

Discipling the Urban Poor: Observations from the Field.

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ABSTRACT

For many years we had been thinking of the huge challenge of reaching the totally unreached youth in our nation. A majority of these youth were Sinhala or Tamil-speaking and came from economically poor backgrounds. We decided to concentrate on these youth, a move which involved a major cultural shift for us. For the past thirty-three years or so my primary ministry has been with the urban poor. This includes our ministry in the local Methodist Church in which my wife and I helped restart about thirty-three years ago, after it had died down. Most of the members of this church are first generation Christians from economically poor backgrounds. This paper will reflect on our attempts to apply principles of discipleship in our ministry with the urban poor.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1960s the Founder Director of Youth for Christ (YFC), Sri Lanka, Sam Sherrard, was going through the list of all who had made commitments to Christ through our ministry and was troubled by how little contact the ministry had with these young people. This led him to a search for a better methodology of follow-through care for our ministry. Around this time he read, two books, both of which first appeared in 1963: *New Testament Follow-Up* by Waylon B. Moore¹ and *The Master Plan of Evangelism* by Robert Coleman.² The result was a revolution in Sherrard's understanding of ministry: he saw the need for follow-through care of those who made commitments and the value of leaders discipling a few people. He abandoned his plans for rapid expansion of the ministry and determined that he would pour himself into the lives of a few people. He assured his supervisors who were a bit worried about the shift that once a good leadership base is developed, the ministry would not only expand but would also find a stable financial support base through volunteers who have been discipled.

Over forty years later, we can say that what he predicted has happened. The ministry now operates through 150 ministry points (like youth clubs) all over the country. Most of the eighty staff and 560 volunteers it works through met Christ and were discipled in Youth for Christ. Discipling remains a key aspect of our ethos.

Around 1978 there was another major shift in the ministry's strategy. YFC had been working primarily with English-speaking, middle-class, nominal Christian youth partly because of the lack of good youth ministries in most churches. Now youth fellowships had begun to spring up in many churches. For many years we had been thinking of the huge challenge of reaching the totally unreached youth in our nation. A majority of these youth were Sinhala or Tamil-speaking and came from economically poor backgrounds. We decided to concentrate on these youth, a move

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This paper will reflect on our attempts to apply principles of discipleship in our ministry with the urban poor.³

TWO LEGITIMATE MODELS OF MINISTRY AMONG THE POOR

When one thinks of ministry to the poor, the first impression that comes is that of great socio-economic need. I have come to the conviction that the glaring and urgent need to remedy inequality in the world requiring large-scale humanitarian assistance programs cannot be adequately met by groups following the typical discipling model of ministry. The discipling model works through pastoral care of individuals. There are so many physically needy people in the world and substantial financial assistance available for them that we simply would not have the ability, if we were to use the discipling model, to help as many people as need to be helped and to make best use of all the available funds. Discipling is a labor-intensive ministry, as it calls for people to get close to individuals and minister comprehensively to their spiritual, social, physical and mental needs. Youth for Christ has primarily adopted the discipling model of ministry. Christian social service organizations can admirably fulfill the need for larger relief and development initiatives among the poor. I believe they are an important segment of the body of Christ.

This division of responsibilities among groups within the body of Christ has become necessary in many countries for practical rather than theological reasons. It is necessary for the church to have a holistic ministry. But in some countries it is not advisable, and sometimes not legally permitted, to combine larger social programs with evangelism. In Sri Lanka this may soon be prohibited by law, and already organizations with both social and proclamation ministries in their primary objectives are not being granted government registration. The allegation is that unethical allurement are being offered through socio-economic assistance to “bribe” people into becoming Christians. People who convert to Christianity are often told that they have betrayed their family religion for a bag of provisions.

The above environment may necessitate the separation of evangelism from major social projects for, as I said, practical rather than theological reasons. The body of Christ, represented by Christian relief and development organizations, is responsible for uplifting the socio-economic lot of people. The body of Christ, represented by evangelistic organizations and churches, is responsible for evangelizing and discipling people. A few decades ago Evangelicals pitted social action against evangelism. Then we had a stage when social action was presented as a partner of evangelism within a given body. Now, in some countries like Sri Lanka, major social projects are done by some segments of the body of Christ distinct from evangelism which is done by other segments.

