


Edited by

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Disciplining the City

A COMPREHENSIVE  
APPROACH TO URBAN MINISTRY

# 12

## CHURCH OF THE POOR

*Viv Grigg*

### **A Letter from a Poor Man**

For myself I've chosen the way of nondestitute urban poverty, and I form evangelical religious orders of workers among the poor. So why do I take time to write to you, good rich friends, who bought this book about the jewel of the gospel for the poor?

Because I hope that in the process I can call you to the one who is wisdom, who because he was wise chose to leave his glory and dwell among the poor. Perhaps I can impart something of the mind of Christ, who came to preach the gospel to the poor and make them his disciples. And by so doing, I may be able to introduce you to a new way of urban discipleship.

### **Squatters—Mission Theme of the Next Decades**

The migrant squatter areas are home for about a billion people in the world. Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of poor:

*the unfortunate poor* (typhoons, war, and famine are great contributors to the burgeoning slum populations);

*the oppressed poor* (those made poor because the rich structure society to remain in power and use the poor for their own wealth);  
*those who are poor due to their own bad choices* (30 percent of men entering one community in which I lived were there because of vice and immorality).

In some ways these communities are a better home than the rural poverty from which the urban migrants come. Despite unemployment, underemployment, garbage, inadequate water and sewerage, and living six family members per room, they are places that offer a degree of hope. Back in rural poverty there was no hospital, little schooling, insufficient land, no other job, virtual slavery, and no future.

Social research indicates that migrants in upwardly mobile contexts are particularly responsive to religious change. I have found this to be true. Squatter homes contain the most responsive unreached bloc of people in the world. Most squatters share an animistic religious understanding of life. Globally speaking, this animist bloc is as large as Muslim, Hindu, or Chinese blocs, and it is found among them all.

I believe God is calling for missionary movements among the poor in all 6,500 cities of the world, especially the megacities and cities missionaries cannot enter. Megacities, of over 5 million people, each contain about five hundred to one thousand squatter communities. Cities of over 1 million generally have about one hundred squatter communities each. Squatters make up 17 percent of the world and 40 percent of the emerging megacities.<sup>1</sup> If we include other classes of urban poor, people who are less reachable or live in less communal contexts that are not as accessible for establishing churches—the street children, prostitutes, drug addicts, alcoholics, those in decaying inner-city slums, household servants—the figure reaches 25 percent of the world population.

Each movement requires a leader who becomes one with the poor or emerges from among them. Could it be you? Is your role to find and then serve such a one?

## **Apostles of Love**

Let me tell you a story of an unlikely apostle from one restricted-access city. By this I mean a city missionaries normally cannot enter. There are at least one thousand such cities worldwide. Access is restricted, but not impossible, and we found a way of taking a team into one such place for several years.

Every day for eight months one of the team, the owner of a forest who had chosen singleness and left all to follow Jesus, had visited this small section of the *bustee* (slum). Quietly, daily, he practiced a few new sentences of Bengali on all who would receive him. The only one among these five thousand slum dwellers who could speak English became his good friend.

One day, the language helper refused to pay money into the community fund for the *puja*, the celebration worshiping the goddess Kali. He had learned of the God who hates idols, and he made his choice. Anger swept the community. He fled. At the home of the rich friend, who had chosen to be poor, he knelt and met Jesus.

That night a train smashed into the community. The next night two children died. A fire swept through a house. People said it was the convert's fault. Then the rich man who had chosen to be poor took a basket of fruits and flowers to the homes of survivors, and they wept and embraced each other. The love of God swept the community, and the foreigner became one of them.

The next day an invitation came from the community to the new convert to start a school for the children of the *bustee*. So the church began.

## **Incarnational Ministry: Key to Movements That Transform**

As a child, reading of that great apostle among the poor, Kagawa of Japan, I learned a principle: the church will not be established among the poor unless it is tended day and night. The biblical principle is that of a grain of wheat. It must be buried. It must die among and for people in order for a new movement to grow up among them.

