The Challenge of Poverty to the Reformed Community*

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Poverty is an easy concept to talk about. Nearly everyone has an opinion, an experience, a stereotype, or a course of action to advocate. But just to talk about poverty would mean to miss its impact as a human experience. Few of us have experienced long-term deprivation. Many can remember temporary poverty as students, but rarely can we from our middle-class statuses find empathy for the deep hopelessness, apathy, and despair that sociologist Edward Banfield (1970) has termed the very "culture of poverty" itself.

Let us bring this issue closer to home. The Reformed community has not been in the forefront in working with the poor in the United States. We do tend, in a limited way, to take care of our own and generously support mission and development work in less developed countries, but more often our

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behavior toward the poor in our communities reflects that of the general population. Poverty is simply something that happens to somebody else and is therefore a low-priority issue.

A question with which each believer should wrestle is, "What is my responsibility toward unmet need in this place God has put me?" Unfortunately, we as a people rarely demonstrate consistent compassion. While we can generously support distant causes, we usually turn a blind eye toward the struggle of individuals and groups in our own communities. The Scriptures repeatedly call Christians to Christlike service and its expansive definition of neighbor leaves little room for personal complacency. The inconsistency of our mercy presents a major challenge, for it is as incriminating to our Christian faith to turn our backs on a local, low-income, single mother as it is to ignore the plight of the hungry in the Third World.

The Reformed philosopher Hendrik Hart recently observed that Calvinism itself may implicitly erect barriers to consistent concern for and action toward social reform. We tend to define our faith intellectually and emphasize grace over works. Hart explains,

> Subscribing to a doctrine is not really much work. And faith opposed to works will find satisfaction in exploring ideas. Thus having an idea of public justice, no matter how correct or even inspiring, may not do Calvinists much good. And this may also explain why the cause of social reform in Calvinism has often lacked full support.
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> (Hart, 1985, p.1)

Our statuses in the social structure also influence our concern for the poor. The Christian Reformed Church, in spite of the efforts of some, remains overwhelmingly a homogeneous bastion of white, middle class culture. Within the boundaries of familiar acquaintances, we commonly practice, inadvertently perhaps, what is termed social class segregation. We prefer contacts with those whose behavior and perspectives are compatible with our own, and we like to avoid, as sociologist Hubert Blalock (1982, p. 97) puts it, "unpleasant, potentially embarrassing, or ambiguous contact situations." Thus, liberals tend to avoid contact with conservatives, religious fundamentalists with agnostics, beer drinkers with teetotalers, and let's face it, we comfortable middle class with the needy.

This segregation serves as a guilt reduction mechanism for many of higher status. "Out of sight, out of mind," as the saying goes. If the middle class cannot see the living conditions facing the poor, if their children do not go to the same schools, it becomes easy to forget unmet needs. Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal (1949) coined the phrase "convenient ignorance" to characterize the utility of isolating one's self from "disturbance" by the unpleasant problems of other groups. In fact, it takes enormous energy to bridge the gap between highly segregated groups such as the middle-class and the poor. It takes the enervating face-to-face contact. Social programs aimed at improving a disadvantaged group's position, for example, hardly ever gain "dominant-group support," as Blalock refers to the white, middle-class, or at best, are given extremely low priority. Our social class isolation is no excuse, of course, but only an explanation.

Negative attitudes toward the poor also inhibit compassionate action. The emphasis the middle-class places on the values of independence, hard work, achievement and success, material possessions, efficiency, even cleanliness and punctuality, exert strong pressures toward conformity. Persons and groups who do not share these same values not only do not measure up to our norms for behavior may suffer because of our support for punitive public policy.

Very commonly poverty is defined by the middle class as a matter of individual deficiency. It relates poverty to Social Darwinism, attributing it to inherent personal defects which make certain people less fit to

survive than others. It is the values, norms, and behaviors of the poor that cause the problem. Not only does the blame for the poor's hapless condition accrue to them alone, but corrective action conveniently would require that the poor themselves somehow must be changed rather than any aspect of our social structure, social institutions, and the manner in which social desirables (e.g. opportunity, education, wealth) are distributed.

Current poverty statistics confront the individual deficiency assumption head-on. Poverty is not randomly distributed by personal deficiency across racial, ethnic, gender, and age groups, but rather accrues with certain social indicators. For instance, while the U.S. poverty rate nationally dipped slightly from 15.3 percent in 1983 to 14.4 percent in 1984, rural poverty increased. Although figures for 1984 will not be published for nonmetropolitan areas, the nonmetropolitan poverty rate had been climbing from 17.8 percent in 1982 to 18.3 percent in 1983, in contrast with the declining metropolitan rates (HAC, 1985). Consider the stark reality reflected in the following:

