

Called to Serve: The Church Responds to Domestic Poverty
28 April 2010
Newark, New Jersey

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Hear the words of the prophet Micah: “What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

“And the prophet Amos: ...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:24)

And the words of the prophet Isaiah, in which Jesus shares and claims as his own mission: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ (Luke 4:17-20)

We’re here to do justice, and love mercy. We’re here to walk humbly with God and bring good news to the poor. That good news of justice and mercy looks like the ancient visions of the commonweal of God where everyone has enough to eat, no one goes thirsty or homeless, all have access to meaningful employment and health care, the wealthy and powerful do not exploit the weak, and no one studies war any more. It includes the work of building community and caring for the earth, both of which are essential to the health of a spiritually rooted person, in right relationship with God and neighbor.

This Church, with its partners both sacred and secular, is part of that mission of God's to bring that holy dream to reality. Though the principles apply to the parts of this church beyond these shores and the rest of the world, this gathering is very specifically focused on building that reality within these United States. How can all the people of this nation participate in the abundance which is already here?

Let's look at food and hunger.

That vision of abundance is holistic – it's about the well-being of the whole person and the whole community – and it begins with a feast. You know it – “on this mountain the Lord will make a feast for all peoples, of rich foods and well-aged wines – and God will destroy the pall that hangs over the peoples” (Isaiah 25:6-7). For some reason we hear it most often at funerals, as though the feast is too utopian for this life. Well, Jesus didn't think so – he made a habit of feasts, so much so that some people called him a party animal.

In a nation that is one of the largest producers and exporters of food in the world, far too many people struggle to find sufficient food every day, from Native Americans whose “local grocery store” only sells chips and soda to those who live in the food deserts of our inner cities. Many of our critically important food responses simply try to provide enough calories – almost anything to stave off starvation – yet what's needed is a nutritious and adequate diet for all ages, from pregnant mothers to children and elders. None will be healthy, none will know the fullness of God's intent for each one until daily bread is within the reach of every person – and daily protein, vegetables, fruit, and enough extra for a feast.

Nutrition is the base of the pyramid of well-being. When each person has an adequate diet, most of the rest of God's dream of commonweal will have been achieved. One of the real

tragedies of poverty is that there are so many tradeoffs – will it be food or medicine, food or shelter, decent food or transportation to a job?

The irony isn't just that we have more than enough decent food to feed everyone in this nation an adequate diet, but that so many of us have an unhealthy relationship with food. Lots of Americans have too much to eat, and epidemic of illness related to overconsumption is a sign of rampant spiritual dis-ease. The work of alleviating physical hunger must be addressed to all of us, and by all of us, beginning with attention to how, why, and what we eat. If your congregation or diocese wants to work on hunger, start by looking at your own relationship to food. An ecumenical effort in Oregon a couple of years ago invited people to live on a food stamp budget for a week. The governor's family made it a public exercise.

If we want to move beyond simply doling out calories to the hungry, the menu has many significant options. Nutrition education, classes that teach how to plan, shop for, and cook healthy meals on a budget, and local gardens are all possibilities. They are also ways to break down some of the barriers between the hungry and the well fed and the over-fed. Consider how much farther our collective food dollars would stretch if we encouraged all the people in our communities to eat a greater proportion of seasonal local produce, rather than foods that require long-distance transportation, like imported fish, fruit, and vegetables, or foods that are highly resource-intensive, like most commercially raised meat.

I've been astounded at the number of schools I've seen recently that are planting gardens, from a child care center in Bridgeport, CT, where each kid is planting their two favorite vegetables in a milk crate, to a rooftop greenhouse in New York City that produces salad and veggies for the school cafeteria, to a southern California school that wanted to know if they

could use a cutout of a bishop to make a scarecrow! Almost every church I've ever seen has some green space, some of which could be used to grow food. Why do we mow those great expanses of lawn in the suburbs, rather than farm carrots or tend peaches? There's a church in Smyrna, TN, that had 20 acres of rich bottomland that they were planning to turn into a softball field until a group of Burmese Anglicans turned up and asked if they could come there to worship. It quickly became apparent that these refugees were almost all farmers and unemployed. There is now an expanding truck garden on that fertile land, producing large crops of fine Asian vegetables, most of which are contracted for before they're planted. Food and the dignity of being able to support a family go together.

Churches in dense urban environments, surrounded by asphalt and concrete, can also have powerful feeding ministries. Some of them are soup kitchens – and it doesn't appear that the need for basic calories is going away any time soon. Some of the more creative ones expand the diet to include other kinds of ministry, like the writing group at Holy Apostles in New York City, or the art program at Welcome Table in Washington, DC. Other options are bulk shopping – as a way to increase the choices and reduce costs for those who don't have private transportation. Some provide space for farmers' markets or contract with a local grower to provide baskets of seasonal produce. The ability to add fresh produce to a sack of staple groceries can significantly improve the quality of food pantry calories.

