

PASTORAL CARE APPROACH TO POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND ITS
IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

Poverty and human deprivation have been recognized as the most central challenges to the development of human society ever since the dawn of history. Alongside them is the issue of wealth, its creation, possession, distribution and our attitude towards it. Poverty is considered a major constraint to any form of development of human beings. The ways and means of eradicating it are now intensely studied and researched in several academic disciplines like economics, politics, history, sociology, religion, theology, ethics and even law. Tremendous amounts of resources and time have been spent on this problem by both governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions for several generations. Yet today, there are more human beings suffering chronic deprivation than ever in history. Ironically, all this is happening in a world that God has blessed with abundance, enough to allow every living soul on earth have a descent and comfortable life. This is the problem this essay endeavors to address. Why is there poverty, suffering and hunger in a bountiful world? Do Christians have any responsibility in the face of such a situation in our world? What role or approach should pastors employ in alleviating poverty in the church and society? Though poverty is a relative concept, it is a multidimensional problem, encompassing not only the material aspects of human life but also its social, physical, mental and spiritual dimensions. The purpose of this essay is threefold: Firstly, to identify the major causes and effects of poverty on the church. Secondly, to examine the major constraints that poverty has posed on pastoral ministry, and thirdly, to suggest pastoral care approach that could alleviate poverty and enhance church growth.

5.2 CONCLUSION

It has been clearly affirmed in the Bible that God cares for the poor and wants Christians to do the same. In fact, failure to care for the poor brings God's judgment. Maintaining a compassionate attitude towards the poor, therefore, must be our lifestyle. We must avoid being indifferent or hardhearted to the predicament of the

poor or to pretend that their condition is not all that bad, or consider them as irresponsible, or justify that our small contribution is adequate. Each of us must confront poverty now or await God's judgment for ignoring the poor. Adequate understanding of poverty and its effects; ways of solving the problem; biblical and pastoral approaches that has been proposed will go a long way in alleviating poverty in the church and our society. The church has a duty to arm itself with theological and practical principles for serving the poor for only until then can it properly proclaim the good news to the world.

5.3 RECOMMENDATION

Sequel to the conclusion above, the researcher makes the following recommendations to the pastoral ministry of the church: It must proclaim the gospel of God's redemption as revealed in Christ. It must "proclaim the good news of the kingdom to the materially poor, welcome them into the fellowship and share in their struggles. Those who exploit the poor and those who became poor as a result of their sinful life style need spiritual transformation that comes through the effect of the Gospel.

The Church must have interest in or have interest in or concern for the poor and demonstrate philanthropic gesture to them. It must criticize prophetically the unjust social-economic structures that prevent the poor from rising above their situation (Amos 5:24) and teach the need to have a non-materialistic outlook in life. Since an example is better than a precept, churches should exercise justice in their economic practices and pay just wages to their employees. They should put less emphasis on things thereby suppressing materialism. Church funds must be invested in socially responsible ways. Christians should have productive ventures to create goods and services so as to have enough to care for the poor. They can organize training in economic issues because ignorance itself is a major hindrance to self-

improvement. If many people know what to do, they will do them and improve their lots with little or no help. This should be preferred to doling out charity to the poor. An adage says, "If you give a man a fish, you feed him a day; but if you train him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime". A better approach to giving aid is to assist the individual and the community we serve to be self supporting.

The Church should seek for economic and social structures which maximize fellowship and cooperation, rather than the autonomy and isolation of the individual and the belief that individual enterprise is the most important goal. Pooling resources together have potential to increase production. The Church should recognize, develop and support local abilities within the Church and in the wider community.

Churches can help the poor and homeless by turning "church basements or meeting rooms into night time shelters for the homeless; organize food pantries; and support relief organizations. They must take aside with the poor; and call on rulers to fulfill their God-given role of caring for the citizens.

Churches and Christians organizations can set up banks where poor people can take loans for investments with little or no interest. An example is the Bowen Microfinance Bank established by the Nigerian Baptist Convention. Christians should not support economic systems that are profit-motivated to the detriment of the welfare of human beings. Rather, they should support and promote economic systems that meet human needs; that put the poor into consideration as they are objects of poverty; and seek to make them (the poor) producers and not fatalistic consumers or predators of the bourgeois. Christians are to be fundamentally different from non-Christians in the way they live among the poor in the society. They must permeate non-Christian society; influence non-Christian society; and retain their distinctiveness. They are to be salt and light as they live and preach the good news to the poor; they should not contribute to the exploitation of the poor.