What about the Poor?

by Thomas B. Turner

A Child’s Introduction to Poverty

A few weeks ago, Jeanne took our children to Berkeley to see their dentist, and then they went out to get a pizza. As they walked down the street they passed a woman sitting on a bench in front of the public library.

Her head was wrapped in different colored clothes. She was dressed in layers of clothing, although it was still summertime and hot.

Next to her were several bags stuffed with her belongings. The woman sat very still with a blank stare.

Kate wanted to know why the woman had all those bags, and Jeanne explained that she had no place to live so she had to carry her belongings with her.

That was not the end of Kate’s questions. Next, she asked, “Why did you take me by that woman? She scared me.” Jeanne talked with Kate about why the woman looked scary and tried to help Kate understand that the woman was poor, sick, and had no place to live.

This was Kate’s first encounter with poverty in our society, and Jeanne did her best to help a young child deal with the situation.

On the way home, Kate had another question, “Mama, are you going to tell Daddy about that poor woman?”

Then on the following Wednesday, as Jeanne and the children were driving to church for the fellowship meal, prayer, and Bible study, Kate asked her mother to tell about the poor woman and ask the church to pray for her.

A Little Child Shall Lead Them

I don’t want to make too much out of this episode in our family and church life, but several things about it seem important to me.

First, while Kate’s initial response was fear, she had access to someone who could help her understand what frightened her. By talking to Jeanne, her fear gave way to concern. I am glad that Kate had someone like Jeanne to talk with, someone who could help transform her fear into compassion.

Second, with her new-found concern, Kate wanted to involve others. It was important to her that others be told about the poor woman and something be done. Kate will soon be six years old, and already she knows that church is where we bring our concern about the brokenness of our world and where our concerns will be heard and shared.

Third, because Jeanne helped transform Kate’s fear into concern, and because Kate was vocal and persistent about her concern, our church prayed for the poor. Her request helped us do what we should be doing as a church. For that I am grateful.

Fourth, Kate’s concern challenges me. It makes me feel my own lack of concern.

The Incredibly Shrinking Safety Net

by Christopher Bryan

More than two years after the controversial 1996 welfare reform legislation was enacted, many questions remain about the efficacy of the Republican-sponsored mandate, which President Bill Clinton signed despite deep reservations. The bill, which transferred block grants to state governments from federal monies, left many skeptics concerned over how states would use the funding to help people receiving public assistance. But because many states have different strategies and plans of action in distributing the money, the results nationwide are scattered.

The 1996 law’s work requirements stipulate that approximately 25 percent of recipients hold jobs or “actively prepare themselves for work.” Federal data released in December 1998 indicate that 28 percent...
out the Holy Spirit on all flesh and our sons and daughters will prophesy (Joel 2:28). One of our daughters, one of the least among us, has spoken up and spoken out on behalf of the poor. She asked questions, and she asked us to pray. Her concern confronts us with ourselves: how concerned are we about the poor?

**The Rich Man and Lazarus**

Jesus told a story about a rich man who showed no concern for the poor. He neglected them and gave no alms to a beggar at his own gate. This was sin, and it was sin because it was unjust.

In the ancient society of the Near East, the wealthy elite were expected to act as patrons to those who appealed to them for help in a time of need. The rich man who failed to help Lazarus showed contempt for justice, and contempt for justice is contempt for God, who “raises up the needy out of their affliction” (Psalm 107:41).

The parable was not a polemic against wealth. Rather, it warned the rich to use their resources in the service of God by giving alms to the poor and thereby acting justly.

The point of the story is this: the rich brothers failed to help the poor because they did not listen to what scripture says. Their neglect of the poor, their contempt for justice, their sin was rooted in their refusal to listen to scripture and follow its teaching.

The meaning for us is this: if we listen to scripture—not only Moses and the prophets, but also the teaching of Jesus and the missionary witness of the early church—then we will be concerned about the poor at our gates, and we will do what we can to help make our society just. If we neglect the poor, then that is a sign we are not hearing what scripture says.

