunbar said that Tacoma House, which serves about three thousand people annually, can't keep up with the need. The center is forced to turn away people who want and need a basic education or training for a job. Often, United Methodist Women fills the gap.

In 2012 at Christmastime, the leaders at Tacoma House identified 120 families in need of gifts. But the corporate sponsors could only provide for one hundred families. Dunbar sent word through the United Methodist churches and United Methodist Women circles, and within three days, United Methodist Women and local church members stepped up, providing more than \$3,000 in gifts, such as gift cards and bicycles.

Dunbar was grateful for the gifts from United Methodist Women. She reminds us to answer pleas for charity as well as to understand and work against systems of injustice. She offered a recent example of a Tacoma ballot initiative to retain the city's public transit. Dunbar explained that many residents thought, “I don't use the city bus, so why should I pay for it?” But, she said, “Low-income people rely on buses to get to the doctor or to get to school. It was voted down. Most voters don't use the bus system.” Members of United Methodist Women can change the system to provide equal access to resources. By becoming better-informed voters, they can make an impact even on a public transport system, ensuring equality for each of God's children.

Looking Globally and Locally

Members of United Methodist Women must be with their international sisters as equals. As women who do good works, we need to reflect on our impulse to swoop in with the answers, reported Liz Calvin, an international advocate and former staff member of the World Day of Prayer.

Calvin learned this in 1990 at a French-speaking Methodist women's conference in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. “We were discussing the realities of Zaire's women and children and the root causes of their difficult situation,” she said. “I will never forget the impassioned statement made by one of the Congolese women to those of us participating from the USA: ‘You women need to do the hard work that is needed to make policy changes with your own government, policies that

impact us all. Then life will be better for all of us.” This advocate reminded the women of how public policy impacts everyone, globally and locally.

Calvin continued, “Reflecting upon poverty and the ways in which we knowingly or unknowingly contribute to the impoverishment of others, it is our responsibility both individually and corporately to open our eyes; take the blinders off; and expose the blind spots in order to become aware of the truths about global poverty, including the state of poverty right here at home in the United States. Then we will understand there is really no need to take a mission trip out of our own community. We can begin to dispel the myths that stymie us, and we can then become activated, prayerfully and politically, in order to bring about needed changes in our government’s policies: domestic, foreign, economic, and human rights.”

Ending Stereotypes about Poverty

This advice from Calvin to dispel myths around poverty is a challenge. One myth about poor people is that they are lazy. In the December 2012 issue of **response** magazine, editor Yvette Moore debunks this myth. She writes:

Nobody, but nobody, works harder than poor folk. Poor people work on and off the books for long hours often in multiple low-wage jobs without health insurance or even sick days off, harvesting crops; cleaning bedpans; caring for children, the ill, the elderly; building, moving and tearing down things. They work very hard at jobs critical to any society and get the least to show for it, including respect. Is there any wonder the biblical prophets single out the poor, along with widows, orphans and immigrants, for special Divine care?

Other stereotypes about people living in poverty may come from a lack of knowledge about government programs or the reality that addiction is an illness.

Through their study of poverty, leaders of United Methodist Women are challenged to talk about and let go of myths and judgments about their neighbors. United Methodist Women is challenged to become the beloved community, a catalyst of change, sitting at the table and making room for all. Being in ministry with means being in relationship with.

“We learn experientially,” said Kris. “We touch people’s hearts in relationships. We open our minds. We open our hearts. We get rid of biases and assumptions by engaging in a relationship with someone we may have stereotyped.”

As we engage in solidarity and ministry with, we may reflect on the ministry of Lorenza Andrade Smith, who is in ministry with the poor by choosing to live with people who are homeless. She summed up her ministry: “Relationships are a gift from God!” Members of United Methodist Women and others are invited to study through word and deed what it means to be in ministry with and live with poverty in 2013. Olson learned this simple truth at her church’s Saturday community meal: we create a beloved community as we break bread together. We also share our vulnerabilities, and we ask the big questions.

Questions for Reflection

- What does it mean to be called to be in relationship *with*?
- What is the difference between charity and justice?
- How can we help ourselves and our neighbors find solutions rather than have solutions thrust on us and on them? What is the difference?
- Who are the Samaritans of today? Who are the people most marginalized?
- What would Jesus do about entrenched poverty? What would Jesus do with those who live in poverty? With people who are homeless?
- What does it mean to be poor in spirit?
- What does it mean to see a relationship as a gift from God?
- What are the stigmas associated with people who are poor?
- When was a time you were perceived as poor?
- How do our international sisters teach us to be better stewards at home?
- How can we be catalysts for positive change?
- How have you created or will you create a beloved community?