

Lord, Send Us the People Nobody Else Wants or Sees!

Developing a Heart for the Poor and Broken

When I was in my last year at Asbury Theological Seminary, I needed one more class to graduate. I was serving as a children's and youth pastor at a local United Methodist church and my wife was getting ready to have our second child, so my schedule was limited. I needed to select an elective class and there was only one that really fit my family and ministry schedule. It was Dr. Robert Lyons' class "The Poor in Scripture and Society." Frankly, the title of the class didn't stoke my fires, but I took it any way.

Throughout the semester, we had one agenda. Read and discuss what the Bible says about the poor. It was that simple, but it completely transformed my thinking. I was blown away at how my upper-middle class rearing had restricted the lens through which I read and comprehended the Bible. I discovered that on almost every page of the sacred text, God was communicating his heart and his people's responsibility for the poor. Somehow in my ten years of following Jesus to that point, I had missed it. In the more than twenty years since then, God has continued to challenge me about my personal and the Church's corporate responsibility to the poor.

The church I serve today has pushed the boundaries of my understanding and practice of ministry with and to the poor, addicted, broken and needy of my community and world even further. The original campus of Grace Church is located in Cape Coral, Fla., a predominately white, working class community with an expanding Hispanic presence. The average in-

come in the neighborhoods around Grace Church is \$40,000 per household. Our church is filled with carpenters, nurses, grocery store clerks, and telephone repairmen.

Among our commitments to caring for the poor and broken of society is a vibrant recovery ministry. On any given week at our three campuses, we are privileged to minister to 800 to 1000 children, students, and adults in our recovery ministry alone. The hub of the ministry is Celebrate Recovery. Begun by John Baker at Saddleback Church, this biblically-based, twelve-step recovery program has opened the floodgates of hurting and broken people. Every Friday night at two of our campuses and every Tuesday night at the other, we get a front row seat to life change. Every two months, we hold immersion baptism services to baptize anywhere from twelve to sixty new followers of Jesus. Six days a week, we are helping people recover through step studies, recovery Bible studies, and secular recovery groups.

Our understanding and message of recovery is that everybody needs it! Everyone has a hurt, habit, or hang-up that is wrecking his or her life. When I introduce myself, I say "My name is Jorge Acevedo and I'm a follower of Jesus in recovery from alcoholism, perfectionism, and control." This kind of honesty has minimized (but sadly not eliminated) the "us and them" mentality of most recovery ministries. It's also created an attractive evangelism culture where the "fish almost jump in the boat."

At the heart of our church is a simple prayer: "God send us the people nobody

else wants or sees." And God has answered that prayer. For the past thirteen years, alcoholics, drug addicts, co-dependents, sex addicts, the angry, and the just plain messed up have filled Grace Church.

And it's messy! Really messy! Our people relapse. They take advantage. They bring their messed-up kids into the children's and youth ministry. They aren't church-broke. They spill their coffee in the sanctuary. They get up right in the middle of my sermon to go have a smoke. They don't put their babies in the nursery so they scream during prayer. But I've learned to love them. I have to because Jesus loves them.

Three experiences within a year took our commitment to the poor and broken to a new level. The first was a trip to England. In the summer of 2005, my wife Cheryl and I were standing in Wesley's New Room in Bristol, England. The New Room served the Wesleys and the early Methodist movement as a meetinghouse and preacher's overnight accommodations. The curator dressed in full attire gave us a first person monologue from John Wesley about the use of this historic building. Following his speech, a time of questions and answers ensued. Remaining in first person, our curator politely answered our questions.

Betsy Ouellette, one of our clergy on the retreat, asked, "Were these pews here during your time?" Betsy was referring to the pews that were permanently affixed to the floor of the New Room. The curator responded, "Oh no! In my time we used wooden chairs or benches so that after our



By Jorge Acevedo

services we could push them to the corners of the room and use it for a medical clinic or a food ministry.” With these words, I began to softly weep. Something inside me knew that this was a part of the Wesleyan message and ministry that was missing from our church.

The second experience that helped expand our ministry to the poor was attending the Acts 2 Conference at Willow Creek Community Church in October 2005. I had heard Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell speaking on the ministry of Windsor Village United Methodist Church. As he spoke about the community development projects, prayer initiatives, and housing ventures, I wondered, “Could God do something like this with us?” God used Kirbyjon to stir in me a desire to believe God for the impossible.

The third experience that expanded our ministry to the poor happened in the summer of 2006. As I approached my tenth anniversary at Grace Church in 2006, we were planning on building a Spiritual Life Center on the Cape Coral campus. It was a needed but very safe project. Down the street was an abandoned grocery store. It was really big—57,000 square feet on eight and a half acres big! And a price tag to go along with it—5.2 million dollars! Ours was a modest church with modest means. This seemed impossible!

What I sensed God saying to me as I was preparing for the ten-year celebration was this. “Jorge, Grace Church has helped Me clean up the insides of hundreds of broken people over the past eight years. Now I need Grace Church to help Me clean up the outside.”

So I met with our leaders and they sensed the Holy Spirit say, “Buy the grocery store.” And thus the Grace Community Center (www.egracecenter.org) was born. A holistic ministry center was planned to meet the practical needs of our community. Dance classes are offered on Monday and Wednesday nights; GED and parenting classes on Saturdays; homeless ministry on Wednesday; and sports min-

istry throughout the week. On the third Saturday of each month we swing open wide the doors giving away two to three tons of food, fifty to sixty haircuts, and one thousand articles of clothing. Medical screenings and referrals are also made. On Sunday mornings, our third worshiping community attracts between 250 and 300 people, most coming from our outreach ministries. More ministries are in the planning stage right now. To help fund the ministry, we opened a thrift store that sells clothing and other home goods at very cheap prices. We also have the third largest rental space in Lee County, so we rent it to schools, businesses, and other organizations (www.swfleventcenter.com).

Dr. Lyons has gone to heaven but his legacy in my life lives on. He taught me that personal piety and social holiness expressed together were and still are the genius of the Methodist movement. To emphasize one at the expense of the other violates not only our tradition but the clear teaching of scripture. And here’s the other deal. It’s the longing placed by God in the soul of our culture. The un-churched, once-churched and over-churched will flock to a place and people who live this tension.

Ministry to the “least of these” may be the great omission of the Church today but I see things changing. There is a stirring in churches of all theological stripes to wed together a red-hot passion for personal evangelism and discipleship with a compassionate love for the poor, marginalized, and addicted. The world is standing on tippy-toe to see this kind of Church! ☐



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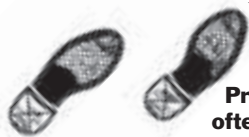
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Action Step

Pray that God would help you see the people our society often overlooks. Make a list of the needs you see in your community and the strengths of your congregation. Assess where your strengths meet others' needs. A congregation with many lawyers may be able to help those in the community needing legal help. A congregation with excellent kitchen facilities may be able to serve lunch to the homeless or elderly. What needs is God revealing to you?