



**DISTANT AND DISPOSABLE
THE POVERTY OF OUR RELATIONS**



SOCIAL POLICY AND
PARLIAMENTARY UNIT
Working for the eradication of poverty in NZ



A Think Piece compiled
by Malcolm Irwin, SPPU, March 2010

“The globalization of communications, trade and culture, globalises human responsibility likewise. The freedom of the few should not be purchased at the price of the enslavement of the many to poverty, ignorance and disease.” *Jonathan Sacks, 2003, The Dignity of Difference*

“It sucks.” *Makayla Sarai, a teen discussing poverty in New Zealand*

A DISTANT VOICE

A plea from the voice of Mrs Svey Sak:

“Charities used to say that if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. But ... *a man* is just as likely to be *a woman* and that woman already knows how to fish. She would like her river left alone by illegal logging companies or fish poachers. She would prefer that her government not build huge dams... dams that have damaged her livelihood. She would prefer that the police not violently evict communities to make way for the dam. She doesn’t want charity. She would like respect for her basic rights.”¹ Mrs Svey Sak (and countless other women like her, and their children) would like to be heard. She would like to be included in decisions that affect her. She would like to be noticed.

The late Mother Teresa observed: “...it is very fashionable to talk about the poor. Unfortunately, it is not fashionable to talk with them.”² Today, despite the meteoric growth of global mass-movements that have celebrities, wristbands and public marches popularising the ending of poverty, and despite the mounting volume of high-leveled international talk there is still a gaping and inhumane global divide between the haves and the have-nots.

How is this? Is the continued existence of poverty simply due to a fatalistic fact that there will always be poor people in our communities or is the continuing entrenchment of poverty due to the very fact that the poor don’t live with us? Do we have a moral obligation to people who’re distant, to people who don’t live on our streets or who don’t share our skin colour, faith, language or future hopes? How should we see and treat otherness? How can we keep the poor at the center of our lives? Do we share a common destiny? Is poverty the result of a paucity of global and local relationships or the result of a scarcity of resources? How can we dismantle some of the distances that exist between the poor and the non-poor? How can we correct our poverty of relationships?

The intent of this discussion paper is to engage with these questions and explore how we can bring both the poor and the rich into reciprocal and redeeming relationships. It would be good to get with some friends or in a small group and think through this material together.

A CHILD TO GO WITH MY FRIES PLEASE

Abolitionist Kevin Bales coined the chilling expression *disposable people*³ to describe modern-day practices of servitude. The descriptor is deeply emotive and captures something of the horrifying everyday experience of the estimated 27 million people who are currently entrapped in some form of slavery.⁴

Disposable people.

It’s a difficult phrase that isn’t easy to fathom, is it? How can *people* be *disposable*? I can imagine disposable nappies, disposable cutlery and even disposable cameras, but *people*? How can we calmly speak of the disposal of a human like getting rid of common household rubbish? How can we cheapen and devalue life to the extent that it means nothing? Isn’t a human life inherently sacrosanct and of incalculable worth?

Actually, no.

The asking price for a human being is mind-bogglingly low. A human person today can be bought, sold and traded for much less than the price of a new pair of sneakers from Rebel Sports.

¹ Mrs Svey Sak, A Village leader in Cambodia, cited in Duncan Green and Isobell Allen, 2008, *The Urgency of Now*. p.g. 20, emphasis in original. The top image on the front cover comes from friends serving with The Salvation Army in Haiti; the bottom image comes from <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/society/3/3>. Photograph by Miranda Wells, Te Ara, the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, © Crown Copyright 2006 - 2010 Ministry for Culture and Heritage, New Zealand, used with permission.

² Mother Teresa, 1989, *In My Own Words*.

³ See Kevin Bales, 2004, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*.

⁴ See <http://www.stopthetraffik.org>.

E. Benjamin Skinner, a Fellow at the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, flew to Haiti in 2005 and in broad daylight haggled with a street hustler to buy a nine-year-old girl as a domestic slave for a miserable \$50 USD, and that's having negotiated the price down from a starting \$100 USD.⁵

A stingy \$65 NZD and the labour of a Haitian child can be yours *for life*. How could someone even conceive of selling a child? Is this a calculated inhumanness? What is driving this shameless disposal of human life?

It gets even grimmer. The earthquake of 12 January 2010, that devastated the already impoverished nation of Haiti and cost the lives of tens of thousands has left many more children orphaned, at risk and vulnerable. The co-founder of the Not For Sale Campaign, Kique Bazan comments:

“Before the earthquake, Haiti was already the greatest hotbed of modern-day slavery in the region, containing an estimated 225,000 child slaves. These ‘restaveks’ become domestic servants when their families, desperate to survive, sell them to other households. In 2008 I went to Haiti for my doctoral research and was horrified to see street children, mostly boys and some as young as six, being sold for sex at \$1.75 USD. Since the earthquake, the news reports have revealed a reality that has turned from grim to desperate for the children of Haiti. Children are either separated from their families or orphaned, and traffickers are taking advantage of the situation. Save the Children says that one million unaccompanied children are vulnerable for trafficking in Haiti right now.”⁶

“I am somehow less interested in the weight and convolutions of Einstein’s brain than in the near certainty that people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops.”

The late Stephen Jay Gould, Professor of Zoology, Geology, Biology, and History of Science at Harvard University, cited at www.Sojo.net/

My head is spinning.

Somewhat closer to home, and no doubt easier to imagine, Iris Claus, Geoff Legget and Xin Wang⁷ calculated in 2009 that the average Kiwi family spent \$268 NZD a week to meet only “the basic expenses” of raising a child aged between 0 and 12. The total cost of raising a child from birth to the age of 18 in New Zealand is thought to be near \$250,000 NZD.

See the difference?

A child in Haiti who is degraded and whose innocence is stolen for a shameful \$2.50 NZD, or, if they're luckier, devalued and enslaved in a lifetime of domestic servitude for a paltry \$65 NZD is in New Zealand esteemed and valued to the estimated worth of a cool quarter of a million NZD.

The disparity is grossly stark, isn't it? How can we live with these deplorable contradictions? Are children who have a distant and different birthplace, skin colour, culture, language or faith somehow less deserving or of lesser significance than our own? Are the lives and deaths of *others* somehow of a lesser value than our own?

No! Then what on earth is going on?

These contrasting images of childhood crudely capture the massive scale of the inhumane divisions and inequitable polarisations that shape our earth. We live in a nation and interact with a global community that can be loosely divided into two major camps of humanity: the “dispossessed” (the have nots; the people who have too little) and the “possessed” (the haves and have mores; those consumed by the having of possessions, the people who have too much).⁸ And, without pushing the explanatory power of this imagery too far, who do you think is the most easily disposed of and repeatedly seen to be of the least value?

⁵ E. Benjamin Skinner, 2008, *A Crime So Monstrous: Face to Face with Modern-Day Slavery*.

⁶ Cited in an e-mail newsletter of the Not For Sale Campaign 13/2/10.

⁷ Iris Claus, Geoff Legget and Xin Wang, 2009, *Costs of Raising Children*, Inland Revenue, Journal of Economic Expenditure, June 2009. Available online at http://www.nzae.org.nz/conferences/2009/pdfs/Costs_of_raising_children_NZAE_paper_v2.pdf.

⁸ Jim Wallis, 1981, *The Call to Conversion*, p.g. 48.

The distant. The dispossessed. The have nots. The poor.