**Challenge**

How concerned are we about the poor? Are we listening to scripture? Do we get what it says?

Jesus was good news for the poor. His preaching of God’s Reign was good news to them. He gave them hope and dignity. He gave them healing and salvation. We who follow him cannot be satisfied with less.

—Tom Turner is founder and director of Pilgrim’s Rest Retreat Center in Greenville, South Carolina, and an itinerant leader in spiritual formation.

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**What about the Poor?**

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**Shrinking Safety Net**

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of adults on welfare rolls are engaged in some kind of work activity, although 10 of the 36 states reporting figures did not meet the projected 25 percent goal. Furthermore, experts say that it is uncertain whether or not states will be able to meet the 2002 goal, which requires half of adult welfare recipients to be employed.

Although the new data attest to the work effort of welfare recipients, they do not show whether people who leave welfare have found good jobs, as Congress intended. Jodie Levin-Epstein, a welfare expert at the Center for Law and Social Policy, a research and advocacy group, cautions, “There’s an assumption that any job is a step up the ladder, and that’s true for some welfare recipients.

But many people get stuck on the first rung of the ladder and remain in poverty because the jobs do not lead to higher wages, even over many years.” Policy analysts predict that, until adequate job training programs and equal educational opportunities are put in place, the intrinsic problems with the legislation will continue to plague those it purports to help.

The 1996 welfare bill also cut $30 billion in nutrition programs over six years. This plank of the plan has thwarted many free-meal programs administered by governmental and non-governmental agencies and charitable organizations dependent on grants and federally-allocated money. Pending legislation, the “Hunger Has A Cure” Act, HR 1507—before the US House of Representatives at this writing—would restore some of those cuts that have paralyzed efforts to feed hungry and malnourished citizens.

Moreover, the US now has the highest wage inequality of any industrialized nation, according to the Bread for the World Institute. Some four million US households suffer from moderate to severe hunger. Misleading data often overlook the fact that, though median incomes in the US have risen, the gap between the rich and the poor—especially the very poor—has also widened. The economic gains were not evenly distributed across states or across income brackets.

And rising median income did not reduce the poverty rate. While households in the top one-fifth of the income distribution received 49 percent of all income, those in the bottom one-fifth received only 3.7 percent. Alarming, downscale households are losing ground: average income for the top quintile rose 2.2 percent; 1.5 percent for the middle quintile; and fell 1.8 percent for the lowest quintile.

**In a time of “peace and prosperity” for the economically privileged, the millions of US citizens living in squalor and poverty are experiencing misery on a daily basis.**

And the number of impoverished people numbers over 36, 5 million, an increase of five million in only 10 years.

In a time of “peace and prosperity” for the economically privileged, the millions of US citizens living in squalor and poverty are experiencing misery on a daily basis. While the media and politicians tend to ignore the fates of the poorest citizens, and rapid economic and educational advancement perpetually lock out the disenfranchised, American society and culture will continue to widen the gap between rich and poor. That great divide, along with a shrinking safety net, will only ensure that more and more people fall through the cracks and onto the streets.

—Chris Bryan will graduate from Baylor University in May as the highest ranking arts and sciences student. He plans to study law in order to immerse himself in the struggle for economic justice.
Reports from Nicaragua
by Marcus Best

Editor’s Note: Even though several months have passed since Hurricane Mitch laid waste to vast areas of Central America, the people there—particularly poor people—still suffer from its effects. The following are excerpts from reports sent by Marcus Best from Nicaragua in early November. Marcus was writing to American supporters of Seeds Of Learning, a small NGO based in Sonoma, California. When the hurricane hit, Marcus says, the SOL staff in Nicaragua was about half its normal number, so the remaining workers scrambled to respond as best they could to the disaster.