* Blacks are 2½ times as likely to be unemployed as whites;
* American Indians are more than 3 times as likely to be behind their grade level in school;
* Puerto Rican teenagers are 9 times more likely to be unemployed compared to white teenagers;
* Median household per capita income is about half that of white households for American Indians, Blacks, Mexican-Americans, and Puerto Ricans;
* Mexican-American families are over 5 times as likely to live in overcrowded conditions, according to standardized measures compared to the majority population;
* The poverty rate for American Indian, Black, Mexican American, and Puerto Rican families is roughly 3 times higher than that of white families;
* White, female-headed families are 2½ times more likely to be poor than white, male-headed families, and more than 5 times as likely to be poor if headed by a minority female (Kitano, 1980);
* 97 percent of all private household workers and 80 percent of all clerical workers are women. Only 6 percent of skilled craft workers are female; and only 28 percent of all managers are female;

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* On average, women earn a little more than half of what men earn, and this gap is increasing slightly. Sheppard notes (1984, p. 359) that "even taking into account all possible factors that might reasonably account for wage differences between men and women—such as age, experience, amount of absenteeism, and educational background—a large difference remains."
* The most numerous group among the poor is children. Just over eleven million of America's poor (40 percent) are children less than eighteen years old. The poverty rate for all children is almost 20 percent of the total.
* The aged account for another large segment of the poor—15 percent of the total impoverished population.
* Those who are blind, deaf, crippled, or otherwise disabled account for some 12 percent of America's poor (Sheppard, 1984).

These grim statistics indicate that poverty is more systematically distributed than most dominant group members wish to admit. The Reformed community must stop blaming the victim. Social institutions such as the economy, government, and social welfare are malfunctioning to the disadvantage of certain groups, and are, in fact, operating in such a way to sustain the condition of poverty. The radio commentator Paul Harvey-type mentality, "pull yourself up by the bootstraps," is a cruel joke to the vast majority of the poor, such as the

- structurally unemployed;
- divorced or single mother;
- lonely, elderly women on a fixed income; and
- those trapped in welfare dependency in which the system penalizes work (Aid to Dependent Children), education (Foodstamps), and family solidarity (Medicaid).

Certainly the question of personal accountability for one's plight is an important one, since each of us will answer to the Lord for the gifts and talents we have been given. But just as clear is our mandate to treat our neighbors as ourselves, defend the poor, and exercise compassion as the Biblical Good Samaritan demonstrated. In terms of how the Christian personally responds to poverty, the cause is, practically speaking, irrelevant. We are to do good and seek justice whatever the circumstance, for thereby we serve Christ himself.

To move the Reformed community toward greater sensitivity toward the poor we must challenge our collective "convenient ignorance" and build bridges to the subordinate groups so socially distant from most of us. A serious effort by Reformed Christians in this regard would necessarily lead us to reconsider some elements of our lifestyles. The following suggests models for involvement and provides a framework for action at various levels. To do any less would be simply guilt-inducing with no long-term effect and create only the illusion of involvement when the need for concrete action is very great.

There are several levels and types of involvement that anyone of us can pursue to alleviate poverty. Given the commitment, each one of us can generate his/her own set of actions. Take the following as a starting point.

Intervention at the State and National Levels

Public policy is where the heart of the problem can be addressed and where long-term solutions can be found. The social welfare system of support is a confusing array of programs from a hodge-podge of public, private for-profit, and voluntary agencies which frequently have conflicting eligibility requirements and goals. Nearly every aspect of social welfare service is fragmented, discontinuous, and frequently inaccessible. Social theorist David Gil (1981, p. 155) concludes that

> we need radical transformation of the system. We develop blinders against the abundant evidence of constant failure [and are] designing forever new variations on the old theme of injustice...we are trapped in the institutional realities, the economic necessities, and false consciousness of our society.... [We] need jobs to survive.

The major question is not first of all whether our service programs need more money, but, "Is this the right approach? Are these programs effective and efficient in reaching their publically stated goals? Do they enable self-sufficiency or merely facilitate long-term dependency?" Honest answers to these questions, according to sociologist Joe Feagin (1975) will lead to a deep, basic recognition of fundamental structural flaws in our social institutions of social welfare and the economy.

A first step toward reform is to admit the self-interest among the middle and upper classes which resists change. In a sense, the middle and upper classes are for a system which offers cheap domestic and unskilled labor, relatively low taxes, social control, and restricted competition between groups through unequal opportunity. A stronger sense of Kingdom values will have to prevail. Although not apparently a Christian, social work author Sainsbury (1980) concurs:

> Welfare is more than matching need and service, but is a complex interplay of societal and group pressures. Tension exists between values of equality, altruism, reciprocity, and the values of self-sufficiency, competition, self-interest. Without changing values the system will only develop incrementally without regard to social functions, purposes, effects.

The charge to the Reformed Christian for public policy is to speak for and with the poor. Economic and social welfare policy can be influenced in our pluralistic political process. Through much communal scholarship, discussion, prayer, and cooperation with like-minded citizens, Reformed Christians can set new directions for public policy. A major assumption here is that government has a legitimate task to preserve justice when other social institutions fail to perform their function.

