



BY STEVE SAINT

I have been in relationship with the Waodani since 1956, when they killed my dad Nate and four of his friends. My relationship continued through the time my aunt Rachel lived with them beginning in 1958 through her death in 1994. I most recently lived with the Waodani beginning just after Aunt Rachel's death in 1994 until later in 1997, maintaining a house and spending about one quarter of my time with them until 2008.

When people visit the Waodani, they look around and think, "Wow, these people have nothing!" People from the outside think the Waodani are poor because they don't have three-bedroom ramblers with wall-to-wall carpeting, double garages so full of stuff the cars never fit and, I guess, because they never take vacations to exotic places like Disney World.

So, on speaking tours I began describing these jungle dwellers as "People who all have water front

# PROJECTING

# POVERTY<sup>1</sup>

## Where it Doesn't Exist

property, multiple houses and spend most of their time hunting and fishing." The most common response I have gotten when describing the Waodani this way is, "Wow, would I ever like to live like that!" I agree completely.

Mincaye, on the other hand, sees the way we "Outsiders" live here in "The foreigner's place" and makes comments like; "Why, never sitting, do the foreigners run around and around in their car things speaking to each other on their talking things but never hunting or fishing or telling stories to each other?" After traveling and speaking with me in the U.S., Canada and Europe, Mincaye is always greatly relieved to get back to his thatched roof hut, with the open fire wafting smoke in his face, eating whatever happens to be in the cooking pot. He sits around in jungle-stained clothes and the look on his face tells it all. He would not live in North America for all the green paper and little pieces of plastic he could carry. He doesn't understand how money and credit cards work but he knows foreigners can't leave home without them.

Mincaye is a rich man. Or, he was until someone taught him to drive a golf cart and he started thinking how much fun it would be to take his 57 grandchildren for rides up and down the Nemom-pade airstrip where we used to live together. Now he wants his own golf cart (which means he would need a charging station, and a solar panel farm to power it, and a shop to maintain it, and spare parts to keep it running...)

From my life experiences with the Waodani—and other people groups in Africa, Asia and South America who live simply and materially content-



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edly—I have learned that it is unreasonable to evaluate their “lack” based on our distorted and exaggerated perception of need. When we try to meet phantom needs of people who live at a lower material standard than we have learned to consider “minimal,” we not only fall into a trap that keeps us from seeing their real needs but we also tempt them into a snare that can raise their perception of need beyond what their economy can support.

When we project poverty on people where it doesn't exist, we also overlook the actual poverty with which they struggle. Solomon said it well, “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. As goods increase so do those who consume them” (Ecc 5:10–11).

### **Dangerous Charity**

Often charity to help the poor attracts more people into poverty. One example I have noticed takes place when North Americans try to care for the needs of orphans in cultures different from our own. If you build really nice orphanages and provide good food and a great education, lots more children in those places become orphans. I see this happen all over. When we attempt to eradicate poverty through charity, we often attract more people into “needing” charity. It is possible to create need where it did not exist by projecting our standards, values and perception of need onto others.

So what is poverty? We in the “Wealthy West” have little understanding of “poverty.” As our standard of living has risen in developed countries, our perception of poverty has changed.

Consider how our definition of an orphan is different from most other cultures. In the U.S., you are an orphan if your mother and father have died. In South America

(where I grew up), as in other contexts where extended family structures are intact, you are not really considered an orphan as long as you have a living grandparent, uncle, aunt or older brother or sister who is capable of helping take care of you. So when North Americans build an orphanage in South America, we “create” orphans by tempting family members to take advantage of our well-intentioned largess. This is seldom in the best interest of those children who are “orphaned” by our desire to meet what we perceive as their need.

### **Provoking Poverty**

In the same way, proximity and exposure to wealth can provoke a sense of poverty. A group of North Americans going on a short-term mission—with our international cell phones, iPads, fancy clothes and fat wallets to buy curios and spend on hotels and restaurants—can create more comparative poverty than most of us can imagine.

But, all of that is not the issue. Do we have a responsibility to care for the poor? Yes. 1 Cor 8:11–15 hits the nail on the head. Let me summarize—“No Christ follower should have too much while anyone else has too little.” So, should we all become poor so that we are no longer responsible? No. Paul also points out that this teaching is not intended to put the poor at ease and to burden the wealthy (2 Th 3:6–12).

Among *people living simply amidst abundant resources*, poverty is not measured in annual income or net worth, but in “what I have in comparison to what those around me have.” In such contexts poverty is more of an attitude and a mood than an actual state of having or not having something. In such contexts, contentment is the secret. Some people think 1 Timothy 6:6 says “Godliness is a means of gain,” but really it says “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” Where

there is godliness with contentment there is no perceived “poverty” until discontentment has been stirred.

### **Building Up Christ's Body**

Our goal in planting Christ's church where it doesn't exist must be to produce churches that are self-propagating, self-governing and self-supporting; especially where the members come from a background of hopelessness, powerlessness and inadequate resources. The most important aspect of church planting is whatever that fledgling congregation needs most. In a growing number of cases, the greatest need new churches have is to become self-supporting.

Giving handouts creates more problems than it solves. It is like casting out demons with long leases. Break the lease or they will come back and bring more roommates (Lk 11:24–26). Where the Church is being established among people that perceive themselves as powerless, there is a great need for deep discipleship, wrestling with the roots of poverty at the community level rather than concentrating on the individual.

Financial help that does not develop sustainable, local, financial self-sufficiency is much more likely to create poverty than it is to meet real needs. Until we realize that we can't overcome poverty with handouts, we will never be much help in completing Christ's Great Commission.

As followers of Christ we must fight poverty through discipleship rather than covering it with spiritual frosting. Either we do God's will God's way or we aren't doing His will at all. Discipleship means teaching others what we have learned so they can teach others to care for their community's physical, economic, emotional and spiritual needs on a sustainable basis! (2 Tim 2:2, Mt 28:19–20)<sup>f</sup>