

Evangelism and the Poor

by Kwasi Kena

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? – James 2:16, NRSV

Have You Seen Poverty?

In the 1990s, my wife and I served as missionaries to Ghana, West Africa. The country, we were told, was the tenth poorest one on the African continent. We had no concept of what that comment meant until daily we began to rub shoulders with misery. Those able to find work made on average a dollar a day. The average family had six children. Each day, young and old struggled to subsist. Jesus' words, "the poor shall be with you always," cut through the din of honking cars and blaring radios. It didn't make sense to me that poverty should exist in a country once called the Gold Coast because of its rich gold deposits. Similarly, it doesn't make sense to me that widespread poverty exists in America, touted as "the most powerful country in the world."

Do We See Poverty?

We live in a rich country, yet the poor populate urban centers and are increasingly found in suburban communities. Do we see them? Do we avoid them?

A recent article in [The Economist](#) notes "The number of poor people living in the suburbs grew 53% between 2000 and 2010 as decades of flight reversed and America's cities once again became desirable places to work..." Poverty's encroachment into the suburbs follows decades of reversed suburban flight. America's cities now attract back better-off suburbanites who view center cities as desirable places to work. This reversed flight is damaging marginal suburban economies.

Poverty affects the next generation. According to [UNICEF](#), "the child-poverty rate is higher than that in Japan, Canada or any European country other than Romania." A child born in poverty is much less likely to achieve educational benchmarks. Poor academic achievement means decreased job opportunities and increased chances of incarceration.

Poverty—How Can the Church Respond?

First, the church cannot ignore the poor. In a recent interview, a pastor noted "We typically are not used to dealing with them [the poor] or inviting them into our mostly suburban churches. We must get over being uncomfortable or looking down on those who have less." He went on to ask the question, "Who is responsible for the poor?" Then he answered his question, "We believe Jesus would have some things to say on the subject."

Indeed both the Hebrew Scripture and Jesus' words recorded in the gospels have a few comments about what the church should do to help the poor.

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and will be repaid in full (Proverbs 19:17, NRSV).

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' (Matthew 25: 34-37, NRSV).

Evangelism Includes Ministry with the Poor

Evangelism involves more than convincing people to utter the sinner's prayer. Evangelism is sharing the good news of Christ—which includes helping the poor. If the community's poor have never experienced assistance from your congregation, they may have had zero contact with faith in action.

Here is a short list of starting points to jump start ministry with the poor in your community.

Preach — Remind your congregation of God's divine abundance. Redirect thoughts of scarcity to extravagant generosity.

Pray — Invite a small group to read Scripture pertaining to the poor. Afterward, ask: "What do these Scriptures call me to do or be?" Then pray by first listening for God's direction. Act on what God says.

Provide — Aiding the poor involves more than doling out money and material goods. Churches can also address systemic problems that contribute to cyclical poverty in multiple ways:

1. Educate your congregation about the hidden rules of poverty and the middle class.
2. Invest in children from prenatal care and early-childhood assistance through their trek through primary and secondary education.
3. Treat the poor humanely.
4. Reach men from 18-45.
5. Coach people on planning, budgeting, and scheduling.

In his book, *[Touch](#)*, Rudy Rasmus, the pastor of St. Johns Downtown UMC, offers five Cs of doing ministry with the poor:

Five Cs

1. Common Sense — Be reasonable about your first encounters with poor (protect them and your church members).
2. Commitment — Choose people with passion to invest their time and energy beyond the short term.
3. Collaboration — Partner with community resources, agencies, and authorities.
(Conduct asset mapping. Talk with the poor. Ask them: "What do you need most? What are you hoping for"? Listen to peoples' dreams.)
4. Consistency — Connect with people and agencies who will serve long term.
5. Contributions — Request cash or in-kind donations. Everyone has something to contribute.

In Jesus' inaugural sermon, he said he came to "set the captives free." Evangelism involves more than uttering words from Scripture. It must liberate people who are captive to cyclical poverty.

Related Resources:

["In Need of Help" \(*The Economist*\)](#)

[*What Every Church Member Should Know About Poverty*](#) by Ehlig and Payne

[*Linking Arms, Linking Lives:How Urban-Suburban Partnerships Can Transform Communities*](#) by Sider, Perkins, Gordon, and Tizon.

[**Bread of Life, Inc.**](#), a ministry serving inner city Houston. Follow links to [**The Pastor Rudy Experience**](#) or [**The Art Project Houston**](#).

[**Tipping Point Community**](#), a ministry in the San Francisco Bay area addressing poverty.

[*Extravagant Generosity Planning Kit*](#)

[**Ministry to Men**](#)

[**National Fatherhood Initiative**](#)

Kwasi Kena, the former Director of Evangelism at Discipleship Ministries, is now an Assistant Professor of Christian Ministry at the Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, Indiana.

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/evangelism-and-the-poor>



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