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REFRAMING BENEVOLENCE

UNDERSTANDING THE PRINCIPLES OF POVERTY ALLEVIATION

As described in the introduction, Ben is struggling to pay his rent, and Debbie needs help with her electric bill.

Those do not sound like enormous problems to solve. But in reality, truly helping Ben or Debbie is usually a very complex process, and there is typically no easy solution. However, there are general principles that can guide you along the way as you walk with low-income people. This chapter describes these principles in order to lay a solid foundation for your church's benevolence work.

It is profoundly important to remember that these principles are not meant to be simple recipes that can be applied blindly to every person. Indeed, the more you delve into any given situation of poverty, the more you are likely to discover all sorts of subtle complexities that require a nuanced approach rather than a one-size-fits-all formula. Hence, understanding the principles in this chapter in no way negates your need to rely upon the *Holy Spirit, prayer, wisdom, and discernment* as you walk with low-income people.

Most of the material in this chapter is a brief summary of the ideas

presented in chapters 1–6 and 10 of *When Helping Hurts*. Thus, for a deeper understanding of these concepts, you might find it useful to read those chapters as well.

POVERTY AND BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS

Imagine going to the doctor because of chronic headaches. What happens if the doctor diagnoses your problem as a sinus infection when you actually have a brain tumor? Or what happens if the doctor simply gives you a painkiller to treat your symptoms rather than running tests to discover the underlying cause of your headaches? In either case, you are not going to get better. Indeed, you could die from the brain tumor despite the doctor's good intentions. In order for you to get better, it is absolutely essential for the doctor to correctly diagnose the fundamental cause of your illness.

The same is true when we work with materially poor people. Good intentions are not enough. If we misdiagnose the causes of their poverty or treat their symptoms rather than their underlying problems, we can do considerable harm to materially poor people in the very process of trying to help them. We have to get the diagnosis right.

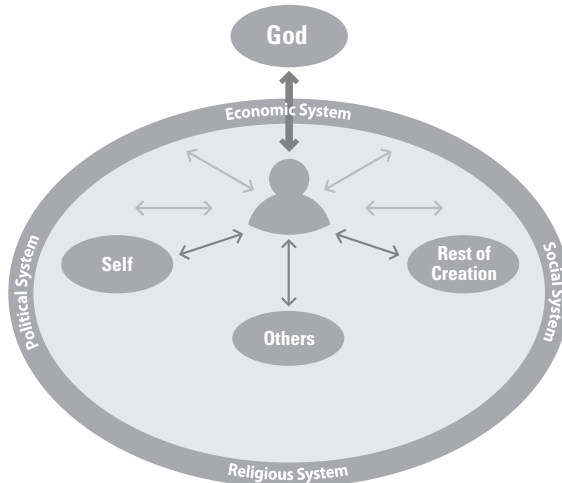
And therein lies one of the fundamental problems with poverty alleviation: being materialistic people, many North Americans tend to think of the disease of poverty as being a lack of material things, such as money, food, clothing, and shelter. As a result, many of us think that the best way to alleviate poverty is simply to give material things to low-income people: money to pay the electric bill, turkeys and toys at Christmas, warm clothing during the winter.

In particular, when a low-income person such as Ben or Debbie approaches our churches asking for help, many of us have a tendency to focus on meeting their immediate material needs by paying their rent or electric bill. Although this is sometimes necessary and can provide much-needed temporary assistance, simply dispensing material resources usually only treats the symptoms of poverty rather than its underlying causes. And if the handouts are repeated over long periods of time to able-bodied people, they can create crippling dependencies. To be truly

effective, we need to move past treating the symptoms of poverty—a lack of material things—and correctly diagnose its deeper causes.

Toward that end, let's consider poverty from a biblical perspective. God is inherently a relational being. From all eternity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in perfect relationship with one another. As beings made in the image of this triune God, human beings are wired for relationship as well. Indeed, the Bible teaches that in creation God established four foundational relationships for each human being: relationships *with God*, *with self*, *with others*, and *with the rest of creation*. When these relationships are functioning in the way God designed them to function, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended: we experience deep communion with a loving God; we understand our inherent dignity and worth as image-bearers; we live in positive, giving relationships with others; and we actively steward God's creation, both caring for it and being able to work and to support ourselves as a result of that work. Indeed, when these relationships are working properly, the results bubble up in all aspects of our lives: families are nurturing, communities are flourishing, work is meaningful, and we are bringing glory to God in all that we do.

