

## WHY BE INVOLVED WITH THE POOR IN AMERICA?

First Baptist Church

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The biblical basis for being involved in working with the poor through the Together for Hope emphasis is:

We are called to bring a heart of compassion towards those living in poverty.

We are called to follow God's commitment of compassion.

We are called to understand that God does not see those that live in wealth greater than those that live in poverty.

We are called to learn from those we encounter in poverty.

We are called to serve others in a spirit of humility.

Poverty or being poor is mentioned in the Bible 2100 times, therefore it must be a very important issue. If this was important to God, then why aren't low wages, inadequate health care and substandard housing not important to us as Christians in 2008?

Shouldn't our acts of mercy come from love rather than from tax breaks and inferred guilt? It has always amazed me at how so many churches prepare Thanksgiving food baskets for needy as if that is the only time during the year that they need a special food box.

The Bible classifies the causes of poverty into four different categories:

1. Oppression and fraud
2. Misfortune, persecution or judgment
3. Laziness, neglect or gluttony
4. Culture of Poverty

Proverbs 10:15 says: "wealth protects the rich; poverty destroys the poor". Poverty breeds poverty and the cycle is not easily broken. People who grow up in an impoverished culture usually lack the education that would enable them to be successful in the future. Poor nutrition, poor education, poor work

habits or lack thereof and poor family relationships can easily condemn someone to perpetual poverty.

The Church and Christians must exercise their prophetic voice and speak out against abuse and misuse of power. The poor should not be exploited and defrauded. We need a welfare system that emphasizes work and initiative and does not foster dependence and laziness. If people have true needs we should help them but, when they are lazy and have poor work habits, we should admonish them to improve. Proverbs 6:6 says that we are to admonish laziness and poor habits that lead to poverty. We must help people to begin taking responsibility for their own lives.

Christians must use their gifts and abilities to help those in poverty. Social action and evangelism often work hand in hand. When we meet people's physical needs, we often open up opportunities to share with them the love of Christ. At the recent New Baptist Covenant meeting, several speakers spoke on various issues that surround the topic of poverty. Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund made the following statements and I quote: "Churches ought to be the locomotive and not the caboose in speaking up for children."

- Thirteen million children in America live in poverty; 5.6 million are in extreme poverty.
- Every 36 seconds a child is born into poverty in the US.
- Every 9 seconds a child drops out of school.
- 58% of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders can't read at grade level.
- 6 million school children come home alone after school.

There are over 77,000 Baptist churches in the US of all stripes. What if each church just adopted one or two families that are in poverty? What a difference that would make !

Shouldn't we as Christians and as Baptists have a prophetic voice? What about dental, care for our children and adults? In KY they are trying to pass a law to require all students entering school to have a dental certificate. But what if there are no dentists in your county? What if you have to drive 25-50 miles to find a dentist or if you don't have a car or phone or money to pay for the gas to get there?

I believe that we have a priority and values problem in America and in most of our churches. I lived in Togo, Africa for 9.5 years. I worked with families in extreme poverty but many, especially the Christians, were rich in spirit. I did not expect to find people in America living without electricity and running water.

My Togolese friends would never believe that there are people in America living like this.

You have partnered to work in Nada and Owsley County in Kentucky. Let me give you a brief snapshot of these two areas. Nada is a pocket of poverty that consists of about 50 families. These families live in old trailers and campers and a few houses. They have no proper water or sewage system. Some families have no water or electricity. The Nada Baptist Mission averages 12-15 in worship on Sunday afternoons. There are some long-standing feuds that are keeping some from attending church. The church building and parking lot is the community center, you might say. There is nothing for the children and youth to do.

Owsley County is 30 miles down the road from Nada. Booneville, the county seat town, has a population of 250 with approximately 4800 in the county. It is the poorest county in Kentucky and the 5<sup>th</sup> poorest in the US. Eight years ago there were some 800 tobacco farmers and today there are maybe 12. The financial impact of this has already closed some small businesses and gas stations. Congregations are declining. There are less than 900 students in the school system and they only have one elementary and one high school. For those who do work, they must drive 45 minutes to 2 hours for jobs. There is nothing in this community for the children and youth except for very limited youth activities at their small churches.

45% of the children in Kentucky live in poverty. Can you believe that there are teenagers who have never been to McDonalds or to Wal-Mart? How can you complete college applications if your parents don't read, you have limited computer/internet access, don't have a car and have no one to guide you through the process?

In a new community development book by Dr. Doris Littrell called Practicing Community Development she states that when communities have shrinking populations and changing demographics and businesses close, often the major institution left in these communities is religious. This is certainly true of Nada and Owsley County.

Together for Hope initiative through CBF in the next 13 years hopes to make a difference in the lives of individuals and communities. One author states that the most effective approaches to reducing poverty should be as comprehensive as possible, addressing both individual and community issues while striving to break the vicious cycles that interlock them. I think that often we forget our roles as advocates for the poor in civic and government arenas.

We know that the Bible says that we shall always have the poor with us. Deut. 15:11 says: "There will always be some Israelites who are poor and in need, and so I command you to be generous to them."

If God has blessed you with wealth, look for opportunities to give it away prudently. If God has blessed you with great abilities, use them for His glory.

We are NOT called to succeed but to OBEY. Thank you for being obedient. Thank you for your ongoing efforts to make a difference in people's lives in eastern Kentucky. My prayer is that through all of our various efforts...the difference will be eternal. ■