



Focus verses

"Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"
James 2:5 (TNIV)

"For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have."
2 Cor. 8:12 (TNIV)

Teaching Leaflet E
"Recent History:
Turbulent Decades"

Teaching Leaflet F
"Response in
Recent History"

LEGACIES OF CARE

LESSON FIVE: THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

Opening prayer

*Be converted to love every day.
Change all your energies,
all your potential,
into selfless gifts for the other person.
Then you yourself will be changed from within
and through you
God's kingdom will break into the world.*

– Anonymous

Introduction to the lesson

We have been following through history two primary concepts of caring for others, both of which have shaped and determined our society's approach to social welfare. One is based on the concept of merit, i.e., a judgment about who is worthy to receive care. The other is based on determining whose responsibility it is to provide this care – church or government.

We now look at the more recent past, from the Great Depression through faith-based initiatives introduced in the 1990s. (*Additional information is available in the Teaching Leaflet E titled "Recent History: Turbulent Decades."*)

Last week's challenge

Share from the challenge you chose to do during this past week.

A brief recap

Up until this time in America, the generally accepted theory about those who were poor was that everyone *could* work and make something of him or herself; if they did not, it was either because they physically were not able to or they willfully chose a life of sin and sloth.

Throughout history and these studies, we have seen that initially, under Constantine, the church and government were one. With the separation of the two institutions, there has been a continuous tension regarding their roles in the provision of services to those in need. Various forms of care, i.e., orphanages, hospitals, educational systems, and systemic care for the imprisoned, initially were operated by or within churches. Since the Reformation, though, there has been an ongoing push/pull factor between the church and government.

The strain of providing care for people in need has been too much in every era for the church alone. Who responds to society's needs – the church or government – still is a major challenge and continues to be played out today. (*More information is available in Teaching Leaflet F titled "Response in Recent History."*)



The important question to ask is not, "What do you believe?" but "What difference does it make that you believe?" Does the world come nearer to the dream of God because of what you believe?

—Verna Dozier, *The Dream of God*

The Great Depression

When America was thrown into economic ruin in the Great Depression, government systems upon which the nation's citizens had depended disintegrated. Suddenly, *all* were poor, and the myth of the "worthy" and the "unworthy" poor crumbled. This was truly a revelation for most people. No longer could poverty be defined by a person's individual flaws or lifestyle. The Great Depression became the great equalizer on the topic of poverty.

»» Class discussion

Some in your class may remember living through the Depression as a child. Others may have stories about that time told to them by parents or grandparents. Share these memories.

- What, if any life lessons, were learned because of the Great Depression?
- How do they impact lives today?
- Relate these memories to today's focus verses.

Post-WWII and beyond

The last six decades of America's history have been a rollercoaster ride of societal and cultural events. Beginning with WWII, we have been involved in four wars. We have experienced great prosperity and great poverty. The awareness during the Great Depression that environmental situations could place everyone in need was forgotten. Once again, the country, and so many of us as individuals, returned to a perspective of determining who was and was not worthy of receiving help.

During these years, the fabric of our society has raveled and ripped as inequity between the poor and the rich, racial tensions, involvement in conflict and distrust in government escalated. Many Protestant churches turned inward, choosing to ignore the conflict and societal pressures outside their stained glass windows. The African-American churches of the 1960s were an exception. They, with a young Martin Luther King Jr. as their leader, pressured the government for civil rights, equality and social reform.

»» Class exercise

Review and discuss Teaching Leaflet F, "Response in Recent History." Share specific memories class members have of these eras. Ask the following questions:

- Which actions or legislation seem scripturally based?
- Throughout these decades, which American leader/s do you think had the best ideas for helping people in need regain independence from welfare?
- In recent history it has become more widely accepted for churches and religiously affiliated agencies to be the providers of help for the poor. Do you think that is the better approach? Why or why not? Can the church provide better care than the government or not?

Where we are today

For the past decade, as a result of Charitable Choice components of Welfare Reform legislation, the discussion about whose responsibility it is to provide social welfare systems has been renewed. As we know from this study, it is a debate as old as time itself.

While the political rhetoric on this issue continues, some churches have taken seriously the challenge of recent administrations to increase its involvement in addressing social welfare needs. Programming by these churches focuses on moving those who are poor from a position of dependence to a position of independence and self-sufficiency, i.e., the “welfare-to-work” approach.