Incarnation was a *profound sociological act* for Jesus. It is not by chance that the sociological expression of the kingdom—the church—is known as his body. Those who choose to emulate Jesus in this way probably will produce significant societal changes. Such is the impact of the two million Franciscans in the world today, and of those who follow John Wesley and William Booth.

Incarnation was a *profound historical symbol* for Jesus. It is from such symbols of humility, sacrifice, and love that men and women are emboldened to transform the earth.

An evangelist may work from the outside; but if he does, he must find a pastor on the inside to develop the new embryo. A development worker may work as a catalyst from the outside, but the church will be established only if there is a pastor tending this work day and night from within.

Incarnation was a *profound economic act* for Jesus. It reversed values, defined jubilee principles, demonstrated the active intervention of a heavenly Father in providing for his needs. Incarnational ministry among the poor, by which I mean living among them, is the primary step to transforming the economics of an emerging Christian community. And, if it is matched with a kingdom theology, it frequently results in the transformation of the economics of the broader community as well.

In practice, one has to balance the various components of such statements. The wise discern what is appropriate: appropriate response to the cause of poverty in a community, appropriate size of the Christian community, appropriate timing, appropriate group dynamics. . . .

Let us consider the balance of three other factors—evangelism, economic and social uplift, and involvement in class conflicts—that are part of urban church planting and development, part of establishing the kingdom in the slums.

## **Holism During the Initial Phase**

The following characteristics appear to mark the holism of this phase in an apostolic ministry context:

### ***The Primacy of Proclamation***

While affirming theologically the holism of the kingdom, strategically it is the availability of the written Scriptures and the teaching and preaching of the Word that break through the darkness and set the captives free. The commission and training of Jesus were built around commands to go and to *preach, teach, heal, and deliver*.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Power Encounter***

Not only is proclamation central, but also these commands of Jesus occur in the midst of miraculous deeds that demonstrate the power of God over common factors of life. These signs are just that—signs. They rarely occur on a regular basis. As the gospel breaks into Satan's territory, the demons cry out and seek to defeat the gospel. When they fail, they depart.

Dramatic healings often occur at this stage. As the initial, apostolic phase gives way to the pastoral phase, healing tends to take place over longer periods—no less by the power of the Spirit, but in a more pastoral way. Signs continue to happen but not as the central element of ministry.

### *Deeds of Mercy*

Because he loves people and becomes actively involved with their lives, the urban apostle meets physical needs in a personalized, informal, unstructured way.

The most beautiful jewel can be damaged if it is cut wrongly. This applies to mission work. During the early stages it is inappropriate to enter a community with large sums of money and large-scale economic projects. My experience with scores of ministries among the poor has taught me that economic projects, when used as entrees into communities, do not facilitate church planting or growth. In fact, I am hard pressed to mention more than one or two churches that have developed from such an approach. New churches among the poor are established as a result of the preached Word, and this is independent of any provision of financial resources for economic development.

There are several reasons for this. One major reason is that the introduction into a community of significant financial resources causes the evangelist to be viewed primarily as a source of funds, not as a spiritual person who is bringing life. The outcome of Jesus' feeding the five thousand is an example of such assistance gone wrong. There are times when feeding the five thousand is the thing to do, when the goals are not to break into a community and establish a church but simply to deal with destitution or poverty. Famine in Ethiopia, flooding in Bangladesh, and an earthquake in Central America are examples of such situations that call for direct relief. But the two goals—relief and church planting—are different. They are both Christian, and at times compatible. But many times they do not support each other well at all.

A second reason was suggested by Jesus: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt. 6:33). We see here that material blessings are a derivative effect of significant spiritual change. The life of Christ once received creates new life in all areas.

I recall numerous communities of believers with whom I have worked in which, as the natural outworking of the received Word, drunkards stopped their drinking and became better able to work. Gamblers closed their gambling houses and, after a period of struggle and unemployment and with the help of believers, learned new trades and began to earn an honest income. Immorality among the men and prostitution among the women ceased, and with stabilized families they were able to find and sustain decent jobs. At the same time, God miraculously provided work for others in direct answer to prayer.

