

Poverty & Inequality Conference 2012

Presentation

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The role of the church in combating poverty and inequality in South Africa: a case study from Cape Town

A calling

Caring for the poor and the needy¹ and seeking justice for the oppressed are right at the very heart of the Christian faith. In the Scriptures there is a fundamental solidarity with the poor and a concern to transform situations of poverty and inequality. When God selected a people who would carry his name and play a central role in his purposes, he gladly picked poor slaves in Egypt. The pages of the Bible are full of stories of transformation, where God delights in taking those who are marginalised or disregarded by society and weaving them into his unfolding story of redemption. This is celebrated in Psalm 113: "Who is like the Lord our God, the one who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes, with the princes of their people." When God looks down upon the heavens and the earth, his heart is filled with compassion for the poor and those in need, for those who have been discarded on the rubbish dumps of society. He delights in exalting the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap, and he seats them with princes! It is not primarily the wealthy and the famous with whom God delights to fraternise. Rather, as John Stott² has pointed out, "what is characteristic of him is to champion the poor, to rescue them from their misery, and to transform paupers into princes."

This fundamental solidarity with the poor is evidenced in the Incarnation. When God became flesh, he chose, for our sakes, to become poor (2 Corinthians 8:9). It is with the poor that Jesus humbly identified in his incarnation. Born in a stable³, a refugee in Egypt⁴, growing up in remote Galilee⁵, dying on a cross like a common criminal⁶, at every point in his life, Jesus rubbed shoulders with the poor. He never had any of the riches of this world. When he crossed the Sea of Galilee, it was in a borrowed boat. When he rode into Jerusalem, it was on a borrowed beast. When he was buried, it was in a borrowed tomb.

¹ The terms, 'the poor' and 'the needy', are biblical categories; though these terms may sound alienating, biblically all humans are ultimately deemed to be poor and in need of redemption.

² John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, p 232

³ Luke 2:7

⁴ Matthew 2:13

⁵ Matthew 2:22-23

⁶ Matthew 27:38

To mark the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus chose to read the following words from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus specifically singled out the poor as the ones to whom he brought good news. While the message Jesus proclaimed was for all, he was particularly concerned that the poor and the needy would realise that this good news was for them. They were the ones to whom Jesus was especially drawn. In the pages of the New Testament we see that the kind of people to whom Jesus paid particular attention included a blind beggar⁷, a man with leprosy⁸, a widow who placed her last two coins in the offering⁹, a nameless child¹⁰, and a despised woman whom society had rejected¹¹.

Poverty stricken or affluent, the biblical faith accords a fundamental dignity to all. God is shown to be no respecter of persons; all humans are equally valued before God no matter their social standing. This is strongly underlined in the New Testament where the church brings together people from every walk of life – Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free – for there is no favouritism with God (Ephesians 6:9). Indeed, the church on earth is intended to reflect the heavenly reality of an eternal people gathered “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9).

Furthermore, the biblical faith incorporates a deep concern to alleviate poverty and counter inequality. The Old Testament Law contained numerous provisions aimed at alleviating the plight of the poor. For example, the regular tithes were to be used to support not only the priesthood, but also the aliens, orphans and widows in the community (Deuteronomy 14:29; 26:12), and there were detailed provisions to ensure that the indigent could gather food during the harvest. These provisions reserved the borders of the fields, the gleanings after harvesting, and the fallen fruit for the poor, the alien, the widow and the orphan, who were also to be allowed to share in the harvest celebrations (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21). In addition, every third year a tenth of the agricultural produce was to be given to the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12); and every seventh year fields were to be left to lie fallow, and vineyards and olive groves left unharvested, for the benefit of the poor who could help themselves to the pickings (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-7).

In passages like Deuteronomy 15:1-15, we see that safeguards were put in place to protect the community from both wealth and poverty. Thus, every seven years God’s people were expected to release all debts and free all slaves; every seven years the balance in the economy would be restored. The intention was that neither would the rich get too rich nor would the poor be crushed. In this sense the wellbeing of the community as a whole was more important than any individual concept of ‘fairness’. The aim was to ensure a harmonious, caring community in which the inequality between rich and poor would regularly be countered.