After the tsunami hit Sri Lanka in December 2004, for four months our ministry gave all its time for relief, working in schools to enable students and those associated with them to recover from the tsunami. It was a time of intense and very exhausting ministry. But we could not proactively share the gospel with those we were ministering to because we were permitted into the schools on the condition that we do not do so. Of course, the friendships forged sometimes resulted in subsequent evangelistic fruit through personal work. After four months we decided that we will

return to our primary call to evangelism, though we continued with some social (mainly educational) programs. We refused many offers of funding for large social projects as we needed to get back to our vocation as youth evangelists (for which raising funds was much more difficult).

Separating these two types of ministry is helpful for other reasons too. Many poor people do not have a personal identity of which they are proud and wish to guard. Owing to this, it would not be a major issue for them to leave their family religion, in order to join a religious group which offers them economic assistance. This could result in people becoming Christians for reasons other than the core of the Christian faith. This is an inadvisable situation both for the “convert” and for the church. The separation of economic assistance and evangelism as outlined above could be a way out of this situation.

In our early years of working with the poor, seeing the desperate need to assist families in their economic development, we launched some schemes to give loans to enable them to begin income generating projects. Soon we found out that it was almost impossible for our workers to recover the loans. Evangelists do not make good debt collectors! Youth for Christ subsequently launched a sister organization that operates independent of us which has been much more successful in such ministries.

Of course, there will be overlap in the functions performed by each ministry group. Ministries majoring on social work and those majoring on evangelism will, to varying extents, have some aspects of the programs of the other ministry group. For example, local churches with a vibrant evangelistic ministry may also have some very significant social projects. Also it would be wise for those in each group to be aware of and learn from the best principles and practices driving those in the other group. Workers in development organizations should adopt incarnational lifestyles in keeping with the model of Christ. The picture of the social worker coming from outside and delivering aid to the people without establishing friendship with them is a denial of many Christian principles and often fosters animosity towards the social service workers among those who are recipients of the aid. On the other hand, those discipling people from poorer backgrounds must do all they can to ensure that they are treated justly by society and must help them in every way possible to develop economically and socially.

While major social projects may not be part of our program, teaching on social responsibility should be part of the regular discipleship curriculum. Following Christ includes being committed to the poor and to their economic needs and to ensuring justice to them. In Youth for Christ we have challenged our volunteers to consider vocations which are connected to poverty alleviation. We are happy that many of them have gone into such vocations working both in the government and the non-government organization (NGO) sectors. Volunteers and alumni are serving as teachers schools in economically deprived areas. Presently the CEOs of four of the six largest Christian social service agencies in Sri Lanka are Youth for Christ alumni and there are several alumni serving in the other two.

Another important aspect of the discipling of young volunteers would be giving them opportunities to be involved, at least in a small way, in meeting the socio-economic needs of others. On my part, despite restrictions within my ministry to involvement in heavy social projects, I have made it a priority to be available to Christian Social service agencies to minister to those working in them as a counselor, theological advisor and Bible teacher.

THE BIBLE HIGHLIGHTS MEETING SOCIO-ECONOMIC NEEDS

Deuteronomy 15:4 presents what an ideal society should look like saying, “But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess.” But that same passage recognizes that this ideal will not be attained in reality, thus requiring generosity towards the poor: “For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land’ ” (15:11). After the Jerusalem church leaders accepted the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, the one request they made related to the poor: “Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Gal. 2:10). All Christians must be concerned about the needs of the poor. Russian Christian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), is reported to have said, “Bread for myself is a material problem. Bread for my neighbor is a spiritual problem.” God’s solidarity with the poor is expressed in Proverbs 19:17: “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.”

Elaborate laws are given in the Old Testament to ensure that the poor are cared for and not exploited and that their honor in society is preserved.⁴ In individualistic countries in the west, the idea is common that if only the poor work hard they can get out of poverty. Examples are given of people who did this. But these are exceptions to the rule, rather than the norm. Though the system in society may theoretically give opportunity for all to prosper, the poor often do not know how to use the system. There is also the problem of low motivation. If a group of people has been treated as inferior in an earlier time in their history, the affects of that treatment last for several generations. And often to compensate for their sense of inadequacy many within the group resort to alcohol. So alcoholism is very high among the urban poor. Therefore intervention from outside attempting to break the cycle of poverty is essential when working with the urban poor. Later we will see that our assistance to the poor should have as a primary aim helping them come out of poverty rather than meeting their immediate needs.

