The Culture Of Poverty: Implications for Urban Church Ministry

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The Church's responsibility to the poor is undeniable but ignorance often bars the way to effective involvement. In this article, Julius Muthengi seeks to analyze the causes of poverty and concept of a "culture of poverty" in order to suggest strategies and tactics for effective urban church ministry among the poor.

Introduction

The problem of poverty and issues which surround it are complex. In the last thirty years, anthropologists and social scientists have raised crucial issues with respect to the nature of poverty. Special attention has been given to mass poverty associated with phenomenal growth of urbanization world wide. Poverty involves more than lack of material goods and finances. It includes powerlessness, social and political oppression, lack of education, unemployment, underemployment, and lack of representation in the political arena.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the so called culture of poverty, its characteristics, causes, and implications for church planting, especially in urban contexts. While many books and articles have been written on the issue, the models of Oscar Lewis and Charles Valentine are specially relevant for those of us in Africa concerned to see the Church expand among the poor within our cities.

The culture of poverty concept was first coined by Oscar Lewis in his book *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (1959). He developed the idea further in several works (1961, 1966, 1969, 1970). The phrase has been widely used by anthropologists and social scientists such as Harrington (1962), Herzog (1966), L. Lewis (1971), and Valentine (1971).

Over the years, anthropologists and social scientists have carefully analyzed this theory. By and large, there has been little agreement among scholars with respect to the usefulness of the culture of poverty idea. The concept in question will be examined in this section based on two models or theories. First, Lewis' model will be examined in detail. Second, the view of Valentine will be presented as a critique to Lewis' theory followed by some reflection on the theories in question.

The Culture of Poverty Concept: The view of Oscar Lewis

Oscar Lewis developed the notion of "the culture of poverty " on the basis of his ethnographic studies of Mexican families (1959, 1961). He compared groups of people whose way of life reflected a specific culture with the poor in general. Lewis' perspective may be summarized as follows:

> As an anthropologist I have tried to understand poverty and its associated traits as a culture or more accurately, as a sub-culture with its own structure and rationale, as a way of life which is passed down from generation to generation along family lines. This view directs attention to the fact that the culture of poverty in modern nations is not only a matter of economic deprivation, of disorganization, or of the absence of something. It's also something positive and provides some rewards without which the poor could hardly carry on (Lewis 1970, p. 68)

According to Lewis (1970), the culture of poverty transcends regional, urban-rural and national boundaries.

Lewis portrayed the culture of poverty as an established fact. He believed that such cultures could best be studied in the context of urban or rural

slums. Moreover, he noted that while there are common traits among those in the culture of poverty, there are differences as well, depending on the particular society. As a way of life, the culture of poverty tends to pass from one generation to another. Lewis (1970) pointed out that by the time slum children are six or seven years, they have absorbed so much of their cultural context that it is difficult for them to change their worldview.

Lewis formulated a number of key characteristics of the culture of poverty. The first key characteristic is that the poor are excluded from participation in the major institutions of society (Lewis 1970, p.70; Valentine 1971, pp.205-206). Lewis conceded, however, that participation in certain institutions such as relief systems, may do more harm than good. Further, low income, lack of property income, perpetual unemployment significantly reduce the chances of effective participation in the larger economic sphere.

The second characteristic of the culture of poverty according to Lewis is that there is tension between what they profess and what they practice (Lewis 1970; Valentine 1971). Those in the culture of poverty may aspire to the values of the dominant group of society, but they live by different standards. For instance, Lewis argued that men would choose to remain single or prolong marriage even when they verbally talk of their desire to get married.

The third proposition in Lewis' model states that organizational structure among the poor is confined to the realm of the nuclear and extended family. Accordingly, those in the culture of poverty may have occasional marginal groupings such as neighborhood gangs. Moveover, there may be a low key sense of community in slums. The phenomenon in question varies from one city to another or from village to village in the rural areas.

