

Ministry with the Poor: Looking Poverty in the Face

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Introduction

Late last April while many of us were at the 2008 United Methodist General Conference, a near disaster hovered over the poor of the world. The prices of global food commodities, especially grain, reached all time highs, spiking at a 150 percent jump in a few months' time. While conference delegates and visitors were inconvenienced by the crowded restaurants in downtown Fort Worth, millions around the globe faced starvation. Did most of us at General Conference know about the crisis? Did we say a prayer, make offerings? No, we went about "business as usual," debating legislation and passing resolutions, including some on hunger and poverty.

It cannot be "business as usual" if we of The United Methodist Church intend to make ministry with the poor a central and serious part of our 21st century mission to "Make Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World." Through one of our new focus areas, we have courageously announced to the world that the United Methodists are renewing and extending our covenant with the poor--for, indeed, a priority focus on the poor is strong in our Wesleyan heritage and strongly identifiable now in our contemporary global outreach. How do we propose to accomplish our strengthened commitment, and how may an expansion of ministry with the poor affect the church itself and its leadership--that is, those of us in this room? These are the hinge questions in my remarks today. Following my somewhat informal comments I hope we will have time for dialogue.

Poverty, says theologian Victorio Araya-Guillen, "is not a subjective, individual phenomenon; it is not a product of chance; it does not fall from heaven as God's will or God's punishment. Nor is it the result of insufficient technology or natural resources. Poverty is not a neutral phenomenon or cold economic fact.... [P]overty has a human face and that face confronts us every day with the theological and ethical dilemma of the death of millions of innocent human beings."¹

Our focus area on ministry with the poor calls us to look boldly at the face of poverty. It calls us to let the faces of poverty boldly look back at us; indeed, in many parts of the world, including some communities in the United States, United Methodists are among

¹ Victorio Araya-Guillen, "The 500th Anniversary of the European Invasion of Abya-Yala: An Ethical and Pastoral Reflection from the Third World," in Meeks, Douglas M., ed., *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1995, 138. (Paper originally given at the Oxford Institute on Wesleyan Studies, 1992).

the poor. Truth be told, our denomination's roots are among the poor of 18th century England.

By and large, those of us gathered here for quadrennial training in church leadership are not poor. We reflect the economically privileged. More than 80 percent of humanity lives on less than \$10.00 per day, and the averages for more than a billion is only slightly more than one dollar, according to new World Bank figures.² What might the average dollar count be in each of our wallets? United Nations reports indicate that the poorest 40 percent of the global population accounts for five percent of global income, while the richest 20 percent accounts for three-quarters.³ Most of us in this room are from that 20 percent that has 75 percent of the earth's income.⁴

Allow me to repeat by basic, interrelated questions: 1) How do we as United Methodists seriously go about ministry with the poor today, that is, how do we look poverty in the face and respond with the love of Jesus Christ? 2) How ready are we to be re-formed by the encounter with the economically least of these--within and beyond our own fold?

I. Getting Serious About Ministry with the Poor

A. Looking Poverty in the Face

To look at poverty is to see the faces of:

- The 26,500-30,000 children under age five who, according to UNICEF, die each day as a result of poverty. They "die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world. Being meek and weak in life makes these dying multitudes even more invisible in death."⁵
- The 72 million children of primary age who are not in school due to poverty, when the expenditure of less than one percent of what is spent annually on weapons of war would put all children worldwide in school.⁶
- The 350 to 500 million persons living with malaria.⁷
- The 1.1 billion people who have no access to clean water and the 2.6 who lack basic sanitation.⁸
- The 12 to 15 percent of the working-age population in the United States who live in poverty, the US being among the top three countries, along with

² Shah, Anup, "Poverty Facts and Statistics," *Global Issues*, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats#src2>, citing World Bank adjusted figures.

³ [2007 Human Development Report](#) (HDR), United Nations Development Program, November 27, 2007, p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Anup, *op.cit.* <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats>, citing the UNICEF 2000 Progress of Nations Report.

⁶ *Millennium Develop Goals Report, 2007*, cited by Anup, *op.cit.*

⁷ Anup, *op.cit.*

⁸ [United Nations Human Development Report](#), 2006, pp. 6, 7, 35, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2006>.