THE DISPOSABLE POOR

The gains and promises of globalisation have not been distributed evenly or fairly. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) Report of 2009 estimated that despite historic advances in the lives of millions of people, and despite a global economy capable of creating three new billionaires every week with unprecedented levels of affluence for millions of people, five billion people continue to live in developing and poverty-stricken countries, 1.4 billion of whom live within the deadly and inhumane conditions of extreme poverty.⁹ The poorest of the poor live in sub-Saharan Africa (380 million people) and Southern Asia (600 million people, including 455 million people in India).

“In 1820, in the world’s wealthiest region, Great Britain, the average per-person income was three times higher than the world’s poorest region, sub-Saharan Africa. Today, the world’s wealthiest nation is the United States, and the average per-person income is twenty times greater than that of the world’s poorest region, still sub-Saharan Africa.”

Jim Wallis, 2010, Rediscovering Values: A Moral Compass for the New Economy

A child in a developing nation dies of hunger every five seconds and more than 24,000 children die every day from preventable and treatable diseases linked to malnutrition, poor sanitation and undependable water supplies; diseases that we have mostly eradicated and which no longer kill in our own nation.¹⁰ The United Nations MDG Report of 2009 noted that more than 880 million people on our planet drink, cook and wash in unsafe water, and 2.5 billion people, 580 million of whom live in Southern Asia, continue to lack proper sanitation facilities; public utilities that could help prevent diarrhoea and malaria, two of the most deadly killers of children living in poverty. The highest incidence of this needless child mortality occurs in sub-Saharan Africa where nearly one in seven children die under the age of five.¹¹

The United Nations MDG Report of 2009 drilled down into the health of children from developing nations and discovered that nearly a quarter were underfed, with children in the poorest households twice as likely to be undernourished and underweight than children from the richest households. The Global Poverty Project estimates that a staggering one-in-seven poor people go to bed hungry every night and this is at a time when there is enough food to feed everyone on earth one-and-a-half times over and, even more scandalously, at a time when the global population of obese overeaters (1.1 billion) now equals the number of people who suffer from malnutrition and under feeding.¹² Southern Asia has the highest global occurrence of undernourished newborns and, not surprisingly, the highest prevalence of underweight children.¹³

Every January, I complain at having to pay the escalating kindergarten and school fees of my three girls. I moan fatalistically: isn’t education a human right? Shouldn’t it be free and universal? The global data clearly shows that it isn’t. Despite improvements in the number of children enrolled in and completing primary schooling, the United Nations MDG Report of 2009 lamented that in 2007 there were still 72 million children excluded from entering formal education. The Report goes on to say that it is the same people, the marginalised and poorest of the poor, who keep on missing out: “Children from poor communities and girls are the most likely to lose out. In some less developed countries, children in the poorest 20 per cent of the population are three times less likely to be enrolled in primary school than children from the wealthiest 20 per cent. In 2007, girls accounted for 54 percent of the world’s out of school population.”¹⁴ Most of the children without schooling, including the highest number of girls excluded from education, live in rural sub-Saharan Africa, Western Asia and Southern Asia.

Not surprisingly, girls and women shoulder the heaviest load of the global divide. Every minute of every day a mother in poverty dies needlessly during childbirth, with a shocking 99% of these deaths occurring in

⁹ The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009, United Nations, p.g. 7.

¹⁰ Child Health Now Report, 2009, World Vision, p.g. 5.

¹¹ Child Health Now Report, *ibid*, p.g. 7; The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009, United Nations, p.g. 25.

¹² Cited at The Global Poverty Project, Global Poverty Info Bank, www.globalpovertyproject.com.

¹³ The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009, United Nations, p.g. 12.

¹⁴ The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009, United Nations, p.g. 16.

developing nations.¹⁵ The global spread of maternal mortality is a stark snapshot of how cruel and inhumane the gap is between the poor and the rich. The safe delivery of a newborn is mostly the sole privilege of the wealthy. Data from the United Nations MDG Report of 2009 shows that “Developed regions ...(recorded in 2005) nine maternal deaths per 100,000 live births compared to 450 maternal deaths in developing regions, where 14 countries have mortality ratios of at least 1,000 deaths per 100,000 live births.”¹⁶ The highest number of maternal deaths were recorded -you guessed it - in sub-Saharan Africa and in Southern Asia.

Even though women account for half of the world’s population, they make up 70% of the poor. And despite some progress towards gender parity, women continue to be over represented in informal employment that isn’t paid for and in risky and vulnerable employment that pays poorly. The underpayment of working women is staggering: “Women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours, produce half of the world’s food, but earn only 10% of the world’s income and own less than one per cent of the world’s property. On average, women earn half of what men earn.”¹⁷ The underemployment of women is the most evident in Oceania and Southern Asia.

The flow-on impact of the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 will only exacerbate the socioeconomic difficulties and inhumane inequalities that developing countries face. Economists and social commentators have forecast that a staggering 80% of the net flow of capital to developing nations will be lost due to the current financial downturn.¹⁸ The United Nations MDG Report of 2009 and Oxfam have estimated that this loss of commerce from contracting economic growth, coupled with escalating food and energy prices will conspire against developing nations and cost the jobs of millions of people, 10 to 22 million of whom will be women¹⁹, force millions of people into low-paid and less secure employment, drive 53 million more people into extreme poverty, and contribute to the deaths of somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 more newborn babies.²⁰ And while children die and families mourn in the developing South, the G8 misspends more than \$850 billion USD on its defense and military operations, I enjoy drinking my chai lattes and shopping for cheap parallel imported goods, and the nations of the G20 somehow manage to find trillions more USD to finance corporate bailouts, tax cuts and public spending to try and stimulate the stagnating economies of the wealthy.

SEEING POORLY

Sit a moment longer in front of these numbers.

Try not to deepen the dehumanizing and devaluing exclusion of the poor by simply engaging with the mind-boggling numbers. Try to remember that these numbers speak of “...human beings who have names, who are made in the image of God, whose hairs are numbered, and for whom Jesus died. The people who live in poverty are as valued, as important, as those who do not.”²¹

Try to *see* past the numbers to catch a glimpse of the poor themselves. What is it that you *see*? *Who* is it that you *see*? How would you describe the poor? What words would you use? What questions would you ask of the poor? What questions would you ask of yourself? What questions would you ask of our world? What would you ask God?

Sitting in front of these global numbers I started to ask:

Are the poor different? How different? What is the essence of our difference? Is it simply a matter of where we’re born? Are the poor Jesus incarnate (Matthew 25)? Mother Teresa claimed that the poor were God in His most distressing disguise. Does that claim challenge how we should interact with or think of the poor?

¹⁵ The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009, United Nations, p.g. 26; Global Poverty Project, *ibid*.

¹⁶ The Millennium Development Goals Report, 2009, United Nations, p.g. 26.

¹⁷ The Global Poverty Project, *ibid*.

¹⁸ Jonathan Boston, 2009, Opening Remarks for Symposium on “Eliminating World Poverty: Global Goals and Regional Progress,” Institute of Policy Studies.

¹⁹ The Millennium Development Report, 2009, United Nations, p.g. 4.

²⁰ Cited at <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/applications/blogs/pressoffice/?p=4011>

²¹ Bryant L. Myers, 2008, *Walking with the Poor*, p.g. 57.