THE GREATEST NEED IS FOR THE GOSPEL

The Messiah’s Ministry. While the great need for socio-economic assistance is great, the greatest need of the urban poor or for any group in society is for the gospel. It is significant that with the coming of the Messiah special mention is made of the preaching of the gospel to the poor. Jesus highlighted this in his inaugural Nazareth message (Luke 4:18). When answering the question of John the Baptist about whether he was the Messiah, among the evidences Jesus gave of his messiahship was that “the poor have good news preached to them” (Luke 7:22). The gospel is the greatest treasure on earth, and it was significant in Christ’s time (and today) that those that society considers weak and insignificant have access to it.

Attracting People through Felt Needs. Proclaiming the gospel to the poor brings with it some special challenges. Most people are attracted to Christ by the hope that he will help meet their felt needs. The affluent may be attracted by Christ as the answer to the problems of guilt or loneliness, or the need for significance, identity, security, or emotional healing. For the poor the major battle is for survival, and their major felt needs are usually physical. So they are attracted by the prospect of healing, of wealth, and of assistance with such needs as hunger, education, and

housing. In our experience, while these are the common needs attracting adults from the urban poor, the needs with youth are primarily for a place of acceptance and fun that is different to the hostile environment elsewhere in society. A recent survey done among urban youth from poor backgrounds and from other faiths who accepted the gospel showed that the most attractive feature of the gospel to them was the hope that Christianity offered and the prospect of a bright future in relationship with God.⁵

In evangelism in the New Testament also we see that the meeting of needs through signs and wonders plays an important role in arresting people, so that their attention is won. So the apostles prayed, “...stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4:30). While studying to write a commentary on Acts⁶ I made the surprising discovery that the chief miracle-workers in Acts, like Peter, Stephen and Paul, were also apologists. The attention was won through miracles, but the talks that ensued, focused on who Jesus was and what he had done. Sadly, today most skillful apologists do not have a ministry of praying for God’s intervention in meeting needs and the messages of most ministers ministering in the miraculous focus on felt needs rather than the person and work of Christ.

The result of needs-oriented preaching is that people become Christians primarily because God meets their felt needs. They view Christianity primarily on those terms. They regard God in the same way that they would regard a medical doctor, as the answer to specific problems. Their primary approach to God is not as the Lord of their life and their Savior from sin. Even in churches where the gospel is conscientiously explained, those who were first attracted by felt needs tend to keep that experience as the dominant feature of their understanding of Christianity. I believe we have attempted to carefully explain the gospel to the members of our church. One Sunday at the start of an evangelistic message in our church I asked the congregation what the biggest need of a human being was. Initially all those who answered mentioned things like the need for food, clothing, shelter, health and housing. I kept telling them that perhaps there was a bigger need. After a considerable number of such answers a lady, who was formally a Buddhist, said, “Oh... the need for a relationship with God.”

We may think that this way of being attracted to Christianity gives evidence of motives which are unworthy of the gospel. We must remember that none of us in our fallen state can produce pure motives as to deserve salvation. Salvation is all of grace. Yet, people can be so blinded by their immediate needs that they find it difficult to see the heart of the gospel. James Boice is credited to have said, “What you win them by, you win them to.” We must attempt to clearly explain the gospel before calling them to respond to accept the Christian message. And after they have made such a commitment, pains need to be taken to further explain the nature of salvation to these new believers.

The Danger of Ignoring Spiritual Lostness. The felt physical needs of the poor are many and urgent. They are also initially more visible than the spiritual needs of the poor. Often it is easier to raise funds for socio-economic projects than for evangelistic ministry. Social projects are usually more highly regarded in society than evangelistic ministries. Therefore it is easy for the church to neglect the spiritual lostness of people and major on other kinds of ministries. YFC has also confronted this danger. Meeting immediate physical needs could be so time-consuming and challenging that we can overlook their more urgent need for salvation.

In view of this danger we have felt that it is always important to keep before our eyes on the reality of the lostness of people without Christ. We need to take seriously the call of Paul to “...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). Lostness is forever, and however much we help people with their physical needs, our work is not complete until we have confronted the more urgent need of their lostness.

SPECIAL CHALLENGES IN DISCIPLING

Once the urban poor come to Christ, the traditional methods of discipling as described in *The Master Plan of Evangelism* and other books on discipling apply. Yet there are some special challenges encountered when ministering to the urban poor. I will mention a few of these.

