Reframing Poverty for Christian Students

James Hensley
jhensley@fwc.org

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Abstract: *This paper presents a project in which I led a group of students at a suburban Christian school in experiences that challenged them to be more engaged with those in their community who are experiencing an economic disadvantage. At the outset, the two presenting problems were: (1) a lack of experience with those who are at an economic disadvantage; and (2) a prevalence of troubling attitudes about poverty, namely, ambivalence toward helping people who live in poverty. A lack of concern for the poor is contrary to the teachings of Jesus. In response to this problem, two teachers and I led a group of high school students in a 48-hour experience with an urban ministry to those experiencing homelessness. During this time we participated in a poverty simulation, which involved making meals on meager resources, sleeping in shelter-like environments, volunteering at various ministries, and meeting people who were experiencing poverty and homelessness. I evaluated the efficacy of this project by studying field notes, informal interviews, and the assessment of an outside expert. I concluded that the experience was an effective first step in responding to the problem, but that more needs to be done.*

Context

Several years ago during a high school Bible class at a suburban Christian school, I led students in a discussion of Matthew 25. After reading 25:31-46, in which Jesus frames treatment of "the least of these" as a kind of litmus test for righteousness, I made what I expected to be uncontroversial comments about the Christian value of caring for the poor. I avoided the more contentious question of how one ought to put this in to practice, intending only to state the notion that Christians ought to care. To my surprise, students immediately began asking questions that demonstrated ambivalence and in some cases outright hostility toward the poor. Students wanted to know why they should feel obligated to help people who were only, as some saw it, suffering the consequences of their own choices. They worried that any assistance they offered would only enable addictions or

other dangerous behaviors. It became clear that some students believed that poverty in the United States was entirely attributable to individual laziness and poor personal decisions. Consequently, these students felt no moral obligation to care for the poor.

The central focus of my ministry as a Bible teacher is the spiritual formation of students. The above anecdote was one of several indications of a gap in both the theological education and spiritual formation of my students. To study this further, I surveyed the student body and conducted interviews with a small group of students as well as key members of the faculty and administration.[1] The results confirmed the notion that "care for the poor" was not a priority.[2] Students' answers in surveys and interviews demonstrated an individualistic mindset, with little sense of responsibility to disadvantaged individuals in the community.[3] In interviews with school administrators, a theme that emerged was that students simply had little experience with people at an economic disadvantage. Most of all of their experiences took place within a privileged private school bubble. This presented a significant and urgent opportunity for growth, as care for those experiencing an economic disadvantage is a high priority for Christian life and ministry. Consequently, this project addresses the need to challenge students to engage those in their community who are at an economic disadvantage.

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[1] I surveyed 100 students and conducted interviews with eight students and four members of the faculty/staff. Survey questions asked students how much the agreed or disagreed with various statements about their experiences and about poverty. The survey also gave students opportunities to answer open-ended questions about their thoughts on these subjects. The ethnographic research method outlined by Mary Clark Moschella generally guided my research. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

[2] More than two-thirds of students surveyed indicated that they did not see "care for the poor" as an essential component of Christian life. I used the term "poor" in the survey despite my preference for a less dehumanizing phrase like "those at an economic disadvantage" so as to make it more readily understandable to high school students. I also use the term "poor" below when discussing Scripture because that is the way people who are at an economic disadvantage are described in many of the relevant passages.

[3] Mary Douglas's social game theory was particularly helpful. Douglas categorizes social behavior as falling into four categories: authoritarian, hierarchical, individualistic, and egalitarian. After in-depth interviews with eight students in which I asked a series of questions about attitudes and habits in these students' families, I used this paradigm and plotted answers on a grid according to Douglas's theory. Six landed firmly in the individualistic quadrant and none in the more group-oriented egalitarian quadrant. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

Theology

Concern for individuals experiencing poverty is a core value in the ministry of Jesus and throughout Scripture. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus introduces his ministry by quoting Isaiah as follows:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> Because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> And recovery of sight to the blind,
> To let the oppressed go free,
> And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (NRSV).