Are we *for* the poor, *with* the poor or *of* the poor? Does it matter how I *see* others? The Christian apologist and novelist C. S. Lewis entertained similar questions and cautioned: “It is a serious thing to live in a society [and world] of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting [and poorest] person you can [see] and talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. There are no ordinary people. You have never [seen or] talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal and their life is to ours the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”²² The eyes through which we *see* our neighbours will determine how we *see and treat the other* and whether or not our shared future is shaped by horrors or splendors.

Are these numbers only a question of deficit or insufficiency? Can poverty be explained only by a lack of income or material goods and eradicated solely by the provision of resources, or should we be looking at how we interact with the poor, at the paucity and scarcity of our relationships? The poor have not only been left behind; they’ve been left out, excluded and marginalised. It is cruel and monstrously naive to think that the extreme poverty of 1.4 billion people is the product of incapable individuals who lack the creativity, knowledge or means to generate wealth. The poor are not the problem; they’re capable and critical partners in development and in the eradication of poverty (c.f. Isaiah 61.3-4; 2 Corinthians 8), courageously resilient in the face of devastating and persistent suffering. And neither is a global insufficiency or a scarcity of resources the problem; there is more than enough for everyone, if we could only learn to accept constraint, live within our means and learn to share. The problem is in how we decide to accumulate and distribute wealth. *The real problem is in how we relate.*

“If you stick me down in the middle of Bangladesh or Peru, you’ll find out how much this talent is going to produce in the wrong kind of soil.”

Warren Buffett, one of the world’s richest people, on how we cannot blame individuals for the extent of poverty

Am I too distant from the poor? Do I have a relationship with the poor? What is my relationship to poverty? Before the 2010 Haiti earthquake 80% of the Haitian population lived in poverty. Did I care? Did I even know? Should I have? And will I continue to care now that Haiti is no longer in the headlines of mainstream media? Will we? The poor and non-poor coexist within broken and dysfunctional relationships; disconnected and fragmented relations that viciously and violently divide people into polarised and segregated groupings of them and us, losers and winners.²³ The dignity, equality, sacredness and “absolute value of every human being must be regained if we are to have any future.”²⁴ The *destiny* of the poor is entangled with and inseparable from the *future* of the rich. We have to learn to *see* that it is the state of our relationships that will either entrench deprivation and suffering or eradicate poverty and permit a commonly-shared wealth.

The screened images of dusty, flyblown and dark-skinned children with swollen bellies, sunken eyes and skinny limbs make me angry, but they don’t change me or how I live. Why? Have the poor become disposable to me, a distant item of news that is forgotten with the next televised commercial and my next mouthful? Are they *throwaway people*?²⁵ The questions stop with the horrifically-honest lyrics of Sir Bob Geldof and Midge Ure sticking in my throat: “Well, tonight, thank God it’s them instead of you.”²⁶

“The poverty of our century is unlike that of any other. It is not, as poverty was before, the result of natural scarcity, but of a set of priorities imposed upon the rest of the world by the rich. Consequently, the modern poor are pitted... but written off as trash. The twentieth century consumer economy has produced the first culture for which a beggar is a reminder of nothing.”

John Berger, cited in Jeremy Seabrook, 2003, The No-nonsense Guide to World Poverty

²² Cited in John Ortberg, 2002, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, p.g. 17, emphasis mine.

²³ See Bryant L. Myers, 2008, *Walking with the Poor*.

²⁴ Jim Wallis, 1981, p.g. 51

²⁵ The concept of “throwaway people” comes from Edgar S. Cahn, 2004, *No More Throw-Away People*.

²⁶ Bob Geldof and Midge Ure, 1984, *Do they Know it’s Christmas Time?*, Band Aid.

Stay in front of these numbers long enough and you start to see who is most likely to be poor and who is of lesser value to us. See the faces? The most common face of global poverty today is likely to be that of a dark-skinned girl or young mother who lives in rural sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. The inhumane existence of poverty is not that palatable when you see it face-to-face, is it?

“Ultimately what is killing girls ... (in poverty) isn’t precisely malnutrition or malaria, but indifference.”

Nicholas Kristoff, cited in Jim Wallis, 2008, Seven Ways to Change the World

HOMEGROWN THROW AWAYS

Even though the number of poor people in our backyard is distinctly smaller and, dare I say it, somewhat easier to stomach than the global numbers, the look of our homegrown poverty is eerily similar.²⁷

In 2008-2009, the national average weekly household income from all sources was \$1,459. The average weekly wage and salary income was \$843. For males, this was \$992, compared to \$688 for females. For Maori, the average weekly wage and salary income was \$686, and for Pacific Islanders, \$670.

20% of New Zealand children (close to 216,000) live in relative poverty. There were 1600 reports of violence against children in 2009.

168,000 people are currently unemployed in New Zealand; over 26% of our working-aged youth are unemployed.

The 2008 Living Standards Survey discovered that only 4% of older New Zealanders (65+) experienced hardship in 2008, compared to 19% of children. The hardship rate of sole-parent families (39%) was found to be close to four times that of two-parent families (11%). And beneficiary households with dependent children were nearly five times more likely to experience hardship (51%) than working families with children (11%). Maori and Pacific Island communities were two to three times more likely to experience hardship than other ethnicities.

There is a growing lack of affordable housing in South Auckland, where in Manukau City only one new house is built for every 14 new residents. A growing number of people “house” themselves in garages, garden sheds, cars, night shelters, caravan parks, while others “sleep rough.”

The issue of food poverty is on the increase. Nationwide, The Salvation Army gave nearly 47,000 food parcels to 25,000 families in 2009.

The Maori infant mortality rate of 8.49 (deaths per 1000 live births) is more than twice that of non-Maori. Maori women can expect to live to 75 years and Maori men to 70 years, compared with 83 years for a non-Maori woman and 79 years for a non-Maori male.

In December 2009, there were 345,476 people collecting some form of Welfare Support (some 231,310 children were living in households dependent on these benefits); 66,328 people were on the Unemployment Benefit; 109,289 were collecting the Domestic Purposes Benefit; 59,158 were on the Sickness Benefit; and 85,038 were collecting the Invalids Benefit. The remaining 25,663 were collecting Emergency Benefits, Independent Youth Benefits, Training and Unemployment Benefits, Student Hardship Benefits or Widow’s Benefits.

Our rate of imprisonment in 2009 was 186 prisoners per 100,000 people, the third-highest rate in the world. Maori were 5.6 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Maori, constituting 49% of the prison population, even though they only make up 15% of the national population.

30,000 kids are out of school every day.

49% of single-parent households live in relative poverty.

²⁷ These statistics were gleaned from “A Road to Recovery: A State of the Nation Report of The Salvation Army. Downloadable from <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-media/social-research/social-policy-and-parliamentary-unit/>; Statistics New Zealand at <http://www.stats.govt.nz/>; and The 2008 Living Standards Survey, 2009, The Ministry of Social Development. Downloadable from <http://www.msd.govt.nz/>.

Stop now in front of these homegrown numbers. Do you *see who* is poor in New Zealand? Can you *see* the parallels of age, gender and race between our poverty and the global poor? Do these similarities disturb you, or is this simply what poverty looks like and *who* you'd expect to be poor? Do you know some of these people personally? Do some of these people live on your street? Do you drive past some of these people to go to church? Have you ever considered the people in these numbers (even if only in your own company) to be disposable or somehow of lesser significance? Do we have a moral obligation to poor people? Do we have a sense of a relational or shared responsibility towards others? How can we make right what is a global *and* local poverty of relationships between the poor and the rich?