Values in Shame-Based Communal Cultures. This is a major issue which requires a separate treatment and is relevant to most ministries in the Majority World. Essentially, in these cultures, a major factor in deciding between right and wrong is how an action is regarded as honorable or shameful to the group. This approach often harmonizes with biblical teaching. But sometimes there are areas of incompatibility too. Losing face by admitting sin may be regarded with greater revulsion than the sin itself. Teaching the new believer to walk in the light and confess sin as a basis of fellowship (1 John 1:5-10) is an alien concept to many. Refusing to take revenge on someone who has dishonored the family is considered a disgrace to the family. Telling a lie in order to avoid shame is considered an honorable action.

Fortunately, as the Bible was written within such a cultural setting, there are helpful hints for us there. Therefore the small group Bible study with practical application to the challenges one faces becomes an indispensable means of growth. In our ministry in YFC and the church I can honestly say that among converts to Christianity only those who were in a small group Bible study fellowship have grown in Christ-likeness. Christ’s statement that sanctification comes by the truth in the Word (John 17:17) applies in every culture.⁷

Particularly significant is Paul’s developing of new criteria for shame and honor, where the new community is urged to view impurity (1 Cor. 15:34, Eph. 5:3, 4, 12), disobedience (2 Thess. 3:14) and selfish, unloving behavior (1 Tim. 5:8) as shameful.

A major concern with communal cultures is the sense of betrayal felt by family and community members when one becomes a Christian. In our early years we took this as part of the promised persecution for those who follow Christ. We warned believers of rejection that comes when following Christ (Matt. 10:34-37). We sought to give them a warm and accepting community which would compensate for the rejection by the family (Acts 2:42-47).

However we soon realized that some of the opposition could be avoided if we related positively with the families of the youth and also did all we could to help them stay within their original community as loyal contributors to it. Therefore whenever a non-Christian youth came to our programs we would try to make contact with their families and make instruction and counsel on how to relate to their families as a major aspect of the discipling process. For example, we would discuss with them what they can participate in and what they should not participate in when the family had functions which have religious rituals.

I have come to believe that helping youth integrate with the ecclesiastical and societal world around them is a key aspect of a youth discipling program. Youth must be taught to relate

positively not only to their families but also to the adult church, to the society to which they will go to live and work. If we keep them safely hidden in a highly specialized youth ministry cocoon we may fail to prepare them for life after their young years. The failure to do this has resulted in many youth dropping out of the church altogether once they cease to be young. The youth program will soon become boring to most youth. We must prepare them to relate christianly to other structures before they leave the youth group.

Special Needs in Developing the Whole Person. Discipling involves doing all we can to develop the whole person. Those discipling poor urban youth will encounter special social needs which would have generally been met from within the family in youth from middle and upper-class backgrounds. The discipling process will then include strategies to enable youth to grow socio-economically and progress in society.

We soon realized that our primary responsibility in the socio-economic area is to help poorer youth with their education so that they could have opportunities for progress in society. One of our first shocking discoveries was that parents often wanted their children to leave school by the time they were about fourteen years old so that expenses associated with education would be eliminated and so that the child could contribute to the family's finances by working. In our church and in YFC we developed scholarship schemes which helped with essential educational expenditures (e.g. clothes, shoes, school bags, stationary and books). More affluent believers were challenged to help with this.

In our very competitive educational system which sees students eliminated and dropping out of formal education at grades 10 and 12 after failure at government exams, attending private tutorial classes is considered almost essential in order to make educational progress. This is particularly needed in the schools in poorer areas where the standards of education are very low and the schools are woefully lacking in facilities. But poorer children are unable to afford these tutorial classes. So Youth for Christ started having tutorial classes for young people in the neighborhoods of our centers. We did not speak about Christianity in these classes. But the youth knew that we were a Christian group and that we would have youth meetings at these centers. Some came for these meetings and subsequently became followers of Christ.

The Sri Lankan education system requires all youth to be taught their religion in school. But many schools in poorer areas do not have teachers to teach the few Christian students in the school. Therefore Christian students had to study Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam and take those subjects for their eleventh grade government exam. Youth for Christ began to supply volunteer Christianity teachers to some of these schools. The schools were so badly staffed that our staff ended up teaching other subjects also. They are able to have an effective evangelistic ministry also with students in those schools.

Many of our youth live in one-roomed houses which makes studying at home virtually impossible. Therefore at evening and night our offices are converted to study halls and youth come and study there under the supervision of a mature Christian. During the thirty-year war in Sri Lanka it was not safe for young people to be out at night in the war zones. Therefore in some of these areas the youth would stay in the center at night and perhaps go home for breakfast or go to school after having breakfast in the center. In one center the students received such good results at their government examinations that so many parents wanted their children to enter the "night study" program that they had to turn many away for lack of space!