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS



Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 27.

However, the fall has damaged all four of these relationships *for all of us*. How? There are a number of forces at work that undermine these relationships for each person, including the Bens and Debbies who approach our churches asking for assistance:¹

- ***Individual Behaviors*** of the person, including their own sins, can undermine the proper functioning of these relationships. For example, if Ben is addicted to alcohol, he may struggle to hold down a job, thereby undermining his relationship to creation.
- ***Abusive or Exploitive People*** can do severe damage to people. For example, if Debbie’s ex-husband physically abused her regularly, those past experiences could still be undermining her self-image (relationship to self), making it difficult for her to work (relationship to creation).
- ***Oppressive Systems*** (economic, political, social, or religious) can make it difficult or even impossible for these relationships to function properly. For example, a recession can create widespread unemployment, hindering Ben’s and Debbie’s relationship to creation by undermining their ability to work. Many of us who are not materially poor tend to underestimate the importance of oppressive systems, because by and large the systems have worked well for us. But the systems do not work well for everybody. In particular, the legacy of institutionalized racism—both historic and contemporary—continues to wreak havoc with the lives of many people who are poor in ways that Caucasian North Americans often fail to see.
- ***Demonic Forces*** are at war with God and human beings as His image-bearers (Ephesians 6:12). Many of us are blind to this cause of poverty, for we North Americans tend to see the world through material rather than spiritual lenses. But Satan and his legions are real and very active, and both the materially poor and the materially non-poor (middle- and upper-income people) need to “put on the full armor of God, so that [we] can take [our] stand against the devil’s schemes” (Ephesians 6:11).

For Ben and Debbie, the way that the four relationships are broken results in material poverty, i.e., a lack of sufficient resources to provide for themselves and their families. But this material poverty is a symptom of something deeper: *the underlying brokenness in the four key relationships due to individual behaviors, abusive or exploitive people, oppressive systems, and demonic forces*. Thus, when a person like Ben or Debbie asks your church for assistance, it usually is not enough to *just* address their immediate needs by giving them money, food, or clothing, though such assistance may be appropriate in some situations. Instead, fostering lasting change requires us to move beyond treating symptoms into a much longer-term process of walking alongside them as we all depend on Christ's power to conquer the individual behaviors, abusive or exploitive people, oppressive systems, and demonic forces that are the root causes of their material poverty.

As we engage in this longer-term process of change with low-income people, it is absolutely imperative that we constantly remind ourselves that all of us, regardless of our income level, are profoundly broken and desperately in need of the restorative work of Jesus Christ. Failing to embrace this fundamental truth will typically lead us to inadvertently harm low-income people . . . and ourselves. Indeed, the way that the materially non-poor (middle- and upper-income people) are broken can deepen the brokenness of the materially poor, and vice versa.

To see this, consider how both parties typically experience brokenness in the four key relationships. Among other things, those of us who are not materially poor often experience this brokenness in the form of pride, self-centeredness, workaholic tendencies, and a desire to “play god” in the lives of others. In contrast, materially poor people often experience this brokenness in the form of a paralyzing sense of shame and inferiority, social isolation, and in less than ideal work opportunities and habits.

When the materially non-poor try to help the materially poor, each party brings their respective brokenness into the process. The materially non-poor often exhibit an air of superiority and “play god” by trying to fix the materially poor, thereby confirming what the materially poor

are already feeling: “I am inferior; I can’t do it; other people need to do it for me.” The result is often that the materially poor become more passive, sitting back and waiting for others to fix their problems. And as this happens, the materially non-poor often become more proud: “I knew they didn’t have my work ethic and initiative. Why don’t they do something to improve their lives?” As a result, the shame of materially poor people is deepened, and the pride of the materially non-poor is enhanced. Both parties end up more broken—more poor in a relational sense—than they were before.

This dynamic is particularly problematic when we have a material definition of poverty. For if poverty is fundamentally about a lack of material things, then we materially non-poor are not broken. We are successful! We have won the game of life! Moreover, we have what materially poor people need: material things. Thus, we are necessarily in the position of being their benefactors, for in our wallets we possess the solution to their problems. A material definition of poverty puts the materially non-poor in a position of superiority over the materially poor.

