

Breaking the Cycle of Poverty

By Don Mosley

“There they are, in those two old cars over there!”

My wife pointed to the far corner of the parking lot, just a few feet from the busiest street in Athens, Ga. Two women were in one car, a man and a woman in the other.

I parked nearby. We got out and walked toward them. Their expressions of anxiety changed to smiles as they recognized us.

“Boy! Am I ever glad to see y’all again,” said one of the women. “I thought for a minute it might be somebody coming to tell us to leave. We’ve been living in the cars ever since my husband got out of the hospital a week ago. Police give us the eye sometimes, but so far they haven’t made us move.”

The speaker was a lady in her late thirties. Her husband sat motionless next to her, his seat tilted back as far as it would go. It was obvious that he was in pain. In the other car sat her mother, a thin little lady whose wrinkles and lack of teeth made her look much older than she probably was in reality. Next to her was the youngest member of the family, a seventeen-year-old daughter.

Carolyn and I had first met this poor little family in a local hospital. Homeless and unemployed, they had all been living for days in the hospital room where the father was being treated for multiple problems, including a very painful back condition. The

mother had been looking desperately for some place they could go while the doctors tried to ease her husband’s pain enough that he could resume his search for a job.

“The doctor says he can’t work unless his back gets better, and sleeping in the car like this is just making it worse.”

This poor woman was articulating a vicious cycle of poverty that affects too many people: health problems lead to debt and unemployment, which lead to homelessness, which only exacerbates health problems and makes it harder to find work.

As we talked with the family, we were impressed by the resilient spirit of the daughter, alert and upbeat despite everything. “I had to drop out of school, but I’m studying to get my GED,” she told us proudly. “And guess what?” she added. “I’ve read twelve books while we were at the hospital and living in the cars!”

After some searching, we were able help the family find a cheap room where they could live for a few days while searching for work. We found a little money for them and then shared some food from our garden. Most of all, we did our best to encourage that bright young lady who was so determined to find her way out of this situation. We were glad to do what little

we could for her parents and grandmother—but in the long run, we're betting on this young woman!

Carolyn and I have been involved in Christian communities seeking to end poverty for over four decades, and there have been many times when we felt almost overwhelmed by the immensity of the human suffering we have encountered. That's the time—we have learned—to stop what we're doing, say a little prayer, and go find the children! I am firmly convinced that they are the best place to start if we are truly serious about breaking the cycle of poverty.

In the 1970s, Carolyn and I lived at a Christian community in southwest Georgia, named Koinonia Partners. The surrounding countryside was littered with dilapidated, rat-infested old shacks. I was shocked to discover that poverty-stricken families—not just adults, but children too—were actually living in most of these drafty old piles of rotting lumber.

Koinonia's founder, Clarence Jordan, died six months before we arrived, but a human dynamo named Millard Fuller had come just in time to take over the leadership of the community. He was enthusiastic about Koinonia's new low-cost housing program, and soon after we arrived there in 1970, he put me in charge of it.



Action Step

Plan a weekend mission project for your congregation to help build or improve a stable home for a family in your area. Visit www.habitat.org, www.jubileepartners.org, or search for other opportunities in your community using the FIND tab at www.10thousanddoors.org.

"If you're serious about fighting poverty," Millard told everyone who would listen, "help them get a decent place to live. Then they have a better chance of coping with all their other problems!"

It was out of that belief that Millard and I, along with several other friends, founded Habitat for Humanity in 1976. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of Habitat houses in a hundred countries around the world. At least a million children and their parents have a better place in which to live. Just as important, many millions of people have worked together at sites all over the earth to help this miracle of hope and love keep growing. I have watched beautiful things happen between people in dramatic situations all over the world.

At times, I admit, I stood out there on a building site in that south Georgia heat and humidity, mopping sweat and swatting those maddening gnats and wondering whether it was worth all the effort. After all, how many houses could our little handful of amateurs expect to build? What difference could we make in the face of all this poverty? Any rational person could see that it was hopeless. But there were all those kids living out in those shacks...

So we kept digging foundations and driving nails, and slowly our little building crew began to grow. So did the number of houses we produced and the number of happy, healthier children who lived in them! In the next few years, we finished dozens of houses and watched a growing stream of families with children move out of the old shacks and into decent new houses and better lives. As we listened to their laughter, saw them become better students, and

watched their dreams take off, our own hope grew. We began to see that poverty was not an invincible force after all!

Before his death early in 2009, Millard and his wife, Linda, also launched the Fuller Center for Housing, a vibrant and creative new ministry that complements the Habitat ministry. In just four short years it had spread to more than sixty locations in seventeen countries. Poverty is being overcome by compassionate action in these communities around the globe.

Now, Carolyn and I live at Jubilee Partners, a Christian community fifteen miles east of Athens. The two dozen people on our staff work primarily with refugees from disasters all over the world—from the "killing fields" of Cambodia to the death squads of El Salvador, from the "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnia to the genocide in southern Sudan. These days we are hosting a steady stream of the victims of the violence of the Burmese military forces. The factors driving all these people from their homes are usually complex, but poverty is always one part of the equation.

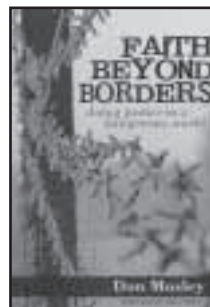
We know that hunger and homelessness are painful for anyone, whatever their ethnic or national backgrounds, and we don't want to become so specialized in our work that we fail to empathize with each needy child of God we encounter—especially the youngest among them.