Report 1: November 19

When the hurricane first hit, people from villages near Darío, our town, walked into Darío for refuge. The Seeds Of Learning staff opened our two buildings to the refugees. We slept in the refuges several nights, maintaining order and coordinating the distribution of food, clothing, and medicine. Several of us helped the locals make a walking bridge over a four-meter gap in the Pan-American highway.

A few days after the hurricane, we loaded into our two trucks with backpacks full of powdered milk and nutritious crackers. We were going to visit the surrounding communities to take censuses and to deliver food to children suffering from malnutrition.

We drove as far as we could and parked the trucks where the road was cut by a river and no longer passable. We walked across the flooded plains that were covered with corn before, but now are expanses of silted sand, where the corn lies flat, broken by the floods.

Upon arriving at Las Delicias (a community of around 60 families), the stories I’d heard of the town became more tangible, more desperate, even more horrible. I talked with survivors who had been stranded in trees for as many as four days without food or water. They told me of family members and friends who, exhausted from the lack of sleep, starving, and weak, had slipped from the trees into the river and were never seen again.

The town lies in a fertile valley that was flooded by the convergence of three rivers. The floodwaters receded and left the town buried in three to four feet of mud; it seemed as though the whole community had simply sunk into the ground, and only the top halves of the houses could be seen.

We walked across the flooded plains that were covered with corn before, but now are expanses of silted sand, where the corn lies flat, broken by the floods.

The families that remained in Las Delicias after the floods were crammed into a few small houses that stood unaffected by the floods. We passed out the powdered milk and crackers to the families that needed them. As we walked out from Las Delicias, back across the fields of silt, we had to carefully avoid stepping on the newly sprouted seedlings that formed tidy rows three feet above the old crops; the farmers had already replanted, hoping to harvest one more crop before the dry season arrives.

Report 2: December 3

Last weekend we took two truckloads of toys, clothes, and snacks to San Juanillo, a small community highly affected by the hurricane. After we finished unloading the donations we spent the rest of the day with over 200 children from the community that could use some cheering up. We played games, the guitar class performed, and we held competitions (like sack races, trivia games, and who can put on a pile of clothes the fastest).

Donations of all kinds have arrived from the US, France, Canada, Italy, and other countries. The Catholic Church donated a few acres of land where we plan to build eighty houses for people in Dario whose homes have been destroyed. Those who evacuated late and couldn’t or didn’t close the door behind them returned to find all their possessions washed away. Those who did close their doors, and didn’t lose their walls, found all their things buried in the mud. One of the children told me it was as if the river was full of Clorox bleach because it left stains on all the clothes, the furniture, and the walls.

A citizen of the village Savana Verde surveys, with his daughter, the rubble that was once their home. Photo by Marcus Best.

continued on page 5
Floods Sweep Northern and Eastern Sudan

Khartoum—Intense flooding in northern and eastern Sudan has lead to devastating effects upon the entire country. The government of Sudan appealed for $19.5 million from the international community. The funds would be used to provide shelter, food and health services to the areas currently ruined by flooding.

The rainy season was just beginning when the first waves of flooding swept the country. Now, with more continuing rains, greater areas are affected. Weeks after the Sudanese government appealed for aid, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) appealed for an additional 3,000,000 Swiss francs. That money would go to preventing epidemics of infectious diseases in affected areas.

The spread of disease such as diarrhea and dysentery could become even more devastating than the flooding. Fecal pools of water are breeding grounds for infectious bacteria. Many drinking water sources (such as dams and water reservoirs) have been destroyed by fighting. Various armies have even thrown human corpses into open wells to contaminate them.

The Sudanese government gave the World Food Programme (WFP) permission to fly humanitarian aid through Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS). OLS has been plagued by Sudanese rumors that it flew surveillance planes ahead of the US bomb attack on a Khartoum factory.

Foreign Minister Mustafa Osman Ismail said an OLS plane had asked for permission to land at Khartoum airport, but instead circled the area several times and left without landing.

