



"Raising up generations of religious and community leaders building a social movement to end poverty led by the poor."

The Poverty Initiative Annual Report 2006-2007

MISSION

The Poverty Initiative is dedicated to raising up generations of religious and community leaders committed to building a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor. We aim to incorporate an embodied spirituality, a social commitment, and successful models of addressing poverty in our churches, the academy and society in order to transform lives and build a social movement to end poverty.

The Poverty Initiative's principles include:

- **Ending Poverty:** Faithfulness to our religious traditions requires the elimination of poverty, not simply reducing, alleviating or managing it. The Poverty Initiative focuses on the systemic issues of poverty and aims to break down stereotypes and educate about the real possibility of ending poverty.
- **Leadership of the Poor:** The Poverty Initiative believes that the people who are immediately affected by economic injustice – poor people – must be involved in solving the problems and bring their perspective and anti-poverty solutions to the forefront of society.
- **Raising up a Generation of Religious Leaders:** A survey conducted of 30 major U.S. seminaries discovered that very few offer courses in economic justice, despite our biblical and ecclesiological tradition that places major emphasis on justice for poor people. The Poverty Initiative is focused on bringing poverty issues and poor people directly into the curriculum and community life at Union Theological Seminary and other religious and educational institutions.
- **Critical Engagement:** The Poverty Initiative builds direct relationships between poor people and the religious leaders that they educate by offering space and joint programming with grassroots anti-poverty efforts, including teaching immersion courses and practical skills in anti-poverty ministry, supporting faculty to make economic justice a continuing theme in their classes and research, holding public conversations on the religious response to poverty and developing lasting relationships with local and national community organizations.

The Poverty Initiative offers an anti-poverty pedagogical paradigm different from other professional graduate schools by bringing students and faculty into direct contact with leaders of poor people's organizations and communities in their homes, neighborhoods and well as in the classroom. The cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative has been the Scholar in Residence Program – an immersion experience where a notable anti-poverty advocate spends a year living at Union participating in classes, forums and personal conversations with the Union faculty, administration, students and other community members. The Poverty Initiative provides a multi-disciplinary curriculum – integrating theoretical, theological, and experiential learning that incorporates the analysis, practice, scholarship, and faith that exists in poor communities.

The Poverty Initiative aims to break the isolation of poor people, clergy, activists, and churches in order to build relationships, transform people and develop an expansive network of leaders and communities committed to ending poverty together. We emphasize an embodied spirituality. Everyone is welcome to join the Poverty Initiative where we value life, community and solidarity.

HISTORY

Union Theological Seminary (UTS) has historically raised its voice in calls for social and economic justice. As the mission statement of UTS, reads, “Union graduates will practice their vocations with dedication to the mission of the churches and leadership in the academy and society, ever seeking to bring a religious and moral voice to discussions of major social and political issues.” Today, UTS is a premiere seminary dedicated to educating a new moral voice in our churches, the academy and society around the pressing issues of our day.

When the current President of UTS, Joseph Hough, was inaugurated, he announced that eliminating poverty was a major objective of his tenure. In May 2003, students and community leaders proposed a poverty elimination program, and since then, with his encouragement, the program has been unfolding. Over the past four years, students and community leaders have been working intensely with administration, faculty, and alumni at Union to plan a multi-faceted program – “The Poverty Initiative at Union.”

The Poverty Initiative falls in line with the **social justice legacy** of UTS, following in the footsteps of: **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** who insisted that religious leaders and other people of conscience must address the pressing social issues of the time, stand against bigotry and injustice, and side with the outsider and other in a joint struggle for dignity; **Myles Horton** who while at Union conceived of and founded the Highlander Folk School which became the major leadership development center for the Industrial Union and Civil Rights Movements; **John Bennett** and members of Clergy and Laity Concerned who insisted that violence and war across the world, particularly in Vietnam eroded Civil Rights and took needed resources and attention away from a fight to end poverty and Martin Luther King’s Poor People’s Campaign; **Bill Webber** and the East Harlem Protestant Parish who modeled a way of being in community and ministering to a struggling city that was replicated at seminaries across the country; and many others including leaders in the struggle for immigrant rights, a living wage, civil rights, ecological and women’s rights movements.

NEED

In the recent memory of the United States, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast. Poverty, racism, violence, governmental irresponsibility and disregard, and other systemic realities were brought into the forefront of the American public’s consciousness. The interrelatedness of these issues and the need for an integrated systematic approach to resolve their devastating effects is also vividly clear through the lens of Katrina.

As we enter the 21st Century, we are facing a rapidly increasing polarization of wealth and poverty. It is arguably the defining social issue of this century. 45 million people have no health insurance; 3 million jobs have been eliminated in New York City since 9/11; soup kitchen visits have risen 150%; child homelessness is at an all time high.

While poverty is spreading across the United States, poorer segments of the population are rendered invisible, except to the extent that they exemplify particular stereotypes. Rarely are the realities of poverty adequately portrayed or analyzed in a way that speaks to systemic causes. And poor people are also almost never portrayed as agents of change.