As a mission statement for the ministry of Jesus, this should also be at the core of contemporary Christian ministry. Richard Hays contends that in these verses Jesus presents "nothing less than a public announcement of his messianic vocation."[4] It has similarly been described as the "foundation stone" for Luke and "likely the most important passage in Luke-Acts."[5] Below, I will briefly explore this passage, including how some of the ideas in it: (a) emerge elsewhere in Luke's Gospel; (b) are continuous with the broader canon of Scripture; and (c) might shape the practices of contemporary Christian communities. Following that, I will describe my attempt to cultivate these values within the context of my ministry.

Jesus's quotation in Luke 4 juxtaposes Isaiah 58:6 with 61:1-2. Isaiah 58 constitutes a command to serve the poor and a reframing of religious life in terms of ministry to the poor, i.e., "Is this not the fast that I choose," (Isa 58:6, NRSV). Isaiah 61, on the other hand, promises a day of ultimate restoration for Israel, announcing "the year of the Lord's favor" (61:2, NRSV). By stitching these two texts together in Luke 4, Jesus advocates a vision of Israel's deliverance that involves justice and mercy for the poor and the marginalized. Richard Hays contends that Jesus's use of Isaiah "places Jesus squarely in line with Israel's prophetic tradition."[6]

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[4] Hays also refers to it as a "programmatic statement" and a "messianic manifesto." Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 115.

[5] Charles A. Kimball, "Jesus's Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke's Gospel," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplemental Series* 94 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 97; James A. Sanders, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," in *Luke and Scripture,* eds. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 69.

[6] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 115.

Furthermore, Hays argues that, by appealing to this tradition and identifying himself as a fulfillment of it, Jesus takes on the role of God's servant portrayed throughout the book of Isaiah.[7] In doing so, Jesus not only conceives of the ministry of God and the ultimate deliverance of Israel as a ministry to the poor and the outcast, but he even defines himself and his own ministry in terms of poverty and social justice. When Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke. 4:21, NRSV), he announces his character and mission. Furthermore, this statement can also characterize the work of the Spirit in ministry to the poor, as Jesus begins with "The Spirit of the Lord is on me."

The theme of caring for the poor emerges throughout the Gospel of Luke, often exemplified through hospitality and charity. Jesus habitually identifies with the poor and shows solidarity with them. As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, Jesus does not speak to the poor from a position of wealth and privilege but as one of the poor himself.[8] Jesus's ministry is supported by the charity of others, according to Luke 8:1-3, and in 9:58 he describes himself as having "nowhere to lay his head" (NRSV). This kind of identification with the poor stands out particularly when one considers the culture in which these teachings and stories are set.

Kyoung-Jin Kim argues in *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke's Theology* that the kind of generosity and hospitality advocated in the Gospel of Luke was quite different from the norms of the day.[9] Although almsgiving was not entirely absent, it was based on a principle of reciprocity rather than genuine concern for others.[10] Luke's ethic seems quite radical when juxtaposed with one that is self-serving and only interested in charity if it benefits the almsgiver. Luke 14:12-14, for example, has Jesus criticizing hospitality that is done merely for the sake of repayment. Here he calls instead for banquet invitations to "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (NRSV), who are unable to repay anyone

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[7] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 115-116.

[8] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 97.

[9] Kyoung-Jin Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving in Luke's Theology* (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 253-83.

[10] Bruce J. Malina describes the patron-client relationships of antiquity as reciprocal but asymmetrical. Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 9.

for the invitations. Such sharing subverts the social norms of the day, looking at the poor as friends instead of mere beneficiaries.[11]

The Parable of the Rich Fool in 12:13-21 and the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19-31 further illustrate Jesus's identification with the poor against the rich. In the parable of the rich fool, the rich man is condemned for nothing more than storing up wealth for himself. The man seeks to build larger and larger barns, and Luke implies that this lifestyle prevents him from being "rich toward God" (12:21, NRSV). Here, richness toward God seems to refer to righteousness, rather than the richness of the world found in wealth or materialism. In 16:19-31, the judgment of the nameless rich man is contrasted with that of the poor man, Lazarus. The reversal of fortunes here, with the rich man condemned and the poor Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, exemplifies Luke's theology of caring for the poor.