This common dynamic can be summarized in the following equation:

Material Definition of Poverty	+	Feelings of Superiority of Materially Non-Poor	+	Feelings of Inferiority of Materially Poor	=	Harm to Both Materially Poor and Non-Poor
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Note that the first two variables in this equation apply to us. Hence, breaking out of this unhealthy dynamic requires us to repent of our trust in material resources and of our sense of superiority. The key is to constantly remind ourselves of the truth of the gospel: *We were all profoundly broken people who deserved eternal punishment; but through Christ’s death and resurrection—and absolutely no merit of our own—we are now the adopted sons and daughters of our heavenly Father* (Galatians 4:1–7). Preaching these truths of the gospel to ourselves every day frees us from our pride and

enables us to move into a mutually transformative relationship with materially poor people, a context that Christ can use to bring healing to the ongoing brokenness in both of our lives.

Sanctifying Encounters

One morning, the pastor on call asked Eric to join a conversation with a woman who had walked into the church requesting financial assistance. It had been a crazy morning, and Eric, a staff member at the church, jumped into the conversation at full speed. “I started going through my routine of asking questions and looking for information . . . I went straight to logical solutions,” Eric explains. She stopped Eric, looked at him, and said, “I’m intimidated by you, and I feel really uncomfortable right now.” In Eric’s words, “I had missed the most important part: making a heart connection with her.”

Eric immediately shifted gears. “I apologized, saying ‘Let’s slow down, tell me what’s going on and how you feel.’” The woman started talking and weeping, letting out the pain she was carrying about in day-to-day life. “I realized she had no one to talk about her life with,” Eric says. “Once she felt that relief of sharing her pain, the bills weren’t the primary issue anymore. She just got up, and said, ‘Thank you for listening and praying with me.’ She forgot to even ask for financial assistance.”

Eric reflected on this encounter for some time. “I took this experience to the Lord, asking, ‘Is this how I am coming across?’ That woman worked in my life, leading me to work through my own dysfunction.”²

Given that poverty is rooted in broken relationships, poverty alleviation can be defined as follows:

POVERTY ALLEVIATION

A process in which people, both the materially poor and the materially non-poor, are empowered to move closer to living in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

The “empowerment” in this definition means that people are growing in their ability to analyze their situation, to make healthy decisions to improve that situation, and to carry out those decisions in all four of these relationships. For example, part of living in right relationship to creation includes their ability to find and perform work that will enable them to support themselves and their families. Ask yourself in each situation: *Will providing immediate financial assistance help or hinder such empowerment?*

THE ULTIMATE SOLUTION TO POVERTY

Given that poverty is rooted in broken relationships, Colossians 1:19–20 is a profoundly important passage for the process of poverty alleviation:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (italics added)

In this passage, Jesus Christ is described as the reconciler of the entire universe. To reconcile means to put things into right relationship again, restoring them to what God created them to be. Given that poverty is rooted in broken relationships, the fact that Jesus Christ is reconciling all things is truly good news for the poor, a group that includes all of us.

Note that Christ’s reconciliation entails more than simply beaming our souls up out of this world into some ghostlike state. On the contrary, Christ is reconciling *all things*, transforming whole people, both bodies and souls. And it doesn’t stop there, for Christ is reconciling communities, nature, cultures, institutions, and systems. Yes, He cares

about people’s souls, but He also cares about hunger, sickness, racism, homelessness, mental illness, spousal abuse, electric bills, and rent payments. How much does He care? Enough to be tortured on a cross so that He could conquer these problems. Jesus cares deeply about Ben’s rent and Debbie’s electric bill.

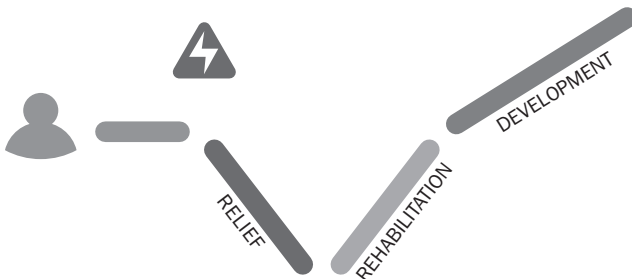
It is profoundly important to emphasize that the full benefits of Christ’s reconciling work are only for those who repent of their sins and put their faith in Him, while judgment ultimately awaits those who do not. These truths should give us incredible passion to share the good news of the gospel—using both words and deeds—for the gospel is only good news for those who repent and believe.