The fourth proposition formulated by Lewis is what Valentine (1971) has labeled "a phychological hypothesis." Accordingly, the culture of poverty produces personal identities, individual characters, and worldviews which are marginal, disorganized and restricted. On the individual level, the major traits of the culture of poverty are "a strong feeling of marginality, or helplessness, of dependence, and of inferiority" (Lewis 1970, p. 72).

In addition to the above characteristics, Lewis noted other traits such as high incidence of maternal deprivation, morality, weak ego structure, a strong orientation to the present with little ability to defer gratification or plan for the future, male superiority, and physhological pathology (Lewis 1970). Lewis argued further that those in the culture of poverty have little sense of history.

They, for the most part, emphasize their own circumstances, their own neighborhoods, and status consciousness. In order to clear himself of any bias, Lewis argued that the traits in question function in clusters. Moreover, the profiles of the culture of poverty will vary from one cultural context to another.

Finally, Lewis raised a crucial question with respect to the future of the culture of poverty. He tackled the issue by making two important propositions. First, Lewis isolated two types of the phenomenon in question. On the one hand, there are countries in which the culture of poverty represent only a small segment of the population (Lewis 1970, p. 78). On the other hand, there are cases of mass poverty in certain parts of the world. In the former case, remedy would include psychiatric treatment and social work. In the latter case, the best solution, according to Lewis, would be revolution or effecting social and structural changes in society.

Second, Lewis attempted to clarify the issue of the distinction between poverty per se and the culture of poverty. Accordingly, the subculture of poverty is perpetuated through the world view, aspirations, and character or the children. Economic improvements alone will not solve the problems involved. Lewis argued further that the main reason why it was difficult to eliminate the culture of poverty was lack of organization. He saw the culture of poverty as having a positive imprint..."people with the culture of poverty, with their strong sense of resignation and fatalism, are less driven and less anxious than the striving lower middle class, who are still trying to make it in the face of the greatest odds" (1970, p. 80).

Critique of Lewis'View

Oscar Lewis' works contain some of the most detailed biographical and autobiographical descriptions of daily behavior in the family context. This is both a strength and a weakness. Lewis relies too much upon such biographies and autobiographies to validate the culture of poverty concept. Lewis should be given credit for raising important issues with respect to the often neglected subject of poverty, at least at the philosophical level, but his anecdotal approach is questionable.

Another weakness of Lewis' view is that his study was conducted among specific families in the slums of Puerto Rico and Mexico. One needs to do such studies in other parts of the world before making any kind of sweeping generalization. This is not to deny the fact that those living in low economic strata have a lot in common, regardless of their geographical location. Rather, the intent is to challenge the representativeness of Lewis's case studies (Valentine 1971, p. 197).

Third, Valentine (1971) criticised Lewis by observing that the culture of poverty idea is a hypothesis which has not been scientifically demonstrated.

Fourth, the culture of poverty concept has lead to stereotyping, "which in turn invited distortion and misapprehension" (Herzog 1966, p. 95). It should be pointed out that indiscriminate use of the concept may lead to what Herzog (1966) called "the cookie cutter view of culture with regard to the individual and the culture or subculture involved."

Herzog's argument is that the "cookie cutter" view assumes that individual people in a given culture turn out alike, just as the cookies do. She further pointed out that, particularly in urban settings, each individual has multiple cultures or subcultures. Moreover, other factors such as personality traits, history, and dynamics of group interaction all play a major role in a person's response in given situations.

Fifth, Valentine (1969) called attention to the fact that the cultural values of the poor are not much different from those of the middle class. Where differences may occur, it may be caused by situational stresses rather than class differences.

Finally, and most seriously, Lewis' idea of culture of poverty has been accused of distorting "the reality of life among the poor" (Valentine 1969).

The Culture of Poverty Concept: Charles Valentine

The debate between Lewis and Valentine is evident in the anthropological and social science literature of the late 1960's and early 1970's. Valentine's view of the culture of poverty stands in sharp contrast to the views of Lewis.

First, contrary to Lewis' proposition, Valentine argued that the poor participate in varying degrees in various institutional areas of the broader society (Valentine 1971, p. 206). Moreover, the level of which the poor

participate in societal realms depends on the external structures. For the most part, the poor would desire to participate in the police force, armed forces, property ownership, and other aspects of the public arena, if the chances were open to them.