A DROWNING CHILD AND THE DEATHS OF OTHERS

Ethicist and philosopher Peter Singer, named one of the “100 Most Influential people in the World” by *Time Magazine*, explores some of the confusing contours of what is our obligation *to others* through a little scenario that I think deserves our engagement:

“On your way to work, you pass a small pond. On hot days, children sometime play in the pond, which is only about knee-deep. The weather’s cool today, though, and the hour is early, so you are surprised to see a child splashing about in the pond. As you get closer, you see that it is a very young child, just a toddler, who is flailing about, unable to stay upright or walk out of the pond. You look for the parents or the babysitter, but there is no one else around. The child is unable to keep his head above the water for more than a few seconds at a time. If you don’t wade in and pull him out, he seems likely to drown. Wading in is easy and safe, but you will ruin the shoes you bought only a few days ago, and you will get your suit wet and muddy. By the time you hand the child over to someone responsible for him and change your clothes, you’ll be late for work. What should you do?”²⁸

It’s fairly clear what our moral obligation is, isn’t it. The child will only be saved if you and I decide to help, if you and I get personally involved and enter the pond, even if that means spoiling our new shoes, dirtying our suit and arriving late to work. Similarly, this line of thinking holds that the fate of the poor will only change and improve when we’re convinced to the core that *the other* is equally important; when we believe with everything we’ve got that the image of God *is* in every human being, and that everyone - whether they live on our street or in a different nation - whether they share our skin colour, language, faith or not, everyone deserves a fair go and to flourish. And, if we’re honest, this is exactly where our moral confusion emerges, a costly indifference that lessens our involvement and our sense of personal and relational responsibility towards *the other*. The scenario becomes too big and demands too much when it is stretched from the immediacy of a single drowning child to the distant 24,000 *children of others* whom we don’t *see* die every day from preventable diseases, something UNICEF and World Vision fittingly call to our collective shame, a “silent emergency.”²⁹ The children of *the other* simply don’t register on our radar.

“There can be no peacemaking or social work or anything else to improve the world unless we are convinced that the other is important.”
Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, 2008, *Living Gently in a Violent World*

Peter Singer laments:

“Most of us are absolutely certain that we wouldn’t hesitate to save a drowning child, and that we would do it at considerable cost to ourselves. Yet, while thousands of children die each day, we spend money on things we take for granted and would hardly notice if they were not there. Is that wrong? If so, how far does our obligation to the poor go?”³⁰

Jim Wallis, CEO of *Sojourners* and a public theologian, is even stronger:

“At the heart of the problem is the painful truth that the affluent believe their children are more important than the children of the world who are now starving to death. The religious assertion that those children are also sacred means that they are just as important as our own children and must be treated that way. It is a spiritual imperative that we have ignored, and the consequence is our own spiritual poverty and moral deterioration. There is a cost to disregarding moral values, and we are now reaping the social and cultural disintegration resulting from our spiritual disregard.”

²⁸ Peter Singer, 2009, *The Life You Can Save*, p.g. 3; See Peter K. Unger, 1996, *Living High and Letting Die*, for a critique of this scenario.

²⁹ See *Child Health Now Report*, 2009, World Vision.

³⁰ Peter Singer, *ibid*, pg. 12.

He goes on (and I think this is the crux of the matter):

“The radical assertion of the image of God in every human being lies at the heart of our best religious traditions and is the insight that could convert and renew our hearts and minds. What would it mean to fashion a global economy and conduct our politics [and our consuming] as if every human being had equal and sacred value? Would that not create a fundamental challenge to all our present systems and operating assumptions? Only a renewed consciousness of the worth of every one of us can provide the beginning of a new politics of community that could bring us together. To create such a new consciousness will be a formidable and spiritual task.”³¹

A new consciousness of *the other*, the hope of a common good that draws the haves and the have-nots into a common destiny and equally-shared future, a new politics of (international and local) community that eclipses “private interests, sectarian commitments and makes possible human solidarity”³² - what on earth could that look like this side of heaven? Is it even realistic? It is, *but only* if we deliberately choose to dismantle and close the inhumane gaps that already exist between ourselves and the poor.

And that means...

DISMANTLING THE DISTANCING OF OUR DEFINITIONS

We have to be careful to not let how we *define and measure poverty* entrench the distance between ourselves and the poor and impoverish the poor even more.

The World Bank and the *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)* of the United Nations, while commendable and hopeful in how they claim to be *for* the poor, limit poverty to a head count of people on the lowest income and with the smallest purchasing power. Thomas Pogge, a Professor of Philosophy at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics in Australia, comments:

“We need to begin by reminding ourselves that poverty is the condition of people whom we describe abstractly as ‘the poor.’ Referring to people by a label is always dangerous ... Whenever we reduce poor people from names to abstractions we add to their poverty and impoverish ourselves.”

Bryant L. Myers, 2008, Walking With the Poor

“Our current understanding of world poverty and of its evolution over time is heavily focused on counting the number of poor people. This counting is based on a narrow conception of ‘absolute’ or ‘extreme’ poverty, closely tied to hunger: people are counted as poor only if they fall short of the income expenditure level below which a minimum, nutritionally adequate diet plus essential non-food requirements are not affordable.”³³

He goes on to explain how this definition and measuring unintentionally functions to keep the poor and the non-poor divided and unequal:

“For the last 20 years or so, the World Bank has taken charge of this counting exercise. It employs for this purpose an international poverty line (IPL) widely known as ‘a dollar a day.’ ... Once the IPL is fixed, poverty is quantified simply by the number of those living below the IPL, and a reduction of poverty as a reduction in this number. Invoking the Bank’s tracking method and figures, the world’s governments (since 1996) have repeatedly promised (as with the Millennium Development Goals) to ‘halve world poverty by 2015.’ An ‘immediate’ view that takes 19 years to solve just half of the world poverty problem is not exactly ambitious, to be sure – just imagine Franklin Roosevelt pledging in 1942 to cut the ongoing harm caused by the Nazis down to half by 1961!”³⁴

Absurd, no?

The commitment we make to how the World Bank and the *Millennium Development Goals* measure and promise to “halve world poverty” is, in the calculations of Thomas Pogge, unwittingly deeming the deaths of 14 million poor to be morally acceptable and the deadly poverty of millions more people who will still be poor in 2015 to be somehow reasonable. It is not and should never be tolerable and if our definitions,

³¹ Jim Wallis, 1994, *The Soul of Politics*, p.g. 76.

³² Walter Brueggemann, 2010, *Journey to the Common Good*, p.g. 1.

³³ Thomas Pogge, 2009, *Developing Morally Plausible Indices of Poverty and Gender Equity: a Research Programme*, p.g. 4. Pdf is downloadable from <http://www.nyu.edu/ipk/events/30>.