NOT ALL POVERTY IS CREATED EQUAL

As we seek to bring the good news of Christ’s reconciliation to a hurting world, we are immediately confronted with the fact that there are different kinds of material poverty, even though they often look the same on the surface. For example, there is a huge difference between the poverty of a family that cannot pay their rent due to unforeseen health problems and the poverty of a family that cannot pay their rent due to being unwilling to work. The families in both of these situations have a housing problem, but the underlying circumstances that have contributed to their plight are very different and require entirely different responses.

In this light, it is sometimes helpful to think of three broad categories of poverty alleviation:

RELIEF, REHABILITATION, AND DEVELOPMENT



- **Relief** can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis. After a crisis, there is a need to halt the free fall and to “stop the bleeding,” and this is what relief attempts to do. The key feature of relief is a provider-receiver dynamic in which the provider gives assistance—often material—to the receiver. Because the needy person is in a crisis, they are typically asked to contribute little or nothing toward reducing their suffering. Although this is not the point of the passage, the Good Samaritan’s bandaging of the helpless man who lay bleeding along the roadside is an excellent example of relief applied appropriately (Luke 10:29–37).
- **Rehabilitation** begins as soon as the bleeding stops and seeks to restore people to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. The key feature of rehabilitation is a dynamic of working *with* the person, asking them to take positive actions as they participate in their own recovery.
- **Development** is a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved—both the materially poor and materially non-poor—closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation than they have been in the past. For materially poor people who are able-bodied, development includes their moving toward fulfilling their calling of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruits of that work. The key dynamic in development is promoting an empowering process in which all the people involved—both the “helpers” and the “helped”—become more of what God created them to be. Development is not done *to* people or *for* people but *with* people.

If a person is in a crisis resulting from a natural disaster, a medical emergency, an unexpected large bill, a physical assault, or some other personal trauma, then relief is often the appropriate response. In these cases, we need to help people quickly and sufficiently to stabilize the

chaos that the crisis has created. Although people sometimes need relief repeatedly, it is often the most appropriate response for people who are experiencing a one-time crisis.

But most of the low-income people who approach your church for assistance are probably not experiencing a one-time crisis. They are battling a chronic state of poverty created by a complex set of forces. While they may not be able to change all of the factors that contribute to their situation, if they can contribute something to improving their circumstances, then development—not relief—is the proper approach.

It is profoundly important to note that when using a developmental approach, it might be helpful for your church to provide money or other material resources to the low-income person you are assisting, but you should only do this in a way that builds on the gifts and resources that they are also contributing to their own progress.

Relief doesn't ask people to take actions to improve their situation; development does. Relief is done *to* people or *for* people; development is done *with* people.

Relief says to the family in which the forty-year-old father has a stroke, "Yes, of course we will help you financially until you get back on your feet."

Development says to the person repeatedly asking for help in paying their electric bill, "Yes, we can help you, but only if you are open to exploring with us the reasons you are struggling to pay your bill and to doing what is needed to avoid this problem in the future. Can we help you make the necessary changes in your life?"

One of the most common and detrimental mistakes that North American churches make in their benevolence work is using a relief approach when the situation calls for development. Because we North Americans tend to define poverty as a lack of material things, our churches often give repeated handouts of shoes, clothing, food, or money to people who are not helpless and who are not in a crisis. This approach can deepen the very feelings of shame

and inadequacy that are often the root causes of material poverty. In addition, giving handouts, especially repeatedly, can foster a mindset of dependency or entitlement, undermining people’s capacity and drive to support themselves and their families through their own work.

Inappropriate Relief: Checking Our Motives

“Even as believers, we might be sinful in our giving. I can give to ease the tension in the room so that person likes me. That’s no different than taking shots of whiskey to ease the tension of the day. I’m living in *my* tension, trying to relieve *my* tension.”

—ERIC, STAFF MEMBER AT EAST RIDGE CHURCH⁹

Of course, knowing exactly when to use relief, rehabilitation, and development is not always clear, for all sorts of added complexities are part of the real world.