Mexico and Turkey, with the largest gap between the rich and the poor.⁹
(http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,3343,en_2649_33933_41460917_1_1_1_1,00.html)

The recitation of the statistics of poverty could go on and on. For reliable data on the scourge of poverty, I urge you to visit an excellent website where a great deal of information from multiple sources is categorized, explained, and linked to primary sources. The site is the "Poverty Around the World" section of *Global Issues that Affect Everyone* (<http://www.globalissues.org>).

Poverty today is a highly complex reality that requires new ways of thinking about not only the use of resources but also our interactions as disciples of Jesus Christ with the systems that control and move food supplies, the systems that shape the policies and procedures that distribute health services. To consider these issues is to question ourselves about our attitudes toward the poor. To look at the face of poverty is to question how we experience and express Christian love, mercy, and justice.

B. Scriptural, Wesleyan Foundations

Several years ago, Victorio Araya-Guillen, a theologian from Costa Rica (already quoted), gave a paper that has become an important benchmark in Methodist thinking on the church and the poor. Speaking at Oxford University, the professor helpfully outlined three church responses to poverty, responses salient to the overall topic of ministry with the poor. The three are:

- Hear the poor--listen to the poor themselves, not just what sociologists and statistical charts say about them.
- Accept the poor--which implies seeing them, acknowledging their existence in the everyday world, not pushing them behind walls and screens.
- Serve the poor--respond to needs physical, spiritual, and social.¹⁰

These responses reflect both scriptural and Wesleyan precedents.

We hardly need to argue that the poor had a central place in the teachings and action ministries of Jesus. Jesus inherited from his Hebrew ancestors a strong sense of God's solidarity with the poor and a strong commitment to both mercy and justice for those lacking in material goods and social position. This theme is often sounded by the prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and it is also found in the Psalms and other ancient Jewish literature. Proverbs 31 offers a stirring summary:

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.

⁹"Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries," Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development,
http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,3343,en_2649_33933_41460917_1_1_1_1,00.html.

¹⁰ Victorio Araya-Guillen, *op cit.*, 144-145.

Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy. (Proverbs 31:8-9)

Throughout the four gospels, Jesus hears, accepts, and serves the poor. He feeds the hungry, heals the sick, pauses to comfort the marginalized, and castigates the rich for their neglect of the poor. "Blessed are the poor," he says in the Lukan version of the Beatitudes, but in Luke 6:24 the word is, "woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

Jesus identified himself as the messenger of good tidings to the poor in his first reading in the synagogue in Nazareth:

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.
He unrolled the scroll, and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.
The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say
to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

Further, Jesus provides an ethic for confronting poverty in Matthew 25 in the account of the judgment of nations. He places himself among the poor and outcasts and boldly said to the righteous: when you provided food, water, and clothing for the needy, cared for the sick, and visited prisons you did these things to me.

John Wesley also heard, accepted, and served the poor in ways powerful and controversial for his day. Wesley both heard and saw the plight of the poor at a time of social and economic transition in English life. His career spanned the birth and growth of the "industrial revolution." People were leaving farms and villages for factory jobs in towns. They worked for low pay in deplorable conditions and received no benefits. Frail children were put to work in jobs unfit for the heartiest adults.

Wesley's experience of hearing, accepting, and serving the poor suggests four themes that can instruct the church as we go about ministry with the poor on a global basis today. They are:

- Embracing the poor as part of the family of faith.
- Comprehending and confronting the economic system and their effects.
- Going beyond charity in service.
- Understanding the links between poverty and health.

Let me point out three excellent resource books dealing with Wesley and our Wesleyan tradition in relation to the poor. These books (all published by our own Abingdon Press

or its subsidiary, Kingwood Books) explore many dimensions of Wesley's thoughts and actions in response to poverty. The essays (two of the books are anthologies) also look at the contemporary church's response and responsibility to the poor. They are:

- *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics* by Theodore W. Jennings, 1990.
- *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, edited by Richard P. Heitzenraater, 2002.
- *The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks, 1995.

I recommend these works to you. The General Board of Global Ministries deeply appreciates the insights of all three as we equip the agency for a strong role in the focus area on ministry with the poor.