³⁴ Thomas Pogge, *ibid*, p.g. 4.

measurements and promises mean that this inhumane calamity will eventuate then we should change them. And now. Similarly, though with a less devastating impact, Susan St John and Donna Wynd of the Child Action Poverty Group of New Zealand caution that when engaging with the poor “...attention must be paid to improvement on *all* measures (of poverty). Real incomes for *all* poor households must rise so that absolute poverty falls. Relative poverty and the depth of poverty must also decrease, and indicators of hardship must show improvement. Only then can we be confident that we have started to reverse the widening gap that has been the dominant feature of the New Zealand economy since the 1980s. Only then can we be confident that the damage poverty has done to our children is being repaired.”³⁵

ACTION REFLECTION:

- a. Do you think definitions matter? Is there more to poverty than income? How else could we measure poverty? Is SAMIS a good measuring tool? Explore the *Voices of the Poor* at <http://www.worldbank.org>. Do these stories differ from the picture of poverty you get from mass statistics? How can we keep the lived experience of the poor at the centre of our own lives?
- b. Are some lives more valuable than others? Are some deaths more costly than others? How do you describe the poor in our own backyard? Have you ever called them or heard them labeled *dole bludgers, burdens of/on the state, solos, beneficiaries, no hoppers, the last, the least and the lost, or the most vulnerable*? How do these differing labels and titles change how we *see* them? Are they somehow less or more deserving than the poor of other nations?
- c. Do you think we have to extend our definitions of family? Is our definition of what it means to be family or a neighbour too narrow? How could you be a “good neighbour”? How could your house/flat become a place of hospitality? How could you beautify the look and strengthen the neighbourly feel of the street you live on?

DISMANTLING THE DISTANCING OF OUR PRIVILEGED AND PROFESSIONALISED FAITH

We have to be careful to not let what I call a defeating *elitist faith* extend the distance between ourselves and the poor and derail our commitment to the eradication of poverty. Sadly, I have heard in Christian circles, and even within The Salvation Army, some people defensively claim that when Jesus said “the poor will always be with you” (Matthew 26.6-13), He meant that there will always be poverty and always be poor people. Nonsense. And it has to be called what it is - a dark and heinous heresy of the privileged. I like how Shane Claiborne engages with this *elitist* theology:

“Almost every time we talk with the affluent about God’s will to end poverty, someone says, ‘but didn’t Jesus say, The poor will always be with you?’ Many of the people who whip out this verse have grown quite insulated and distant from the poor and feel defensive. I usually gently ask, ‘Where are the poor? Are they among us?’ The answer is usually a clear ‘no.’ As we study the scriptures, we see how many texts we have misread, contextualized, and exegeted to hear what we want to. Like this one about the poor being among us, which Jesus says in the house of a leper and after a poor marginalized woman anoints His feet with perfume. The poor were all around Him. Far from saying in defeat that we should not worry about the poor, since they will always be among us, Jesus is pointing the church to her true identity - she is to live closer to those who suffer.”³⁶

The counterclaim of Jesus is that it is the closeness of *new community* that makes a difference; that presence and proximity with the poor is a defining measure of both our *love* for God and our neighbour (Deuteronomy 15; Isaiah 58.6-14; Proverbs 19.17; Matthew 22.34-40; Matthew 25.33-40; 26.11; 2 Corinthians 8.9; Philippians 2.1-13; 1 John 3:17), and the only hope we have of a reciprocal, redeeming transformation. Does this mean that every follower of Jesus has to move into a disadvantaged neighbourhood or sell everything and fly off to a developing nation? “God forbid” snaps Jim Wallis. “The poor couldn’t survive the inundation.

“Love, of course, is not the language of finance or economics: it is the language of relationships. God measures a society by the quality of its relationships.”

Michael Shutler, cited in Dave Andrews, 2008, A Divine Society

However, I know of no other way to have our lives really affected by the poor other than through relationship to the poor. How else can one begin to listen, to learn, to understand? That, by the way, is the *only* posture in which the affluent can begin to approach poor people. Not to tell, nor teach, nor even help, but to put themselves in a position to *listen* and to be changed ... The key for the affluent is to be in a situation where

³⁵ Susan St John and Donna Wynd (eds.), 2008, *Left Behind: How Social and Income Inequalities Damage New Zealand Children*, Child Poverty Action Group, p.g. 25. See how the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit has designed indices of poverty and social well-being in its State of Nation Reports at www.salvationarmy.org.nz.

³⁶ Shane Claiborne, 2006, *The Irresistible Revolution*, p.g. 160.

they can no longer ignore the existence of poor people.”³⁷

The feisty Shane Claiborne stretches this thinking and contends that the gifting of *presence* is a non-negotiable of our faith:

“It is much more comfortable to depersonalise the poor so we don’t feel responsible for the catastrophic human failure that results in someone sleeping on the street while people have spare bedrooms in their homes. We can volunteer in a social programme or distribute excess food and clothing through organisations and never have to open up our homes, our beds, our dinner tables. *When we get to heaven, we will be separated into those sheep and goats that Jesus talks about in Matthew 25 based on how we cared for the least among us.* I’m just not convinced that Jesus is going to say, ‘When I was hungry, you gave a cheque to the [Save the Children] and they fed me,’ or, ‘When I was naked, you donated clothes to The Salvation Army and they clothed me.’ Jesus is not seeking distant acts of charity. He seeks concrete acts of love: ‘*you fed me ... you visited me in prison ... you welcome me into your home ... you clothed me.*’”³⁸

There is something of a double-edged knife in this thinking for The Salvation Army, isn’t there? Historically we have invested energy, expertise and millions and millions of dollars, not to mention much of our credibility and identity, on the professionalism of our social programmes, or what might be called the *Social Work* model of our social services. The tension we have to grapple with is that even though this professionalisation has added enormous strength and value to our staff and services, the:

“...social work model can easily entangle the church in the efficiency of brokering services and resources

[and] in a web of ‘clients’ and ‘providers’ [where we can struggle] to retain God’s vision of rebirth, in which we are all family. Faith-based non-profits can too easily be the mirror image of secular organizations, maintaining the same hierarchies of power and separation between rich and poor. They can too easily merely facilitate the exchange of goods and services, putting plenty of professionals in the middle to guarantee that the rich do

“Stop creating dependencies; stop devaluing those whom you help while you profit from their troubles.”

Edgar S. Cahn, 2004, No More Throw-Away People

not have to face the poor and that power does not shift. Rich and poor are kept in separate worlds, and inequality is carefully managed but not dismantled. When the church becomes a place of brokerage rather than an organic community, she ceases to be alive ... The church becomes a distribution centre, a place where the poor come to get stuff and the rich come to dump stuff. Both go away satisfied (the rich feel good, the poor get clothed and fed), but no one leaves transformed. No new radical community is formed.”³⁹

Are we entrapped in a similar brokerage of goods and services, efficiently and professionally complying with contracts and proscribed standards, but in the end separate and separating? Is this the fate of The Salvation Army? Is this the future of our Community Ministries?

My desk is in front of a food bank and everyday I *see* a constant flow of broken and close to desperate people coming for help and leaving with a food parcel, the dribble-down impact of the current economic crisis and the growing problem of food insecurity and food poverty in our communities. There is, in this frantic coming and going, simply no space or time for the deeper practice of new community or mutual reciprocity; there is only enough space and time to deliver a charitable and efficient service, engage in a little lighthearted banter and then, with a dignifying smile and some humanising laughter, the “client” is dispatched to make space for the next. It is a distressing sight that only stops when the centre closes.

Is there an alternative? Do we have to do less? Do we have to deliberately *slow down* and create the space and time that is necessary for capacity strengthening and the development of new community? Do you think we could slow down long enough to give our “food bank clients” the dignity of choosing what goes into the food parcels, a “go slow” that could enable hands on budgeting advice and maybe the space needed for the “clients” and staff to develop something more of a partnering relationship? Is that even possible given the entrenching of food poverty and the escalating dependency on food banks nationwide? The Salvation Army experienced a 40% increase in the number of people seeking help from our food banks in 2009. Are these people somehow of lesser significance, our own “throw-away people”? No; then how could we communicate

³⁷ Jim Wallis, 1981, *ibid.* p.g. 53.