Leadership of the Poor

One program or policy change is not going to end poverty in our society and world. Instead the Poverty Initiative insists we need to build a social movement that will change the priorities and ethos of this nation. Historically, successful social movements have been led by those most affected by the problems they are working to resolve.

- Slaves and ex-slaves led the anti-slavery movement
- People of color led the Civil Rights Movement
- Women led the women’s suffrage movement

These leaders all struggled for recognition that the problem they were facing was immoral and their struggle was legitimate. They fought to be considered fit for leadership of such a movement themselves. Yet today, we recognize the moral evil of slavery, and the right – and necessity – of slave and ex-slaves to lead the struggle to end it. If we are serious about ending poverty, poor people must be involved in the leadership of a budding movement to end poverty. In the Poverty Initiative, organized poor people are at the center of the program; we offer opportunities to convene public discussions and debates on poverty that includes the voices of poor people.

Poverty and Religious Community

What are religious leaders and other people of conscience to do in the face of growing poverty, homelessness, and misery? The rise in poverty has had demographic impact even on our congregations. Church membership has declined rapidly as poverty has increased. While both the number of Protestant churches and their overall fundraising have increased, attendance remains mired at its lowest point in a decade. Many people have to work on Sundays rather than attend church. Others complain that our churches have become less relevant, failing to address the needs and questions of people struggling to work two jobs just to pay rent or a mortgage. Many religious congregations are not discussing economic injustices and when they do they develop charity programs, rather than systematic responses that might eliminate poverty. Some even use Biblical texts to explain the futility of doing anti-poverty work -- stating that poverty is inevitable. Poverty in a land of abundance is a moral outrage, yet society, including our religious institutions, has learned to tolerate it. The new generation of religious leaders is increasingly called upon to address issues of poverty in their communities and congregations from meetings people's needs to working on systemic solutions to end poverty.

POVERTY INITIATIVE PROGRAMS

Scholar-in-Residence and Poverty Scholars Program

“The cornerstone of the initiative has been our Scholar-in-Residence program. Willie Baptist, a leader in the poor people's movement, has lived, worked, and prophesied among us, holding in front of us the insidious and devastating effects of poverty. Our classes, worship, alumni network, and public events have been infused with Willie's wisdom and experience in organizing against poverty.”- Rev. Amy Gopp, M.Div. '05

Willie Baptist of the University of the Poor has served his third year as the Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence. In the Spring 2007, Willie co-taught a course with Professor Jan Rehmman, Social Theories of Ending Poverty, Alternative Models? Willie has also consulted with faculty, staff, alumni, and students on ways to integrate

The Scholar-in-Residence and Poverty Scholars Program support the organizing and empowerment of poor people and poor people's organizations, by bringing together notable anti-poverty advocates from around the country to spend a year in intentional intellectual query, reflection and development. It challenges traditional academic and social change paradigms by proposing that the people with lived experience of economic and social injustice are intellectual and experiential leaders whose scholarship, when placed in dialogical conversation with the academy, creates structural solutions to systemic problems.

Immersion Courses

Our experience has shown that providing student, faculty and others opportunities to immerse themselves in the reality of poverty in a particular area and familiarize each other with models and leaders working to address poverty in their communities has a profound impact on all participants' educational and vocational

development. In January 2007, the Poverty Initiative sponsored an immersion course to Appalachia. Our visits in 2007 were to groups including: Alderson Broaddus College, People's Chapel of Philippi, WV, Direct Action Welfare Group, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, World Vision Appalachia, Rural Action, Organize! Ohio, Head Start, and South Parkersburg Baptist Church of Parkersburg, WV. We have published our second book based on writings, reflections and experiences from this immersion called *Appalachia: Listening with Our Hearts*. In January 2008, the Poverty Initiative is sponsoring an immersion replication experience to Appalachia. We will bring faculty and student representatives from various seminaries, colleges and universities interested in replicating the Poverty Initiative at their campus on this train-the-trainer immersion experience. This trip is being planned in cooperation with the groups we developed relationships during the 2007 trip.

Martin Luther King Last Years Project

The Poverty Initiative is engaged in an on-going project to study and celebrate the theoretical and theological framework developed by Martin Luther King Jr. in the last three years of his life. This project includes an intensive study of the speeches and writings of MLK in the last three years of his life and develops original publications and analysis. Some of the materials to be produced include videos, articles, and archival displays. We have participated in gatherings on the significance of MLK's Last Years including a weekend put on by the Beloved Communities Initiative called "Catching Up with Martin", looking at the connections between spirituality and social change work. We have also sponsored workshops at the Poverty Truth Commission and for other gatherings. It is our hope and aim to re-ignite the Poor People's Campaign and to follow in the footsteps of King where he insisted that the United States could and should "lift the load of poverty."

Arts & Culture

At the April 2007 Poverty Truth Commission, the Poverty Initiative launched our own Poverty Initiative Choir. This choir is based at UTS but has choir members in communities across the country. The choir composes its own songs and works with artists and musicians dedicated to economic justice. The Poverty Initiative Choir aims to travel to religious communities and community organizations across the country to perform new freedom songs for a movement to end poverty. In fact, poor people's organizations are already requesting the choir to perform at their community centers and events. Members of the choir have performed at protests of the Restaurant Opportunities Center – New York and other community events in New York City. The Poverty Initiative also sponsored an art exhibit, step performance and concert at the Poverty Truth Commission. We held special meetings with artists working for social change from India, Washington DC, Appalachia, the Gulf Coast.