⁷ Mark 10:46-52

⁸ Matthew 8:2-3

⁹ Mark 12:42-44

¹⁰ Luke 9:47-48

¹¹ Luke 7:36-50

This ethos of concern for the poor and a sharing of resources so that all would be free from need, characterised the early church that we glimpse in the pages of the New Testament. We read that “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). Whenever anyone was in need, they shared. This concern was not confined to caring for members of the church community – in Galatians 6:10 Christians were urged not merely to do good to fellow believers, but to do good to all people. This ethos continued to characterise the church for many centuries. For example, there is evidence that by AD 250 the church at Rome supported some 1500 needy persons in a way that was otherwise unheard of in the late Roman Empire.¹² In the following century the Roman emperor Julian tellingly complained about Christians (whom he called Galileans) as follows: “The impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well; everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”¹³ During outbreaks of the plague, Christians were known for coming into the cities to help the dying, rather than fleeing from the cities to save their own lives. Helping the poor set Christians apart, showing that they operated according to a radically different value system. Indeed, until the development of the welfare state in the West and state socialism in other parts of the world during the past century, the church often took the lead in providing care for the poor and places of refuge for the sick and dying, for the ill-treated and for travellers.

In the New Testament we see that Paul himself devoted a great deal of time and energy to alleviating poverty among Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. When famine struck in AD 46, Paul was involved in taking economic assistance from Antioch to Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30). Later, in various of the New Testament letters we see Paul arranging for further gifts from church communities elsewhere to assist the poor Jerusalem Christians materially (e.g. Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:22-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9), and in writing to the Corinthians he outlined a principle of ‘equality’ whereby those in need would be provided for by those who had a surplus (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). Paul reasoned that, while some may have had the ability and industriousness to gather more than they needed, others may not have gathered enough; however, as they apportioned what they had gathered so as to provide enough for each person, those who had a surplus would provide out of their surplus for those who did not have enough.

The reality was that, in the early church, many of its members were drawn from the ranks of the poor. James, one of the early church leaders in Jerusalem, commented: “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” (James 2:5). For James, the answer to this question was self-evident as he looked around at the members of the young church. Of course God had chosen the poor! The inference is that God delights in taking those who are ‘poor in the eyes of the world’ and catching them up in what he is doing on the earth. So many of those who feature prominently in the Bible story were from humble backgrounds; as they acknowledged their need of a redeemer, God caught them up in his purposes.

Jesus taught, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). In other words, a humble acknowledgement of one’s poverty before God is a prerequisite for entry into God’s kingdom and inclusion among God’s people. The humble poor are those “who acknowledge their bankruptcy before God. They have no righteousness to offer, no merit to plead, no power to

¹² Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, p 88

¹³ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions and Eternity*, p 226

save themselves. They know that the only way to enter God's Kingdom is to humble themselves like little children and receive it as a gift. So they come as beggars, with nothing in their hands."¹⁴ Grasping our mutual poverty before God means that we all stand on level ground before God. This is an amazing leveller in a society where identity is often equated with where we have come from. In the church, identity has to do with how God has redeemed us and transformed us – it has to do with our future and not our past.

This understanding accords a real dignity to those who have been gripped by poverty. This is a crucial component in combating poverty holistically. For poverty is not only a lack of the material necessities of life; poverty gets rooted in the psyche. While addressing the physical needs of the poor is vital, the struggles and oppression of the past can effectively mean that people remain trapped in ways of thinking and living that tend to replicate poverty. The church has a profound role to play in addressing this fundamental dimension of poverty.

The church as a significant role-player in combating poverty and inequality in South Africa

Poverty is complex and needs to be addressed holistically. The church is well placed to provide a holistic response to poverty and inequality in the following three areas. Firstly, the church is furnished with a vocation to care for the poor, to alleviate suffering, and to stand for justice. Secondly, the biblical faith affirms that all are equally valued and have a part to play in God's unfolding story, according dignity and significance to all irrespective of their socio-economic standing. Thirdly, the church provides a redemptive community in which change is normative as minds are renewed and lives are transformed and caught up in God's purposes.