Urging young people to study is another aspect of discipling, and this is a topic that is usually brought up at every discipling appointment. A Hindu young man failed his eleventh grade government exam so badly that his teacher advised him to leave school and look for a job. He took the advice. Subsequently he went for a Youth for Christ camp and received salvation. He was assigned a discipler who urged him to attempt his eleventh grade exam again, and helped him to prepare for it. He was successful in this exam and went on to succeed in the much harder thirteenth grade⁸ exam also. Today he has almost completed his qualifications to becoming the equivalent of a Certified Public Accountant. Teaching people to study, doing seminars on how to prepare for and perform at examinations also became regular programs organized by Youth for Christ. In rare cases we have taken older teenagers to stay in a YFC centers because their prospects of vocational advancement were very bleak and sent them to government-sponsored vocational training programmes. The results of these programmes have been very encouraging.

These are all aspects of empowering urban poor. Often the poor are unable to avail themselves of resources available to them. So youth workers need to be aware of such resources and know how to connect the youth with those available resources. Several years ago I was discipling a young adult who had come to Christ in our church. He had already become an alcoholic and was working as a poorly-paid laborer. After his conversion he gave up his drink and I started doing a Bible study with him and a converted drug dependent. He did not have a birth certificate, which meant he did not get a government identity card. This eliminated any prospects of getting regular employment. I was surprised that he was not willing to pursue the task of getting a birth certificate. Soon I realized that the reason for this was that paper work intimidated him. So we helped him with the paper work, and we persuaded him to apply for his birth certificate and then his identity card. Now, about twenty years later he is a church leader and would be classified as a middle-income person.

Healing Emotional Wounds. Urban poor youth come to us battered and bruised from rough and hostile neighborhoods. Often the father is an alcoholic and the mother has to work really hard to keep the family going. As a result she is almost always stressed out and snaps at her children unreasonably. Sometimes the mother leaves the children in the care of a grandparent or just the father and leaves for a foreign country to work as a housemaid believing that this is the only way to come out of the family's grinding poverty. The children grow up wounded from wounds inflicted from these non-ideal family situations. Many have been sexually abused by the time they come to us. They are attracted by the affirming and caring family atmosphere they see in the YFC club that they join. But soon their wounds begin to show. Youth workers need to be sensitive to these needs and seek to be agents of healing in their lives or to refer them to qualified people who can help them.

A key aspect of preparing them for adulthood is to teach them what a Christian family is like. Most of our volunteer and full-time staff were converted in our ministry and have come from such dysfunctional backgrounds. They found joy outside the home within the YFC community. Now we must teach them what a Christian home is like and prepare them for the responsibility of building their own families. One of the major responsibilities I have had in the past ten years or so has been to give pre-marital counsel to couples getting ready for marriage. Occasionally during the counseling a serious wound emerges which needs to be specially treated with the healing balm of God's grace.

People from difficult backgrounds tend to remain tough and ignore their pain. Becoming a Christian softens them. When the pain of their wounds surfaces they may suffer more emotional

pain than before they were Christians. We need to be sensitive to this and seek the best ways to help heal their wounds.

INCORPORATING THE POOR INTO THE BODY

The challenge of incorporating the urban poor into the wider body of Christ is so acute that I will present it as a major sub-section.

The Need to Feel Equal. When poor youth first came to Christ in our ministry, we were surprised to encounter a lot of anger among them over the class distinctions in society. Some would complain about being treated as second class and sometimes adopt a rebellious attitude. I soon realized that this was a good sign. I realized that they had understood the biblical teaching about equality and that they were upset about being deprived of it for so long. Before they became Christians they resigned themselves to being considered a downtrodden group. Now as they had a taste of equality, those suppressed desires had resurfaced and triggered a new anger over class differences. I am now seeing a similar anger among young pastors in churches where there is a huge difference in the salaries and lifestyles of the relatively affluent, westernized pastors and those from poorer backgrounds.

As poorer young people had been treated as inferior for so long, even when they come to Christ they do not feel that they are equals in the body of Christ with those from affluent backgrounds. Sadly, some Christians perpetuate this class distinction by the way they treat their poorer brothers and sisters. We realized that there was a great need to incorporate these poorer Christians in such a way that they are not only told they are equal but also feel that they are. The key was following the biblical ideals of community life. Early in my ministry I studied the passages in Acts which described the community life of the early church and realized that this was a model which we need to follow (Acts 2:42-47; 4:33-37; 6:1-7). I was particularly challenged by the statement “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common” (4:32).