Berger and Neuhaus (1977) suggest that perhaps the government's most essential role in this process is to "empower" the institutions of family, church, community, and business to do their jobs better. If each could perform their social functions more adequately, much of the brokenness and want in society could be averted. Where unmet need does arise, these institutions could benefit from incentives to meet these needs better in a decentralized manner.

Whatever the specific policy recommendations develop through this process of communal scholarship and discussion, individuals and families need to pursue responsible citizenship. Time needs to be allocated and new priorities set in our busy schedules to educate ourselves on the issues, write elected officials, monitor local programs, attend public meetings and vote for candidates receptive to the Biblical themes of compassion and justice. Group action is essential to magnify one's impact on the policy-making process. Reformed Christians should affiliate with organizations such as the Association for Public Justice and local advocacy groups to ensure their voice is heard in the policy-making process.

Group Action at the Community Level

A second level of involvement is meeting local needs through communal action. Consult with those who work with the poor as a first step toward reducing our social class isolation and convenient ignorance. Through these contacts we can learn the most pressing needs in our communities.

Discover from human service workers how to learn more about local poverty from the poor themselves. Local community centers may provide contact with the poor, as will those distributing surplus government commodities, those administering domestic violence aid programs, offices where fuel assistance applications are being received, or senior centers, subsidized housing complexes, or day-care centers. Share findings with friends, neighbors, and fellow church members to determine what could be done jointly to address the need right in our communites.

Of special relevance is the role of local church diaconates which are charged with leading their congregations in lives of grateful service. Sharing the needs you have identified or assessing needs jointly with the deacons would help both deacons and congregations to respond to the call:

> Be compassionate to the needy. Encourage them with words that create hope in their hearts and with deeds that bring joy into their lives. Be prophetic critics of waste, injustice, and selfishness in society, and be sensitive counselors to the victims of such evils." (Form for the Ordination of Deacons, Christian Reformed Church, 1982)

Compassion as a Component of Family Life?

A final model for involvement strikes at the heart of how we model lives of service for our children. Our attitudes toward poverty are formed much like anyone else's—through socialization by parents, peers, and social institutions such as the school and church, and through the media. If we think about how we acquire attitudes, we begin to realize that compassion without an exceptional experience or specific effort for the poor becomes an uncommon ingredient in our middle-class socialization.

The major question is not first of all whether our service programs need more money, but, "Is this the right approach? Are these programs effective and efficient in reaching their publically stated goals? Do they enable self-sufficiency or merely facilitate long-term dependency?"

A normal part of a family's routine should include activities which become bridges to the poor. Each of us must expend special effort to overcome our social class isolation and partially thwart the stratified social structure to which we are so accustomed. These bridges should include three basic components. First, regular and specific acts of compassion which involve family members to illustrate loving one's neighbor as oneself. Consider activities such as donating new and used clothing to a local agency or to a diaconal project, sharing your excess furniture with an impoverished family, providing transportation to an older or disabled person, or just visiting an isolated family or institutionalized individual.

A second component is the development of on-going supportive relationships for needy persons. A family could "adopt" an unemployed family or elderly neighbor. Expand the scope of your family's concern by incorporating a single mother in Sunday dinners and family outings. These relation-

ships could be long-term and lead to very closely involving the life of your family in the social, material, and spiritual needs of the poor. The relationship could serve to integrate the impoverished individual or family once again into a supportive community and thereby demonstrate the love of Christ in both word and deed.

A final component is to set goals as an individual or family for giving, praying, and living stewardly lives in the light of both local and world poverties. How can we as member's of God's family best use the material blessing the Lord is giving? Do we pray together often and specifically regarding local, state, national, and world needs and injustices? How can we simplify our lifestyle to free up time and resources for serving? A conscious attempt by singles and families to ask these questions of themselves may, by the work of God's Spirit, change attitudes and lead to lives which more completely model obedience and service.

Marten Vrieze, a Christian sociologist and theologian, has observed (1985) that in the Scriptures poverty is not strictly a matter of economic need. More often, the Biblical needy are the widow, the alien, the orphan, the unclean. What made one "poor" in this sense was isolation from the community, a certain estrangement and lack of solidarity.

If we can apply this principle to today's poor in our communities, then our mission is clear. It is personally, as individuals, as families, and as church community, to reintegrate the poor; to establish their sense of belonging; and to model with our families, churches, and schools ways of, restoring the poor to our communities. Such restoration of community cannot be delegated to impersonal agencies but depends on the sympathetic gesture, words of encouragement, and lifestyles which demonstrate concern.

These suggested actions will not eliminate poverty. In fact it is true that we will always have the poor. The more important question is, "What does the Lord require of us?" Each of us needs to re-examine commitments and priorities as individuals and as families. Such a re-examination is not an option but a clear call to service. As the prophet Micah declared, "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

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