

NEW REALITIES AND PRACTICAL HOLINESS: SHAPING NAZARENE RESPONSES  
TO URBANISATION AND URBAN POVERTY INTO THE FUTURE.

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"We are his workmanship, created anew in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before prepared, that we might walk therein." (Eph. 2:10)

"Come, ye blessed children of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat: Thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." (Matt. 25:34, &c.) "Verily, I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it to the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." If this does not convince you that the continuance in works of mercy is necessary to salvation, consider what the Judge of all says to those on the left hand: "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was hungry, and ye gave me no meat: Thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: Naked, and ye clothed me not: Sick and in prison, and ye visited me not. Inasmuch as ye have not done it unto one of the least of these neither have ye done it unto me." You see, were it for this alone, they must "depart" from God "into everlasting punishment." -

... Visiting the sick: A plain duty, which all that are in health may practise in a higher or lower degree; and which, nevertheless, is almost universally neglected, even by those that profess to love God. – Sermon 98: "On Visiting the Sick" Bicentennial Edition, Works, Vol. 3: 386.

"One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is, that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorances an excuse for their hardness of heart. "Indeed, Sir," said person of large substance, "I am a very compassionate man. But, to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in the world that is in want." How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way; and if he fell upon any of them unawares "he passed over on the other side." – Sermon 98: On Visiting the Sick, Bicentennial Edition Works Volume 3: 387.

*Intro: The Nazarene... and poor people*

Poverty almost always has a feel and a look. Because I am a city dweller, I am forced to reflect on poverty within this context. At the beginning of the paper I want to note that I am aware that the majority of the world's poor (at least at the time of writing) are still rural, and that my emphasis and attention on urban poverty is not to suggest that this should be our sole focus.<sup>1</sup> Nor are all of those who live in urban communities poor, nevertheless, like most practitioners I am most mindful of my context, and for the last twenty three years I have felt compelled to live in the city and attend to my neighbours, and often, very often, those neighbours are poor.<sup>2</sup>

Concomitantly, I have been a practical theologian, employed (gainfully!) within an institution of the church, emphasising education, learning, training men and women to serve the church. As part of my role and research I have been engaged in studying Wesley, reading his sermons, considering his engagement within his context as a forerunner and example of good practice (at least in his ministerial life). As such, I have been unavoidably gripped by his perspective on what it means to be a Christian, engaged in practices that shape life and the church. Amongst other things, his Sermon 98, 'On Visiting the Sick' has been a source of great consternation and inspiration, for as I read it, I see myself and am challenged.

In many global cities, poverty is [carefully and intentionally] often tucked away in no-go areas, arterial roads carefully skirting around it. In many cities there is a look: under-developed children and adults, a reflection of their streets, schools and public spaces; unkempt homes, an environment of broken-ness, ill-resourced and ill-equipped schools, doctor's surgeries, a whirlpool of social problems drawing more and more people inexorably in. There are often multiple problems that we attach to poverty: addiction, street children, street people, sexualised living, homelessness, despair. Although, of course, many poor people are just the same as you, or me, only they are without the same options, passports and opportunity. In many places poverty seems contagious, it spreads and soon entire neighbourhoods become 'poor' ends of town. In many places, the issues of poverty taint the lives of the people so afflicted, blighting them, and their children's children.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: See the Rural Poverty Report, 2011.  
[http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/ruralpov/pdf/ifad\\_rural\\_poverty.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/briefingpapers/ruralpov/pdf/ifad_rural_poverty.pdf)  
<http://www.trickleup.org/poverty/rural-poverty.cfm>;

<sup>2</sup> I am aware that not everyone urban is poor; I am an example of that.

The common responses to such urban poverty appear to follow particular paths: flee from it; avoid it; professionalise the response to it; categorise it; criminalise it; relativise it; or make it invisible. A further possibility is to objectivise it – study it, and thereby dehumanise those men and women who are poverty’s captives.

In this paper I am arguing that the community of churches known as the International Church of the Nazarene, by our DNA, our genetic inheritance, if you like, and by our self-avowed theological principles of mission, cannot take any of these options. Instead, I contend that the only option truly possible for the people called Nazarene is to recover an element of our identity shaped by continued commitment to holiness worked out in, amongst, for and with poor people. I see this as one of the core aspects of being Nazarene that is a legacy from both lines of our parentage: through the actions, ministry and proclamation of our American Holiness founders and through the actions, ministry and proclamation from our Wesleyan roots. This double heritage means that the emphasis upon responding to urban poverty with a message of hope and good news is essential to who we are.