The church’s response

Unique to the calling and mission of the church is the gospel story. Throughout history, the church has taken that mission seriously, and we see that in both individual and local church efforts as well as in national, denominational initiatives.

We are on the cusp of a new era in our society as it pertains to care for the poor and the “stranger” among us. In innovative and grace-filled ways, individuals, churches and religiously based agencies are “walking alongside” individuals in need. They are stepping out in faith to do an “impossible” work – a God-sized mission.

Volunteers may serve as mentors and educators teaching life and work skills and spiritual values in ways that research has shown is respectful of individual religious beliefs and values. The church is beginning to demonstrate a refreshing ability to think unconventionally about how to partner with other agencies and groups to meet needs.

With this revitalized sense of purpose has come a hunger from churches to learn more about how to assess, design, implement and sustain effective community ministry programs. The occasional food basket or toys for children at Christmas may no longer be enough for church members who desire not only to meet immediate needs but to transform lives – including their own.

Our prayer is that we are returning to Jesus’ example of radical love, where there is no concept of merit and no assignment of responsibility for provision of that care to one system or another. We are all called to love our neighbors – every single one of them. What remains to be seen - and truly has never been fully examined - is if individuals, churches and governments can find ways to work together.

In the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that what we do for “one of the least of these brothers of mine,” we do also for him (v. 40: NIV). Look deeply enough at the person beside you, and you will see Jesus.

The early Macedonian churches

For further encouragement in this God-sized mission, revisit 2 Cor. 8 and Paul’s report to the brothers of “the grace that God has given” them (v. 1; NIV). The poverty and trial they were experiencing in the churches was extreme, yet with “overflowing joy,” they begged for the “privilege” of participating in the collection for the poor saints of Jerusalem. Paul notes that “they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will” (v. 5). It is the churches’ willingness, despite their circumstances and regardless of the amount they could give, that made their gift so excellent (see v. 12). Nor did they ask for a collection for themselves; they gave to others. As Paul writes to Titus, and to our churches today, “see that you also excel in this grace of giving” (v. 7).



... God will act in us and through us to renew the Church by preparing, in prayer, what we cannot yet imagine or understand. In this way our prayer and faith today will be oriented toward the future which we ourselves may never see fully realized on earth.

- Thomas Merton
from *Contemplation in a World of Action*



Silence before God

We all have reasons for not trying something new or risky. If you could imagine one single way to help one person in need, what would it be? What would keep you from doing it? Ask the Spirit to lead you in this exploration.

Key points from today's lesson

- Throughout history, the church has quietly carried out its mission of helping those in need.
- Because the church is also a segment of society, it too has struggled with ideological and theological differences. Because of limited resources, the church also has made choices about who should or should not receive care.
- We are experiencing a renewed emphasis on divesting the federal and state government of its responsibility to provide care for those in need and returning it more deliberately to the church and religiously affiliated agencies.
- Many believe that the societal needs are so great that this approach will not be sufficient.
- It is our willingness to give, not the amount or the results of giving, that makes the gift acceptable to God.

Challenge

Choose from the following options for the coming week:

- Make an effort this week to learn more about the immigration situation in your church's neighborhood. Talk to city or local government leaders. Research on the Internet. Call your denomination office and ask what materials they have on this topic.
- Meditate on the words "stranger," "alien" and "neighbor." Have you been in situations when you felt or were treated as any of these? Explore the emotions and reactions in those situations.
- Finish each devotional time this week with this prayer: "God, what would you have me do?" Write down any direction you feel you receive.



If the gospel is about transformation, how is it that two thousand years of proclamation have had so little effect? How is it that the gospel of Jesus Christ, so far from producing radical change, has instead become a cloak for avarice and arrogance, for a willful deafness to the cry of the poor and of the earth itself? ... It is only possible to speak of the gospel as a source for a remedy of the planetary crisis that we face if we are talking about a gospel that makes possible, indeed requires and in fact produces, a radical and visible transformation in all dimensions of life. Only a gospel that produces holiness, scriptural holiness, can transform the economy of death - or rather, abolish it and give in its place something that can really be "good news to the poor."

– Theodore Jennings, Jr., *Good News to the Poor*

