

Philosophy of Ministry: Poverty & Hunger

U.S. Missions Compassion Ministries, June 2015

In Matthew 25, Jesus explains to his disciples that when we help the hungry, we are doing it for Him. Accordingly, the four-fold mission of the Assemblies of God includes “show compassion” as its fourth reason for being. The vision of U.S. Missions is to reach every “special needs group, ethnic group, and cultural environment” in America, “that none perish.” Poverty is, unfortunately, a defining cultural norm for over 15% of Americans, meaning there are daily opportunities to serve Christ by helping to meet the needs of the poor and hungry.

Poverty manifests itself in many settings—from urban communities where crowded public housing offers little opportunity for jobs or stable family life, to rural families struggling to provide basic necessities such as shoes, for children depending on school breakfast and lunch programs for any hope of adequate nutrition. Students in poor communities face significant challenges just to make it to school daily. For many, poverty is cyclical and generational, with no hope of meeting college entrance requirements or getting a job sufficient to meet basic needs. In many communities, poverty goes hand in hand with racial tension, or there is the added burden of being recent immigrants with a language barrier, compounded by limited access to health care and geographical locations that make it difficult to commute to jobs or community colleges. Some families resort to producing or selling illegal drugs as a way to make money, or to the abuse of drugs and alcohol as an attempt to escape the realities of their situations, creating an increased number of children entering the foster care system and making it even more difficult to get a job upon release from incarceration. Other vulnerable young people, looking for a way out of poverty, become easy prey for traffickers.

Varied challenges call for creative and Spirit-led ministry. Biblical mandate and civil law call for respect for authority and working with established governmental policy. Within these frameworks, U.S. missionaries must work to support churches and engage in communities on several levels:

- Encouraging partnership with federal, state, and local anti-poverty initiatives; being familiar with available services.
- Assisting local churches with tools for community outreach, including financial help and training for pastors.
- Helping to establish ministries for dealing with the effects of poverty, such as addiction recovery, prisoner reentry, or mentoring of foster children.
- Working in communities to help residents recognize and develop their own strengths.
- Providing practical opportunities such as job training, budgeting classes, and youth centers.
- Modeling reconciliation, diversity in ministry leadership, and sensitivity to ethnic and cultural issues.

It is important to minister to the poor and needy for the simple reason that Jesus said to do it, but it is equally important to remember that meeting physical needs often opens doors for meeting spiritual needs. Partnership and genuine cooperation with governmental and secular nonprofit entities can present opportunities to speak scriptural solutions into a tense community situation. Conducting a community event through a local church creates natural openings to share the gospel, as does using doctrinally sound, Biblically-based curriculum for financial training or addiction recovery. While ministry can and should have the goal of assisting the poor and hungry in improving their immediate situation, it must also work to evangelize the lost, lead them in the worship of God, and disciple them in their faith as they move toward long-term solutions.