Even texts in Luke's Gospel that do not set the poor against the rich in such stark terms still often carry the same theological implications, often through a reversal of expectations. The Parable of the Good Samaritan shows this theme through the charity and mercy of the Samaritan (10:25-37). The compassion of the Samaritan is contrasted with the indifference of the priest and the Levite. Here again Luke reverses expectations by identifying not with the pillars of Israelite religious life, priests and Levites, but with the marginalized—in this case in the form of the cultural and ethnic outsider, the despised Samaritan.[12] In 18:18-30, "a certain ruler" (NRSV) approaches Jesus to ask him what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. After a discussion of the commandments, Jesus concludes that all he lacks is giving up all his possessions to the poor. This example further illustrates the irony and reversal typical to Luke's Gospel. The theology of reversal also shows up in Mary's song, the *Magnificat*. Mary says, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:52-53, NRSV).

Luke's interest in caring for the poor is further illustrated in Jesus's hospitality. The story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (19:1-9) serves as a prime example.[13] At a glance, one might think this story is an odd choice in support of this argument, because Zacchaeus is presented favorably despite being clearly identified as a rich person. However, these themes are

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[11] James A. Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth in Luke's Travel Narrative* (Boston: Brill Academic, 2007), 8.

[12] Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving,* 177.

[13] Zacchaeus serves as a "model of conversion." Joseph A. Grassi, *Informing the Future: Social Justice in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 174-76.

reinforced rather than undermined by this example. Jesus shows hospitality to Zacchaeus by acknowledging him despite the opinion of the crowd, and Jesus also receives hospitality from Zacchaeus by staying at his house even though Zacchaeus is a tax collector and a "sinner." Furthermore, Zacchaeus separates himself from the archetype of "the rich" in Luke because he gives half his wealth to the poor and to anyone he had defrauded.

Luke's theology of caring for the poor also has eschatological implications. This theology has already emerged in the story of the rich ruler, where the question that frames the entire passage involves requirements for eternal life, and in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, where the scene has both Lazarus and the rich man experiencing the consequences of judgment. According to Hays, "Luke places increased emphasis on the theme of eschatological judgment as a warrant for moral behavior in the present time."[14] The idea that moral behavior, particularly with regard to treatment of the poor, has eschatological consequences is not unique to Luke in the canon of scripture. In fact, it is not even unique among the Gospels. Matthew 25:31-46, alluded to above, is the most poignant echo of this idea in the other three Gospels. Here Matthew shows Jesus not only directly attributing one's divine judgment to one's treatment of the poor and needy, but also identifying himself with the poor, saying, "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (Matt 25:45, NRSV, cf. 25:40). More broadly, the eschatological framework of pleas to care for the poor involves the conviction that justice for the poor will finally be achieved by "the coming eschatological reversal."[15] By working toward that goal now, followers of Jesus can lean into that kingdom and live under God's sovereignty "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10, NRSV).

This theology shares continuity with not only the other Gospels but also the Hebrew Bible. As Hays puts it, "the constancy of God's purpose is to be discerned above all in the deep correspondences between the Old Testament and Luke's Gospel story."[16] Luke is not introducing something wholly new with this emphasis on caring for the poor but is echoing a major theme of the Torah and the prophets. "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land," says Deuteronomy 15:11 (NRSV). Likewise, Exodus 22:21-27 sets forth laws concerning the treatment of immigrants, widows, orphans, and the poor. Israelites were not to take interest on loans

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[14] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 129.

[15] "Eschatological reversal" refers to the notion that justice for the poor will be fully realized at the final coming of God's kingdom. Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 161.

[16] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 113.

given to the poor, and oppression or abuse of other socially marginalized groups was forbidden. Leviticus 25 sets further social safeguards and provisions for the poor and marginalized. The year of jubilee would mean liberty from both slavery and from debt.

These values are even more evident in the Hebrew prophets.[17] Those who use their wealth and power to exploit the poor and marginalized receive some of the harshest criticism in the Old Testament prophetic books. The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard in Isaiah 5 tells of a vineyard that was destroyed because of the bad fruit it produced.[18] Isaiah then identifies the vineyard as Israel and Judah and the bad fruit as injustice and violence (5:7). The prophet criticizes "you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you" (5:8, NRSV). This indictment of the wealthy and the powerful in ancient Israel characterizes a major theme of Isaiah and other biblical prophets. Jeremiah 22 echoes these sentiments. Here the prophet equates justice and righteousness with good treatment of the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow (22:3). As in Isaiah 5, those who acquire wealth by injustice and oppression and those who use power to exploit and abuse the weak are condemned. Some of the most impactful language against injustice is found in Amos 5:11-12, where the prophet says:

> Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate (NRSV).