Geneticists are beginning to understand that it's not just the total calorie input that's essential to ongoing health, and that the impact of diet extends to new generations. The quality of a pregnant woman's diet has significant effects on her child's later health, including susceptibility to obesity, diabetes, and cancer. Those effects may extend to her grandchildren as

well. Studies show measurable third-generation effects as a result of famine in the Netherlands at the end of World War II. Third generation. Grandchildren. We have long suspected such effects as a result of poverty on reservations and in the inner city. That old proverb about the parents eating sour grapes and the children's teeth being set on edge may have implications we never imagined.

Let's talk about water.

“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...’” (Matthew 25:34-35).

Access to clean water is one of the benchmarks of the Millennium Development Goals, but it is also of growing significance within the United States. While most communities have access to clean drinking water, a number of towns and cities deal with the legacy of environmental pollution, and the poor are almost everywhere disproportionately affected. There are significant poor populations within the United States who simply do not have access to basic water and sanitation: the homeless, migrant farm workers, portions of several Indian reservations, and some isolated rural households. Every summer, people die in the deserts of the Southwest for lack of access to drinking water, whether it's clean or not. Most of them are either homeless or migrating. Many more people, across the United States, suffer from inadequate sanitation and lack of sufficient clean water. This is a little noticed issue, but the local need can be just as significant as in some third world nations.

The larger issues of water and poverty in the US have to do with overextraction from aquifers and with the environmental consequences of climate change. As this planet continues to warm, we are going to see increased drought, shifting crop production and changes in the ability to grow traditional crops in various geographic areas. The poor will most assuredly be disproportionately affected, and least able to respond. Think, for example, about the rural poor who depend on wells for both domestic and agricultural water, who will have less access and less ability to respond to depleting aquifers as opposed to large-scale commercial agriculture.

The aftermath of Katrina, both the immediate crisis response in terms of access to clean drinking water and sanitation, and the longer-term response of restoring municipal waterworks, is a sad example of how poverty is related to water availability in denser urban areas. Water issues are little noticed in much of the poverty work we do, but they need attention in many localities. Domestic water policy and mission work could benefit by learning from and partnering with international water organizations. This is a point we should make this week at this conference. There are a number of US government programs that focus on water issues, but they are almost never directly linked to issues of poverty.

Housing and shelter

“And Jesus said to 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)

He also said, “Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house.” (Luke 10:7)

It may be fine for Jesus to live out of a suitcase, but most others are meant to have homes to live in. Our most distinctive image of poverty in this country has to do with whether or not a

person has a home. Once we passed the immediate crisis of Katrina, building and rebuilding homes for the displaced became a central focus. Our work as a church continues to address poverty in New Orleans and on the Mississippi coast, as well as throughout the country, through sheltering those without adequate homes.

Much of the impact of the recent fiscal crisis on the poorer segments of our society has been felt through a decrease in housing stability, through a loss in housing stability. The church's response has been varied: continued work with programs like Habitat for Humanity that seek to provide individual home ownership through volunteer labor and donated materials; opening and expanding shelter facilities for temporary housing; transitional housing ministries, including programs like Family Promise that facilitate moves to more permanent housing arrangements; and the construction of low- and mixed-income housing. St. Paul's Development Corporation in Savannah is an example of how a congregation can transform an entire neighborhood through working to provide affordable housing. Every congregation, no matter what size it is, has an ability to partner in some way to provide shelter and housing for one or more people.

It's appropriate to consider here ministries that address clothing needs – from providing winter coats and hats to school children and the homeless, to business clothing for those seeking new employment. Remember the Hebrew covenant law about justice for the poor centered on debts and pledges? A cloak offered in pledge would be needed as evening shelter, and could not be justly held overnight.

Each of these ministries addresses different aspects of the need for shelter, some of them crisis intervention, like shelter beds, and some longer term, like transitional housing and Habitat, but the structural issues are rarely addressed until we get to intentional work that mixes

economic classes or advocates for different solutions. In the same way that congregational study about food and nutrition might cut across economic divides, intentional boundary crossing is needed in regard to housing. Most of our towns and cities are still highly economically segregated, and both the civic amenities and infrastructure usually reflect the difference, and truly privileging the wealthy. Schools are of varying quality, the kind and availability of grocery stores reflect the neighborhood's poverty or affluence, and industrial zoning rarely impacts the wealthier sections of town. Justice expects that all have access to the abundance for which we were created, and that none of us enjoys radical excess while some are in want.

