

Ministry to the Poor

A New Frontier

By Rolfe Westendorf

The WELS Outreach to the poor

Goal – To share the Gospel with those normally beyond the reach of our congregations.

Objectives – To contact individually 200 low-income persons per month;
To conduct daily Bible classes for 20 low-income peoples;
To conduct Sunday school weekly for 40 persons of all age groups;
To conduct adult instruction classes for individuals who show significant interest and dependability;
To commune those who complete instructions and confess their faith, although it is not expected that a congregation with communicant membership will be formed through this effort;
To provide personal assistance in procuring food, clothing, housing, and counseling services.

Program:

1. Identify 6-block area of low-income houses as target area.
2. Locate a 2-room facility in area for group meetings.
3. In January recruit 3 Seminary juniors to serve as evangelists to low-income citizens.
4. Train recruits in May, covering evangelism, the culture of poverty, and catechetics.
5. Canvass area in June for VBS.
6. Conduct 2-week VBS in July, using volunteers from inner-city program, if necessary.
7. Continue to make contacts and conduct classes through the middler year.
8. As veterans return to the Seminary as seniors, one of them should replace one of the juniors on the team so that team consists of 1 senior and 3 juniors.
9. Area to be expanded or additional areas added as opportunities appear.

Estimated costs

1. Evangelists to earn \$5.50 per hour, 40 hrs/wk for summer, 20 hrs/wk during school year.
 2. Senior evangelist to earn \$6.00/hr.
 3. Evangelists not paid during training,
 4. Estimated annual cost for manpower \$28,160
- | | | |
|-------------------|---------|------------------|
| “ “ “ “ rooms | \$600 | |
| “ “ “ “ materials | \$1,200 | TOTAL – \$29,960 |

Ministry to the Poor – A New Frontier

In the past twenty-five years, the Wisconsin Synod has developed into a national church body. Over that period of time it has faced many “new frontiers,” in world missions, in home missions, and in special ministries. And by God’s grace many of those new frontiers have become a normal part of our Gospel ministry.

I have been particularly involved with two of these new frontiers, the outreach to blacks and Hispanics, both of which are now accepted as a legitimate and necessary part of our mission endeavor. It is any association particularly with these two groups that leads me to suggest that there is another new frontier that deserves our attention, and that is the poor who reside within reach of our WELS congregations.

This is certainly not a new frontier in the sense that the poor are a novelty. Jesus said, “You will always have the poor among you.” The poor were a part of the work of the first congregation in Jerusalem, and to this day our congregations have responded to individual needs in their midst, and to more distant needs through the Committee on Relief.

The poor who make up the new frontier are those outside our congregations, who need not only physical relief but also spiritual healing. This is a new frontier, because these people have been beyond the reach of our best mission efforts. We have succeeded rather well in reaching out to all levels of the middle class. On the other hand, our success among the poor has been limited, and our efforts minimal.

Why should this be happening in a Synod which is committed to reach out with the Word to all people, a Synod which has again and again demonstrated its commitment to outreach and integration? In the paragraphs that follow, I will offer some initial thoughts on the matter, in the hope that these thoughts will stimulate interest and planning that will eventually lead to an organized Gospel outreach to the poor.

1. *We have not reached out to the poor because the poor have no money.* That statement is not intended as harsh criticism. It is simply a fact that we expect our missions to become self-supporting. It is a fact that we expect our new members to be good contributors, and a generous contributor is a delight to every pastor and church council. With a tight synodical budget we are loathe to start missions that will not likely be self-supporting. And inability to give like the rest has discouraged many poor people from coming to church. There is no intent to exclude the poor. They are, in fact, encouraged to come, even if they cannot afford compatible clothing. But we also admonish the negligent for the stingy giving, and the poor are invariably caught in the cross-fire.

2. *We have not reached out to the poor because they live in other neighborhoods.* The WELS has a heritage of hard-working independence. Most WELS members have been blessed with an ability to earn a decent living. They have homes appropriate for their income, and they have built their churches in the vicinity of their homes. For the most part Wisconsin Synod people do not see the poor because the poor can’t afford to live where they live. And if a neighborhood deteriorates to the point that the poor can afford to live there, logic dictates that the more affluent people move out. The notable exceptions to the general trend are the inner-city congregations who have chosen to remain and minister to the people of their community. But for the most part, WELS congregations would be hard-pressed to find poor people as evangelism prospects, even if they tried.

3. *We have not reached out to the poor because of stigma of poverty.* We have no problem with the people made indigent by accident, illness, or economic failure. In fact, those of us who are over fifty can identify rather readily with that kind of poverty. By today’s standards, most of those who lived through the Great Depression were poor.

But we have also heard it said, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. And who is there in this wealthy land who has to be poor if he is willing to work? Again and again the fact of poverty is accompanied by the fact of laziness and incompetence, or so it must seem to those living on the outside. How often haven’t poor people become prosperous and even wealthy by their unflagging determination and ingenuity? The conclusion is that most people are poor because they deserve to be poor. The worthy poor we will cheerfully help, but there is no hope in helping most of the poor, because they are getting what they deserve, and for the most part, that’s the way they want it.

4. *A ministry to the poor requires a change of attitudes.* From a distance we see only broad outlines. The details are lost. A closer examination often reveals that things are not nearly what they seemed to be from afar. When the details become visible, first impressions are totally inaccurate.

Close examination reveals that there are many reasons for poverty. Let me outline them as follows:

The Red Factor – Some people are poor because of economic circumstances over which they had no control. World War II made many people poor. “We lost everything.” Some are poor because of prolonged illness, or because the plant that needed their skills left town. If the red factor (an arbitrary choice of colors) is the only factor, these poor will need only temporary help. They will soon find a way of attaining an acceptable standard of living again.

