THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY IN RESPONSE TO POVERTY
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As the clash between "East" and "West" diminishes, the polarization of the "North" and "South" intensifies. Earlier this summer in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the Earth Summit (officially the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) dramatized these differences. A United Nations document, Our Common Future, proclaims that:

The Earth is one but the world is not. We all depend on one biosphere for sustaining our lives. Yet each community, each country, strives for survival and prosperity with little regard for its impact on others. Some consume the Earth's resources at a rate that would leave little for future generations. Others, many more in number, consume far too little and live with the prospect of hunger, squalor, disease, and early death.¹

Behind that bleak portrait lie some sordid statistics. More hungry people suffer in the world today than ever before in human history. One-fifth of the persons in Two-Thirds World nations are under-nourished; one-fifth in major industrial nations are overweight or obese. An hour's worth of the military expenditures of all nations would immunize 3.5 million children who are destined to die from preventable infectious diseases. Only 25 percent of the world's population use some 79 percent of the available drugs and vaccines. An official Earth Summit poster underscored the dimensions of contemporary world poverty by declaring that if the world were a village of 1,000 people:²

• One-third (330) would be children and only 60 would be over the age of 65.
• Only half of the children would be immunized against preventable infectious diseases such as measles and polio.
• 200 people receive 75% of the income; another 200 receive


²It would include 584 Asians, 124 Africans, 95 East and West Europeans, 84 Latin Americans, 55 former Soviets, 52 North Americans, and 6 Australians and New Zealanders. The religious breakdown would be 329 Christians (among them 187 Catholics, 84 Protestants, 31 Orthodox), 178 Moslems, 167 "Nonreligious", 132 Hindus, 60 Buddhists, 45 Atheists, 3 Jews, and 86 for all other religions.
only 2% of the income.
• Only 70 people of the 1,000 own an automobile (although some of the 70 own more than one automobile).
• Just one-third have access to clean, safe drinking water.
• Of the 670 adults in the village, half are illiterate.
• The village allocates 83% of its fertilizer to 40 percent of its cropland—that owned by the richest and best-fed 270 people. The remaining 60% of the land gets only 17% of the fertilizer but feeds 78% of the people.

And the litany of statistics could continue almost ad infinitum and ad nauseum.

Facts alone, however, will not save us or the earth. As Archibald MacLeish once noted, "We are deluged with facts but we have or are losing our human ability to feel them." The endless accumulation of facts yields no panacea; in fact, we may feel even more impotent in the face of the magnitude of the global crisis. Worse yet, it can prompt "compassion fatigue" even among the most unselfish and altruistic. How can we remember to care in a world so busy that most us cannot recall what we had for breakfast?4

Thus amid this context we are called to explore the question of the church's ministry in response to poverty. In doing so, we are prompted to rethink our understanding of Jesus Christ, to revision our portrait of the church, to recall our Wesleyan heritage, and to reimage our vision of mission and ministry.

Jesus As Peasant

The image of Jesus dominating one's thinking and life decisively shapes one's understanding of the mission and ministry of the Christian church. Amid the multiplicity, if not kaleidoscope, of images that evolved over the centuries, we must discern for ourselves who Jesus was and what meaning he has for us today. An understanding of Jesus shapes the church's ministry in response to poverty.

If Jesus is viewed as the Christ of the cathedrals, distantly enshrined in stained glass windows, or the Monk Who

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4 This and other sections of the paper are drawn from Donald E. Messer, A Conspiracy of Goodness: Contemporary Images of Christian Mission (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992). See p. 86.
Rules The World celebrating chastity and asceticism, or as the Teacher of Common Sense epitomizing the Enlightenment, or even as an other-worldly Escatological Prophet convinced the world was coming to an end, the consequence is likely to be different than if Jesus is remembered as a "marginal Jew" or "peasant". If the Christ we proclaim is identified with the poor or "the wretched of the earth," then the challenge of global poverty takes on a distinctly different spiritual dimension. Christ can become Good News again to millions of people who have been marginalized by the church and world. In the words of the Brazilian bishop, Dom Helder Camara:

... in a world where two-thirds of the people are in a state of underdevelopment and hunger how can we squander huge sums on the construction of temples of stone, forgetting the living Christ who is present in the person of the poor? And when shall we come to understand that in too sumptuous churches the poor have not had the courage to enter and to feel at home? But Christ is there anyway, groveling in misery and hunger, living in ramshackle huts, without medical attention, without work, and without a future.