C. Embracing the Poor

Wesley was suspicious of riches and those who had them. He once told a colleague, "The poor are the Christians."¹¹ However, we must never reduce his concern for the poor or his discomfort with wealth to mere economic and social terms. Wesley was concerned for the physical welfare of persons but he was even more interested in spiritual vitality--in knowing and loving God--in salvation. Those on the path to perfection and sanctification would out of their love of God engage in acts of mercy, including not only service to the poor but association with the poor who are also candidates for salvation.

In a fine essay in the volume entitled *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, Professor Randy L. Maddox of Duke Divinity School reminds us that works of mercy are indispensable in the Wesleyan understanding of salvation.¹² Maddox offers a charming summary of Wesley's long-running correspondence with one Miss J.C. March, a young woman of means who found it difficult to either visit the poor and even more difficult to try to make friends among them. Miss March insisted that a Christian should associate only with persons of good taste and good character. Wesley responded to her:

I have found some of the uneducated poor who have exquisite taste and sentiment; and many, very many of the rich who have scarcely any at all.... I want you to converse more, abundantly more, with the poorest of the people, who if they have not taste, have souls, which you may forward in their way to heaven. And they have (many of them) faith and the love of God in larger measure than any persons I know.

He said in another letter to her: "I find time to visit the sick and poor; and I must do it, if I believe the bible, if I believe these are the marks whereby the Shepherd of Israel will

¹¹ Letters of John Wesley, September 30, 1786.

¹² All of the information and quotes dealing with Miss March from Maddox, Randy L., "Visit the Poor": John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers," in Heitzenraater, Richard P., *The Poor and the People Called Methodists*, Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2002, pp. 76-79.

know and judge His sheep at the great day. I am concerned for you; I am sorry that you should be content with lower degrees of usefulness and holiness than you are called to."

Wesley's admonitions are strong reminders to the church of the 21st century that the value of souls and depths of faith are determined neither by economic status nor by a sense of good taste. Embracing the poor is the necessary first step in ministry with the poor.

D. Comprehending and Confronting the Economic System

Wesley was a keen student of the emerging industrial economy of England in the 18th century. He studied industrial operation and its impact on individuals and families. He watched and complained as grain was diverted from bread to the production of alcohol. He and his brother Charles complained to public authorities about inadequate wages, insufficient economic "safety nets," and the contamination of water, air, and soil. Wesley would likely be an advocate for the "green revolution" were he around today. He railed against exploitation and dispossession of the poor by industrialists, merchants, doctors, and lawyers. He lambasted colonialism and the slave trade. Concern for the poor became a sort of litmus test for Methodist social witness in his day, and he complained so long and long that his protests were one reason he was denied permission to preach in Anglican pulpits.

Do we have the same passion today to understand the operation of economic systems far more complex than those of Wesley's time? We need to comprehend, and at times, challenge those systems if we will engage effectively in ministry with the poor.

Admittedly, the current international economic system is so complex, as the present economic recession indicates, that it is almost impossible to understand or explain. That very fact challenges the church to become more adept at monitoring those forces that shape economic possibilities and perpetuate poverty.

In an ironic twist, the sky-high commodity prices registered during General Conference last spring declined somewhat in proportion to the worsening economic conditions that have us so worried over our pension plans and airline ticket costs. However, according to several articles, economists are hard pressed to explain why food prices soared so high just when they did. One explanation holds that the selling down of government-held food reserves in recent years would encourage private investors to move into agriculture, boosting production. Something seems to have gone down in the global "marketization" of agriculture. For various reasons, including weather, production declined or remained level in times of expanding need, and former reserves were low or gone. Prices spiked, according to that theory.

Another, related explanation is that food and fuel prices rose and the stock markets hit the skids because the deregulated, free-trade system simply broke down and must be replaced.¹³

¹³A great deal of literature exists on both the causes of the food spike and the future of free trade. For a brief discussion of the first, see Surowiecki, James, "The Perils of Efficiency, *The New Yorker*, November

Which of these or other theories are right I cannot tell you, but I am convinced that the church today has an obligation to find its economic voice and to equip leaders who can vigorously engage in economic dialogue from the perspective of justice. I was heartened last December to read of the launching in Manila of a global ecumenical movement for economic and ecological justice. A statement from the group asserted that the time has come to put economic justice and ecological sustainability at the heart of faith. ¹⁴ Amen!

