

What Every Church Member Should Know About Poverty



Bill Ehlig & Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.

CONTENTS

1. Introduction and Overview	3
2. Hidden Rules Among Classes	9
3. Language Patterns and Cognition	31
4. Violence/Conflict Resolution.....	39
5. Family Structure and Marital Relationships	53
6. Money, Stewardship, and Spending	65
7. Church Participation.....	71
8. Whom Do We Help and How Much?	77
9. Transitioning the Poor into Membership	85
10. Issues with Integrating the Poor into the Church	91
11. Systemic Issues in Church Organizations	101
12. Assessing Resources	109
13. Conclusion.....	123
Appendix: Statistical Charts on Poverty	127
Bibliography	133

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

In the late 1990s Dr. Ruby K. Payne and I decided to take the ideas within *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* and apply them to the church setting. The exploration of life resources, language registers, and hidden rules had already helped middle-class schoolteachers as they worked with families in poverty. The application of these ideas to churches and Christian organizations also has been useful—as revealed in workshops and special studies the past six years in which this book has been a focal point.

This second edition of “The Church Book” is a continuation of the effort. We have added another chapter (a new Chapter 12) describing the use of a “Resources Inventory” to better understand existing and/or needed resources among those serving and being served. We also have updated the economic and demographic data in the back of the book; cultural and linguistic shifts of recent decades have presented complicated challenges to churches in the United States.

Individuals are encouraged to read *What Every Church Member Should Know About Poverty* on their own, but many church groups also find it helpful to use the book as a study tool. There are two basic approaches I would recommend for interested groups:

- The standard 13-week quarterly. The book has 13 chapters, so it is ideally suited to the traditional Sunday school study format.
- A five-week course for mid-week groups or Sunday school classes that want to give attention to this issue but not over a long period of time. I recommend five thematically grouped units of about 25 pages each, as follows:

Week 1: Foreword, Preface, and Chapters 1–2

Week 2: Chapters 3–4

Week 3: Chapters 5–7

Week 4: Chapters 8–10

Week 5: Chapters 11–12 and Conclusion

The Biblical mandate is clear; both the Old Testament and the New Testament have literally hundreds of admonitions to respond in love to the needs of the poor. May our responses to need around and among us flow out of the compassion of Jesus himself.

—Bill Ehlig

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Overview

A Story

In the ancient story, a man sat by the city dump. Though once blessed in many ways, he had about lost it all: his health, his wealth, and his children. Such a person was, in the eyes of that age, destitute. Health gave hope for the day's labor. Wealth was power to face the bigger trials. Children would mean protection and someone to lean upon in the closing years. All were now gone.

The situation was difficult for him to comprehend. Nothing in his experience had prepared him for such catastrophes. He had followed the rules. He had been an exemplary, even notable, citizen. In his mind he wondered at the extent of the disaster. He could not find a reason for it. As he sat in the pain of his crumbling body, he doubted he could keep his sanity.

Along came three of his friends who had known him in the blessed times. They too sat down in consternation. Only in their case the difficulty was not pain or hopelessness, rather it was how to make sense of such troubles. They concluded: "God must be angry at you because of your sins for you to suffer so." And that's just what they told him.

From ages ago we have this story of the troubles of Job. His three friends came to him and offered thoughts that were comforting, that is, comforting to themselves. It is easier to deal with the problems of others in need if you decide that their troubles have been caused by their own willful sin. In that case, you can take part in the "justice" of the situation when you do not help at all. Should you choose to help, even just a little, such magnanimity would show your great virtue.

In the eyes of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, Job had caused his own suffering. But at the conclusion of the Book of Job, their counsel was condemned by God Himself. As the world has done since the time of Job, we struggle today with the phenomenon of people in need, sometimes great need. Is it sufficient for God's people to offer no more than the foolish counsel of Job's friends?

Part, at least, of their folly was a failure to see deeply enough into Job's situation. The purpose of this book is to help individuals to look deeper, even into themselves, as well as into the lives of those who have need.



Some key points about poverty need to be made.

1. Poverty and wealth are relative. We basically know our own poverty or wealth only in relationship to others.
2. Poverty occurs in all races and countries. The notion of middle class as a large segment of society is a phenomenon of the past 100 years. In America the largest group of individuals in poverty is children under the age of 18. If one counts the number of children in poverty or very close to it, the number of children in poverty is close to 50%. One of the biggest misconceptions is the difference between percentages and numbers. The greatest number of children in poverty are white, but the greatest percentage of children in poverty is by minority group.
3. Generational and situational poverty are different. It generally takes two generations to make the transition from middle class into poverty. When an individual has been in poverty two generations or more, then the patterns and habits are different. Situational poverty is when there is a divorce, death, or illness,

and the resources are temporarily reduced, but the mindset remains largely with middle-class norms and values.

4. This work is based upon patterns of the group, and all patterns have exceptions.
5. Every individual brings with him or her the hidden rules of the economic group in which he or she was raised. Hidden rules are those unspoken cueing mechanisms we use to let people know they do or do not belong.
6. Schools and businesses use the hidden rules of middle class. So do many churches. Because America now tends to be economically segregated, most individuals do not know the rules of other economic classes.
7. For churches to be successful with the poor, members must understand the hidden rules of generational poverty, as well as middle class, so that the transition can be more readily accepted. For the transition to occur, both sets of rules must be openly acknowledged.
8. To move from poverty to middle-class norms and values, a period of time exists where some relationships are broken. These relationships may be resumed at another time, but there is a period of time in which the old relationships are very tentative and, sometimes, broken.
9. The fundamental reasons for poverty are lack of educational attainment and the disconnection of family and/or community.
10. Four reasons one leaves poverty: It's too painful to stay, a vision or goal, a key relationship, or a special talent or skill.

OBSERVATION

A soul must have certain resources to keep life going on a given day or week—resources like air, water, food, a sufficient distance from sharp objects. To look forward more than a few days takes another list of resources—things like knowledge, friends, health, a sense of purpose or hope, and wisdom. Lacking a significant amount of these is not only life-threatening, it is also fairly obvious. It is obvious to those around who do not want to contract whatever disease troubles the deprived soul or who do not wish to waste their limited resources upon one who may not survive anyway. What am I to do when presented with one who is short on survival resources? It is an old problem, and one with which the Bible grappled long ago.

QUESTIONS

1. What would your parents/grandparents think of your current possessions?
2. If your grandparents could return at your age now, how would they relate to your friends and their interests?
3. What rules for the use of money did you develop from your experiences in life?
4. What places can you visit and feel at home? Why?
5. Where have you been and felt completely foreign?
6. A group project: Spend 30 minutes or an hour trying to determine what it costs to live an independent life in your community. Include basic housing, home maintenance (utilities, appliances, furniture, etc.), meals, clothing, transportation (if a car is necessary, include repairs, insurance, fees, etc.), health insurance, education costs for children, and whatever else applies.

- a. What is the difference between such a life and your own?
 - b. If someone lived such a basic economic life, where might it be at risk of failure?
 - c. What would be the potential hopes and worries of such a family?
7. In which economic group do you envision God? Why? Might another economic group envision God in another way?

© Hawker Brownlow Education