In South Africa, therefore, the churches could potentially play a very significant role in combating poverty and inequality. The majority of South Africans regard themselves as Christian and many would have some association with a local church. The church reaches into communities across the nation and has the potential to touch the lives of millions of South Africans. The church enjoys a measure of respect in South African society as a role-player of integrity. In fact, the church is somewhat uniquely positioned to cross racial and socio-economic divides and work at grassroots level in local communities, whereas the efforts of other institutions and NGO's are often inhibited by the legacy of the *apartheid* era that still casts a shadow over South African society.

Although the churches in South Africa emerged during the colonial era, this does not negate their excellent track record in caring for the poor and those in need in both urban and rural contexts. They were often frontrunners in the provision of health care and education until substantially divested of these responsibilities by the *apartheid* state. Under *apartheid*, there was pressure for churches either to lend support to the policies of the state or to step back from engagement in the

¹⁴ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, p 238

socio-political arena. Yet, the church did provide significant leadership and support in the struggle against *apartheid*, despite complacency or compromise in some quarters. Currently, the churches in South Africa have the potential to help radically transform the face of poverty and inequality in our nation – a point that is acknowledged from time to time by South Africa’s political leaders. For example, President Nelson Mandela said the following at a thanksgiving service for Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1996:

“As the Churches in South Africa and abroad accompanied us in the struggle for justice and peace, so should they now accompany us in building a just and equitable society. This is not a call for the religious community to accompany government uncritically. Uncritical support would endanger our infant democracy. On the other hand criticism without visible action to help alleviate poverty and suffering can only serve to discredit the message of the Church. Rather, the way forward is in what some theologians have called ‘critical solidarity’ with government in the reconstruction and development of the country. The track record of the religious communities, both before and after the achievement of democracy, makes us confident that in them we do indeed have strategic partners, in the project of empowering our people to use their freedom to work together for a better life.”¹⁵

Speaking at women’s conference at the Ethiopian Episcopal Church on 25 September 2007, Thoko Didiza (Minister of Public Works) commented as follows:

“Religious communities are in touch with the grassroots, the poor are in our pews, the churches have the gift of resources of infrastructure and personnel. Therefore, it is only right that the government and the church form partnerships to ensure effective delivery. We have to make sure that not just the spiritual, but the physical needs are met. It is therefore essential that the State, civil society and the church among others co-operate and collaborate with each other in working towards the entrenchment of our fledgling democracy.”¹⁶

By way of exploring this potential, let’s look at a particular local church in Cape Town – Jubilee Community Church.

¹⁵ Extract from the text of a speech by President Nelson Mandela, issued by the Office of the President (23 June 1996); <http://www.polity.org.za/polity/govdocs/speeches/1996/sp0622.html>

¹⁶ http://www.publicworks.gov.za/PDFs/Speeches/Minister/UMzi_wase_Topiya_Speech.pdf

Case study of a local church: Jubilee Community Church

Jubilee Community Church is an evangelical local church in Cape Town with a history that goes back to 1983. The 1980s were a stormy time in South Africa, and the struggle against *apartheid* was intensifying. At the time, many evangelical churches in South Africa still tended to shy away from involvement in socio-political matters, focusing rather on that which was 'spiritual'. However, this new church had a keen desire to build in an authentically New Testament manner. The New Testament ethos of a church which embraced people from every walk of life – from different cultures, races, languages, and socio-economic standing – became a significant inspiration. In this context, building a non-racial church community became an important value, and the young church congregation was intentional about being part of the solution and not part of the problem in the South African context. It was not always an easy road for a suburban local church to tread in a deeply polarised society.