Revisioning Jesus as a marginal Mediterraneaen Jewish peasant radically challenges many of our preconceptions and prejudices. By identifying his cultural and class roots, and by emphasizing his proclivity for relating to the outcasts and marginalized of his own society, we are forced to rethink what it

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6See Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968). Schweitzer wrote that "each epoch ... found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus" (p. 4).


means to be a disciple of such a Lord in our own generation. Many historical "facts" are obviously lost about Jesus, but recurrent historical data clearly seem to indicate that Jesus associated with the poorest, broke the established etiquette of his day to have table fellowship with those who were the most ostracized of his society, and created a new life of the spirit characterized by an ethos of compassion. Marcus J. Borg claims that:

Taking the vision of Jesus seriously calls the church to be an alternative culture in our time. Though there may have been periods in the history of the West when its 'official' values roughly coincided with the central values of the Christian tradition, that time is no more. . . . The dominant values of contemporary American life—affluence, achievement, appearance, power, competition, consumption, individualism—are vastly different from anything recognizably Christian. . . . We live in a modern Babylon, one largely unrecognized as such and all the more seductive because of its mostly benign and benevolent face. 9

Church of the Poor

The distance between the contemporary church and the church of the catacombs, especially in relation to the poor, varies significantly around the globe. Clearly the chasm in the One-Third World is everywhere evident, but even the church in some Two-Third's World nations also has drifted away from the marginalized and impoverished. The spectacular success of megachurch growth in South Korea has often been achieved at the expense of overlooking the minjung people, the oppressed masses who suffer from injustice and poverty. The historically middle-class Methodist Church in Argentina, for example, is struggling, despite hyper-inflation, to re-position itself to become the church of the poor in the 1990s.

Theologian Rosemary Ruether has suggested that the early disciples were known as "the Poor". She interprets the images of the disciples and the poor in the Gospel of Luke to mean that "the primary identity of the people of God ceases to be taken, symbolically, from the ruling classes, i.e., sons and princes. Instead, the primary identity of the people of God comes from the poor and despised, women and slaves." 10

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9Borg, Jesus a New Vision, pp. 194-195.

Another feminist theologian, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, argues that the images of the church as the Body of Christ must be combined with the idea of the Church of the Poor. Images not only reflect but reshape reality. By contrasting the vision of the church of the poor with our own experiences, we hear God's voice of judgment, challenge, and a call to political action. To simply emphasize the Body of Christ imagery is insufficient for the transformation of the church in our time. Thistlethwaite declares that:

Taken by itself, this metaphor can be understood to say that the churches can continue to be marginalized from the mainstream of American culture and privatized, unable to confront this larger culture and call it to task. But the metaphor of the Body of Christ, when combined with the metaphor of the Poor, is radicalized and politicized. This Christ is the Christ for the poor. The Body of this Christ acts out that commitment. ¹¹

This vision of the church affirms a missional understanding of God's preferential option for the poor. Central to this perspective is an understanding that the ministry of Jesus was oriented to the needs of the poor and oppressed. To join in God's activity in this world is to identify with the sufferings of the marginalized.

The church's ministry in response to poverty does not begin in abstract theories, dogmatic theologies, or even infallible books. It begins with a commitment to the suffering, struggling poor of this world who refuse to accept passively the misery imposed on them. The Global 2000 Report noted that "Today, some 800 million people live in conditions of absolute poverty, their lives dominated by hunger, ill health, and the absence of hope. By 2000 . . . their number could grow to more than one billion." ¹² The New York Times estimated that there were thirty-five million poor in America (meaning a family of four with income less than $10,178 per year). ¹³ These are not just staggering statistics, they are sacred human beings made in the image of God.