We began to develop several principles and practices as we went along.

The Language We Speak. Thirty years ago speaking English among non-westernized people was a way to affirm supposed superiority. People described speaking English as wielding the sword, presumably meaning that one is cutting down the other by speaking English. So we decided not to speak English in non English-speaking company. Now, thankfully, the attitude has changed and in some circles not being able to speak fluently in the vernacular languages is a bigger shame. In fact now there is a strong desire among the poor to learn English, and we have tried to do what we can to help with this.

Simple Lifestyle. We realized that if the poor are going to feel equal with us, it would be good to avoid a lifestyle that they see as hopelessly distant from them and extravagant. The Lausanne Occasional Paper on simple lifestyle⁹ and Ron Sider’s book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*¹⁰ were very influential in this. In my life the simplicity of the lifestyle of Robert Coleman was also a big influence. A major motivation here was Paul’s statement that one of the aims of

giving is so that there will be equality (2 Cor. 8:13-14). As the popular statement says, “We live simply so that others may simply live.”

I realize that extravagance by leaders working with the poor is not a problem in the Prosperity Theology model of ministry. As prosperity is something all are to seek after and is supposedly promised to all Christians, poor people in such churches would want their leaders to demonstrate to blessing of prosperity. So they have no problem with their pastor having the trappings of great wealth. We, however, do not subscribe to that approach to ministry.

We adopted a practice which might seem somewhat foolish to those in the corporate world. We decided to be one step behind in terms of technological advances. If we felt that the poor considered something so alien that it belongs to another class altogether, we would not have it, until it became something considered normal. So we waited till computers were a normal part of office life in the city before we switched to computers in the 1980s. Later we even started having computer classes for poorer youth.

We did not want the poor to feel distant to us. We wanted them to be able to feel at home in our office. We wanted them to financially support our ministry. One of the factors that triggered this thinking was our discovery that if we found a house big enough to hold a YFC club meeting, poorer youth did not like to go to that house for meetings because it was too posh for them. So we had to have our meetings in halls and sometimes in temporary sheds.

Simplicity, however, is not the same as mediocrity. You cannot motivate the poor to dream great things for God through programs that are poorly planned and executed. One of the great challenges of ministering to the poor is finding ways to do brilliant programs inexpensively. We need creative people who are committed to the idea of simple beauty. When I was a youth I attended a youth congress in India where I learned a slogan that I made my own motto: “Following the Greatest Leader and being involved in the Greatest Cause.” When we started working with poor youth we knew that we must find ways of imparting that vision to them. One way was by giving them a vision of the glorious things that we can do as representatives of the great God of the universe. Involvement in exciting and brilliantly executed programs does much to motivate these youth to excellence and mature fruitfulness.

Brilliant programming is not an automatic step to spiritual and ministerial maturity. There are other spiritual factors that are more basic to nurturing Christians to greatness. But the lack of good programming is a sure retardant to the development of fruitful servants of Christ. Throughout history visionary leadership has served to rouse up the poor into becoming history-changing movements. Our prayer is for more such visionary leaders who, through God’s Spirit and empowering, could rouse the poor and develop powerful movements for the kingdom.

Giving to the Movement. We knew that a key to ownership was for the poor volunteers working with us to sense that they are contributing towards our salaries. We realized that if we staff workers live on a hopelessly high economic plane, then the motivation of the volunteers to contribute to our salaries would be greatly reduced. We have tried to have a salary scale which gave a living wage to our staff. Usually staff salaries were a little higher than that of our volunteers from poor backgrounds, but they were not so high that our staff were associated with the extravagant wealthy. I wanted our poor volunteers to get the sense that they were contributing to my salary. That would give them the freedom to speak up when they did not like something in YFC. This freedom, of course, is a key to developing a sense of ownership.

From the story of the widow’s offering (Luke 21:2-3), we attempted to develop the “Mighty Mite” principle. We wanted to communicate the idea that all contributions are important—

however small they may be—and that in God’s sight small gifts given sacrificially are very precious. For this reason we decided not to give prominence to rich donors and not to have plaques in our buildings commemorating large gifts. While this is not something I insist on for all Christian groups, we believed that in YFC it helped encourage sacrificial giving by the poor.