Amos goes on to describe the "day of the Lord" as a time of ultimate retribution for these evils. As in the New Testament, the use (or misuse) of wealth and power, particularly as it relates to the poor and marginalized of society, constitutes a central element in God's judgment of humanity.

Thus far I have argued that caring for the poor plays a major role in the broad canon of Scripture, especially in Luke's Gospel, as shown in 4:16-21. I have not yet asked the more important question of how this forms and

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[17] For an analysis of this subject, see Hemchand Gossai, *Justice, Righteousness and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Prophets*, American University Studies Series VII: Theology and Religion (New York: Lang, 1993).

[18] Cf. Luke 20:9-19

informs our life together as Christians and members of society. In other words, how might the faith communities that follow Jesus better practice the kind of jubilee that Jesus announces in Luke 4? It is one thing to say that the idea of justice for the poor is an important theme in Scripture, but it is quite another thing to identify a set of practices to live out this value. Should all Christians be required to give up their possessions as Jesus suggests in Luke 18? Or should Zacchaeus's response of giving up half his possessions and repaying those he defrauded be considered normative?

One way to look at this problem is to ask what precisely the transgressions of the rich are.[19] Is wealth itself condemned, or perhaps just overconsumption? The story of the rich young ruler would seem to indicate the former, while the story of the wealthy landowner in Luke 12 would suggest the latter. Perhaps Luke is simply calling for a different perspective toward wealth. Luke 8:1-3 suggests that Jesus depended on the rich to provide for his needs. The rich are not universally condemned, but more may be required of them than of others (Luke 12:48). Pilgrim frames Luke's message as a call for the rich toward "a new evaluation of possessions and their place in the Christian life and Christian community."[20] In this view, wealth is not wholly rejected, but it is radically shared with the needy.[21] Pilgrim goes on to say that Christians ought to "adopt the Zacchaeus principle for sharing wealth . . . simplify the way we live . . . become advocates for the poor . . . and oppose systems that perpetuate social injustices and inequalities."[22] Similarly, Metzger characterizes Luke's ethic not as a complete renunciation of wealth but as a call for generous charity without expectation of repayment.[23]

Luke Timothy Johnson argues in *Sharing Possessions* that these texts are less about a specific set of rules than about an "orientation to the world" that should shape what it means to be Christian.[24] Johnson argues convincingly that the sharing of possessions is indeed a "mandate of faith," but the particular way in which that mandate is put into practice will vary

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[19] Luise Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, *Jesus and the Hope of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986) 89.

[20] Pilgrim, *Good News,* 164.

[21] Ibid., 165.

[22] Ibid., 172-75.

[23] Metzger also emphasizes the distinctions between the lessons of the various stories in Luke. He argues that there is no way to arrive at a single perspective without conflating these messages, so the distinct voices should be preserved. Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth*, 189.

[24] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 31.

widely according to the situation.[25] As such, there can be no universal criteria on this issue. Instead, the sharing of possessions is, according to Johnson, a "symbol" of the proper response to God and of the Christian life. Luke brings up questions that followers of Jesus should be asking, but he does not offer universal answers.

The early church embodied these values. In Acts, Luke describes the church in Jerusalem as a community that shared wealth and possessions "as any had need" (2:44-45, NRSV). A significant theme in Paul's epistles is taking up a collection for the poor (e.g., 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15). During the Patristic period, practices of justice and hospitality are so ubiquitous that, according to Amy Oden, "one encounters it at every turn, under every rock, around every corner."[26] Oden makes a convincing case that such practices were not only present in early Christianity, but they were the norm. Likewise, Everett Ferguson identifies eleven distinct examples in early Christian writings that convey the value of what he labels "acts of mercy."[27] Ferguson characterizes these efforts as a part of Christian worship. Early Christian communities saw practices of mercy, justice, and hospitality as a moral imperative.[28] Promoting justice in society at large was not seen as peripheral to Christianity but was instead an essential part of living out its core values.[29]

Based on these biblical and historical precedents, the contemporary church should also embody principles of caring for the poor through acts of hospitality, mercy, and charity. While there are instances of the contemporary church focusing on the poor, the major emphasis seems to be more on personal salvation. Luke Timothy Johnson asks why the church seems to only conceive of sin as "weaknesses of the flesh" and ignores economic injustices.[30] If care for the poor is, as I have argued, such a central biblical ethic, then why does it seem to sit on the periphery of Christian praxis? Johnson also points out the church has historically been an

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[25] Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 138.