Putting all these experiences together, I can say that ten to fifteen years after a community receives the gospel one usually can perceive significant economic uplift. This is borne out by several recent studies of the urban poor in Pentecostal churches in Latin America. Rejuvenated economic life is a natural outgrowth of new kingdom life in a community. It may be assisted by outside programs, but these do not generate kingdom life. They only reflect it. It is the Word preached in the power of the Spirit that produces the life. The jewel of the gospel has its own inner life-producing radiance.

It appears that where workers enter a community with a priority to proclaim, many deeds of mercy, acts of justice, and signs of power will occur. From these the church will be established. But when workers enter with a priority of dealing with economic need, they may assist the people economically very well, but they rarely establish a church. There is a time for both, and there are life callings to do both, but they must be distinguished.

## **The Nature of Poor People's Churches**

What kind of church should the missionary team expect to form in the slums? Churches of the poor do not look like middle-class churches. Middle-class people are often upset by the nature of churches among the poor, and hence they put poorer Christians down. Understanding the culture of the urban poor helps decrease such tensions.<sup>3</sup> What tends to characterize urban poor churches?

### ***Legalism***

The migrant poor are sometimes referred to as *peasants in the city*. Urban peasants are people who grew up in villages where any change in traditional patterns could send the whole village into poverty. Among these people, any deviation from traditional patterns is strongly discouraged. Consequently, the patterns of teaching and behavior introduced at the time the squatter church is first established will probably be maintained for a long, long time.

For example, the missionaries who planted the first Brazilian Assemblies of God churches wore suits and ties and frowned on beards. Today I cannot preach in many of these churches because of my beard. If they do invite me to preach, I must be sure to wear my preaching suit and tie. In the same way, constant repetition of certain doctrines is regarded as important.

### ***Authoritarianism***

The members of a squatter church establish a new community not unlike a peasant village. The pastor is generally regarded as the *padrino*, the middle man between the poor and the middle-class society, and between the *informal sector* where the poor operate and the *formal sector* of government departments. There is group decision making in such communities. But once the consensus is formed, the pastor articulates the decision and it is law.

More than that, coping with all the psychological problems, centuries of life as an oppressed people, and the depths of sin from which many of the converts are emerging requires a strong authoritarian style of leadership. That is why you find few Baptist or Presbyterian churches among the poor. Baptist and Presbyterian church structures are built around leadership patterns that do not work well among the poor.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Noise***

The slums are a noisy place. One would expect noisy worship in a context where people daily face deep emotional traumas because of the external tragedy of their poverty. Worship provides a time of emotional and spiritual release. It involves the expression of centuries of pain.

### ***Power Encounter***

Coupled with this is the extent of demonic activity among the poor. Numerous studies by secular researchers, who do not profess to believe in the reality of demons, indicate that demonic activity is significantly more evident among the lower class. The worldview of the poor contains more about spirits and demons than about the official tenets of Islam, philosophical Brahmanism, or Catholicism. Since they lack the resources of modern medicine, the poor seek healing through spiritual means. On conversion, it is natural for them to go to Jesus for healing, and he responds to such faith.

### ***Isolationism***

Each peasant village is a self-contained entity. Survival seems to require a closed society. Hence there are strong taboos and fears against the next village. A positive aspect of the church in the squatter area is that it creates a social structure that enables the people to feel something of the security of the village they left behind. The negative aspect is the fear and suspicion toward neighboring churches with different names and doctrines.



Part of the role of middle-class Christians is to help bridge the gaps between such churches. Middle-class training and culture can sometimes make us peacemakers among the urban poor.

### *Small Size*

Some of the above characteristics will tend to keep the poor people's churches small, usually consisting of not more than three extended families. The lack of management skills in the slums also results in pastoral leaders who cannot handle a congregation of more than thirty, fifty, or one hundred members. Sometimes these small fellowships are linked to a megachurch that gives them a sense of broader identity.