As members of the church began to engage with some of the issues in our context, building relationships in a divided society was seen to be key. This led some to participate in various projects (such as housing, carpet-weaving, and health clinics) in some of the informal housing settlements. Strong relationships were built with some of the residents of Khayelitsha, which later led to the planting of a local church in that rapidly growing township. In the Tambo Square informal settlement near Gugulethu some members of the church became involved in helping with a children's crèche, while others joined the community in campaigning for adequate housing. Eventually the authorities allocated land for this purpose and the present Tambo Village began to take shape. Transport was provided for members of that community to join the church at Sunday meetings, and this led later to the establishment of a local church community in Tambo Village that reflected a mix of township and suburbs members.

In 1991 the church purchased a church complex in Crawford, with the intention of moving the church community's centre of gravity from the Cape Town southern suburbs closer to the communities on the Cape Flats. Soon after this the church adopted the name Jubilee Community Church – a name which resonates with rich biblical imagery evocative of God's desire to see the oppressed set free and good news preached to the poor. Intentional steps were taken to become a community that increasingly would embrace people of different races, cultures, languages and nationalities – songs in different languages were employed in the worship times and translation was offered into Xhosa and subsequently French (for the benefit of migrants and refugees from francophone Africa).

As the church community grew, larger premises were required and at the beginning of 2000 a warehouse in Observatory was acquired. In a divided city, Observatory remained something of a melting pot of people from different races, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds; it had the added advantage of being accessible on public transport from many parts of the city, and so it was an ideal location for a diverse church community to gather. The warehouse was totally refurbished over a period of 18 months to provide ample facilities for church gatherings as well as for social ministries that would serve the wider community – these have come to include a health centre.

As the church community increasingly attracted people from both affluent and poorer sectors of the city's population, a journey of discovery has been embarked upon as to what it means to reach

across the barriers in our society to get to know and care for others. Taking seriously Jesus' injunction to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' and to 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:37-39), has inspired members of the church to engage with the issues facing our city and to launch initiatives that seek to address some of the significant challenges that we face in our nation. At present members of the church run a health clinic as a community service, a halfway house for women being released from prison on parole, life skills programmes in schools, English classes for refugees and others, business empowerment skills training, and a housing project, among other ventures. The church community seeks to play an active role in civil society, addressing issues such as HIV/AIDS, crisis pregnancy and health care; education; skills training; housing; and the rehabilitation of ex-prisoners and addicts.

At present there are approximately 750 active adult members of Jubilee Community Church. Approximately 200 of them serve in a voluntary capacity in various ministries and initiatives of the church, and these impact the lives of some 4000 adults and more than 6500 children in one way or another. Some of these initiatives that serve the poor and needy include the following:

- The **Jubilee Health Centre** provides medical and counselling care for the wider community. In 2011 approximately 2600 patients were seen. The idea of a health clinic run by the church was initially conceived as a response to the massive HIV/AIDS challenge, but, because of the stigma attached to the disease, it was launched as a general purpose health clinic, where people could come and receive caring, holistic care. The church employs a medical doctor, nurses, and counsellors, and this team is augmented by medical and counselling volunteers. Jubilee funds the clinic as a service to the wider community.
- **ThinkTwice** was launched more than a decade ago to equip and empower children and teens, and those working with them, to understand and deal with issues surrounding HIV/AIDS and child sexual abuse. Life skills programmes have been developed to instil in children and teens a healthy sense of self-worth and a healthy respect for others. Initially teams were sent into high schools to run programmes for the learners to empower them to make healthy choices in life. Later the focus shifted to children of primary school age, and more recently the main emphasis has been on training educators and carers to run such programmes so as to greatly expand their reach; and parent workshops have been developed to help parents of young children take responsibility for the development in their own children of a healthy sexuality.
- Closely associated with issues of poverty, the crowded prisons in the Western Cape and the terribly high rates of recidivism – where the vast majority of prisoners end up back in prison within just a few years of their release – provoked some members of Jubilee to get involved. They formed **Beauty for Ashes**, a ministry that cares for prisoners and ex-offenders. Running life skills and restorative justice programmes in Pollsmoor Prison and a halfway house in Observatory where women on parole can be received and be helped to reintegrate effectively into society.
- Inadequate housing is an aggravating feature of poverty in our nation. Over the years, members of Jubilee have been involved with various projects – from working with 'Habitat