Second, the poor share much of the key values found among the middle class, unless these values violate cherished cultural ideals. Examples include high regard for educational achievement, desire for material comfort, and the value of competition in appropriate contexts.

Third, Valentine challenged Lewis' view of lack of organization among those in the culture of poverty beyond kinship realms. Accordingly, low income areas exhibit local organizational structures such as community councils, political organizations, denominational church organizations, and personal social networks (Valentine 1971, p. 207).

Fourth, Valentine challenged the idea espoused by Lewis that the culture of poverty produces a disorganized and restricted world view, leading further to feelings of marginality, helplessness, dependency, and inferiority. Valentine's perspective is that many of the negative characteristics of the poor offered by Lewis are not inherent traits. Rather, they are the result of distortions of the social order, and thus imposed on the poor. Moreover, Valentine (1971) argued that the fact that the poor continue to function as human beings in adverse conditions, is indicative of inner qualities of great humanity.

It should further be pointed out that the negative characteristic of the poor outlined by Lewis are contingent upon the situation (Valentine 1971). For instance, the poor would no doubt plan for the future, when assured of favorable alternatives. Valentine's recommendation is that while relationships may exist between the life of poverty and the so called culture of poverty, care must be exercised, lest the two ideas be confused. Accordingly, uncritical use of the culture of poverty concept should be avoided, through the exercise of informed, and independent judgment. In view of the foregoing, the "culture of poverty must be discarded as a theoretical guide" (Valentine 1971, p. 211). Valentine concludes that the concept in question lacks any scientific evidence.

Evaluation of Valentine's View

For the most part, Valentine has raised important issues with respect to Lewis' methodology in data gathering and analysis. In addition, Valentine's concern about how widely we can generalize on the basis of Lewis' findings is legitimate. As has already been observed, Lewis' research was very specific, but he nevertheless coined the culture of poverty concept and gave it a universal application. The criticism of such overgeneralization of the culture of poverty idea is one of Valentine's strengths. At the same time, Valentine appears to be overly critical of Lewis' concept. He called for total abandonment of the idea which appears to be an overreaction rather than a balanced conclusion. It seems clear that concept of the culture of poverty needs to be understood in a way that is more nuanced than Lewis's or Valentine's views.

Causes of Poverty

While scholars are not agreed on the culture of poverty concept, all agree that poverty is a global reality which should be taken seriously. Poverty is especially evident in the urban settings where people have moved from the rural areas to the cities in search of jobs and economic survival. By and large, there is a widening gap between the affluent nations and the third world countries, and between the affluent elite individuals and the poor masses.

What are some of the key causes of poverty? First on the list is the issue of land distribution. According to Johnson (1985), recent analysis of 83 countries has revealed that 3% of the world's population controls 80% of the world's land mass. For this reason, the world's cities are filled with people from rural areas in order the seek fortunes!

The Land issue is crucial in understanding the magnitude of poverty in the world today. The writer knows cases in Kenya where parents have to choose between education for their children and maintaining their piece of land. Since education is so vital for obtaining a decent job, many have chosen to sell their piece of land to the wealthy elite in order to pay tuition for their children. In such cases, a family may remain with only a small portion of land for small holding farming. Consequently, their children will have to start from scratch

in the future. They will struggle to buy land elsewhere in order to build their own houses and for farming.

Second, the issue of unemployment and underemployment is another cause for poverty. For example, many jobs require higher education or technical skills, which may exclude the poor from acquiring the jobs. Moreover, even when the poor get employment, they may be paid merely a minimum wage (Claerbaut 1983, p. 74). The poor (especially in urban context) suffer the consequences of either unemployment or underemployment. In the latter case, they earn so little that they cannot meet the basic needs of their families. The writer knows cases in Kenya where some poor men working in cities will choose to send the little they have to their families, rather than use the money for busfare home. In this context, many men stay away from their families for months, trying to accumulate enough money for their transportation and family needs.