The Blue Factor – Some people are poor because of physical and mental deficiency. The physical handicaps are obvious and often overcome. A physical handicap can become an incentive rather than a liability, and with help the physically handicapped often leave the ranks of the poor. The mentally handicapped are not so blessed, especially in the age of the computer. Mental weakness is shunned by employers, and the ability to earn is limited. Still society has made a place for the mentally handicapped. They may always be poor, but their need is obvious, and so is the response.

The Yellow Factor – Some people are poor because they have been damaged emotionally and socially. These people had the misfortune of being born into a family, a neighborhood, and environment, that did not nurture self-esteem. This one could be the child of a teen-age mother who went back to playing jacks after she had her baby. This one could be the child of parents who were too busy making money to implant self-esteem in their child. This one could be the one who was shot to pieces by the pre-divorce warfare that raged in his home. And this one might be the child of stable Christian parents, who married a clod who wanted attention, and sex, but no responsibility.

These people are for the most part physically able to work for a living. But they quit their jobs for petty reasons. They waste good earning opportunities because they don't feel like going to work. They seek escape from reality and spend what little they have on drugs and alcohol. And they struggle to conjure up a little self-esteem in a brief love affair that produces another child, who has less chance of escaping poverty than its parents had.

These are the “undeserving poor,” who are poor through nobody's fault but their own. And yet it is not their “fault.” They did not choose their parents, their neighborhood, their environment. They could not predict the failures that would show up after marriage. Only with the body are they able to work. Their spirit feels neither the desire nor the possibility for earning a living.

The Gray Factor – And this factor is added only because people never cooperate with categories. You are not likely to find any poverty that is all red, or blue, or yellow. The pigments are generally mixed in such a way that it is not possible to discover the primary cause or the probable solution. The result is an ugly gray, some with a decided yellow tinge, some with more blue or red, but hardly ever a problem that has one single solution.

Yes, some poor are more deserving than others, but ultimately there is no difference. The elements that destroyed these undeserving poor would most likely have destroyed any responsible citizen alive, including this writer. I firmly believe that I am not on welfare, or drugs, or in prison, only because God spared me the debilitating evils that have destroyed most of the poor.

Besides, what did the apostle say about helping those who deserve our help? Absolutely nothing! We must work that we may have something to share with *those in need*. This clarification of the reasons for poverty does not solve the problem. It does not tell us how to reach those in need. It is only intended to change some attitudes about the worthiness of the poor, and to eliminate some of the stigma of poverty.

5. *A ministry to the poor requires a change in methods.* Before we talk about methods, the obvious must be restated. The poor have a need that is greater than their lack of funds and that is their lack of forgiveness. In ministering to the poor, the focus must never switch from spiritual to physical. Maintaining priorities will never be simple, for the apostle was clear about responsibilities to a brother in need. But it must remain understood

that the poor need not join the middle class in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Our call is to preach the Gospel to every creature, including those of the lowest class.

But experience has shown that we will not reach the poor with the conventional method. The conventional method I refer to includes the canvass, the evangelism call, the instruction class, the confirmation, and the assimilation into active membership. In most cases this will not work.

To begin with, the poor must feel uncomfortable in a typical WEIS worship setting, in spite of earnest efforts to welcome them. They cannot conform to the dress code, the offering expectations, to say nothing of unfamiliar hymns and liturgy. But never mind that. The poor will probably never get to church in the first place, because they don't have bus fare or gasoline. The poor will not complete the adult instruction class, because that moves at a regular schedule which is entirely out of synch with their lives. Keeping appointments is an ability that the prosperous have learned. If the poor had learned it, they would not be poor. Even the canvass offers little help in reaching the poor. By the time you return to the address, someone else will be living there. The poor have moved elsewhere, to avoid creditors, or perhaps the police.

Are the poor then in fact beyond our reach? Only if we limit ourselves to "conventional methods." The poor may never complete instructions or receive communion. But as we have the opportunity, God's good news can be shared, and the love that he inspires can be offered. I am an expert on what does not work with the poor. I know nothing about methods that succeed. But I can at least suggest some things that have not yet been proven failures.

1. Concentrate on personal witnessing. The goal is to witness, not to gain members. The goal is to share as much as the time and opportunities allow, to be content with the promise of the Spirit's power, to work and witness without being able to report impressive numbers of adult confirmands.

2. Offer worship opportunities that require no commitment. Rent a room in a poor neighborhood. Put up posters. Hand out flyers in the hallways. Sing some simple Gospel songs and preach the amazing grace of God, the riches of his mercy. And pray. Don't expect a crowd. Don't expect "prospects." But don't be surprised when the Spirit grants visible signs of his blessing.

3. Gather the little children. They are often free to wander, hungry for the adult concern that is lacking in their lives. Collect them for Sunday school. Don't expect to win their parents. Don't expect them to become "Lutherans." Just show them that Jesus cares and let the Spirit accomplish his will.

4. And don't expect to be cost effective. A church that runs on budgets can't really handle this. Somehow it's OK in world missions where \$50,000 per convert is an acceptable return. But a \$50,000 investment that would touch 5000 poor might seem ineffective use of the Synod's funds. We need some kind of statistic, some measuring stick to measure the immeasurable progress of the Gospel. It would even be good for the success-oriented missionary to have something he could put down on paper. He might record daily the number of contacts of differing kinds. He might record the incidents of note that suggest the success of the Gospel. We might even decide arbitrarily what "cost-effective" means in this new ministry, and then pat ourselves on the back for doing what we knew we could do.

But these are not answers to the problem. These are rather an invitation to start thinking about the challenges that will be presented, if ever we decide to enter this new frontier.