For example, your church is not the only option in town. Even if your church believes it is giving financial assistance to Ben “just this one time,” other churches and ministries in your community may be doing the same thing for Ben. As a result, your “one-time” gift may actually be just one of a long series of handouts that collectively enable Ben to persist in chronic poverty. If Ben is able-bodied and not in a serious crisis, you should be quick to use creative ways to walk with Ben as he takes actions to contribute to his own improvement (development) and slow to simply give him material resources (relief).

Another complexity is that communities and the individuals within those communities might need different approaches. For example, a community struggling with chronic poverty might need development overall, but some of the individuals or families within that community might need relief, because they are suffering from a real crisis and legitimately need immediate aid.

Furthermore, consider the additional complexity that the same individual might repeatedly move back and forth between needing relief and development. For example, New Hope Church was pursuing

a developmental approach with Sarah, a single mother of three who was living in a housing project. New Hope was providing spiritual counsel and discipleship to Sarah, helping her find work and assisting with transportation and childcare. Progress was slow, but Sarah was trying to overcome some of the behavioral issues that had contributed to her material poverty. One day as she was walking home from the store, she was mugged by two men who stole the bags of groceries she had been carrying. The church wisely discerned that while Sarah generally needed development, she also suddenly needed relief. This was not a time to place all sorts of conditions on Sarah before she could get assistance. Sarah and her kids were in a crisis and needed help, so the church bought her several bags of groceries to replace what had been stolen.

Finally, not all low-income people fit the description—at least on the surface—of struggling with a sense of shame or inferiority. Indeed, like many of us, some low-income people struggle with pride and an unwillingness to submit to authority. The key principles and tools in this book still apply to such people, but—as always—you will need to adjust to the particular nature of the people with whom you are walking.

In light of this complexity, here are a few tips:

- Ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom and discernment and then move forward humbly but without fear. Jesus Christ is actively present, and He will accomplish His purposes despite our mistakes. All we can do is our best.
- A helpful rule of thumb is to avoid paternalism: *habitually* doing things for a person that they can do for themselves.⁴
- Don't become paralyzed by trying to categorize people into relief, rehabilitation, or development. When faced with a decision, ask yourself the following question: *If I take this action, will I be contributing or detracting from the long-term goal of empowering this person to live in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation?*

- When you have done all that you can to discern the best approach but are still in doubt, generally err on the side of providing material assistance.

ASSETS NOT JUST NEEDS

When a person like Ben (or Debbie) walks into your church asking for assistance, what is the first thing that enters your mind? Many of us focus on what Ben is lacking in terms of resources. As a result, we then pursue a “needs-based” approach to working with Ben, focusing on his deficits and needs and assuming that he has little to offer to combat his problems. In this approach, the assumption is that the resources, solutions, and initiative to help Ben will not primarily come from him but from your church. A needs-based approach often exacerbates the very dynamic we need to get out of in poverty alleviation: handing out material resources to people rather than helping them steward and grow their own resources.

In contrast, an “asset-based” approach to walking alongside low-income people starts with the biblical truth that Ben is an image-bearer. Yes, Ben is broken, just as we all are. Yes, maybe Ben is just trying to get the church to give him money he is capable of earning himself. But this brokenness does not negate the fact that Ben retains the image of God and has gifts, resources, and abilities he is called to steward. Indeed, helping Ben become a better steward is one of the key goals of poverty alleviation: seeking to restore people to right relationship to creation. An asset-based approach does not ignore his needs, but it seeks to identify, celebrate, and mobilize his own gifts, abilities, and resources as much as possible to address those needs.

Note that using an asset-based approach does not mean your church should never give resources or other forms of help to Ben, but rather that you should only do so in a way that builds on, not undermines, Ben’s use of his own gifts, abilities, and resources. Unfortunately, because we North Americans are materialistic people and because we tend to think that poverty is fundamentally about a lack of material things, we often provide resources too soon and in too large quantities. And in the process, we undermine Ben’s

use of his own gifts, abilities, and resources.