This "preferential option for the poor," as the Latin Americans call it, summons Christians not to idealize poverty but to enter into solidarity with the poor to protest its


dehumanization. Post-liberation Christians in the People's Republic of China caution against idealizing poverty. Chinese Bishop K. H. Ting, speaking after the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, declares that we should hesitate to think that the poor, just because they are poor, are necessarily the bearers of truth and that the mandate of history is necessarily in the hands of the poor in their struggle against the rich. To be poor is miserable. The poor deserve justice. But poverty is no virtue, unless voluntary, and does not always bring with it wisdom. To make a messiah of the poor just because they are poor and to pit the poor against the rich . . . is neither Marxist nor Christian.\textsuperscript{14}

By emphasizing the church of the poor, the purpose is not to exclude the non-poor. God does not love the victims of society more than others, but because Yahweh is a righteous God, divine concern extends out especially to persons, classes, races, and nations in need. Rich persons are not excluded from God's Kingdom, for they too are often victims of systems that trap and dehumanize them. The wealthy can experience conversion and provide an option for the poor by engaging in mission for justice, for social transformation, and for political systems that will offer social alternatives in order to eliminate disparities between the rich and the poor, and encourage a society of people to do justice and love mercy.\textsuperscript{15} Using Bernard Dumas imagery, Joseph C. Hough, Jr., and John B. Cobb, declare that:

\begin{quote}
In this way not only will the church be the hope for the poor, but the poor are the givers of hope for the church. As Dumas has put it, the two faces of Christ, the poor and the church, cannot remain alienated and expect to be whole. It is only when they are together, fully with each other and for each other, that the faces of Christ are united and the body of Christ really becomes one.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}


Enslaved Liberators In The Methodist Tradition

The heritage of Methodism is grounded in John Wesley's movement to relate to the poor, imprisoned, and marginalized. It was not directed toward the wealthy and culturally advantaged. His was not a "hot-tub" ministry oriented to the "fabulously well-to-do." The earliest evangelism attracted the lower economic classes of the unchurched. As Wesley wrote in his journal:

> It is well a few of the rich and noble are called. Oh, that God would increase their number! But I should rejoice (were it the will of God) if it were done by the ministry of others. If I must choose, I should still (as I have done hitherto) preach the gospel to the poor.\(^{17}\)

The dilemma for much of modern Methodism and Methodists is that while we may not be "fabulously well-to-do", we are certainly attached to a life-style that alienates us from the masses of the world. We are enslaved to a life-style that is contradictory to the faith we proclaim. We are called to follow Christ the liberator, but we find ourselves enmeshed in the complications and ambiguities of life. Our need for forgiveness and fortitude calls us to be enslaved liberators in our mission and ministry in the Methodist tradition.

As Christian ministers, we experience not only the web of personal contradictions but also the social dimensions of sin. Illustrative, says theologian Delwin Brown of The Iliff School of Theology, are the world's economic systems. In the United States 60 percent of all productive assets are controlled by two hundred corporations, owned by less than 5 percent of the population. Visitors from another planet undoubtedly would conclude that our national and global systems need fundamental and immediate change. Not only external forces but also elements within us permit these systems to control us.

One-Third World Christians are enmeshed in structures that often keep others poor. Despite the difficulty such a situation poses for effecting change, Brown says that is not the deeper problem. Rather it is how our "thoughts, feelings, and actions" are controlled by these economic principalities and powers. Speaking theologically, he asserts:

> In a factual sense, we are the enemies of freedom, the enemies of the God of freedom. We wish that we had never settled into these comfortable structures of inhumanity, although they grew up out of our own wills, but now that

\(^{17}\)John Wesley, *Journal* 4:358 (November 17, 1759).
we are here we do not move beyond them to new forms of social and economic organization where freedom and justice are more nearly one. St. Augustine said that we willingly enter the bondage wherein we unwillingly find ourselves. It is also true that we willingly remain in the bondage wherein we unwillingly find ourselves. We wish we were not here, but we choose to stay. 