To engage in the public economic forum, we need more and better trained men and women who can both comprehend the complex contemporary systems and convincingly speak for justice. We have the opportunity to identify such persons at Global Ministries through our leadership development scholarships. For example, the World Communion Scholarships provide support for graduate studies to persons whose professions will foster the goals of the gospel. Young men and women who grasp economic theory and practice and also understand the Christian demand for justice are great assets to mission and ministry.

Campus ministries, UMYFs, Sunday school classes, and Volunteers in Mission groups are all venues in which we can increase education for economic justice. The various youth-based initiatives in hunger alleviation provide excellent opportunities for training in how economic systems work--work well for some people and to the disadvantage of others.

E. Going Beyond Charity

Early Methodist services for the poor consisted primarily of alms, some raised by begging in the streets. As the movement grew, Wesley organized the "Strangers' Society," for the relief of the "poor, sick, and friendless" beyond the Methodist bounds. ¹⁵ It did not take long for the Methodists to realize that more than acts of charity were necessary to provide for the needs of the poor among themselves and in the larger society. More beneficial efforts include:

- Employment for the poor, especially in sewing collectives
- Loans enabling the poor to acquire tools and materials for small businesses
- Free health care
- Poor houses for destitute widows and children, set up so that Wesley and other Methodist preachers could also live among the poor, thereby maintaining solidarity with them
- Schools for children of poor preachers. ¹⁶

24, 2008, p. 46; a synopsis of thinking on free trade, see Skidelsky, Robert, "The Remedist," the *New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 2008, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴ *Ecumenical News Service*, "Christian Leaders Say Justice Must be at Heart of Global Economy," December 12, 2008.

¹⁵ John Wesley's Journal, March 14, 1790. (*Works of Wesley IV*: 481)

¹⁶ Summarized by Jennings, Theodore W., Jr., in *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, 60-64.

Any of this sound familiar? Wesley became increasingly committed to long-term solutions not dependent on financial handouts. Basic literacy was often a gift both to adults through the class meetings and to the Sunday schools that the Methodists would organize for children who could not attend regular schools because they worked six days a week.

The global United Methodist Church already has in place outstanding examples that can be expanded and adapted for use in other areas. These are *empowerment* ministries, helping people to find their vocational interests and talents and develop them. Three types of these ministries are: business and job creation, credit unions and loan funds, and board-based community economic and housing development.

- Business and Job Creation

Significant work in church-initiated business and job creation is happening today in the Philippines, a Central Conference, and Laos, which is part of the Southeast Asia Mission, and in UMCOR rehabilitation work that continues in locations of natural or human-caused disasters.

The Simon Peter United Methodist Church on the island of Mindanao is home-base for a banana chip production that is sustaining 23 families in the village of Acacia. Guava jelly and bags woven of palm leaves are other products of the Innovative Ministries Partnership Program of The United Methodist church of the Philippines. The denomination at large supports these empowerment ministries through Global Ministries. Literacy classes and child care facilities are part of this work in the Philippines.

In Laos, the focus is on mushroom cultivation, which is proving to be a boon to poor members of the growing United Methodist community there. Congregations supply plantings to church families. Crops mature in a relatively short time, with the products sold on the commercial market. The farmers pay a tithe to the church, enabling an expansion of the mushroom ministry. As in the Philippines, basic education is also a priority of the church in Laos.

UMCOR in the Darfur area of Sudan provides equipment and training for persons displaced by civil conflict to resume and improve their farming skills. More than 4,000 women and men have gone through the program, with the result of providing assistance to 18,000 family members and neighbors. Clean water systems and sanitation are being provided to contribute to the economic empowerment of the people.

Education to help persons develop their minds and human capacities is one of the basic tenets of United Methodist mission--from the days of Wesley until now. Our church has made enormous contributions to many cultures and societies around the world by providing opportunities for basic, contextually appropriate education.¹⁷

- Loan Funds and Microfinance Banks

¹⁷ Information on examples of business and job creation is from the news files of the General Board of Global Ministries.

We are committed to an increase in the number and range of loan funds and micro-credit institutions that provide capital for family and community empowerment among the poor.