Our work at Jubilee has also led us to confront poverty and suffering in other ways. In almost every situation we have been motivated primarily by the suffering of children. Through our Walk in Peace campaign we helped provide thousands of artificial limbs for children and young people who had been maimed by war in Nicaragua—and through that program we continue to provide scholarships for hundreds of bright young Nicaraguans from some of the poorest neighborhoods in the world. Our efforts on behalf of Iraqi children who were war victims led to the launching of the All Our Children program. Through it the United Methodist Church and many other denominations around the world have saved lives and eased suffering for an estimated 200,000 children in Iraq.

Decent homes, medical care, education for the young—every one of these approaches has an impact on the root causes of poverty, in this country and everywhere else.

Jesus warned us not to expect that we could simply wipe out all poverty. But then he told us unequivocally to get busy and do whatever we can. The world is full of great problems. Most of these problems rest on a foundation of fear, hopelessness, and a shortage of empathy. These are contagious diseases of the spirit!

But here comes the good news. Love is also contagious, and it is more powerful than all of those forces of evil. □



Don Mosley is co-founder and resident of Jubilee Partners in northeast Georgia, has helped launch many projects around the world to fight poverty and relieve suffering over the past half century.

He is the author of *With Our Own Eyes* (Herald, 1996) and *Faith Beyond Borders, Doing Justice in a Dangerous World*, coming in 2010 from Abingdon Press.

A Sermon Starter from RETHINK CHURCH

Rethink Sharing (Acts 4:32-35)

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. (Acts 4:32, NRSV)

The believers in the early church relied upon one another's possessions to benefit the whole community. Those with property offered it freely to help those without means, so nobody went without what they needed. As our denomination supports ministry with the poor as one of the Four Areas of Focus during this quadrennium, this passage helps us focus on partnerships with people living in poverty. What if we shared all things with those in need?

Questions to Consider

- How can I re-evaluate my giving of time, talent, and treasure?
- How can we consider our property as "community" property, for the benefit of those who have none?
- What can the church do to create partnerships with people in poverty, to improve living conditions in our neighborhood?

Possible Themes

- Believing we have something to offer
- Together, we can do something
- Share the wealth
- Eternal sharing—what we do may make an eternal difference for someone
- Teach people to fish—don't give them fish, give them skills
- I can't change the whole world but I can start by helping my neighbor

Image Ideas

hands, gift boxes and bags, knitting blankets, horn of plenty, a feast, a community garden

Video Ideas

- "Open Hearts" TV messages: "The Gift" (woman shares her gifts around the community); "Thousand Hands" (not just about money in the offering plate)
- UMTV stories: "Prom Brings Joy After Storms" (a church in VA helps teens in hurricane-ravaged area); "Kids Care for Homeless" (youth make "manna bags" with a day's worth of healthy food); "Constructive Kids" (teens help rebuild homes to make safe housing for neighbors in need).
- Movie clips: The Pursuit of Happyness (a kind person sometimes makes all the difference in someone else's life); Cinderella Man (faith, prayer, hard work and a few breaks help sustain a man and his family through the Great Depression and times of deep despair); Places in the Heart (a woman cobbles together a unique "family" to revitalize a farm)

Action Ideas

- Support organizations that help gleaners; these groups help clear land so we don't waste crops.
- Start a community garden on the church's land—invite community people to participate as a welcoming and non-threatening way to get them to engage with your congregation—no strings attached.
- Invite homeless people to join you in a church pot luck; while you're talking with people, ask how your church can help meet their ongoing needs
- Learn from churches already rethinking the church's response to poverty. In *Change the World: Rediscovering the Message and Mission of Jesus*, Pastor Mike Slaughter of Ginghamburg United Methodist Church discusses how to reorient your congregation's structure, budget, and perspective to live out Jesus' mission to the poor.

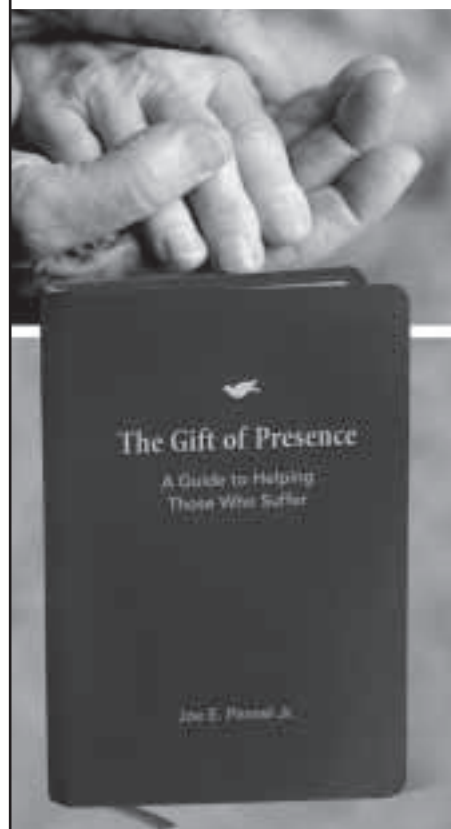
Resources for United Methodist congregations and conferences:
www.rethinkchurch.org

For those looking for their doorway to changing the world:
www.10thousanddoors.org



Adapted from United Methodist Communications' Rethink Church Sermon Starters, available at www.rethinkchurch.org/sermonstarters. Find *Circuit Rider's* lectionary-based Sermon Starters online at www.circuitrider.com

The Gift of Presence, from Joe Pennel, Jr.



What do you say to the brokenhearted? Joe Pennel offers practical help for clergy and laypersons. Ideal for use by Stephen ministers, congregational care teams, new clergy, chaplains, and hospice and hospital ministries. Abingdon Press.

Cokesbury 
store, web, phone
Cokesbury.com | 800.672.1789

CS0496610009 PAC-P005935411-01