

Caring for the poor



Introduction

BY LESTER BOLEYN

This edition of In Our Midst, prompted by Annual Conference and produced by the General Board, is designed to help congregations identify and respond to the needs of the poor in their communities.

Are you afraid of becoming poor? According to Rebekah Graydon, assistant editor of *Habitat World*, the publication of Habitat for Humanity International, “If you’ve worried about becoming poor at some point in your life, you have plenty of company. In fact, 51 percent of adults in the United States fear they may become poor some day, according to a survey sponsored by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.” Are you one of those people? Do you know someone who is poor, or who worries about becoming poor?

Even if most of us do not fear becoming poor, we surely don’t want to be poor, either. When Jesus was anointed with “very costly ointment” at the house of Simon the leper in Bethany, his disciples “were angry” and protested that the ointment could have been sold to benefit the poor. You know Jesus’ often-quoted response: “You always have the poor with you . . .” (Matt. 26:11). When we use this text to defend why we

don’t help the poor, we are saying that Jesus accepted poverty without concern for those affected by it. But Jesus was simply stating it as a fact: As long as people are the way they are, some will be poor. But we need only to look at Jesus’ lifestyle and his ministry emphasis to know that he cared a lot about those who were caught in the cycle of poverty. Can we do less?



Phil Grout

Perhaps Jesus was calling to mind the laws concerning the sabbatical year. “Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’ (Deut. 15:11). In the parable of the sheep and

the goats (Matt. 25:31-46), Jesus implies that when we help or fail to help those in need, we do the same to him. The psalmist tells us, “I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor” (Ps. 140:12). The prophet Isaiah also challenged attitudes concerning the poor: “Is not this the fast that I choose . . . ? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you

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see them naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isa. 58:6a, 7). And Jesus used the well-known passage from Isaiah 61:1-2 as his own personal mission statement in Luke 4:18-19. If we look at all the biblical evidence, it seems that Jesus’ statement in Matthew 26:11 is telling us that, because they will always be around, we must care for the poor, not ignore them. In fact, Mark’s version of this text adds “. . . and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish . . .” (Mark 14:7).

Obviously the Brethren hear the message this way also. As far back as 1793, as Kenneth Shaffer notes in the historical perspective he writes, Annual Meeting outlined what should be done when a congregation was having trouble providing for the needy. And as recently as the 2000 Annual Conference, the delegate body urged wide engagement with and on behalf of the poor.

This resource, prompted by the 2000 Annual Conference Statement, seeks to provide Church of the Brethren congregations with the basic tools and resources that will help them identify, understand, and respond to the needs of the poor in their communities. In the pages that follow, you will

find stories from congregations that are already working with the poor in their communities. Use these stories to inspire your congregation to do the same. Contact these congregations or Church of the Brethren agencies for information on how you might start your own ministry. You will also find listed other church, parachurch, and secular organizations that are helping people break out of the cycle of poverty. Some of them may be active where you live.

In addition to ideas for making your congregation more aware of who the poor are and how to find and help them, you will find resources for worship and sermons and study on the subject of poverty.

We hope you will encourage your congregation to begin or to continue your ministry to the poor in your community. If you need more information or help, please contact the Congregational Life Ministries office at 800-323-8039.

And please be in prayer for the poor. Jesus’ statement, “You always have the poor with you . . .” is a challenge for Christians to be helpful, not an excuse to do nothing. Let us help you as you go about caring for the poor where you live.