UMCOR's post-disaster work often involves the setting up of loan funds to assist persons to reclaim their lives economically, or to find productive vocations. Sustainable Guaranteed Agricultural Assistance for Women in Armenia is one good example. It uses the group-solidarity lending model from the well-known Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Instead of providing loan collateral, a "guarantee group," set up by several women in a community, take on the responsibility of all loan repayments. These loans have a major impact on the women and their families, enabling them to purchase equipment, materials, or livestock or to hire other workers needed to start and maintain farm-based handicraft or food businesses.

Sarepta Bank, affiliated with the women's organization of The United Methodist Church in Côte d'Ivoire, is a type of microfinance institution, something like a credit union, that is successful and growing. Members can get loans six months after making initial deposits, often for starting agricultural, food, or sewing enterprises. Skills learned in receiving and repaying loans help to strengthen families, congregations, and communities. Not surprising, the Women's Division of Global Ministries had made deposits to build the capital of Sarepta Bank. You can read more about the bank in, I believe, the current issue of *Interpreter* magazine.¹⁸

- Broad-Based Community Economic Development

We as United Methodists have the capacity and the experience to engage more extensively in broad-based community economic development. That often includes job and business development, production of affordable housing, and, sometimes, the launching of community-based financial institutions. There are numerous examples of this type of empowerment ministry in the United States, where capital comes not only from church sources but also from local, state, and federal governments, corporations, and foundations. Often what is needed is vision and incentive which congregations, districts, annual conferences, or church-related organizations can provide. Opportunities for ministry with the poor through faith-based community economic development are well-known to our community centers and other national mission institutions.

One example will illustrate the capacity of church-initiated and related community-based development programs to make serious economic and social changes in their locales. That example is the ABCD--the Association for Better Community Development, Inc., in Canton, Ohio. ABCD started at least 25 years ago as one of the early sites of our continuing Community Developers Program, whose work is supported by a portion of the Human Relations Day Offering.

ABCD was launched by a small African American congregation that no longer exists but which gave its community a living legacy. The initial focus was on community organizing, on efforts to achieve fairness and justice for black

¹⁸ Information on the banks and micro-credit institutions from the Global Ministries' is from the news files and mission publications.

citizens in all aspects of civic, social, and economic life. Gradually, as so often happens, ABCD and its visionary leader, Will Dent, edged out into transportation services for the poor and into job training. Still later would come energy conservation and housing development. Today, ABCD is a major institution in Canton and a training model for others wishing to enter community economic development. Its Center for Entrepreneurial Development houses several businesses and nonprofit organizations, a property management company, and its own offices. The transportation business now operates out of shared facilities with AUTO, Inc., a school that trains men and women for careers in the automobile industry, and includes technicians and mechanics. The energy conservation business insulates 250 houses a year and installs 50 furnaces, primarily for the Cleveland Housing Network, with some funding from the East Ohio Gas Company and government grants. In addition, ABCD conducts electrical audits and when necessary replaces light bulbs and refrigerators through a contract with Ohio Partners for Affordable Energy and funding from Ohio Edison and First Energy.

And in addition, ABCD has developed, with public and private partners, more than 300 units of affordable single family and multi-unit housing in the last four years in Canton and Alliance, Ohio.¹⁹

For more than a decade, Will Dent, the dynamic leader of ABCD, has been a trainer with the Communities of Shalom program, which Global Ministries now shares with Drew Theological Seminary. ABCD of Canton is not the only impressive United Methodist-initiated community development corporation in the US. The work of Black Community Developers of Little Rock also quickly comes to mind, as well as the empowerment ministries that have emerged from First Church in Los Angeles, and the Shalom Program in Petersburg, Virginia. ABCD is, I think, the oldest.

Comprehensive, faith-based community economic and housing development requires passionate, informed, caring local leaders who both initiate and maintain the work and sustain the energy required to make it successful. It also requires a broad range of funding partners. The church locally, regionally, or on the general level does not have the capacity to cover all the costs. We do have the capacity to provide start-up funding in some cases and to afford training for those who are going to organize and lead the community-based efforts.

All of these models of empowerment ministries go beyond charity, even as Wesley did in expanding the early Methodist program with the poor beyond alms. They tell us that we are not without models and not without practitioners who can instruct us in productive ministries that hear, accept, and serve the poor.