[26] Amy G. Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 11.

[27] Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak,* 3rd ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999), 203-211.

[28] Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 15-16.

[29] Robert Louis Wilken notes that, at least by the time of Augustine, it was not viable for Christians to consider social justice "someone else's responsibility." Wilken writes that, for Augustine, true worship is not possible without justice. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 186-211.

[30] Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus*, 95.

institution of wealth and power far more than it has been one of weakness and poverty. If the church takes seriously Jesus's statement that it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24), then perhaps the wealthy should be pitied instead of admired. This is counterintuitive partly because of the ways in which values of individualism and materialism have permeated American life.[31]

The church must find ways to challenge the cultural norms of individualism through practices of mercy and hospitality. But, again, what might that look like in contemporary Christian life? Hays demonstrates that it may be done through the practice of corporate sharing of wealth and possessions.[32] The communal dimension is important because the biblical witness on this seems to be more focused on the identity of the people of God than it is on any individual's success or failure to meet a standard of behavior. The people of God should share with one another communally so that their identity and character is one of justice. The specific method of this sharing must adapt to the various contexts in which Christian communities exist. Hays uses the word "sharing" to describe this practice because he contends that a radical abandonment of wealth and possessions is not always called for. Sharing also reflects the Christian notion that wealth and possessions should be thought of in terms of stewardship rather than ownership.[33] Again, there is no single rule for how this should be done. Instead, each Christian community must "respond in imaginative freedom," creatively living out these values in a way that makes sense in their particular context.[34] Because this understanding of Luke avoids specific prescriptions, perhaps it is better understood as a direction in which to aim than as a roadmap for how to get there. Luke does not command a specific set of actions or behaviors but a more general reorientation regarding poverty and possessions.

Intervention

The problem of this study led to an evaluation and intervention that aimed at the reorientation discussed above. In order to begin to make

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[31] William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Jen Hatmaker, *7: An Experimental Mutiny Against Excess* (Nashville: B&H, 2012); Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann, and John McKnight, *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

[32] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 466-67.

[33] Kim, *Stewardship and Almsgiving*, 285.

[34] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 469.

progress in this arena I needed to find ways to immerse students in contexts of poverty in ways that they had not had the opportunity to experience before. Experiences that lead them to confront the realities of poverty could function in a similar way to Luke's presentation of the parables and narratives of Jesus. Just as the parables and narratives about Jesus lead readers to question their own values and desires, I thought that perhaps I might challenge my students to do the same. I attempted to do this by immersing students in a context in which they might see positive examples of Christian ministry to economically disadvantaged individuals and encounter people living in poverty who do not conform to some of the students' preconceived notions about such people. I hoped that if students engaged in this kind of experience and if sufficient reflection occurred during and after the experience, the change I hoped for might begin to occur.

My ethnographic research revealed the students' attitudes about poverty were in large part due to lack of experience. Students simply had little to no experience with people who lived in poverty. In interviews, faculty members and administrators noted that the suburban private school bubble isolates students from much of their community, perhaps working to maintain ignorance about poverty. Prior to this project, the most important school-sponsored activities that might have countered this were short-term international mission trips. Although many students spoke about the value of international mission trips and how such experiences were eye-opening for them, these experiences did not seem to correct the attitudes described above. They may have in fact been counterproductive in that they established the notion that Christian mission and ministry is something that happens elsewhere, after a long plane ride, rather than in one's own community. Various groups within the school had occasionally participated in brief service projects in partnership with local churches and organizations. These, too, were ineffective with regard to the problem of this study. Simply painting a wall or stocking a shelf at a food pantry, though good and worthwhile, likely would not challenge one's basic attitudes about poverty. I wanted to find something more transformative for this project. My hope was to cultivate both a concern for, and active engagement with, those in their community who were experiencing poverty. In response to all this, I partnered with a local ministry to urban homeless individuals and conducted a "poverty simulation." This experience was designed with many of these concerns in mind. With

nineteen high school students and three faculty members, we went on a 48-hour excursion to learn about poverty.[35]

We began with a group discussion about poverty including a budgeting exercise that demonstrated how difficult it is for, as an example, a single mother who works full-time at minimum wage to earn enough money to support her family. After writing out a realistic budget, students were divided into groups and asked to come up with ideas for what one might be able to do in such a situation. This exercise alone began to erode some of the assumptions with which students had entered. Students' comments indicated that they learned from this conversation that poverty was more difficult and complex than they had previously thought, with no easy solutions. One student said, "All our best ideas were bad ideas."