Finances, financial issues, employment

“If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them.” (Exodus 22:25)

The current economic ills of this nation, and indeed, of the globe, are largely the result of greed, and the unwillingness of governments to limit profits. They are largely the result of usury. The Hebrew Bible prohibits taking interest from fellow members of the religious community, and the taking of interest is what usury originally meant. There were some permissible exceptions – profit from the use of money was acceptable if the risk was shared between lender and receiver; in other words, you could lose your investment as well as gain from it. And interest could be charged to those outside the religious community. The church carried this prohibition into developing Christianity, and for centuries Jewish moneylenders were essentially the only source of credit in Christian communities. We rarely talk about the financial aspects of anti-Semitism, but that history is a contributing part. Significant change came under

Henry VIII in 1545, in an act that permitted people to charge up to 10% interest on loaned money. We've been paying an increasing price ever since.

In the United States today, usury is defined by state statute, with little national regulation. Banks and other financial institutions largely avoid local usury statutes through specific legal exemptions or by being headquartered in a state with weak restrictions. The result in recent years has been exorbitant credit card rates, and predatory lending practices. Usury, particularly in the sense of excessive and exorbitant profit, is rampant. The poor are being exploited all around us, and excessive interest rates contribute mightily to keeping people locked in poverty. Growing awareness and critique of such practices has yielded initiatives which seek to limit interest to a figure of 10% – 10% is enough - though such a move will undoubtedly be politically very difficult to enact.

Many different approaches are possible, beyond legal reform. Financial education for all would be an excellent beginning strategy. It needs to include all, not just the poor, in the context of the stewardship of the gifts God has given. When is contracting debt a reasonable decision? How do faithful people manage their money – what kinds of information, and approaches, and decisions are important? What kind of investments are legal, moral and just? Learning about the interconnected global economic system is a significant aspect of Christian stewardship, and should inform our civic duties as well.

Educated congregations and dioceses can engage proactively by establishing credit unions and microlending opportunities – both can be effective ways of liberating many from predatory practices. Initiatives like this also present creative ecumenical and interfaith possibilities. They use the gifts already present in a community to respond to local need.

We have an important but little-known resource as a Church in the Economic Justice Loan Fund. Some seven million dollars are available, in a revolving loan fund, for development partnerships in communities which lack sufficient access to financial capital. The funds can be used for economic development, for social services, for job creation. The loans are not made to end users, but to local community financial institutions – and they can be an important encouragement to establishing of loan funds, credit unions, and other local economic development initiatives. Chris Johnson can steer you to more information.

Meaningful and adequate employment opportunities are an essential part of addressing the worst of domestic poverty. The unemployment rate on Native American reservations is often 50-80%. In inner cities, something approaching half of young black males are often without jobs. These are deeply systemic issues, reflecting a major shift in our economic engine, as well as inadequate job training, economic investment, and job creation. The challenges of employment are increased by insufficient affordable childcare, which is another poverty-alleviation strategy that's available to many local congregations.

This past Sunday I had a conversation with some homeless men in Washington, DC. At least some of these guys were employed, but still homeless. One of them told me that economic studies show that a living wage in the District would need to be \$24 an hour, based on average housing costs of \$1400 a month. The Bureau of Labor said that was too high; and set it at \$12 an hour.

How many congregations and dioceses are leading ministries that focus on full employment? How many are leading ministries that are entrepreneurial laboratories that help to match gifts with employment possibilities? They are out there – many feeding programs expand

into case management, into shelter and employment assistance. St. Stephen's in Grand Island, Nebraska subsidizes a one-stop community ministry coalition in an adjacent building, that includes food, shelter, literacy and education ministries as well as Habitat for Humanity, United Way, and a community foundation. The Diocese of Los Angeles runs a culinary training program that grew out of its support for artisanal food vendors called Mama's Hot Tamales.

Education is an important part of this.

In addition to hunger, the most ancient and traditional service ministries of this church have been focused on healing and education, reflecting Jesus' own ministry of feeding, healing, and teaching. Schools continue to be an essential part of our ministry of transformation, and they are central to addressing poverty. Two schools in the greater Boston area, Esperanza Academy and Epiphany School, both work with poor inner city middle school students and their families, equipping them to succeed in competitive secondary and higher education. They do remarkable work. Bishop Walker School in Washington, DC is focused on at-risk boys and their families in a poor section of the city. St. Mark's Day Care in Bridgeport, CT works with preschool and kindergarten children, as well as facilitating after-school enrichment for students through middle school. St. James Family Center in Cathlamet, WA, serves children and families through pre-school, Head Start, parenting classes, teen programs, and community programs that foster education and healthy development.