I turn now to the last of the four Wesleyan themes that can instruct the church as we go about ministry with the poor on a global scale today.

F. Understanding the Links between Poverty and Health

¹⁹ Information on ABCD Corp. comes from the Community and Institutional Development Program Area of Global Ministries and the organization's website at <http://www.abcdinc.net/Home.html>.

John Wesley clearly grasped the linkage between poverty and the lack of access to health services. Of course medicine in his day was, as the title of one of his books noted, "primitive" in comparison to the situation today. Knowledge of bacteria or of antibiotics did not exist. Surgery was dangerous.

Wesley was not ahead of his time in the health arena, but he knew that the poor had no access to the admittedly limited health services available to the rich. In response, he organized a book of home remedies called *Primitive Physick* that went through multiple expanded editions and became the best-selling English-language self-help book of the 18th century. Methodist circuit riders carried this health resource in their saddle bags and shared its information as needed.²⁰

You and I would not want to self-treat from *Primitive Physick* but we can benefit from his insistence that clean water and air and uncontaminated food are essential for good health, and that alcohol and tobacco are harmful. We should also listen to his insistence that the poor should have access to the best health services available.

One of our four new focus areas is that of "combating the diseases of poverty by improving health globally." Many diseases are linked to poverty but, generally speaking, this focus area points to preventable diseases, including but not limited to HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis. There is, quite naturally, a close affinity between the health focus-area and ministry with the poor.

Again, this emphasis on health is a matter of the degree of emphasis. One must doubt that Methodism has even been disengaged from health ministries--in England, the United States, and in the multiple mission areas. Methodists in America set up scores of hospitals and clinics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many of which continue with ties to our denomination. Missionaries set up health facilities formal and informal and launched medical education in multiple regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Based on our experience, we are today attempting to advance our health ministries with the poor in keeping with the current health standards and possibilities, a goal that has been in place for at least two decades at Global Ministries. This means updating existing facilities in Asia and Africa, organizing more health education, and turning where appropriate toward community-based health initiatives that stress prevention. As a denomination at large, we also need to build closer ties to international governmental and nonprofit health programs and to take our place at the tables where health policies and programs are considered. We need to remember that United Methodists constitute only .002 percent of the world's population.

UMCOR includes massive health components in post-disaster situations, often remaining for years after other relief organizations have left. UMCOR Health also provides health

²⁰The text of the 1747 edition of *Primitive Physick* can be read online at the Global Ministries website, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/primitive-physick/?search=Primitive%20Physique>.

education scholarships for ethnic and racial ministry students in the US. We have a new group of Global Health Missionaries--10 to date--at work in sub-Saharan Africa. In the US, we also have a new program that helps equip congregations to address health issues among their memberships and among the poor in local or nearby areas.

The recent United Methodist responses to both AIDS and malaria are good examples of how we can cooperate within and beyond the church to combat diseases of poverty. Our work with HIV/AIDS patients and their families began shortly after the epidemic was identified in the United States. We set up a network, operating primarily online, aimed at encouraging families and congregations to accept those suffering with AIDS as children of God. This network was enormously helpful in a pastoral sense and was phased-out only within the last month, having become little used because of changing attitudes. Later, work was started primarily through UMCOR in areas in Africa with high HIV incidents. This involved education and, especially, the care of children left parentless by the disease. In 2004, the General Conference set up the World AIDS Fund which continues to provide assistance to a variety of HIV/AIDS-related ministries on a global basis.

The malaria initiative, including the highly successful Nothing But Nets fundraising campaign, originated around the middle of the last quadrennium from two centers of energy: a community-based prevention and treatment program started by UMCOR and the creative link between United Methodist Communications and the United Nations Foundation's Nothing But Nets. In one of the largest distributions of malaria nets--in Côte d'Ivoire, with nets provided by the Texas Annual Conference, UMCOR organized the community-based training in how to use and care for the nets, while Nothing But Nets provided and distributed the product.

My report is more than enough to show the essential linkage between ministry with the poor and global health needs. They go hand-in-hand, and I am sure the United Methodist agencies and members will go hand-in-hand in addressing them.