Curriculum Development and Replication

The Poverty Initiative focuses on integrating issues of poverty into the curriculum at UTS and changing the way that teaching and learning is done in theological education. New courses including "Reading the Bible with the Poor," "Theories of Ending Poverty" and "Women's Experience as a Resource for Worship" have been proposed and implemented. In the Spring of 2008, faculty will lead semester-long classes including: "Poverty and Poor People's Movement: Social Analysis and Ethical Reflection" and "World Religions and Poverty". Professors have found ways to merge their research agendas with grassroots anti-poverty groups and poverty issues including New Testament scholar Hal Taussig who is co-authoring a book on poor people's burials today and in the ancient world with Picture the Homeless, an organization led by homeless New Yorkers in the Bronx. The Poverty Initiative has sponsored one-credit seminars including: "Ending Poverty: New Strategies and Skills for Community Organizing," "Prison Ministry and Poverty," "Poverty and Worship: A Case Study of Potter's Field," "You Shall Plant Vineyards and Reap Their Fruit - A Case Study of the Coalition of Immokalee Worker's Taco Bell Campaign." These classes have inspired on-going projects such as "Prayer Partners with Bedford Hills Correctional Facility," "Poverty Bibliography," "Fair Food Bible Study and Youth Program" and others.

The Poverty Initiative aims to be a model for other seminaries, universities, and religious institutions to replicate. Columbia University School of Social Work (CUSSW) has started a Poverty Initiative that is now offering immersion courses. CUSSW is also developing curricula that support the belief that social work has to be towards the goal of social transformation and building a social movement with the poor at the lead. At Marburg University in Germany, following a travel course to Germany, students and faculty are starting a Poverty Initiative. Other seminaries and universities that have expressed interest in starting Poverty Initiatives include: Harvard Divinity School, Graduate Theological Union, Yale Divinity School, Drew University and Theological School, California Institute for Integral Studies, etc. At the April 2007 Poverty Truth Commission, faculty and students from 15 seminaries and academic institutions participated in the weekend's events. The Poverty Initiative had a successful panel presentation at the Association of American

Clearinghouse and Publications

The Poverty Initiative serves as a clearinghouse for community organizations, poor people's groups, faculty and students, alumni, local congregations and religious denominations to share experiences and resources on anti-poverty ministry. This means offering new ideas and models for working to end poverty and fostering debate and discussion on effective means to address growing poverty and homelessness. We are working to offer our resource center online at: www.povertyinitiative.org. We publish a monthly newsletter. We are also archiving and distributing materials from local poor people's organizations, religious institutions and historical and theological documents on social movements, religious organizing and the preferential option for the poor.

A goal of the Poverty Initiative clearinghouse is to produce and disseminate our own resources. These include: *Katrina: Listening with Our Hearts*, reflections on the Poverty Initiative Immersion course to the Gulf Coast in January 2006 and *Appalachia: Listening with Our Hearts*, reflections on the immersion course to Appalachia in January 2007. We are working to publish more than four new publications including: *Reading the Bible with the Poor*, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: The Potter's Field Campaign*, *Social Theories of Ending Poverty – Alternative Models*, and *Anti-Poverty Liturgies*.

Religious and Community Outreach

The Poverty Initiative offers programming and resources for religious congregations, denominations and community organizations interested in joining the fight against poverty. The Poverty Initiative have provided consultation to the American Baptist Churches, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Week of Compassion, the moderator of the Presbyterian Church, as well as the National Council of Churches, the Riverside Church, Sojourners/Call to Renewal training and involving potentially millions of people of conscience in distinctive means of effective anti-poverty ministry. The Poverty Initiative is ever-seeking preaching and speaking engagements at local congregations and religious groupings throughout the country.

The Poverty Initiative reaches out to community organizations and grassroots anti-poverty groups in order to share models and effective means of anti-poverty ministry and community leadership development. Poverty Initiative leaders travel to towns and cities across the country to grow new connections and reinforce established ones. The Poverty Initiative also offers resources to Union alumni and is working towards building a network of concerned religious and community leaders.

Public Events

The Poverty Initiative is committed to starting a national debate on the religious response to poverty. To this end, we sponsor regular public events including Poverty Truth Commissions, lectures and book events. In the 2007-2008 Academic Year, the Poverty Initiative is co-sponsoring the Bonhoeffer Lecture Series featuring

Jeffrey Sachs and culminating in a Poverty Truth Commission. We are also planning a gathering of international interfaith leaders against poverty in the winter of 2007. In the Spring 2008, we will co-sponsor the New Testament and Roman Empire Conference with the New Testament Department at Union featuring a new methodology of reading the Bible with the poor. We are also working with poor people's organizations and other communities across the country to hold local Truth Commissions in places including Detroit, Michigan and New Orleans, Louisiana.