Restructuring the earth's economic systems is beyond the scope of my competence. Too many of our economic "fixes" actually deepen the chasm between the rich and the poor. Supply-side economics has been described as "feeding the horse so the sparrows can eat." Other approaches can be hopelessly utopian. No economic ideology dare be baptized as Christian. No absolute transformation of material nature or human nature is possible. The ministry of enslaved liberation does not require a panacea for all of life's problems but a willingness constantly to wrestle with these problems in the light of Christian imperatives of love, justice, equality, and freedom. Enslaved liberators accept Ernst Troeltsch's classic words: "Faith is the source of energy in the struggle of life, but life still remains a battle which is continually renewed upon ever new fronts. For every threatening abyss which is closed, another yawning gulf appears." 

In the bondage of life's assigned and self-chosen contradictions, we know with Thomas Merton that we "could hardly survive for long without special mercy"--the grace of an infinitely loving God, who offers forgiveness even when we feel unforgivable and strength even when we seem too weak to seek transformation for our lives and our world.

The tendency is to domesticate Jesus and to make trivial his teachings. Those of affluence spiritualize references to the poor, the imprisoned, and the oppressed. Lost in the translation is "the acceptable year of the Lord," which really refers to "the Jubilee year" of Leviticus 25:1-24. Not pious rhetoric but a radical proclamation, Jesus' vision of a Jubilee year points to a time when social inequities created over the years will be wiped off, slavery will be abolished, and people will begin anew on the basis of a new social and economic equality. John Howard Yoder, writing on The Politics of Jesus, says that "the acceptable year of the Lord" was understood to be "a visible socio-political, economic restructuring of relations among the people of God, 

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achieved by his intervention in the person of Jesus as the one Anointed and endued with the Spirit."^{20}

Is it any wonder that this hometown boy should say "no prophet is acceptable in his own country" and end up having to flee because the people were filled with wrath and intended to throw him off a cliff? Would the world's bankers and politicians respond any differently today if an enslaved liberator were to announce a Jubilee Year for Two-Third's World nations?

John Wesley never renounced his social, cultural, and academic standing; in that sense, he remained enslaved. Yet he sought to transcend himself and his situation by becoming a liberator. Wesley focused on practical measures for aiding the poor, such as providing needed food for the hungry, clothing, fuel, and medicine. He instituted interest-free loans and a system for finding employment. He sought to create new jobs and even learned to practice medicine himself. But his most important contribution, says Manfred Marquardt, ". . . lay in the changed consciousness that this now notorious preacher began to engender both among the affected poor and the higher strata of English society."^{21} If we can learn to live with the tension of being enslaved liberators in this Methodist tradition, we may truly transform the church's ministry in response to poverty.

Ministries of Faithfulness

The church's public ministry in response to poverty can and should take many forms in various contexts. Let me suggest a few, without prioritizing, and urge the reader to expand the list.^{22}

First, ours should be a ministry of reminding. The Church must ever seek to be the conscience of societies and nations. In an age of alarming militarism, pressing economic needs, world hunger, and oppressed human rights, the exigencies of global life make imperative a renewed role of reminding for the Christian community.

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^{22}Adapted from Messer, Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry, pp. 186-190.
The Methodist Church in Kenya has clearly sought to remind the government of higher values of justice and democracy, not letting the death of their Anglican brother, Bishop Alexander Muge, to have been in vain. In Guatemala Christians have stood in solidarity against human rights violations and the destruction of the indigenous people. We who are committed to a faith that has a clear bias toward the poor, therefore, must remember that ours is always a ministry of reminding, of calling attention to forgotten people, to hurting victims of life's tragedies and systems, and to transcendent norms that summon us to repentance and renewal.

Second, the church's response must be a ministry of interpretation. We are called to be faithful interpreters of the Word in relation to the needs of the World. It has been noted that the ancient prophets discerned and interpreted the signs of the times. Our task is no less. We are called to discern the moral meaning of the present situation and so interpret it that eyes are opened, hearts moved, and political will redirected. 23

Rosanna Panizo of Peru has dramatically warned us that "the Third World is rapidly becoming No World, moving from dependency to destruction." The church as interpreter must emphasize to "the powers that be" that much of Africa and Latin America is being deliberately left out of any benefits in the new patterns of world economic order. Especially important is for the church in every place to interpret the needs of women and children, who suffer enormously under World Bank and International Monetary Plans designed to pay back global debts.