We also tried to combat the misconception that giving was primarily a financial matter. The poor can contribute in areas other than finances. For example, I have found that earnest prayer is much more natural to people who have lived with need all their life and less natural to those who have lived with plenty. The sense of being needy is a key aspect of Christian spirituality as the first four beatitudes indicate (Matt. 5:3-6). It is also a key to powerful praying. The poor can bring much richness to the church through their ability to look to God as needy people. Most of YFC’s vibrant prayer movements have been initiated by people from poorer backgrounds.

My wife is having cancer, and it has been an amazing thing for us to see how generous the poor members of our congregation are. Every Sunday I return from church with parcels of vegetables and fruits which the members have heard are good for cancer patients. They are like the church in Macedonia about whom Paul said, “...in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (2 Cor. 8:2). Many studies have shown that the poor are more generous givers than the rich.¹¹

Sharing. The principle of sharing taught in Acts 4:32 became very important to us. It says that the first Christians “were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” A key to this was friendship, a characteristic of all good youth ministry. Just as the early Christians “broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:46 NIV), we tried to be a happy community of people who enjoy each other’s company and enjoy inexpensive meals in our homes or in simple roadside cafes.

Opening *homes* is a key aspect of sharing. Luke’s frequent mention of homes in his Gospel and in Acts testifies to the importance of open homes for Christian community.¹² This would mean the poor stay in our homes and we stay in the homes of the poor. The children of one of our church members living in a slum once invited their friend my son to stay with them for a night. We gladly let him go. And this family stayed with us when they were renovating the house they went to following the prosperity that ensued from becoming Christians. There is a strong sense of sharing that takes place when you go to a person’s house.

Keeping an open home does not fit in well with the western understandings of privacy and efficiency that I grew up with. The poor are not bound by time as we are. They expect us to visit them when they are sick or have an important function, and are usually not satisfied with the excuse that we are busy. Everything must stop for relationships. These are great values that westernized people can imbibe. As a writer, I had to find ways to escape from my home so that we could keep the open home idea while also devoting myself to study and writing. I did this through finding places in Sri Lanka and abroad to “escape” to for study, and also through the habit of sleeping in the afternoon and studying at late into the night. I believe that the open home principle has been a key to fostering ownership even though it may have markedly reduced our efficiency.

It is clear from Acts 4:32 that *possessions* were included in the sharing. Often when we think of fellowship, we think of spiritual unity, of good relationships existing within the community and of the sharing of good feelings towards each other. But the common Christian

word for fellowship, *koinōnia*, means much more than that. Historian Justo L. Gonzales has shown that, in the Bible, *koinōnia* and its related words have the meaning of partnership also. The examples he gives include the use to indicate the business partnership between Peter and the sons of Zebedee (Luke 5.10); and the giving and receiving of financial support between Paul and the Philippians (Phil. 4.15).¹³ So we need to re-think our understanding of Christian fellowship in the light of what the New Testament records. In Acts, fellowship includes an attitude to what one possesses that says, “This is not my own.” It is an attitude that does not keep personal finances as something that no one else in the body knows anything about.

As an application of this principle, we decided to have an open salary book, so that there is no hiding about what the leaders earn. Everything I did in ministry, whether preaching or writing was done as part of YFC and all the funds received were sent back to YFC. This was a great relief to me, as the members of the YFC family did not complain about my foreign travels and I also had a safety net of having an organization which handled all my financial transactions. If I received a substantial personal gift I shared it with my accountability group so that someone in YFC knows about that too. The salary scheme was also developed in such a way that the primary factor determining remuneration was need. Lesser emphasis was given to responsibility and position in the organization. For those from rich backgrounds this resulted in a comparatively low salary to what they could earn outside. But for those from poorer backgrounds this meant a higher salary than what they would earn outside.

Fostering Integrity. One of the greatest problems people encounter when working with the poor is that of dishonesty in speech and in the handling of money. I believe that the accountability and ownership of belonging to a family of equals is one of the two best ways of combating this problem (the other being a vision of the glory and purity of God). When there is such a strong sense of openness, comradeship and ownership within the team it is difficult for dishonesty to survive. Dishonest people will either change or leave. We have seen both of these things happening in YFC.