For the sake of argument I am making several assumptions here. First, that most of my hearers will accept that poverty exists. Second, that most accept that poverty is not God’s will for people. Indeed, the very opposite, that whatever is destructive of human flourishing is a manifestation of the principalities and powers that God seeks to reverse in the being and personhood of Jesus. Third, that urbanisation is not going to go away – and that the tug to the city as a place of hope for the rural poor is not always matched in the city’s reality. So – what are the ways the church, our church, can respond to the needs of the urban poor?

*Listening to poverty’s story and responding to the deep needs.*

The reality of poverty is that it is often far more complex and nuanced than ‘they became poor’. There is such a variation to the stories of poverty that the voices of poor people need to be heard. Listening takes time, attentiveness, compassion; the ability to sit with people and hear what is being said and what is not being said. Listening to stories of poverty empowers those voicing their story – it ensures that they are known, named, heard. Such listening is a pastoral and congregational responsibility. Such listening is not easy. The cycles of poverty encountered can often be frustrating, heart-breaking, traumatising and disempowering to hear about. Imagine then, if they are your life’s reality.

The significance of personal connection with people who are experiencing poverty can take different forms – in a deeply Christian world, there would be engagement with mutuality, deep listening to one another’s lives, shared understanding, and of course, a lessening of need.

*Challenging oppressive practices.*

It is not enough, of course, to listen. We are, as evangelical Christians, activists. As we see need we are compelled to respond. We respond by clothing, feeding, aiding, sheltering, physically supporting, and enhancing lives. Of course, this is important, necessary, and valuable. However, a danger for our practice is that we merely collude in acts of oppression by masking its harm, smoothing over the rough places by our intervention and hiding from speaking truth to power.

The role of the church as an agent of transforming grace is to move from activism alone to powerfully challenging the structures and systemic evils that create and inhabit the systems that captivate and destroy. Whether they are governmental or societal, culturally normative, or based on kinship structures, the role of the church is to have such an ethic of incarnational presence and speaking truth to power that the words of Jesus in Luke 4 become symbolically enacted in the present.

Such challenge is not easy. Oppression is not always simply to identify, it wears many guises and takes many forms, some seemingly legitimate ones.<sup>3</sup> The challenges that must be made, however, are vital: the church as a collective has the possibility of prayerfully and thoughtfully identifying those places that would silence and dehumanise poor people. The church has the capacity to name, know, advocate for and voice with others the sins that would crush and bring death through poverty.

However, such a response – vital though it is – has a dangerous possibility – that of objectifying ‘the poor’ into a cause, rather than people, named, known, befriend-ed, loved. The poor are over there, they are Othered, and this slight of hand means that well meaning attempts to speak *on behalf of* can disempower, discourage, speaking *alongside* or from *within*. The challenges that lay before the church are to advocate for justice, to engage in the lives of poor people, and for poor people themselves, as they become part of congregations to

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<sup>3</sup> For example market economies can influence and lead to poverty... but are embraced by many, including Christians, as the best form of life.

be truly equal. Equipped and empowered to serve the Kingdom in their urban settings, dissatisfied with the urban poverty they experience and part of redeeming and restoring the city-spaces they inhabit as places where God is at work.

*Location to the margins*

Location, location, location: There is a long history of gentrification and its resulting ‘redeem and lift’ patterns of life for new converts. For those from the inner city who, by virtue of their conversion and transformation find a shift in values that often leads to greater education, wealth, opportunity and options (both personally and corporately), it is challenging to stay committed to the inner city and its nuanced landscape of wealth and poverty. The culture of leaving the city for alternate spaces, of moving towards a lifestyle dependent upon a particular vision of wholeness and is often seen and understood as a vital transition for the sake of emerging from poverty. The reverse options, taken by some people of deliberately relocating to the margins as an act of embodied mission is significant in relation to identification with poor people. Of course, it can be read in multiple ways: patronising, hope-filled, a gift, or a taking away of necessary housing... Depending on the receiving culture, there are enormous challenges to be wrestled with. However significant moving towards the places of poverty is as a **personal** decision, in some ways of far more significance is a congregation’s decision to stay or go, a congregation’s commitment to rootedness or relocation. The operant stance<sup>4</sup> of a group that opts to stay may be a reflection of their espoused theology of incarnation, embodied presence, sacrificial love and commitment to the poorest, least and lost. (Of course, it may be nothing of the kind, they stay because they’re demotivated, or declining, waiting out death, or bounded for other reasons of convention or tradition).