Third, we are called to a ministry of protest. There are simply times when we must say no. As Christians, we have to draw ethical lines and raise probing moral questions. By declaring ourselves in protest to policies, procedures, and programs that dehumanize persons, we begin to be catalysts for Christ in our churches and communities.

"Negative starting points" are sometimes easier to identify than positive programs. Protesting against "savage capitalism" or "inhumane socialism" is imperative. As Peter L. Berger has suggested, we must begin by saying:

23 The first five of these ministries are adapted from the listing found in "Identifying a Food Policy Agenda for the 1980's: A Working Paper," Interreligious Task Force on U.S. Policy, 1980, pp. 8-9.
No to children living in garbage, no to exploitation and hunger, no to terror and totalitarianism, no to anomie and the mindless destruction of human beings . . . . From these concrete instances of saying no one may then move ahead to the painstaking task of finding alternatives which will not only be morally acceptable. Christians are not responsible for developing "perfect" or utopian social and economic systems, but we are responsible for caring for the planet and all life.

Fourth, ours must be a ministry of advocacy. Despite limitations placed on the church in various parts of the world, the church often has more freedom and opportunity than others to speak as advocates of the poor. The church, said Walter Rauschenbush, must fight for the "underdog" since "the strong have ample means of defending their interests and usually enough power left to guard their unjust interests also."

John Wesley and later Methodists have provided a rich heritage of advocacy on behalf of the poor and all those treated as nonpersons. "Preferential option for the poor" language is not new to liberation theology, but has emerged wherever the Gospel has been truly proclaimed. As theologian Karl Barth noted:

The Church is witness of the fact that the Son of God came to seek and to save the lost. And this implies that—casting all false impartiality aside—the Church must concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society. The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of its primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the state's responsibility for those weaker members of society.

Fifth, ours must be a ministry of envisioning. Without a vision, the people perish; that is a cornerstone of prophetic understanding. Visions have a way of defining reality and determining consequences.

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Dreaming impossible dreams, seeing beyond the usual, envisioning a new way or a new world—flows from the very essence of the Christian faith. Because the church's commitments transcend parochial and national self-interest, and because the values affirmed inspire greater compassion, justice and equality for all persons, Christians should dare to be involved in a public ministry in order to transform dreams into reality.

Christians must help envision new models for the world's economic future that are environmentally sustainable. We must seek in various contexts to discover non-technological health care, cooperatives, low cost technological agriculture, etc. that will address the issues of world poverty. Our dreams can become our destiny.

Sixth, the church's mission is to share the Good News. The community of faith must be obedient to both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission—to love God and neighbor and to proclaim the Gospel to all the earth. Humanitarian good work, social services, feeding the hungry, etc., does not justify our forgetting to share the Good News. The poor will be poorer indeed if we do not share the spiritual riches we enjoy. Such sharing should not be arrogant but be in the spirit of D. T. Niles' classic definition of evangelism as "being one beggar telling another beggar where to get food."

The possibilities for such evangelism, however, are limited in a world where the disparities between the rich and the poor are increasing. Illustrative is what happened at the evangelical sponsored Lausanne II Conference in the Philippines in 1989. Outside of Manila stands Smokey Mountain, a giant garbage heap where poor Filipino families live, struggling to survive on what they can salvage from the leftovers of others. A worker from Smokey Mountain spoke at the conference, dramatically declaring that until the church and world overcome the economic disparity of the rich and the poor, "be not surprised that the people of the garbage dumps of the world will think our Gospel is just another piece of trash."

The church's ministry in response to poverty can and must take many forms. Clearly the task will not be easy and panaceas probably do not exist. But if we are to be faithful to our peasant Lord, we must seek to respond in humility and obedience, recognizing and repenting of our own complicity in the sins of the world, but trusting in God's great grace and hoping in God's great victory.