Following this introductory exercise, students were given five dollars and two bus passes, which constituted the entirety of their resources for food and transportation for the remainder of the experience. [36] Students were divided into three groups, and one person in each group was given no money and no bus passes. This person had to work with their group to figure out what to do. This immediately presented a problem because the neighborhood was a 'food desert,' where grocery stores were few and far between.[37] Because not everyone had bus passes, students chose to walk two miles to the nearest store to buy food for the remainder of the time there. Each evening after dinner we had a group discussion about the experience and what students were thinking and learning. During these conversations we also explored the relevant theological issues and considered some of the biblical texts mentioned above.

The first night everyone slept on cold concrete floors in a multipurpose room simulating the experience of sleeping in a shelter. The following day the three groups rotated through three experiences. One was a "homeless experience," which involved a tour of the area and a

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[35] All high school students were introduced to the project in a chapel service, during which I explained both the theological foundation of the project and the experience itself. After several meetings and conversations, nineteen students eventually committed to participate. There were sophomore, junior, and senior students in the group. Some of these students had previous experiences with mission trips and service projects, but others had none.

[36] This amount was chosen to approximate the value of four meals using only funds from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, colloquially known as food stamps).

[37] Nathan Berg and James Murdoch, "Access to Grocery Stores in Dallas," *International Journal of Behavioural and Healthcare Research* 1 1 (2008): 22-37.

conversation with the ministry's neighbor specialist.[38] The following three hours were then spent doing nothing, which, according to the ministry's representatives, is typical of a homeless neighbor. This time was intended to help students imagine what it might feel like to have nowhere to go and nothing to do. The second activity was the "living in poverty experience," which lasted approximately three hours. This experience included touring the ministry's Opportunity Center and hearing an explanation of the programs available to those who are working but live in poverty. The group also toured a downtown vertical resident community, with units reserved for formerly homeless people and the people who were working but still experiencing poverty. The third activity was the "working experience," which involved volunteering for three hours at a thrift store and food pantry. This activity was intended to allow students to reflect on how a difficult night's sleep in a shelter, taking public transportation, and possibly not having sufficient food can all affect one's productivity on the job. After these three activities, the groups then reconvened at the Opportunity Center for dinner and a time for reflecting on everyone's experiences of the day. That night, the group experienced a simulation of homelessness by sleeping in the outdoor courtyard of the Opportunity Center. The following morning the experience concluded with a group breakfast and a few hours of discussion and reflection.

Evaluation Methodology and Results

In order to evaluate the efficacy of the experience, I collected data from three different points of view. These three provide a researcher angle, an insider angle, and an outsider angle, allowing for a triangulated data set.[39] The primary advantage of this approach is that it prevents the researcher from making unsound conclusions due to having a limited vantage point.[40] The first of these three angles, the researcher angle, consists of field notes. These field notes catalogued my observations, impressions,

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[38] This included a look at a "tent city" underneath a nearby overpass, where dozens of homeless people lived in tents.

[39] Triangulation is a way of gathering data from distinct sources in order to cross check potential conclusions. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 75; Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd ed. (Newbury Park, CA, Sage, 1990), 187-8.