The best education focuses on the whole person – with attention to physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and cultural growth and enrichment. The Diocese of Mississippi is engaged in very important conversations about how this Church can most appropriately serve the range of educational needs in their communities, and not limit the church's educational mission to the

wealthy, to private education, or those who are academically competitive. It's an important discussion everywhere, and it is connected to our understanding that all God's children have gifts for ministry, that all people have a role in the transformation of this society toward something that looks more like the Reign of God. One of the best recent introductions to this kind of understanding particularly about the gifts of the poor, is a book by Julia Dinsmore, *My Name is Child of God, Not "Those People."*

Successful schools like these include families because they understand that education focused on families and communities together can have a far greater impact on poverty than a solely individual focus. We are all interconnected. One of the clearest predictors of a child's success in life is the presence of interested and unrelated adults – mentors, coaches, godparents and grandparents, padrinos y madrinas. When a community is invested in children's success, everyone comes closer to abundant life.

That leads us to the larger systemic issues of poverty, and the particular challenges of Native American reservations and inner city minority communities. Both exist in the midst of a dominant culture that has worked hard, both unintentionally and by conscious policy, to eliminate those cultural differences and gifts. Native Americans have been the subject of cultural "cleansing" if you will, as have African Americans and many other ethnic groups. The poverty we're here to talk about often has something to do with cultural injustice and racism.

The decision of General Convention last summer to hold up this domestic poverty initiative also included a strategic decision to focus on First Nations peoples, or Native Americans. We do that hoping that the strategic responses that emerge from this initiative will provide models and examples and success stories that can be applied in other communities.

Poor Native communities often experience levels of violence far, far higher than in dominant culture environments, particularly this is expressed in exceedingly high suicide rates among young people. On some reservations, the suicide rate is ten times what it is in America generally. Violent behavior in general spikes in communities where poverty is rampant, and hopelessness has something essential to do with it. Restoring dignity in the midst of cultures where it's been denied can have positive impacts on that interrelated system of violence and poverty.

Equipping leaders to make and own decisions, strategies, and priorities, is essential to development and the relief of poverty. We're learning how to do this – and it has a great deal to do with affirming the gifts that are already present. Asset Based Community Development is one framework for this kind of endeavor – discerning gifts for ministry is another. There is a very natural and appropriate connection between the two. In Native communities, the work of White Bison is about this kind of dignity and self-determination. All of these will be the subject of further conversation and workshops here.

Cultural healing and restoring dignity may focus on the healing of communities, yet is likely to have more prosaic health benefits for the members of those communities. Conversely, a focus on the physical and mental health of individuals is also a major aspect of addressing poverty.

The poor have far higher rates of preventable disease and chronic illness, often as a result of structural injustice – the lack of adequate food, clean water, predictable shelter and employment, and access to preventative and other forms of health care. The very stresses of living in poverty contribute to many forms of disease. Aspects of our genetic material actually

change in response to that kind of stress, permitting or preventing the expression of genes that have to do with disease prevention and immune response.

The poor are also much more likely to deal with environmental pollution. The poor will bear a disproportionate share of the effects of climate change.

We can address these realities in a variety of ways – health screenings, parish nursing programs and medical clinics, ensuring access to addiction treatment and mental health resources, but another essential part is the kind of advocacy work with governments that is required to transform the structures of injustice. This is all the kind of reconciliation work that is mandated by Jesus in “love one another as I have loved you.”

Peacemaking on the local and global level will release enormous resources to address issues of poverty. Peacemaking that is concerned for people and the planet will help to heal deep poverty. We’ve already talked about how the fear and anxiety that come with living in violent environments impact basic health, but the structural aspects of resource expenditure on war divert resources from basic human needs. Providing basic healthcare for everyone in this country would be a relatively trivial economic issue if our defense budget went on a diet.

Healing the worst of the poverty in this nation is intrinsically connected to restoring human beings to right relationship with the rest of creation. We’ve already noted that global climate change will have its most devastating effects on the poorest, who are least able to adapt and respond. The educational efforts we can undertake in congregations can provide an important impetus toward solidarity with the poor. How willing are the wealthier among us to change our lifestyles in the direction of those experienced every day by those without? A relatively minor alteration in carbon use for fuel and power, in water use, in recycling, in

washing dishes rather than using Styrofoam, if spread across large populations, will permit others to improve their standard of living. It is a basic issue of selfishness vs. sharing. Are we willing to live more simply so that others may simply live?

We pray regularly that God's kingdom come, and that we have daily bread. That vision of the Reign of God is about adequate food, water, shelter, the resources that come from employment and education, it's about healing, it's about communities that live in right relationship with God and neighbor (both human and the rest of creation). Sometimes that's called *shalom*. It's more than an absence of war, but the end of violence is an essential part of the abundant life for which Jesus came among us.

We're here to see how we might together move more effectively toward that holy dream. We've talked about particulars of that vision and how some of them are being addressed already. The task here is to dream that dream, and look for strategies, partnership, collaboration, networking, and the gifts that are already present. What is God asking of us in response? We're here to discover how we can claim those words of Jesus' in Luke 4, after he reads that vision statement from Isaiah about good news to the poor and the year of the Lord's favor – before we leave here, we need to be able to say, "Today, this scripture is being fulfilled in our hearing."