## **Holism at the Pastoral Phase**

These glimpses into squatter church culture raise issues about the nature of holistic ministry in the slums. How do we work within such an imperfect context to form jewels of Christian discipleship?

I was preaching in a church ten years after I had helped bring it into being, and my topic was, "*Ingit, ingit, ipis sa puso*" ("Envy, envy, cockroaches in the heart"). The people listened with rapt attention. It was their language they were hearing. And it was the voice of one who had lived among their cockroaches. As I looked, I saw the transformation of those faces. Ten years had slowly changed the darkness of poverty into light, the hardness of broken families into softness. The kingdom had truly come to this slum. Jewels had been formed, but it had taken ten years.

The healing of the poor is not instantaneous. The church is a gathering of broken people being healed, sometimes over ten or twenty years. This is the work of the Spirit in the context of the preaching of the Word. It is not so dramatic as the initial, apostolic phase. It is, in fact, full of problems. It always looks imperfect.

During this phase, the crucial issue is the development of strong leaders who can function as elders and deacons. The leaders have to emerge out of a context of broken families and immorality.

Let me return to the use of outside economic resources to create a holistic ministry that deals with both the poverty and the spiritual need. It is not inappropriate during this phase to use outside resources to meet the needs of the widows and orphans, construct part of a building, or establish income-generation projects. These are proper activities of a Christian diaconate. They have to be done wisely if they are not to destroy the indi-

generosity of the church. Yet they are also expressions of the mercy of Christ and of the church universal.

In general, however, there are enough resources accessible to the community of believers for its healthy growth. The main issue is not a lack of resources but the need for a diaconal team that can identify the needs of the community, formulate appropriate responses, and then find and manage the resources that are available. In this process outside help can make a significant contribution.

## How Do the Poor Escape Poverty?

The question is not, "How do we help the poor?" but "How do the poor themselves escape poverty?" If we learn the answer to this question, we can work with them in the processes that lead to transformation.

Surprising as it may seem, the answer to the question is not in terms of economic projects. Throughout history the poor have escaped poverty through *migration*.<sup>5</sup> Where are the Christian international job placement bureaus? General William Booth's strategy to help thousands of poor escape London's poverty included migrant colonies in Canada, South Africa, and Australia. He died before this part of his plan could be implemented. The poor churches that have emerged in the last ten years in the slums of Manila have been funded largely by slum workers who have migrated to Saudi Arabia for employment.

Another poor people's solution is *education*. A poor family will sacrifice all to get one child through college. That child will then bring the next. Money from wealthy churches for vocational scholarships is not wasted.

*Mutual aid associations*, where small amounts are collected from each member and, when amassed, given as capital to one of the group, periodically enable quantum jumps into new levels of business. The obvious solution for poor people's churches is the development by the diaconate of credit cooperatives.

*Middlemen* are a central component in the economic advancement of the informal sector. Pastors with links to rich churches can often function in such a role.<sup>6</sup>

## The Politics of Incarnational Ministry

In writing about holistic kingdom ministry in the slums, I began where most evangelicals begin, with the spiritual and the economic. But the cause of the poverty of the slums has to do not only with the spiritual condition of

the slum dweller and the lack of resources among the poor. It has to do also with oppression and the political and economic structures of society that operate in favor of the rich. Holistic ministry cannot avoid confronting the principalities and powers that pervert and corrupt the structures of society in ways that bring abundance to the few and grinding poverty to many.

To walk into the slums may be a nonpolitical act on your part as a simple, sincere disciple of Jesus. But it will likely be perceived by those in power as profoundly political.

In the same way, when Jesus came from the Father's hand into a smelly manger, his act had *profound political implications* for governments through the ages. The Jewish leaders sensed this, and it aroused their opposition to the point of crucifying him, the ultimate political solution (or so they thought).

For you to transfer finances to the poor may seem to be nothing more than a simple act of mercy. But to those in power it may be seen as a political act, because it threatens their control of the poor, the source of much of their wealth.