When we encounter lying or other acts of dishonesty we have tried to respond as a family would, disciplining and loving the person who has fallen. As a youth organization we often have to exercise discipline—a most painful task that is very costly to the leaders and the organization. Yet we have found that most of those who were disciplined have stayed on with us. Some could not continue on staff, but they have stayed on in the fellowship. This fellowship gave them accountability and pastoral care during the period of healing leading to restoration.

LEADERS GRADUALLY EMERGE

One aim of discipling is nurturing the disciples to take on leadership. We have had many failures in our attempts at leadership development. A South African bishop is reputed to have said that any one hoping to work with the poor shouldn't expect a Sunday school picnic.¹⁴ Yet over the years we have seen some develop into effective leaders. We believe that they are the first-fruits of a larger harvest of leaders that will come one day. Their success will give others models of how they too could live a godly life, take on greater responsibility and the discipline and hard work that leadership requires.

However, the style of leadership may differ from what we are used to. In Sri Lanka, until a few years ago, most YFC leaders were English-speaking and leadership meetings were held in English. Those who emerged as leaders from poorer backgrounds did not know how to speak English. So we had to change the medium of conversation to Sinhala and Tamil so as to welcome

the new crop of leaders. It is very difficult for people from poor backgrounds to become leaders in some ecclesiastical structures. For example, many people from poorer backgrounds who are excellent leaders may not possess the educational qualifications for leadership in many structures. Many leaders in our ministry began to pursue education only after they became Christians. They study after they become leaders. Almost all our young staff are pursuing some program of study.

I have realized that I will not be a very effective evangelist in reaching large masses of the urban poor. Some of our staff workers from poorer backgrounds have good potential to do this. They need to be taught the basics of biblical life, ministry and leadership. They need spiritual parents. I have tried to provide this teaching and parenthood to some of these staff.

Yet the styles of some of these leaders may be different to what we are used to. After one leader had used some coarse language during a conflict within the ministry, there was some question about how a leader could talk like that. My response was to say that, if the natural course of events took place, this person would either be dead, be in prison, or be a leader of an underworld gang. Instead he was now bringing to Christ; people whom most of us could not dream of reaching.

* * * * *

John Stott has made famous the statement that the growing church in many countries is a mile wide and an inch deep. Most of the new believers in these churches are from economically poor backgrounds. It is my conviction that the urgent need to develop Christ-like character in these believers would be met by adopting a discipling model of ministry among the poor.

¹ Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963.

² Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1963. I still have a copy of the original edition, priced at \$1.00.

³ I wrote a paper for the Convocation of Youth for Christ International in Chicago, Illinois in 1993 after about thirteen years of ministry among the poor. It was published in *Their Future, Our Passion*, edited by Gerard Kelly and Lowell Sheppard (Singapore: Youth for Christ International, 1996). A shorter version appeared in *Didaskalia: The Journal of Providence Theological Seminary*, Fall 1997. This paper represents further reflection after almost twenty more years of ministry among the poor.

⁴ See my *Deuteronomy: Loving Obedience to a Loving God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012). See the discussions on Deuteronomy chapters 15, 23, and 24.

⁵ See Anton Francis, "Hope and Suffering among South Asian Buddhists: Observations from the Field," in *Suffering: Christian Reflections on Buddhist Dukkha*, Edited by Paul H. De Neui (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 2011), pp. 115-131.

⁶ *NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

⁷ On this see my "Wesley's Small Groups as Keys to Nurturing Godliness among Converts from Economically Poor Backgrounds: A Case Study from Sri Lanka" in *World Mission In the Wesleyan Spirit*, Edited by Darrell L. Whiteman and Gerald H. Anderson (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2009), pp. 235-243; and my "Holiness and Community," in *Global Passion: Marking George Verwer's Contribution to World Mission*, edited by David Greenlee (Carlisle, Cumbria: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003), pp. 11-19.

⁸ In Sri Lanka the school system goes up to grade thirteen and the usual university course is three years.

⁹ "An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle," subsequently included in *Making Christ known: Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989*, edited by John Stott (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 139-153.

¹⁰ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (InterVarsity Press, 1977). Subsequent revisions have appeared.

¹¹ See Judith Warner, "The Charitable-Giving Divide," in the Magazine, *The New York Times*, August 20, 2010 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22FOB-wwln-t.html>).

¹² I have described many such occasions in my *Acts*. See the sub headings in the entry on “hospitality” in the Subject Index on p. 650.

¹³ Gonzales, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1990), pp. 82-83.

¹⁴ I heard this stated at a conference and wrote it down, but I do not know the identity of the bishop who made the statement.