It is possible, of course, to remain in a location of poverty and need and still be distant from it. There are multiple examples of congregations travelling *to* a space for a service of worship and never connecting with the space they’re sharing with the urban poor people who surround them. It is perfectly possible to live in the city and avoid poverty and its issues; one simply looks the other way.

For those congregations who decide that part of their Nazarene identity is to resist the temptation to move, the commitment they portray by staying in a community and serving it,

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<sup>4</sup> That is, the way a group enacts its practice.

reshaping it, engaging with its members, mutuality developed through shared acts of service, food-eaten and drinks shared, learning together what it means to speak truth to power, practicing transformation through cross-cultural encounter (whether the cultures be racial or fiscal, educational or caste-based), organising together so that no one is hungry or naked or nameless or alone - this commitment is a powerful witness to Christ.

*Personal engagement: 'a plain duty'*

Of course, the congregations are made up of their constituent parts. People. The professionalisation of caring for the poor, the sick, the psychologically fragile, the addicted, the homeless –moving it from a person-to-person, neighbour-to-neighbour stance towards a professionally employed and potentially transactional carer is detrimental to a genuine development of mutuality. That is not to say, of course, that the professional has no role to play, however, our care for people who are poor cannot be only on a caring-professional basis. The pastoral leader alone cannot be the sole visitor, contact, or advocate for poor people. The removal of ‘neighbourly’ care from within a congregation can also shift the understanding of poverty towards one that is abstract and othering; creating assumptions about the use of money, use of time or circumstances of the poor (‘they’ are lazy, or addicted, or spend all their money on gambling, widescreen tvs, drink, etc), making it very difficult for stereotypical assumptions to be challenged. The need for men and women to engage with one another, to enter each others’ homes, to converse as equals, to encounter one another’s realities is significant. Through personal empathetic experience the genuine circumstances that bring about poverty can be challenged, explored and transformed. This, in and of itself, is an enormous hurdle: in order to engage with people experiencing urban poverty ‘they’ must be encountered, as people. Named and known by others with whom they are co-equal in Christ. Of course, policy, social work, agencies of transformation are also part of the solution, however, the need for grassroots connectivity, for men and women to encounter one another as persons is also vital: without this, the transformation that recognises on another as agents and subjects can be limited.

How does all of this affect our ecclesiology? I think that it pushes us further to consider what kind of a church we are. As a biblically shaped church, our mandate to be amongst people, advocating for the flourishing of the city, engaging in practices of justice and redemption is clear. As a theologically Wesleyan church, we believe that good news is

for all people, that all can be redeemed, that sin can be vanquished and assurance of salvation known. We believe that by grace the Holy Spirit can, and does, transform people. We believe that people can become more than their circumstances would proscribe. As a theologically holiness church, we believe that lifestyles that reflect Christ-likeness, corporately and personally, bear witness to Christ's Lordship and authority over all elements of our lives. As an organisation that celebrates the priesthood of all believers, that believes in lay ministry and membership, that enables congregations to equip and enable, we believe that anyone may be called to lead, speak, and be a minister. There are, however, aspects of our development that must be taken seriously in order to continue to serve with and alongside the urban poor.

First, we must be mindful of our actions and seek to make them genuinely empowering. This may begin through advocacy for those with less voice, but must lead towards empowering those voices to speak on their own behalf. This may be a matter of education of the congregation, intentional shaping of those spaces that give power (boards, committees, centres of action) so that the voice of those typically voiceless may be heard. The membership of the Nazarene church, attainable for all who participate and affirm the articles of faith needs to be more substantial than a certificate and more empowering than a vote. Although these are, of course, important, we want to ensure that the church hears the voice of the poor – deliberately and repeatedly, and in hearing, responds with acts that help dignity to be developed and lives liberated from oppression.

Second, as we resist relocation to places of wealth, we must continue to reflect the locale we remain in. We must consider our presence and reflect upon how we contextualise our congregations in such a way that oppression is challenged but the culture around is met with grace. The Wesleyan expectation that God is at work in places before we attend them, that God is ceaselessly for people mean that we must seek ways of demonstrating that to be true. This means that discernment, engagement, commitment to the local community is vitally important.

Third, as congregations we must begin to practice resistance to those elements within culture that oppress and ensure the cyclic reality of poverty for those people who are the least able to break free from it without intervention. At one and the same time, we must ensure that intervention - when practiced – is time limited and evolved in such a way as to reject collusion in the very problems we are mitigating against. It is vital to know and name, as congregations, just what the systemic reality is. As congregations, understanding that the

fish/teach to fish; money/teach to work, etc., etc., must be part of the ethos of social action. We are compelled to recognise those aspects of oppression that we collude in.