[40] Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 267.

and initial analyses shortly after the event.[41] The second angle, the insider angle, consisted of data from informal interviews with students. Informal interviews are essentially casual, open-ended conversations.[42] I planned for these interviews to be unstructured and to take place in the school hallway, after class, at lunch, or whenever students were available for a conversation. This strategy was preferable because students might not be available for more formal, in-depth interviewing. For the outsider angle, I arranged to ask an independent expert to assess the project's impact.[43] The value of an outsider's perspective is significant because he or she can look at the context and the intervention without many of the biases that might limit the researcher or insiders. Furthermore, the outsider may have expertise that enables a more accurate evaluation the project. In this case, I arranged for someone who had experience both with student groups like mine and with our homeless ministry partners. After the trip, he came to our school and led a conversation with the students. Following this, he wrote a brief summary of his analysis. This summary was the third data set for triangulation. Because qualitative research data can often be difficult to analyze and evaluate in meaningful ways, I coded the results in order to find patterns and filter the information.[44]

These three angles of evaluation all indicated that the experience challenged students in ways that I hoped it might. My field notes were full of quotes from students such as, "Poverty is a lot harder than I thought," and, "There's no easy answer." Some statements indicated that what they experienced helped them to see people at an economic disadvantage as real people rather than subjects of argument. One said, "We have these ideas about our rights, but yesterday, when I looked at those people, I realized that God thinks about them the same way he thinks about me. Once you understand that, the other stuff does not matter." Others were connecting what they saw to their own life experience. After sleeping uncomfortably the first night, I heard one student ask another, "Can you imagine what it would be like to have to go to school after sleeping like that every night?"

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[41] For a discussion of the value and legitimacy of field notes as a data set, see Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 387-89.

[42] "The strength of the informal conversational approach is that it allows the interviewer/evaluator to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes." Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation*, 281-82.

[43] Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 223; Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 172-73.

[44] Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 55, 56-57; Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 3-6.

After seeing the "tent city," where dozens of people live under a highway overpass, one student asked, "How many bridges have I gone over not knowing that there were people living underneath?" Perhaps the most frequent comment I heard was simply that poverty was exhausting. It was not lost on students that they were experiencing only an imitation of poverty and only for two days, but they nevertheless were struck by how tiring it was.

Interviews with students also demonstrated that the experience had an impact. Several students indicated that they had been talking with family and friends about what they could do to make an impact in the community. Without prompting from me or the other adults involved, a group of students organized a trip back to the ministry we partnered with in order to participate in a worship service for those experiencing homelessness in that neighborhood. Others spoke of organizing donation drives and local opportunities to spend time with people experiencing homelessness. Some students said that the experience had caused them to rethink how they spend their money, and expressed dissatisfaction with their previous habits. Some answers showed engagement with the theological side of this project. One student said, in reference to homeless individuals, "I think about that Scripture where the rich man is told by Jesus to give up everything and he has such a hard time. I think these people might be closer to God than we are." Others made comments that alluded to Matthew 25 and Luke 4.

Not all the interview answers were encouraging. Some students expressed cynicism about the long-term impact of the experience, which was beyond my ability to assess for this project. Some also commented that the students who would benefit most from this kind of experience would likely not volunteer. This was a necessary limitation of the project, though, because forcing students to participate would not be appropriate. Nevertheless, the majority of the data suggested that the experience was a positive one. The independent expert concluded his evaluation of the project by writing, "The students, in my estimation, understand that the problems of poverty are complex. They understand that poverty can happen to a whole host of vulnerable people and that poverty is not always directly linked to bad choices by the individual. They appear to be emotionally involved in the reality of poverty." Although the scope of this project precluded complete resolution of the problem at hand, it was an effective first step towards deconstructing long-held beliefs and attitudes toward poverty.

Conclusion

This project was richly meaningful for me, for the students involved, and for the school as a whole. Ministry leaders in other contexts who share similar values might choose to replicate these experiences in their own settings. Although this particular poverty simulation experience might not be available, it would not be too difficult to set up similar experiences in other urban contexts. Although each context is unique, the beneficial impact seen here might be duplicated elsewhere. For my ministry context, this project was an effective first step to address the problem I identified, but much remains to be done. This project was only a first step in addressing these issues. Several ideas have come along since this experience, some as a direct result of this project and some unrelated. One recent idea involves partnering with an organization that reunites homeless neighbors with relatives. Another idea involves working with a local community garden program that provides vegetables for refugee communities. I hope that this experience is followed by many more as I seek to more fully and faithfully lead students in spiritual formation.

James Hensley was born in 1983 in Kansas City, Missouri. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Harding University in 2004, a Master of Divinity degree from Abilene Christian University in 2008, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Abilene Christian University in 2016. Since 2008, he has taught high school Bible classes at Fort Worth Christian School in North Richland Hills, Texas. His primary areas of interest are spiritual formation and social justice.