Third, the poor also face economic and/or consumer exploitation (Claerbaut 1983; Galbraith 1979). To underscore the issue at stake, Claerbaut argued:

> In addition to employment problems, the poor also face exploitive consumer practices. The poor spend a greater proportion of their income for necessities in the form of food, shelter, and health care than do the middle class, although the quality of their investment return is much less. The poor pay more for less... Because there are often no large grocery stores in the neighborhood and no transportation to stores outside the community, the people often buy their goods at small neighborhood establishments. A walk through almost any such store will reveal inflated prices and inferior merchandise. The proprietor takes advantage of the patrons' lack of shopping alternatives. If the people do not do much looking elsewhere, they are often unaware of how badly they are being exploited anyway (Claerbaut 1983, p.75-75).

The issues raised by Claerbaut have universal implications. For example, the exploitation of the poor in American cities reflects the state of affairs in most African cities. In such context, the slum dwellers in places like Mathare Valley in Nairobi, Kenya have to buy whatever goods are available in their

neighborhood. They are, for the most part, dependent on public transportation and very little income.

Exploitation of the poor is not confined to consumer practices, but also in the money market transactions. For instance, many banks are controlled by the middle class elite which makes it difficult if not impossible for the poor to operate bank accounts (Claerbaut 1983, p.75). In Kenya, for instance, the minimum balance to be maintained in the savings account is beyond the ability of most poor people. Moreover, the service charge required for currency exchange is exploitive to the poor. They cannot for the most part maintain a bank account because the minimum balance is too high. It is even difficult for the poor to afford any money to deposit in banks.

Fourth, especially in Africa, climate may be cited as a cause of poverty. In many parts of the continent, people depend on their agriculture for sustenance. Due to the unpredictable nature of rain, great parts of the continent are famine stricken. What happens in Africa's rural areas affects life in the cities since the latter depend on the former for food supplies. Those who do not understand the phenomenon in question may attribute much of Africa's poverty to either corruption or laziness. Such uninformed views should be challenged.

Planting Churches for the Poor

The foregoing discussion underscores the fact that whether we talk of the culture of poverty or poverty per se, the issue is real in the world, particularly in urban settings. There is need for both the church and the governments of the world to address the issue candidly. Whether one is talking of individual poverty, mass poverty, national or international poverty, the fact remains that the gap between the poor and the rich is widening day by day. Adequate measures should be taken to address the issue particularly in the cities of our world, which are the future of governments, church planting, and Christian world mission.

The foregoing discussion on the reality of poverty in the world has great implications for church planting, especially among the urban poor.

The first implication is that the church can provide the poor with skills needed in order to come out of economic plight. A case in point is the Africa Inland Church, Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya. The church was started about eight

years ago in one of the poorest and roughest sections of the city. Initially, the church had 35 members but in about six years, the congregation grew to about fifteen hundred members.

The cause of such phenomenal growth was largely the ministry srtategy of the pastor who proclaimed the gospel by word and deed. He started several projects such as a mechanical engineering school, a tailoring school, as well as neighborhood prayer meetings and Bible studies. Within five years, the Kibera Church had ministries beyond their neighborhood. The Church devised a plan called 20/20 in which they resolved to plant twenty churches in the city of Nairobi every twenty months. Moreover, the Church began to build a new auditorium which could seat thirty-five hundred people.

As a result of the Church's witness and tangible expresson of Christian love, many positive things took place in Kibera. The crime rate was significantly reduced in the area. Many people found jobs as a result of their new skills. The Church became a witnessing community, leading to further church growth. This is only one example of what the church can do, by God's enablement, to alleviate the problem of poverty.

The example of the Kibera Church is quite in line with what many experts on urban ministry have constantly emphasized. For example, Greenway (1989) has pointed out that many Christians are ignorant about urban poverty. Greenway argued:

> ...The beginning of a Christian response to the poor in the city, therefore, must take the form of planned visits, the development of trusting relationships, the exchange of ministries and resources, and growing demonstrations of Christian love. I suggest that every suburban or small town church make a long-term commitment to building meaningful relationships with a church in a poor city neighborhood (Greenway 1989, p.176).