II. A Church Re-formed through Ministry with the Poor?

How will The United Methodist Church be changed--re-formed--by taking ministry with the poor with great seriousness? I am assuming that many parts of the church intend to take this focus area seriously. Five likely results come to mind and, of course, these will be influenced by location and cultural context. My descriptions will be brief because I still hope we will have time for dialogue on the subject.

First: Study

We will go to the Bible more intently on the reality of poverty and the place of the poor in God's plan of salvation. Various study guides along these lines will be available during the quadrennium, but each congregation can start now by organizing introductory courses using a New Testament Gospel as the text. There is also a five-session course called "Global Poverty Bible Study" on the website of the West Ohio Annual Conference. It

may be available elsewhere, but West Ohio's site is where I saw it. The author is the Rev. Alexis Coleman, a pastor in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. The web address is: <http://www.westohioumc.org/page.asp?PKValue=1584>.

Bible study on the poor will lead to greater study of the Wesleyan and early Methodist experience and teaching. I have already shared with you the names of three books that directly consider these matters.

Second: Actions, to Hear, Accept, and Serve

Study often leads to action, a point well demonstrated by the annual mission studies prepared by Women's Division and used extensively by United Methodist Women. Study of public education has led to much greater involvement of local churches and United Methodist Women's units in local action for high-quality schools. Or study of interfaith issues leads to more actual contact across religious lines. Study of poverty and the conditions of the poor will motivate us to greater listening, acceptance, and service among the poor.

Another type of action will be the development of more congregations within poor communities or, in some places, greater outreach to bring the poor into existing local churches. This can be especially important in the US where we usually think of church development as confined to the suburbs, and church revitalization in neighborhoods of changing demographics. As I have said, many members of our church outside the US, and some in this country, are poor, but when in the US have you seen a publication on "How to Start United Methodist Churches among the Poor" or "Bringing the Poor into our Congregations?" I hope we will see them.

Third: Greater Social and Economic Diversity

Serious ministry with the poor will result in our church's membership looking more like the diverse human family, with persons of many nationalities, races, ethnic cultures, and economic conditions working together to glorify God and to make disciples for the transformation of the world. Many of the poor today are from racial and ethnic groups that have not been well represented in the denomination. We are called to make sure that our doors are truly open to persons of all sorts.

Fourth: Greater Care in the Use of Resources

How much do we of the church today spend on non-necessities that we should use to serve the poor? That is a question that every individual, every congregation, every annual conference, every bishop, and every general agency should ponder in deep prayer. To hear, accept, and serve the poor will likely mean the change of at least some economic habits. Could those of us who are adults stop the practice of giving our siblings and friends Christmas gifts they may neither need nor want, and give the money to UMCOR for poverty ministries? Several people I know did that this past Christmas, and their families were deeply appreciative.

At Global Ministries, we are rigorously combing our budgets to maximize the gospel-value of each expenditure, to find the means to put substance in ministries that serve the poor. To keep the poor clearly in our sights--and here I mean the entire church--is never easy and becomes especially difficult in a time of global economic downturn, as we are now experiencing. However, God does not tell us to visit the prisoner and feed the hungry only when convenient or when the bank account is flush.

Fifth: A Sense of Being Closer to God

We need not doubt that both Jesus and John Wesley understood that the poor have a preferential place in God's grace, and that the community of faith regardless of its economic means has a duty to incorporate and assist the poor. Enthusiastic ministry with the poor in the 21st century will strengthen our United Methodist sense of fulfilling God's will on earth. As Richard Heitzenrater reminds us, we see Christ when we look at the faces of the poor, and John Wesley believed that the Methodist movement had a special responsibility to the poor as God's beloved.

As we hear, accept, and serve those whom God in Christ loves, we express our love for God.

Amen.

For small-group discussions linked to the contents of this address:

Hearing and Accepting the Poor

UNICEF reports that 26,500-30,000 children under age five die each day as a result of poverty. They "die quietly in some of the poorest villages on earth, far removed from the scrutiny and the conscience of the world. Being meek and weak in life makes these dying multitudes even more invisible in death." Discuss this in light of Jesus' admonition, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (Luke 18:16).

The Use of Money

The phrase, "Gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can," sums up John Wesley's view of money, with the critical emphasis on the third point. He did not believe Christians should accumulate surplus wealth while some do not have necessities and others are in "extremities." Wesley found the message hard to sell. How would it be received in your congregation in 2009?