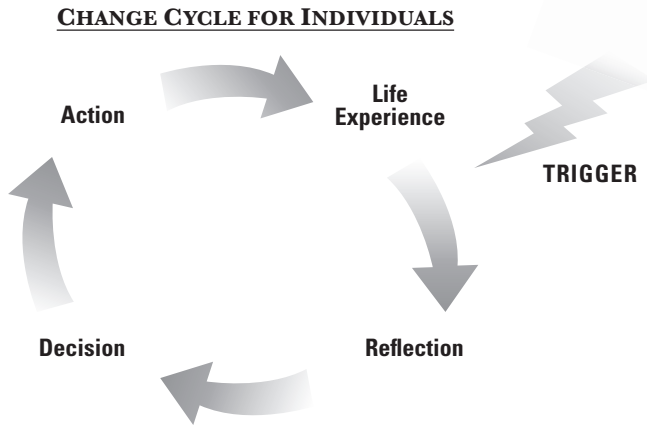
An asset-based approach can help prevent the unhealthy dynamic captured in the equation mentioned earlier. Focusing on the assets God has given to low-income people frames our interactions with them in light of their God-given dignity and responsibility. It affirms that they have gifts they are called to steward, thereby combating their feelings of inferiority and calling them to take responsibility for improving their situation. This approach also fosters an attitude of respect in our hearts for low-income people, countering our sense of superiority and our tendency to feel we need to fix them.

THE CHANGE CYCLE

Recall that poverty alleviation is a process in which people, *both the materially poor and the materially non-poor*, move closer to living in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. Hence, poverty alleviation is fundamentally about change. As mentioned earlier, the changes that are needed often involve addressing individual behaviors, abusive or exploitive people, oppressive systems, and demonic forces. We do not want to downplay the latter two causes, and they will be discussed more in later chapters. But for the moment, let's focus on the first issue. What does it look like for an individual to make the necessary changes in their own behaviors that can help them to emerge from poverty?

Take a moment to reflect on a time when you made significant, positive changes in your own life. What led you to make those changes? Did you ever try to change but fail?

Change does not happen overnight, and making positive behavioral changes is extremely difficult for most people. Indeed, as will be discussed further below, fundamental and lasting change is actually impossible without the saving work of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. In addition to this, researchers and practitioners have observed some fairly regular patterns in the way human beings experience change, patterns that can be used to encourage the kind of changes central to the poverty alleviation process.



Adapted from David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983).

As pictured above, the context for change is the person’s current life experience. Change begins when something triggers this person to reflect on the current situation and think about a possible future situation they would prefer. This reflection can then lead them to make a decision to take some action they hope will move them into a more desirable future situation. Taking this action will lead them to some new life experience. The cycle needs to repeat itself over and over if people are to continue to make positive changes in their lives.

Many different circumstances can serve as triggers for change, but several common triggers that can lead to a desire to change are:

- A recent crisis
- The burden of the status quo becoming unbearable
- Encountering a new way of doing or seeing things that could lead to improvement

One of the key roles your church can play in walking with low-income people is to initiate a trigger for change by gently asking probing questions, introducing new ideas, or helping people see a new set of possibilities. This can lead to a spiraling cycle of action and reflection, a “learning as you go” process: walking with people, trying something

together; reflecting on the experience, *together*; deciding to try something additional, *together*; reflecting again; trying again.

Of course, once a trigger for change causes some reflection, it is *not* at all automatic that the rest of the cycle will continue. Indeed, a host of obstacles can get in the way of significant change. A major part of the poverty alleviation process is coming alongside low-income individuals to encourage and support them as they remove obstacles in their lives and help them overcome the obstacles they are incapable of removing on their own.

For example, as you and Ben talk about his current financial problem, it might become clear that he needs to think about work differently. So you suggest that he participate in a jobs preparedness program your church sponsors. He decides to give it a try and enrolls in the twelve-week program. As he faithfully attends the classes and attempts to complete the assignments, a member of your church acts as a mentor, helping him with some of the homework, encouraging him, and cheering him on. In the midst of the course, Ben has some financial shortfalls. The mentor lets the church know about Ben's needs, and the church helps pay a few bills as a way of supporting Ben on his journey. Ben graduates and soon gets a job due, in no small part, to the great references from his mentor and the course instructors.

RECEPTIVITY TO CHANGE AND PARTICIPATION

Of course, change is only possible in a low-income person if he or she is willing to change. If Debbie does not believe that change is possible, if she is unwilling to go through the pain of change, or if she does not believe that she is the person who is primarily responsible for making the necessary changes in her life, it will be very difficult to make progress with her. Indeed, one of the most challenging elements of poverty alleviation is identifying those people who are truly ready to change: namely, those who have experienced a trigger for change and are willing to embark on the process of change. Chapter 4 will discuss the use of an "intake form" as a tool to gauge a person's receptivity to change. Remember: while we have a crucial role to play in the life of a low-income

person, we cannot effect change. Rather, our role is to be an encourager of them as they initiate and drive their own change process.