Do not be surprised, then, at the opposition that comes against you as you walk in the paths of Jesus among the poor. Neither be surprised when you are brought into the presence of kings and they seek your counsel, sometimes in chains and sometimes as a guest (Matt. 10:17–25; John 15:8–25). Unintentionally you are a political person, for you are causing changes that affect the *polis*—the people, the masses.

Learn political savvy from Jesus, the man of the people. Hide when you sense danger, confront evil at times that are appropriate to you, debate issues that extend the kingdom publicly, but do not answer people on issues that are irrelevant to kingdom community development. Be as harmless as a dove and wise as a serpent (Matt. 10:16).

While the issues already mentioned may be acceptable to people holding a conservative, evangelical theology, the next level of political action about which I *must* talk, if I truly care for the poor may be upsetting. For compassion among the poor requires teaching the church how to deal with poverty and its complex causes. While preaching the kingdom, we are to live by and advance kingdom rule to creation and society.

Consider this: If the poverty of your squatter area is caused by oppression, the pastoral response will involve actions that may conflict with the interests of those who oppress. What you set out to accomplish will be viewed as political action. Obtaining water is a political act. So is seeking city help with garbage disposal. These easily become issues of class con-

flict. *Community organization* is a discipline that has emerged in this century to deal with such conflicts. It is unfortunate that much of its theory was developed from Marxist presuppositions. Marx's analytic tools were inaccurate, and his solutions far worse. But he did deal with real issues, and those issues await the serious attention of evangelical Christians.

Where are the evangelical theologians who, from experience in following Jesus among the poor, are writing about godly patterns in the midst of class conflict? Where are the Christian agendas for transforming the slums? It is pointless to spend time criticizing liberation theologians while failing to come to grips with the agonizing issues those theologians seek to address. Go to Jesus the wise man, who began among the poor.

Helping slum people is sometimes made illegal, for they are illegal, at least until election time. Their only illegal act may be finding a place to sleep in an overcrowded city. It is like healing on the sabbath—illegal. The theological issues of our time are shaped by the fact that half the world consists of landless peasants or illegal squatters. They are dispossessed. It was illegal for a Buddhist woman to set up schools in her slum in Bangkok, until an international award made it politically wise to encourage her. Where are the evangelical theologies of land rights?

And ultimately, the poverty of the poor cannot be changed by that great inertia called the masses. It is the middle classes linked to the educated elite who bring social and economic transformation. In every city we need a movement of the educated elite who follow the economic, social, and political discipleship of Jesus as they work among the poor. Then we may see the poor saved not only eternally, but also from their poverty. Then we may see the kingdom established not only in the future, not only in the establishment of churches, but also in the transformation of many aspects of society. The changes will benefit believer and nonbeliever alike: poverty will be abated, corruption curbed, oppression minimized, and economic security enjoyed by a greater number.

## **And What of Our Role?**

I have outlined some of the issues of ministry among the migrant poor. I have outlined enough grand themes for several lifetimes of work. They may excite you. But one question is more important. Can you ignore Jesus, the Son of God, who chose to come and dwell among the poor in order to establish a community of disciples? Can you ignore his command to go and do likewise?

Will you take your gifts and become part of a team of urban church planters? Will you pressure your mission board to adopt new strategies for reaching the urban squatter communities? If for health, family, or other reasons you are unable to go yourself, will you commit your resources to backing up other people who will go where you cannot? Will you help create movements among the elite that will lead in tangible ways to the economic and social transformation of the poor?

At the end of your life the question you will have to answer is this: Did you follow the Prince who became a pauper?

## Discussion Questions

1. What did you find to be personally challenging, perhaps even disturbing, as you read this chapter?
2. Explain why many evangelicals prefer to work with the middle class rather than the poor.
3. Give as many reasons as you can why high priority ought to be given to ministry among the urban poor.
4. Describe the kind of ministry the author is calling for—its purposes, participants, and methods. Why was political action included?