³⁸ Shane Claiborne, *ibid.* p.g. 158, emphasis mine.

³⁹ Shane Claiborne, *ibid.* p.g. 158-159.

that they're not useless and are of real value? What if every one of our "clients" could be invited to participate in some meaningful practice of communal service or voluntary work? Do we need to redefine and revalue what work is? What if we could shift our Community Ministries from the doing of stuff *for* people to the doing of stuff *alongside* people, from the efficient exchange of goods, programmes and services to the organic, messy and mutual practice of reciprocity and transformation? What if we were to put the *community* back into our Community Ministries? What could that look like? Engaging with these issues and questions, though difficult and disagreeable to our professionalised standards, promises to dismantle some of the entrenched dependencies and disinvestments that continue to distance the poor from the rich; the inhumane and needless separation of *them* from *us*.

The good news is that The Salvation Army is already starting to see some of this shift toward community development and reciprocity in our movement. Booth College of Mission is developing a mutual relationship with its counterpart in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, enabling the students and faculty at Booth College to listen to, learn from and identify with the hopes and struggles of colleagues in a developing territory. The intentional flats of *nitechurch* in Dunedin, *614* in Wellington, and the intentional housing of *Rec* in Oranga, Tamaki and Waikowhai, to name only a few, similarly embody hopeful signs of Salvationists recommitting themselves to living within marginalised neighbourhoods, personally reconnecting with neighbours and redistributing some of the relational riches they have to share.

ACTION REFLECTION:

- Do you agree with the comments of Jim Wallis and Shane Claiborne?
- Have you ever considered moving to be physically closer to the poor? If you had a choice between living among the poor for a couple of years (internationally or locally) or doing a big OE, what would you choose? Do you think there is merit in The Salvation Army creating a fund that could help young adults encounter and experience personally what it means to live in poverty?
- Mother Teresa has commented, "Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat." What do you think of this comment? Plot with some friends or in a small group how you could share some of your own relational riches to help correct the global and local poverty of relationships. Email Major Vyvyenne Noaks, Overseas Development Officer at vyvyenne_noakes@nzf.salvationarmy.org for ideas and practical projects that you could support.

DISMANTLING THE DISTANCING OF OUR HURRY

We have to work at slowing down long enough to even *notice* the poor amongst us. The anxious haste of our everyday lives limits our capacity for engaging with *otherness*. The frantic pace of our hurry closes us in on ourselves and makes us immune to the suffering of *the other*. We become indifferent, numb. We fail to *notice the stranger* with whom we have no history or significant relationship. We dehumanise the poor even more and make poverty into a matter of abstract information and depersonalised mass numbers. The time we feel we have (or fear we don't have) determines how we respond to what and who we *see*.

"If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."

Mother Teresa

"On April 30, 1991 - on that one day - 138,000 people drowned in Bangladesh. At dinner I mentioned to our daughter, who was then seven years old, that it was hard to imagine 138,000 people drowning. 'No, it's easy,' she said. 'Lots and lots of dots, in blue water.'"

Annie Dillard

John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson, psychologists from Princeton University designed a social experiment in 1973 to explore the ethical and moral leverage of the parable of the Good Samaritan. They entitled the experiment "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior"⁴⁰ and looked at what difference a knowledge of the parable and the pressure of timelessness could make to how we *see and treat* the needs of *the other*. The experiment involved seminary students who were studying to be ministers of religion. They were informed that they were going to give a presentation to a group of new students in a lecture theatre not far from where they were. Half of the students were instructed to prepare a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan, while the other half were told that they were to prepare a talk on employment opportunities for people studying theology. The students were then told when and where they had to make

⁴⁰John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson, 1973, From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behavior. Cited at <http://www.aug.edu/sociology/Jerusalem.htm>.

the presentations and were left to prepare themselves.

At the scheduled time of the presentations the students were informed that the location had changed at the last minute and they were now go to a new location. Some of the students were at this point told that they had plenty of time (low-time pressure), some were told that they were already late and had to hurry (high-time pressure) and others were told that if they left in the next minute or two they could still make it on time (medium-time pressure). The students were then given final instructions and were told to go and make the presentations. Earlier that day, Darley and Batson had deliberately organized a male stranger to be in the doorway of where the students had to be. The man had been instructed to cough in distress and groan as the students were passing to enter the lecture theatre.

The experiment had been designed to test three hypotheses. That:

- everyone would notice the stranger and stop to help, given that the students were studying to be ministers of religion and would be more likely to be sensitive to the needs of *the other*.
- the students who were having a fresh look at the parable of the Good Samaritan would be more likely to stop given that they were studying a similar situation to that which they were now facing.
- the students who were hurrying less would be more likely to stop, given that the extra time they felt they had would enable them to *see* and *treat* the needs of *the other*.

The reactions of the seminary students were recorded, and it's startling what they found:

- not everyone stopped.
- the students who had been engaging with the parable of the Good Samaritan were just as likely to *not* notice the stranger as the students who weren't looking at the Bible; in-fact, Darley and Batson discovered that the fresh engagement with Scripture seemed to make no significant difference to what these students noticed, with most of them stepping over the stranger and ironically going on to give a presentation on the Good Samaritan.
- the students who hurried less were more likely to notice the stranger and were more likely to stop and help (63%) than those who felt they had no time (only 10% of the students who were hurrying stopped to *see* if the stranger needed help).

The researchers concluded that the anxious haste of hurry "narrowed the cognitive map" of the pressured students and negated, to some extent, *the knowledge they had of Scripture* and *who they could see*. They deduced from these results that for some people "...the frequently-cited explanation that ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases is at least an accurate description."⁴¹

There is a deep connection between this and the alternative socioeconomic imagination of the Sabbath, isn't there? The historic Sabbath, the God-given command to *slow down and stop*, countered the anxious hurrying of the Empire and the deep fear of Pharaoh, which converted human beings into disposable machine-like objects and, at the same time, enabled the newly-formed community of Hebrews to *revalue* and *see* the poor as *neighbours* who lived amongst them. The instructions of Exodus 20.8-11 make this clear:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

Did you catch how *slowing down and stopping* enabled the Israelites to see *the other*? The Sabbath meant that everyone got to be seen in plain sight and, if only for a day, everyone got to be treated fairly, without labelling and with mutual respect: family, adults, children, parents, daughters and sons, male and female slaves, foreigners, even livestock. The day of rest declared to the community that there is more to being human than the competitive desire for more or the anxious fear of never having enough. Walter Brueggemann explains how the practice of the Sabbath is critical for our common good and for the plight of the poor:

"Persons living in *a system of anxiety and fear* - and consequently greed - have no time or energy for the common good. Defining anxiety focuses total attention on the self at the expense of the common good ... (The Sabbath is *an*) *immense act of generosity* (that breaks) the death grip of the system of fear, anxiety and greed. (And those) who are immersed in such immense gifts of generosity are able to get their minds off themselves and can be *about the work of the (global and local) neighborhood*. Children of such enormous

41John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson, *ibid*.

abundance are able to receive new commandments that are about the well-being of the neighbour and not about entitlements of the self.”⁴²

The Sabbath-induced *slow down* is a critical practice of our common future, in that it enlarges our capacity to *notice the other* and respond. We have to be careful in New Zealand that with the governmental review of the Holidays Act we don’t diminish the alternative life-giving power of the Sabbath and succumb to a singular economic definition of life that reduces everyone and everything to cost-benefit “market relations.”