In order for a low-income person to pursue the hard road of making the necessary changes in his or her life, it is profoundly important that they own the course of action from the very beginning. This means that Debbie must see herself as the person who is primarily responsible for making these changes happen. Like most human beings, low-income people generally own plans that they have helped to initiate and to shape more than plans that have been imposed on them.

Hence, poverty alleviation efforts should avoid “blueprint” approaches that impose a predetermined plan on a low-income person with our ideas about what to do and how it should be done. A blueprint approach fails to create the necessary ownership of the change process that is essential if the low-income person is going to initiate and sustain the necessary changes in their life. In addition, a blueprint approach tends to exacerbate the harmful dynamic in which the materially non-poor “play god,” speaking and acting in ways that confirm the sense of inferiority and shame that many low-income people are already feeling.

In contrast, a participatory approach asks Debbie what she believes she should do to improve her life, how she thinks she should do it, and what actions she will take to pursue positive change. This does not mean that you should never speak into Debbie’s life but simply that you act in a way that is consistent with biblical truth. As an image-bearer, Debbie has insights and abilities, and she is called by God to be the primary person who stewards those insights and abilities by using them to initiate and sustain positive changes in her life.

THE LOCAL CHURCH AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

We have described an asset-based, participatory process that moves in a developmental direction because we believe it is a powerful approach to fighting poverty. However, the concepts and principles we have discussed must be rooted in something deeper: the power of Jesus Christ to address individual behaviors, abusive or exploitive people, oppressive

systems, and demonic forces that cause the broken relationships that are at the heart of poverty. And this is where the local church has far more power in her than first meets the eye. The Bible teaches that the church is the body, bride, and fullness of Jesus Christ, the only one who can truly alleviate poverty (Ephesians 1:18–23; 4:7–13; 5:32). The poor need Jesus Christ, the reconciler of all things, and He is found in the local church!

The Church as Family

“I think churches haven’t sized up their gifts. We are not a bank, we are a family. I drive you to the doctor; I don’t perform the surgery myself. I help you get a bank account set up; I don’t give you the money. I put my family hat on in this work. Family doesn’t fix your car; we help you get the car fixed. [This framework] invites relationship . . . What would a family do? I don’t need to solve everything!”

—**JAMES**, DEACON AT NEW LIFE CHURCH⁵

Dear brother or sister, you may often feel inadequate and overwhelmed as you work with your church’s benevolence ministry. But take heart, for you are not alone! The triune God is working in and through you and your entire church. As people are drawn into the fellowship, life, and worship of your church, they encounter Jesus Christ Himself! In fact, even just the “ordinary” activities of the church that we so often take for granted—the preaching of the Word, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, accountability and discipline, and prayer—are the very means that God has *ordained* to draw people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and to be nurtured in that relationship.⁶ These routine things work! They accomplish God’s purposes, not because your church is so talented but because God has declared that these are the means that He ordinarily uses to draw people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ and to nurture them in that relationship.

And as we mentioned earlier, this relationship with Jesus Christ is

the foundation for addressing all the causes of poverty for believers:

- We are made into new creatures in Christ and are given power by the indwelling Holy Spirit to embark on the painful and slow process of addressing the *individual behaviors* that contribute to all of our poverty (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:17–32).
- We get to celebrate Christ’s conquering of *abusive or exploitive people, oppressive systems, and demonic forces*. We see some of this happening now, but we also wait in eager expectation for that great day when His kingdom will be fully consummated (Revelation 21:1–7).

This relationship with Jesus Christ is not just something abstract and theoretical. Rather, it is experienced—yes imperfectly, but really—in the family of the local church, a family that consists of the adopted sons and daughters of our heavenly Father (Galatians 3:23–4:7). Indeed, when someone from either inside or outside your church seeks assistance, you have something to offer them in addition to rent money or food. You get to offer them a nurturing and supportive family that embodies in its words, actions, and life together the reality—in the here and now—that Jesus Christ is indeed making all things new by conquering the individual behaviors, abusive or exploitive people, oppressive systems, and demonic forces that impoverish all of us in various ways.

Think about it: your benevolence ministry is often the front door through which people enter into this incredible family!