Although OLS activities are strictly humanitarian, the issue had lead to talk of discontinuing the program. Since that incident the OLS planes have continued to transport their cargoes of food and medicine throughout Sudan.

Flooding is not Sudan’s only problem. While the media has focused on south Sudan (the site of the greatest flooding) 55,000 other Sudanese are displaced in the east after shelling from Eritrea (a bordering state). 36,000 people are currently in refugee camps.

WFP transported 166 tons of food from Gedarif to Kassala in northeastern Sudan to provide one-month emergency rations to about 8,000 people most affected by flooding in the area. The commercially-important Gash river overran its banks, ruining virtually every riverside industry.

In the river town of Kassala (located near Ethiopia on the Gash River) 70,000 people have been flooded out and over 10,000 have lost their homes and possessions. And it is still raining in the area.

Further problems have hit the town of Yirol (located in the southern tip of Sudan). Yirol is supposed to have 14 supplementary centers for the feeding of children, but only three are getting support. Children who are able to eat porridge eat three times a day, along with milk and oral rehydration salt (ORS). Those under intensive care take only milk and ORS due to vomiting and acute diarrhea. Conditions here are exacerbated by civil war. Yirol town was captured by Sudan People’s Liberation Army in June last year.

Entire Relief Communities Lost in Central America

Wheaton, Illinois—The Pan-American Highway runs from the United States down through Mexico and on into Chile. At least it used to. Now it is cut in dozens of places where its bridges have collapsed and been torn apart. The destruction of this link to the outside world only complicates relief efforts.

Before the slow trickle of aid began to arrive, many communities had moved together to haphazard relief stations. The Mexican state of Chiapas has been particularly devastated. Three tropical depressions and a tropical storm drenched the state causing rivers to overflow and flood the flat lands.

“We’re leaving because we were left without a home, without land. We have nothing to eat, nowhere to live,” said Chiapas resident Juan Manuel Villafuerte Figuero.

Over 200 people died in Chiapas alone. About 450,000 people have been left homeless. Mexico’s government has pledged to build 25,000 low-cost homes to help the problem.

Health officials worry about diseases spread from standing water, which include malaria, dengue fever, cholera and conjunctivitis. Health workers dumped chlorine in the area’s drinking wells to disinfect them, but they say that it is logistically impossible to clean all the drinking water.

Unlike Mexico, with its relatively strong government, Honduras and Nicaragua both depended more on the international community for aid. Hurricane Mitch had destroyed roads, water supplies, and electrical power to vast expanses in both nations.

World Relief reported that workers have tried desperately to account for all of the remote communities it helps in Honduras and Nicaragua. World Relief’s next step after reestablishing contact with its staff was to begin sending seeds and fertilizer to farmers. The hope was to provide farmers with quick-growing crops so the area will still have a reduced harvest.

Extensive flooding occurred in areas of rain forest removal. Both logging and banana interests have continued to expand the area of cultivated land. Scientifically, mud slides in areas of deforestation are drastically higher when compared to untouched areas. But the power of Hurricane Mitch was so great that there was hardly a community untouched.

—from International Federation of the Red Cross, World Food Programme, World Relief, Stop Hunger Now

—from World Relief (see also “Report from Nicaragua” on page 3)
Cambodians Farmers Face Famine

WHEATON, ILLINOIS—Cambodia’s rice crops have had hard years before, but over the past three years Cambodian farmers have barely been able to survive. Two years of low crops and a season of drought have reduced the rice crop to minute amounts.

Comparable to the vast famine occurring in North Korea, this food crisis is directly linked to the rice harvests. Each rice harvest bears the fate of the farmers who raise the crops.

Because of their dependence on rice, rural communities are most affected by this food shortage. Over 5,000 people in 50 villages need emergency aid to survive until the next rice harvest.

Because of their isolated nature, getting aid to these rural communities will be difficult. But also because of their solitary nature, these communities have nowhere else to turn.