ACTION REFLECTION

- a. Did the experiment of Darley and Batson surprise you? How much of a decision-making influence does Scripture play in your everyday life? Are you part of a small discipleship group that is helping you to go deeper in your faith? Study Luke 12.33-34. How could the counterclaims of these texts help reframe your spending and your reinvestments in relationships?
- b. Do you rush? How “busy” is your calendar or diary? Do you practice a Sabbath? Does it help you to rest and slow down? Does it give you more space for *others*? How? Do we need to reconsider the meaning of work? Is it simply a matter of paying the bills, something that is valuable only when it is paid for, or is there something more significant to our work? Is there real value in voluntary service? How could we revalue what is done voluntarily every day in our communities? If not already, try volunteering some of your time to a group working among the poor. If you have children or belong to a small group, invite them to volunteer with you. And why not bake a cake or some muffins and in a spirit of thankfulness share them with some of the volunteers in your neighbourhood.
- c. Explore the review of the Holidays Act online at <http://www.caritas.org.nz>. Do you think the initiative of enabling workers to swap holidays for cash will lead to a selling of holidays? Is that healthy? How do you think this would impact on low-income earners in the labour market? How do you think this would impact on families and on family life?

DISMANTLING THE DISTANCING OF OUR HOARDING AND MISUSE OF RESOURCES

The Christian community has to be the sea change our future demands and show leadership in closing the gaps that exist between the poor and the rich. We have to be a dramatic demonstration of how “enough is enough” and that there is “enough,” that poverty is the result of a neglect of relationships that is undoable and not a scarcity of resources that makes a real resolution unthinkable. The mandate is ours to prophetically embody how it is possible to play by a different, fairer and more humane set of economic rules. Ron Snider, a professor of theology at Eastern University in the US, claims that: “contemporary Christians have an enormous opportunity to use politics to shape a better world ... More than a third of the world’s people claim to be Christians. That one-third of the global population controls two-thirds of the world’s wealth. If even a quarter of the world’s Christians truly followed biblical norms in their politics, we would fundamentally change history.”⁴³

“Our affluent way of life is not only crushing the poor economically. The consequences are also spiritual. In a world context of Christians who are poor, our way of life is a violation of Christian fellowship. Our wealth breaks the unity of the body of Christ.”

Jim Wallis, 1981, The Call to Conversion

Sadly, that hasn’t happened. We haven’t been the new socioeconomic direction that our (international and local) communities need, and it’s not only the tabloid media that have noticed. Peter Rollins, a philosopher and emerging church leader in the UK has concocted “A First World Translation” of “Jesus and the Five Thousand” (c.f. John 6) that cheekily captures what the poor might say of Western Christianity. Sit in silence with this retelling and let it speak to you:

“JESUS WITHDREW PRIVATELY BY BOAT TO A SOLITARY PLACE, but the crowds continued to follow Him. Evening was now approaching and the people, many of whom had travelled a great distance, were growing hungry.

Seeing this, Jesus sent His disciples out to gather food, but all they could find were five loaves of bread and two fishes. Then Jesus asked that they go out again and gather up the provisions that the crowds had brought to sustain them in their travels. Once this was accomplished, a vast mountain of fish and bread stood before Jesus. Upon seeing this He directed the people to sit down on the grass.

⁴² A paraphrasing of Walter Brueggemann, 2010, *The Journey to the Common Good*, p.g. 28-29.

⁴³ Ronald J. Snider, 2008, *The Scandal of Evangelical Politics*, p.g. 231.

Standing before the food and looking up to heaven, He gave thanks to God and broke the bread. Then He passed the food among His twelve disciples. Jesus and His friends ate like kings in full view of the starving people. But what was truly amazing, what was miraculous about this meal, was that when they had finished the massive banquet there were not even enough crumbs left to fill a starving person's hand."⁴⁴

Disturbing, eh.

Is it fair to describe Christ like this? Is it fairer to say that it is our own habits of consumption that deny Christ and double cross the poor? Peter Rollins comments:

"The initial shock of this story relates to the way that it inscribes selfish and inhumane actions onto Christ Himself ... While it would seem perfectly acceptable to attack governments, corporations, and individuals for failing to distribute goods appropriately and turning away from the poorest among us who suffer as a direct result of our greed, it would seem inappropriate to read such inhumanity into the actions of Christ Himself ... However, if Christ is proclaimed in the life of His followers, if the body of believers is thought to manifest the body of Christ in the world, then we must stop, draw breath, and ask ourselves whether the above tale reflects how Christ is presented to the world today, at least in the minds of those who witness the lifestyle of Christians in the West."⁴⁵

A difficult line of questioning that pierces me to the core. The Salvation Army is in 119 different countries and spans the extremes of the global economy; we're connected to and involved in communities and countries where people have too little and we're among people who have too much. Salvationists in the developed North, and that includes the 11,000+ people who identify with The Salvation Army in Aotearoa New Zealand, have to dig deep and ask if our own management of money and financial practices faithfully present Jesus to our colleagues in the developing nations of the South. Do our finances speak of our belief that everyone is equal; do they testify of our conviction that, "enough is enough" and that there is "enough for everyone," or do they witness to our own captivity to the anxious and hoarding economics of scarcity? Walter Brueggemann has this to say, and I pray that we don't rush on from these words:

"Such captivity of the human spirit must be again and again challenged, for it is that captivity that makes it possible to commit aggressive brutalising war in the name of democratic freedom; to tolerate acute poverty in an economy of affluence ...; to sustain policies of abuse of environment, all in the name of nurturing (the privileged place we occupy in) the economy."⁴⁶

The good news is that there is a growing commitment of The Salvation Army to ethical consumerism, and with many of our centres, corps and our soldiery now investing in ethically-produced coffee, milo, tea, sugar, chocolate and clothing,⁴⁷ we're learning to (re)connect our faith to the correcting of injustices in the global financial market and we're helping to guarantee something of a livable wage for workers in developing countries. The commitments we make to this ethical consumerism and to the more institutionalised "open purses" of Home League Projects, Child Sponsorship, the Self Denial Appeal, Overseas Aid, and the Officer Endowment Fund are healthy practices of our internationalism and demonstrate our relational responsibility towards the poor amongst us. The challenge that we're left with is how to shift this giving toward a discovery of the gifts that poor people themselves can bring to the table; how can we shift our giving towards listening, mutual learning and reciprocal relationships.

ACTION REFLECTION:

- a. Did the claim of Ron Snider give you hope? Did the imagery of Peter Rollins steal your hope?
- b. Sit down and slowly review your own finances. Do a similar inventory of the stuff you own. If you can, do this inventory with someone you trust. Encourage your centre or corps to take a moral inventory of how they spend money. Explore how your (personal and collective) habits of consumption "vote" for either a harsher or fairer world? Ask whether or not you already have enough? How could you change your spending to make your own consumption more ethical? Try to discover where the products you purchase come from and how they were made and, if necessary, try switching to alternative products that have been produced ethically and responsibly. If there is no alternative in the supermarkets, speak with the store

⁴⁴ Peter Rollins, 2010, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales*, p.g. 10-12, capitals in original.