As Claerbaut (1983, p.69) pointed out, to many middle class people especially in the United States, poverty is a mere abstraction. Moreover, the people in question cannot become personally involved in the plight of the poor because they do not understand what is at stake.

The second implication of the poverty issue is that the problems of the city call for what Grigg (1987) called "the incarnational model" of ministry. The

idea is that Christian workers should enter the slums and live among the poor. Accordingly, "we must stop treating the urban poor as objects of charity and relief, begin to understand them as they are, and deal with spiritual and social needs together in genuine integration of word, deed, and life." In other words, the environment of the urban poor should be taken seriously for any meaningful encounter to take place between the Gospel and the people.

Other scholars have echoed Grigg's sentiment. For instance, Johnson (1985) pointed out that our world is shrinking. As such, the Church should seriously think of the urban context. Johnson wrote:

> It is no longer possible to live unperturbed within the ghetto of our own parochial interests and theological squabbles. Missions means turning outward, pulling up the blinds, opening the windows, and taking the risk entailed in breathing the foul air of the world where people are ensnared and held captive. This is where the word Incarnation needs to be seen and heard (Johnson 1985, p.193).

The incarnational model should be taken seriously by the Church. It seems that many Christians especially in western countries have become too comfortable and complacent. Few are willing to enter into the world of the poor and the down trodden. Christians should wake up and put their houses in order with respect to the crucial needs of the urban poor.

The third implication is that the Church should have a prophetic voice on behalf of the exploited and oppressed urban poor. Networks of church groups can address issues relevant to the poor. Sometimes the poor who are exploited by bureaucracies and red tape do not know their way out. The Church should, however, be careful not to tell the poor for whom to vote.

The fourth implication is that urban churches can target poor neighborhoods and address some of their specific needs. An example would be to start a literacy or tutoring program (Claerbaut 1983, p.86). The writer knows cases in Kenya where such programs led to great opportunities of evangelism. In many cases, when people learned how to read and write, they would engage in Bible study through which many were converted.

In addition to the foregoing, Johnson (1985) has offered other practical suggestions. Accordingly, mission boards should take a hard look at their candidates to determine whether they have the background and skill to cope

with the social problems in the cities. Theological institutions should include courses in social work in their training programs. This is especially important because urban pastors and missionaries need to develop skills in understanding the unique challenges found in urban ministry.

Furthermore, the third world church should be prepared to address social and civil ills in their cities. They should let the Gospel of Jesus Christ speak to human situations in their cities. In addition, churches in cities should take a fresh look at the use of their physical amenities for the inner city ministries.

The reality of poverty in urban settings calls Christians world wide to be tangibly involved in the needs of the less fortunate.

Finally, church bodies should devise strategies for strengthening the economy of the rural areas, which have been deserted by many people in search of a better life in the cities. This is especially crucial in Africa where draught regularly threatens the economy of the entire continent.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, the culture of poverty concept has been examined. The concept was coined by Oscar Lewis to refer to the people who are at the bottom of the social strata. Lewis' basic premise is that the culture of poverty is perpetuated through the children of the poor. Lewis argued that the culture of poverty is different from poverty *per se*. Accordingly, the former concept is a given while the latter may be temporary. The dynamics operating in each of these concepts are quite different.

Lewis' view has been criticised by Valentine who argued that it is a mere hypothesis, awaiting scientific demonstration by ethnographic method. For the most part, Valentine proposed counter views to those of Lewis. He finally rejected the concept arguing that it could not be scientifically demonstrated. Moreover, Valentine even doubted the validity of Lewis' data collecting method, and criticized his overgeneralization of his findings.

The study has also critically examined a number of reasons behind poverty. Finally, several key implications of the study to church planting were isolated, and relevant conclusions drawn. For instance, the church should take a hard look at the poverty stricken cities. Christians should get involved in

serious ministry in these areas. Whether there is a "culture of poverty" or not, poverty in the world is a reality which the church cannot ignore.

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