Fourth, we must consider again our identity as related to our corporate truth: we are children of God. As such, our primary Christian identity (as rooted in a community which is a fictive family) becomes shaped by those amongst us who are poor, as well as those who are rich. How do we ensure that the gospel's non-preferential treatment of the rich is encoded and enshrined within the communities we serve? How do we teach and equip the congregation so that those with the most power are able to self-empty and serve? How can we ensure that we enact the radical egalitarian DNA that we inherit from Christ (whose disciples were mixed as far as we can tell) and from our Wesleyan and AHM heritages which emphasised preaching to the poor people of the day and then enabling them to be equal in Christ is enacted in the present day? Empowering people to take roles, engage in responsibility for one another, ensuring that in our public worship those from a range of backgrounds are drawn upon to serve, creating spaces for stories to be told and mutuality in prayer or side-by-side service all can foster an identity of shared practices that reflect unity in Christ.

This aspect of recategorisation is significant: we are no longer those who Other and categorise into 'the poor', or the 'adjective here' (deserving, lazy, xyz race) poor... This practice distances us from poor people, who should be named and known, loved and identified as human, rehumanised by Christ-in-them, is profoundly important for the church.

Fifth, we must stretch our imaginations. Can we imagine the city as renewed? Can we weave such a hope filled perspective into our preaching, teaching and practices? What would it mean to align ourselves with God's vision of the city as a place of peace, home, haven, and worship. What would enable a vision to be seen and enacted that would enable the city to become a place of regenerative hope? Restored to such an extent that the communities of holiness people were understood to be *for* the city? Creatively engaging with urban society and those within in (poor or other) to restore wholeness to places that are broken and fragmented, identify the glimpses of hope within systems that seek to restore cities, and shape the shared practices of community that enable the restoration to spread as an alternate contagion of holiness are all part of the imaginative prophetic practices that we can engage in.

Sixth, we must reflect corporately on our symbolic action and ceaselessly speak truth. The role of the church necessarily involves bearing an ethic, holding the world accountable, being a plumb line for justice. The tensions that challenge us in our desire to help poor people



and simultaneously being a part of systems that may continue cycles of poverty must be addressed. Truth telling and repentance may well be part of our story.

Seventh, the wealth of the church must be employed in consistently working for the sake of the poorest. Creatively enabling money to serve rather than be served. Supporting leadership development for those from the least privileged homes, supporting creative bivocational leadership in churches that otherwise could not have pastoral leadership.

Eighth, in the development of the church we must continue to support emerging Christian politicians, teachers, media professionals, artists, scientists: men and women alike, holding them accountable to be mindful of poor people and conscious that in all they do they are to serve Christ and those who are the least. Too, we must take seriously the wider issues of environmental poverty, food poverty, the implications for our own life-styles and encourage those who take positions of power to reflect on the plight of poor people – wherever they may be found. Totally accepting that the reality of poverty is different in Britain than Bangladesh, or the USA and Uganda, Bahrain and Brazil... the church nevertheless needs to support those in each of these societies who is working towards a new way for the sake of poor people.

The pastoral implications for all of this are profound. The complexities of life in congregations, there is a need for congregations to practice discipleship beyond a worship service and into a daily sojourning alongside the Other. The Church of the Nazarene must draw together disparate people – the rich and the poor – into one congregation where mutual regard and a vision for unity is upheld as essential. The Church of the Nazarene in its polity and its practices must learn to be in the spaces of the poor– and in identifying injustice and challenging it, be reshaped into a community that reflects the Holy Spirit’s transformation of the lives of men and women, who through encountering Christ become reshaped into an identity based on faith, not socio economic strata.

In the cycle of practical theology, outlined by the British Theological Helen Cameron, she notes that there are four voices in a pastoral cycle: the normative understanding, (the bible, the manual, etc); the formal understanding (what the theologians and other professionals say): the espoused understanding (what we say out loud about ourselves); and then the operant (what we DO). As these elements inform and shape one another the church moves forward in its self-understanding.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Cameron, *Talking about God in Practice*, London: SCM, 2010.

My own sense in this paper, is that in the normative, formal and espoused, we know who we are: a church of and for the poor. As we grow, as the world becomes urban, as we engage with the least, our operant realities need to continually cohere with who we say we are. Until such a point as we become a church that reflects that the Nazarene, known for his sacrifice and poverty, his presence with the least, his hope for the whole of humankind and creation, for whom he came and in whom he longs we are not yet complete.