⁴⁵ Peter Rollins, 2010, *ibid*, p.g. 11-12. See Philip Jenkins, 2006, *The New Faces of Christianity - Believing the Bible in the Global South*, for a deeper exploration of how Christianity is being reframed by Christians in poorer nations.

⁴⁶ Walter Brueggemann, 2010, *The Journey Toward the Common Good*, p.g. 31.

⁴⁷ See <http://www.micahclothing.co.nz>

manager to see if it is possible for the supermarket to stock them. Some of the young people from Winton Corps managed to get Fair Trade products stocked in a local supermarket simply by insisting that if the store supplied them they would purchase them. How could you give relationally?

- c. Do you grasp the significance of what Walter Brueggemann is saying? Have you ever felt captive to a fear of not having enough, or to a desire of having more than enough; the economics of scarcity? How has this shaped your habits of consumption and spending? How could the concept of “enough” be freeing for both the non-poor and the poor? How could “enough” change you?

DISMANTLING THE DISTANCING OF OUR WEIGHTLESS WORDS

We have to work at dismantling the division that comes from our employment of depersonalising language, what Naomi Klein calls a vocabulary of “weightlessness.”⁴⁸ Everywhere my ears go, at church, at the cafe, at the hairdresser, at the dairy, and mostly on mainstream media, I continually hear people discussing a disembodied and “free” economy, a force-like *something* that is somehow “free floating” and non-human. There is a constant mentioning of a divine-like and omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent “invisible hand” that directs the “free market”, a god-like impersonal presence that tips everyone and everything towards commodification, efficiency, productivity and profit. There is, in the imagery of William T. Cavanaugh, “a profound sense of resignation to fate (in our language and) attitudes toward the market. The process of globalisation seems to have advanced beyond anyone’s control. Managers sigh that their decisions are subject to the impersonal control of ‘market forces’... Consumers feel besieged by marketing and surveillance, and they feel powerless in the face of enormous transnational corporations that are disconnected from the communities where they live. We hear rumours that our shoes are made by children and other exploited (and disposable) labourers, but we have no idea how we could begin to resist.”⁴⁹

The starting place of our resistance and how we can counter this deeply embedded sense of depersonalized fatalism is in learning to speak honestly of the economy and of our own position in the “market place”. The financial market is not a disembodied or “free-floating” force. There is always *someone* leveraging financial levers, *someone* making economic decisions, *someone* involved in the engineering of commercial transactions. The “market place” is a decidedly human construction that billions of people like you and me commit to every day and make possible every day. Every time you and I go to the bank we get entangled in human-made agreements that govern what happens between a bank and its clients; every time we pay tax we get entangled in human-made expectations that govern what happens between citizens of this country and our government; every time we get paid for clocking in at work and for working we get entangled in human-made regulations that govern what happens between employers and employees; every time we grab a packet of coffee at Pack N Save, a Meadow Fresh milk at the corner dairy, a cheeseburger at McDonalds, or shop for a bargain at The Warehouse, we get entangled in human-made rules that govern what happens between multinational corporations and governments, what happens between market supply and consumer demand, and what happens between retailers, shop owners and shoppers.

See that?

The economy, or the “free market”, is nothing more than a complex, interdependent human network of governing agreements, decisions, expectations, norms, patterns and rules that define how we think of ourselves and shape how we interact with and relate to others. Every day we simply (and mostly without thinking) recommit to its relationships and we reestablish its rules. And that means, every day, with a little discipline and a little hopeful intentionality, we can re-describe these same relationships and we can re-imagine these same rules. We can actively change *how* we interact with the economy; we can challenge the given expectations of the market; we can counter what has always been expected and what everyone expects has to always be. Every day, even if it is only hesitantly, we can, with the little we have and the littler we know, point to the possibility of something alternative, something new. We can start to create a different set of economic relationships where the non-poor and the poor get a fair deal and where we decide to play by a new set of relational rules that rule out poverty. Think of Fair Trade, Micah Clothing, Trade Aid, the Rainforest Alliance and the phenomenal growth of “earth-friendly” and “green” brands. We, the consumers, have “voted” with our dollars and have changed the direction and the shape of the market. A financial language that describes how *human* the economy *is*; a personalising language that speaks of how *changeable* the market *is*, deflates the exaggerated fatalism of the globalised market *and* enables everyone to accept the challenge and the hopefulness of what is really our shared responsibility.

⁴⁸ See Naomi Klein, 1999, No Logo.

⁴⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, 2008, Being Consumed, p.g. 1-2.

See the potential of this thinking?

Today, with one child dying of hunger every five seconds in a developing country, if we hope to make a real difference we will have to learn how to engage face-to-face with the human interconnections of our global and local economies that entrench this gross and inhumane injustice and give poverty its look and feel of permanence. Edgar S. Cahn captures powerfully how this “earthed” and relational reframing of poverty could give a new and hopeful energy to our solidarity with the poor:

“The first woman who sees the babies floating down the river tries to pull out as many babies as possible, but she misses more than she helps. The second woman decides if she can teach the babies to swim, some will learn and save themselves. The third woman decides the only way to save all the babies is to find the bum who’s throwing them in and stop it at the source.”⁵⁰

ACTION REFLECTION:

- Do you believe in a “free market”? Do you think it could be time to create a public debate on how we might limit the “freedoms” of the market and how we might tip the market towards the common good of human dignity, equality, neighbourliness and reciprocity? See how the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit of The Salvation Army in New Zealand is involved in this debate at <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-media/social-research/social-policy-and-parliamentary-unit/> How could you fuel this debate where you’re at?
- Do you think how we speak of the market or of poverty matters? Thomas Merton has said, “In the end, it is the reality of relationships that saves everything.” How do you think this statement could reshape our own involvement in the market place?
- Do you identify most strongly with the first, second or third woman in Edgar S. Cahn’s imagery? How does your choice of character frame your engagement with the market and the poor?

RECONCILING, RECIPROCAL, REDEEMING AND REVALUING

The hope of our common future lies in *how* we see and treat *the other*. There is no magic bullet, no single campaign or solitary action that will eradicate the entrenched poverty of our relations. There is only the everyday slog of people like you and me (re)investing in reciprocal and redemptive relationships; relationships that reconcile divisive distances and revalue our shared humanity.

“Change begins with a new relationship with the poor.”
Jim Wallis, 2008, Seven Ways to Change the World

RESOURCES TO RE-IMAGINE AND RESPOND WITH

- Ash Barker, 2009, Make Poverty Personal - Taking the poor as seriously as the Bible does.
- Tom Beaudoin, 2007, Consuming Faith - integrating who we are with what we buy.
- Child Poverty Action Group, <http://www.cpag.org.nz/>
- Mark Douglas, 2005, Confessing Christ in the 21st Century (especially chapters 11 on Stewardship and 14 on The Market).
- Duncan Green, 2008, From Poverty to Power - How Active Citizens and Effective States can Change the World. Free Publication of Oxfam at www.oxfam.org.uk/publications.
- Brian McLaren, Elsie Papilla, Ashley Bunting (eds.), 2009, The Justice Project.
- Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, 2009, Half the Sky - Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide. See <http://www.halfttheskymovement.org/> for challenging and inspirational stories of women in poverty.
- The DVD *The Soloist* (Patricia Whitcher, Executive Producer) engages with many of the debates and myths surrounding *disposable people*.

⁵⁰ Edgar S. Cahn, *ibid*, p.g. 155.