

The Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary Annual Report 2004-2005

After two years of preparation, the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary was launched in the fall of 2004. The Poverty Initiative is a student-initiated program that brings poor people into all facets of Union's life - classes, worship, workshops and informal discussions, where they are no longer regarded as objects of charity, but are appreciated as change agents, working for a more just society.

Union Theological Seminary -- with its profound concern for the life of the city and world -- has the potential to shine a light on the economic justice dimension of the issues facing our society. As the new mission statement 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.*" We see the issue of poverty and a growing movement to end poverty as another opportunity for Union to challenge our religious institutions and the society at large around these urgent social injustices and to get communities in motion working for economic justice.

We believe that our religious traditions call for the elimination of poverty -- not simply reducing, alleviating or managing it. And, in order to be effective, the people who are immediately affected by economic injustice - poor people - must be involved in solving the problems.

Some of the activities of the last year have included:

Poverty in Parish, Pew and Pulpit Series - co-sponsored by the Poverty Initiative and the Ministerial Formation Caucus. The four part series has included, "If not me, then who? Imagining Change in your Context", "A Sanctuary for All: Addressing Poverty through Preaching, Bible and Worship", "Beyond the Food Pantry", "Your Young People Will See Visions: Involving and Empowering Children and Youth in the Movement to End Poverty"

Poverty Truth Commission - The Poverty Initiative held its first annual Poverty Truth Commission on April 15, 2005. Inspired by Truth Commissions held in South Africa, Peru and other countries around the world, the Poverty Truth Commission was established to hear the stories of those whose lives are in jeopardy due to poverty including the lack of health care, housing, adequate food, education or living wage jobs. The space created was for all too often unheard stories to be told. Prominent religious, academic, and community leaders heard and responded to these testimonies, which represent the stories of millions living in poverty in America.

Commissioners included: Rev. James Forbes of the Riverside Church, Rev. Bob Edgar of the National Council of Churches in Christ, Ivone Gebara, Luise Schottroff, Gabriella Letini, Joseph Hough of Union Theological Seminary, Yance Shelton of Call to Renewal, Traci West of Drew University, Noelle Damico of the School of Theology of the University of the Poor, Cheri Honkala of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, the Rt. Rev. Sisk of the New York Episcopal Diocese and Rev. Earl Kooperkamp of St. Mary's Episcopal Church. The day began with an interfaith prayer service, included four workshops, and a community organization's fair and art show.

January Immersion Course - This two-week course explored the reality of poverty in New York City and across the United States and offered tools for overcoming and eliminating poverty. A hands-on and experience-based course, the Poverty Immersion Experience included dialogue with leaders of local and national poor people's organizations, human rights trainings and documentation in poor communities, Bible studies, video showings, and poverty reality tours. Trips were made to Philadelphia, PA where students were hosted by the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the Youth Health Empowerment Project and to Upstate New York where leaders of the Ithaca Workers Rights Center and the Tompkins County Living Wage Campaign, as well as community leaders associated with SUNY-Cortland and the Mid-State Labor Council hosted discussions and sponsored poverty reality tours for class participants. In New York City, students were hosted by Picture the Homeless in East Harlem, Ron Cassanova from the NY State Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign and Artists for a Better America, Frances Moses from Bridges, and multiple leaders from the Broadway Community Incorporated (BCI).

Field Education 226 - The Poverty Initiative has sponsored two one-day Field Education Seminars on "A Historical Look at Social Movements and the Role of Church" and "New Concepts and Skills in Community Organizing"

Scholar in Residence - The cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative is a Scholar in Residence program-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 first scholar in residence has been Willie Baptist, a formerly homeless man, who is Education Director of the Philadelphia-based Kensington Welfare Rights Union and Co-Coordinator of the University of the Poor, the educational arm of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, a national network of poor people's organizations working to build a social movement to end poverty.

Classroom Participation - Our Scholar in Residence has served as a guest lecturer in the following courses: Introduction to the New Testament, Christologies in Film,

Ecological Ethics, Introduction to Preaching and Worship, Political Economy of Misery, New Testament Greek, and Feminist, Womanist and Mujerista Theologies. Students have written papers and done presentations on poverty and the Poverty Initiative in nearly all Union courses.

Outreach to Other Seminaries and Educational Institutions -

Andover Newton Seminary - A delegation from Union's Poverty Initiative visited Andover Newton Seminary in Boston, MA to encourage the administration, faculty and student body to adopt a program similar to the Poverty Initiative there. Community leaders joined Andover Newton and Union representatives.

Representatives from the Poverty Initiative have visited the University of Chicago Divinity School and Harvard Divinity School to promote the Poverty Initiative and explore ways those seminaries can focus their classes and community activities around poverty issues. Harvard students participated in the Poverty Truth Commission in April.

Relationships with Community Organizations

Artists for Better America - Union Theological Seminary has hosted monthly meetings with Artists for a Better America, an organization of homeless and poor artists and allies who encourage the artistic talents of poor people as well as use art to raise consciousness around poverty and homelessness in the United States. Students have gotten involved in the organization and sponsored an exhibit of the works of Ron Casanova, the founder of ABA. The exhibit was held in James Chapel and included a reception with the artist and other community leaders.

Picture the Homeless - Students have gotten involved in the work of Picture the Homeless, an organization of homeless and formerly homeless people who advocate for housing and the civil and human rights of homeless people across the city of New York. Union Seminary's Poverty Initiative hosted the first meeting between Picture the Homeless and NYC clergy regarding their Potter's Field Campaign. Presently the City of New York disposes of the bodies of indigent people, one quarter of whom are children, in unmarked, inaccessible and mass graves on Hart's Island. The Campaign wants to insure a dignified burial (including a worship service) and access to the grave sites.

BCI - Students are deeply involved in the community food program, arts and shelter program of Broadway Community Inc, located at Broadway Presbyterian Church, only blocks away from Union Theological Seminary.

Bridges - Students have participated in the clothes, food and necessities distribution sponsored by Bridges, an organization that works to "bridge" housed and homeless people throughout New York City and New Jersey. Also members of Bridges are heavily involved in the Poverty Initiative's Advisory Board.

Movimento Sem Terra (Brazilian Landless Workers Movement) - The Poverty Initiative sponsored an evening dinner and discussion with leaders from the

largest social movement in the Western Hemisphere on how religion is a part of the movement of the poor.

Local congregations - Poverty Initiative participants have been invited to lead adult study session and to preach at local congregation including St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Darien, CT, The Riverside Church in NY, and St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Manhattanville.

Worship - The Poverty Initiative held worship services summing up what students learned in the January Immersion Course, reflecting on the Art Exhibit by Ron Casanova, holding a formal Potter's Field Memorial Service, and other services led by poor people, students, administrators, and faculty members preaching, singing, praying about the elimination of poverty.

Union Community Events

Board of Trustees - The Poverty Initiative presented to Union's Board of Trustees and held a luncheon with interested Trustees on the Poverty Initiative.

Union Days with Jack Nelson Pallmayer - Poverty Initiative leaders participated in the Alumni Conference with guest speakers Jack Nelson-Pallmayer and Traci West.

Spirit of Union Week - Poverty Initiative students presented a panel as a part of the Spirit of Union Week to prospective students interested in coming to Union because of its current involvement in social justice issues.

Orientation - Poverty Initiative leaders presented at the first year orientation program, trying to enlist interest and support from the entering class.

Day of the Dead Altar and Party - Poverty Initiative students constructed an altar to honor poor and homeless people who have died in New York City in the past year because of poverty. Students were awarded first place for their altar.

For More Information, Visit our Website at www.povertyinitiative.org