for Humanity' to campaigning with the residents of the Tambo Square informal settlement for land and adequate housing. Recently an initiative called **Level Ground** has been launched to promote justice, restitution and the restoration of dignity by assisting those who, due to past injustices, do not have the financial ability to own or have access to adequate housing. *Apartheid* has left deep wounds in our society and *Level Ground* aims to facilitate restitution between those who benefitted and those who suffered from *apartheid*, by providing a safe and accountable way for restitution payments in cash or kind (labour, materials) to be effectively channelled into acquiring houses.

- Access to quality education can be a significant step towards alleviating poverty. Under *apartheid* there were massive inequalities in the provision of state funding for education for those of different races. At Jubilee an **Education Fund** was established as a vehicle for restitution by those who benefitted under *apartheid*. The beneficiaries are South Africans from previously disadvantaged backgrounds; the fund enables such beneficiaries to attend school, college or courses that will further their education and prospects. Some Jubilee members also provide a tutoring programme for school children of all grades.
- **CARE** (Classes for Acquiring Real English) provides tuition for adults who need to acquire English. The classes have primarily been attended by 'displaced persons', predominantly from countries in Central Africa. Many of the learners have been physically and emotionally scarred by atrocities perpetrated in their home countries, and so *CARE* seeks to offer more than just 'English classes', interacting with the participants and nurturing a hope for the future by demonstrating the love, grace, and forgiveness of the 'one who was most displaced' for us all.
- In Cape Town there are a large number of unemployed, unskilled people with no real prospects of improving their lot in life. Some at Jubilee are engaged in **BEST** (Business Empowering and Skills Training) aiming through skills training to open up opportunities for employment. These include computer skills and carpentry skills, as well as mentoring and other support for micro-business enterprises. A sewing and beading project called **Umoja** was launched in 2002 to empower unemployed refugee women in the community. A soap-making project has recently been launched.
- In contexts of poverty, substance abuse can cause havoc and much suffering. **Beth Rapha** is a rehabilitation programme that seeks to provide a safe and non-threatening environment for men who are struggling with the crippling effects of substance abuse and its consequences. They are accommodated at a home while they are working through the initial stages of the rehabilitation programme and they are subsequently cared for in an 'out patients' programme while they reintegrate into society.
- Members of Jubilee are also involved in supporting families in the Observatory, Salt River and Woodstock communities. **Sunshade** provides support for women and their pre-school children. **Kidz Klub** caters for primary school children in a Saturday programme.

These are some of the initiatives that members of Jubilee Community Church are currently involved with. Jubilee members are encouraged to harness their resources to serve the poor and needy both within the church community and beyond and to work towards the transformation of our city for the benefit of all. More than this, however, Jubilee Community Church aspires to be a redemptive community – a community that not only serves those in need, but embraces them as valuable members of the community. The starting point is that before God all are in need of redemption. God graciously redeems us out of our poverty and embraces us into his family. It is in the context of such a redemptive community that God transforms us, renewing our hearts and minds, and empowers us to serve his purposes on the earth. This is the kind of holistic context that is required for people effectively to break free from poverty.

Jubilee is merely one local church congregation. Yet, there are many different local church congregations right across the city of Cape Town and across the nation of South Africa. They already reach into many communities of low socio-economic status, and should be urged to increase their capacity to touch such communities. For, the churches are positioned at grassroots level like few other institutions to transform the social landscape. They share a calling to follow Jesus' example and care for the poor and needy, engaging with issues of poverty and inequality. They are motivated to transcend the factional interests that can limit the influence of political and social organisations, and they enjoy a measure of respect as role-players on the social landscape. This potential of the church to play a significant role in combating poverty and inequality in South Africa needs to be harnessed. If appropriately harnessed, it could make a huge impact for good in our nation.

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