—from World Relief

Bangladesh Faces Worst Flood in History

WHEATON, ILLINOIS—Floods that began in late July 1998 in Bangladesh continued through September, and then stayed until November. It was the longest-lasting flood in Bangladesh’s history. More than three-quarters of the country were affected.

During the flood, landfills near major cities flooded, causing garbage to literally float into people’s homes. The threat of disease that was first a scare quickly developed into an even more scary reality. More than a hundred people died in hospitals from disease over the first month of the flood.

35 million people have dragged what they can into the numerous relief stations set up by the government and international relief organizations. Even though the waters have slightly receded, the flood still affects this fragile nation.

35 million people have dragged what they can into the numerous relief stations set up by the government and international relief organizations. Even though the waters have slightly receded, the flood still affects this fragile nation.

Restoring three-quarters of a nation that has been underwater for months is a mind-boggling task for the ravaged survivors to undertake.

—from World Relief

—David Lane is a senior at Midway High School in Woodway, Texas. He has been writing for Seeds of Hope since he was 15.

In the wake of Hurricane Mitch, Seeds of Learning workers found many of their schoolrooms in shambles, like this one in Las Delicias. Photo by Marcus Best.
Sider’s 20th-Anniversary Edition Still Indicts Apathetic Christians


In the new edition, the main focus of the book is still on the failure of Christians, who own a majority of the world’s wealth, to do anything for the poor worldwide. While Christians have made some progress, the fact remains that people are starving and that the Christian community is generally not concerned.

The book is divided into four main sections which are entitled, “Poor Lazarus and the Rich Christians”, “A Biblical Perspective on the Poor and Possessions”, “What Causes Poverty?”, and “Implementation”.

The new edition of the book has been revised and updated, showing both growth and change in Sider’s thinking. He has re-evaluated his view on “extremes of wealth”, his interpretation of the Jubilee passage in Leviticus, his view on capitalism, and his view on government intervention.

Overall, Sider’s book is an attempt to open the reader’s eyes to the tremendous problem of world hunger and to provide simple, practical ways in which the reader can become a part of the solution. The book is a call to the Christian community to move from a position of affluence to a position of generosity.

For more information or to place an order, contact Word Publishing, 1501 LBJ Freeway, Suite 650, Dallas, TX, 75234; (214) 488-9673.

Resources from Food First: Lappe’s Myths Updated

World Hunger: Twelve Myths, Second Edition examines commonly believed myths concerning the causes of hunger and famine and comes to the conclusion that hunger is not caused by a scarcity of food, overpopulation, or natural disasters. The book shows that unequal access to wealth and resources, along with extreme free-market policies, is the root cause of hunger.

The Paradox of Plenty: Hunger in a Bountiful World provides an overview of the world food system, the US role in that system, how global politics affect hunger, and the free market. This book seeks to help the reader understand how the world food system fails to provide food for all people as well as to help the reader understand how to change that system.

America Needs Human Rights: Fighting Hunger and Poverty in the Richest Nation on Earth argues that human rights are routinely violated in the US by policies designed to protect profits rather than people. The book discusses social ills in the US and lays the basis for a movement for fundamental changes.

Deborah Toler argues that, if given a chance, Africa could produce enough food to feed all of its people. In her book entitled Africa: Myths and Realities, Toler claims that Africans go hungry for the same reason that Americans go hungry—we live under an economic system which considers profits more important than people. Toler focuses on finding the real causes for hunger in Africa and suggests alternative solutions which could allow Africans to feed themselves.

For more information or to place an order for any of these four resources, contact Food First: Institute for Food and Development Policy, Subterranean Company, Box 160, 265 So 5th St., Monroe, OR 97456; 1-800-274-7826.

Tooley Provides a Voice for Guatemalan Women

Voices of the Voiceless, a book written by Michelle Tooley, explores the injustice suffered by Guatemalan women as a means to securing justice not only for them, but also for all who suffer injustice in this world. The book tells the stories of individual women, yet interprets these stories through theological reflection and perspectives on the political history of Guatemala.

