

Further Reflections



Empowering our Evangelism

Greg H. Parsons, Global Director, U.S. Center for World Mission

Discussing the poor is one of those subjects that makes us uncomfortable. Perhaps it is because we feel, at some level, it is their fault—they brought it on themselves. I'm sure it is true sometimes. People make bad decisions every day, and we've all heard the stories of those who had great jobs, a home with a family, only to lose it all for some reason.

Another reason we don't like to think about it much might be that we really don't want to get a burden for the poor or we might have to do something about it! It could rattle our comfort zone. And after all, we are involved in missions, and that is our way of reaching out.

Of course, if you are really involved in missions, you must deal with the poor and the issues of justice or clean water and other local environmental needs that often cause poverty. These issues impact mission work in all kinds of places. Where it doesn't yet, it likely will in the future.

The interesting fact is that by dealing with, say, an issue of clean water, you positively impact the lives of the poor and often create opportunity and improve health. Studies have demonstrated that clean water alone improves productivity and decreases health expenses.

I realize that some who read this issue and this editorial will likely wonder if we are just trying to be "cool" in talking about these issues. After all, we are the "unreached peoples" people. How does this relate? Perhaps a true story will help.

Last year, I met Peter Harris, who is the founder of A Rocha (www.arocha.org) the Portuguese word for "rock." I've since called Peter "the Ralph Winter of conservation." He has been around this kind of work for more than 30 years. He lives

it out daily. As committed Christians working on dozens of projects over many years, here is what A Rocha have learned:

1. Those who research and work on environmental and conservation projects are often depressed and hopeless. When they see God followers caring about God's creation, they are shocked and grateful for the added efforts. It gives them hope. It opens doors for the gospel.
2. They have the opportunity to build bridges with the entire community, including the local government.
3. It opens doors for sensitive sharing of faith with the poor, others working on the projects and government officials.

In other words, working on problems that impact people's lives, health and productivity empowers our evangelism. And often that is with those who might not hear the truth through other avenues.

Like sharing through business or medical work, this should never be done with coercion. Working with the poor already has huge, built-in dependency potential. We don't want more "rice Christians" who "believe" because they get food or water but don't hang around when their circumstances improve. I rarely recommend "handouts" except in response to emergency or urgent situations. And almost never cash! While I don't have the space to explain more here, biblically and practically people actually need to work.

So, like Paul, we urge or compel people to turn from sin, repent and turn to Christ by faith. But we never make our efforts with them or our offer of food or water contingent upon them

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getting a tract or hearing a message. As you might expect, the message that may speak the loudest will often come through our effective service—which can come in many forms.

We all know of examples where care was not taken to understand the local situation and, as a result, efforts seemed ineffective, if not destructive. Naturally, any project—indeed any work in a different cultural setting—needs to be done in the context of the real needs of the situation, and, where possible, with the involvement of the community. While those who work on a project for a few weeks as volunteers might not need to understand a great deal about the culture and language (they should be oriented of course), it would be wise, and more effective, if those leading the work do.

One of my biggest fears with raising an issue like we have done with this *MF* is that people will mistakenly think that working with the poor in some way is only a means to sharing the gospel. There is no question that these kinds of efforts do open doors. As I've stated above, they often open doors with people who would not ordinarily be exposed to the gospel. But I believe we do this kind of work because it is good. It demonstrates God's goodness. It displays His glory to restore His original creation. We long to see the destructive work of our mortal enemy—Satan—thwarted, and this is one more way to accomplish that and to let God's creative light shine. f