The book discusses injustice in Guatemala, especially through the powers and authorities, the response of women in Guatemalan human rights groups, and the theory of social justice. Tooley encourages Christians to look at the ways in which their own individualism impedes their response to injustice around them. She emphasizes that the way to make a difference is through participation—Christians working together to bring about justice.

For more information or to place an order, contact Herald Press, 616 Walnut Ave., Scottdale, PA, 15683.
the reality of hunger and God’s intention for the world), “Who, (or What), is to Blame?” and “What Can We Do?” The overall intent of the booklet is to increase awareness concerning worldwide hunger and to offer concrete steps that one can take to help solve the problem.

For more information or to place an order, contact RENEW Book Services, RENEW International, 1232 George Street, Plainfield, NJ 07062-1717; (908)769-5400.

Church World Service Continues Facts Have Faces Series

The latest in the Church World Service’s Facts Have Faces series is entitled “Caution: Children at Work.” The fact sheet tells the tragic stories of children who are forced to work in abusive, exploitative situations for virtually no pay.

The sheet also gives information about efforts that are aimed at changing the use of children for labor. The sheet not only offers resources that the reader can use to obtain more information but also gives some practical things that the reader can begin to increase his own awareness and to help stop the problem of child labor.

Another new edition to the Church World Service’s Facts Have Faces series is entitled “Africa: In Bondage to Debt.” It is a six page study/action resource introducing the crushing impact of foreign debt on Africa’s poorest nations. Many spend more each year on debt repayment than on primary education and health care combined. The sheet profiles faith groups and other caring persons around the world who have joined in a vigorous “Jubilee 2000 Campaign” to forgive the debt.

What About Globalization?

Gilbert Rist’s book The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith seeks to examine the beliefs that economic growth will provide new jobs, that countries will repay international debts, and that all can achieve prosperity through globalization. Rist says that while most people share this ideology, it has clearly failed. He examines history, theory, and strategy that have shaped relations between the countries in the North and the countries in the South and explores levels of poverty and degradation.

For more information or to place an order, contact Humanities Press International, Inc., 165 First Avenue, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, 07716; (908) 872-1441.

—Lynnette Ogle is a student at Baylor University. She compiled this group of resources as part of a class on poverty.

Four 20-page packets each year filled with prayers, litanies, sermons, activities, art, and more. $50 per packet or $120 for all four. To order, call 254/755-7745; fax 254/753-1909; write 602 James, Waco, TX  76706; or e-mail seedshope@aol.com.
Responding to Victims of Disaster

Here’s What Anybody Can Do

The following are suggestions from Rev. Judy Dahl, director of global outreach for her denomination, as possible ways to respond to the critical needs of disaster victims (as well as victims of economic injustice and food insecurity):

The first thing you can do is organize your study group or congregation to receive a special offering. Your denomination has ways of reaching these distressed areas. Contact your denominational relief office for information. They will be able to facilitate your offering and keep you informed about the human conditions in the area you are targeting.

Rev. Dahl reminds us that, as people of faith, we should never forget the power of public prayers for victims of natural disaster, war, and economic injustice. Please remember people in crisis around the world—as well as in your country and community—in prayers during your church’s worship services. You can play a vital role by assisting your clergy in holding the urgent needs of these people before your congregation.

If you would like to respond directly to Seeds of Learning in Nicaragua (see story beginning on page 3), you can get more information by writing to them at Seeds of Learning; 585 Fifth Street West; Sonoma, CA 95476.

You may also e-mail SOL at sol@vom.com. If you would like to help SOL in the form of a donation, make checks payable to “Dario Relief Fund” and send them to the address above.—eds.

These include litanies, sermons, children’s and youth activities, bulletin art, and drama. Contact the address above for information.

Seeds of Hope, Inc., holds the 501C/3 nonprofit tax status. All contributions above the subscription rate are fully tax-deductible.

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