



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

Poverty Initiative Annual Report 2005-2006

History:

Union Theological Seminary has historically raised its voice in calls for social and economic justice. As the mission statement of Union Seminary, 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."

When the current President of Union Theological Seminary, Joseph Hough, was inaugurated, he announced that eliminating poverty was a major objective of his tenure. In May 2003, students and community leaders proposed to him a program, the goal of which is to eliminate poverty, 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".

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.

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.
- **Leadership of the Poor:** The Poverty Initiative brings poor people into all facets of Union's life – classes, worship, workshops and informal discussions because we believe that the people who are immediately affected by economic injustice – poor people – must be involved in solving the problems.
- **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.
- **Hands on Experience:** 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 practical skills in anti-poverty ministry.
- **Faculty Involvement:** The Poverty Initiative challenges the Faculty to make economic justice a continuing theme in their classes and research.

Our Programs:

Poverty Scholars Program/Scholar-in-Residence – The Poverty Initiative offers an anti-poverty pedagogical paradigm different from other professional graduate schools by bringing students and faculty into direct contact with poor people in their homes and 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. Our first Scholar in Residence is Willie Baptist of the University of the Poor. Willie has served as the Scholar-in-Residence for the first two years of the Poverty Initiative. The Poverty Initiative is starting a new program in the 2006-2007 Academic Year. The Poverty Scholars Program will train more than 20 low-income leaders to become Scholars-in-Residence for other seminaries, universities, and religious institutions.

“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

Alumni Events – People from the Poverty Initiative spoke at the Union Reception at the SBL/AAR in Philadelphia, the largest gathering of Union alumni each year. The Poverty Initiative sponsored a Poverty Reality Tour of Kensington, North Philadelphia for students and faculty members attending the American Academy of Religion. Also, Su Pak and Janet Walton presented in San Francisco on the Poverty Initiative, numerous mailings have gone out about poverty and the Poverty Initiative to alumni, and alumni and development staff have presented on the Poverty Initiative at most development events held this year.

BCI Empowerment Group – The Poverty Initiative has held regular movie showings and discussions with the Empowerment Group at Broadway Community Incorporated (BCI) at Broadway Presbyterian Church at 114th and Broadway. This has led to the creation of a new group of homeless people at BCI who have started a clothes drive and other organizational activities. Poverty Initiative members also regularly participate in the soup kitchen, shelter and art therapy programs that are held at BCI.

Course Involvement – Poverty Initiative members have met with faculty and staff about integrating issues of poverty into the curriculum at Union. Professor Brigitte Kahl will offer a class entitled “Reading the Bible with the Poor” in Spring 2007, Professor Jan Rehman will co-teach a course on “Theories of Ending Poverty” with Scholar-in-Residence, Willie Baptist in the Church and Society field in Spring 2007 as well. Professor Hal Taussig is co-authoring a book on poor people’s burials today and the ancient world, Worship Director and Professor Troy Messenger has written a liturgy based on the life and art of formerly homeless Poverty Initiative community leader, Ron Casanova, and Professors David Carr, Wyn Wright, Barbara Lundblad, Janet Walton, and Troy Messenger have invited the Scholar-in-Residence, Willie Baptist to lead certain class sessions. The Poverty Initiative also presented at a faculty meeting in September.

Day of the Dead – Poverty Initiative and Latino Caucus members put together an art exhibit commemorating the Day of the Dead and All Saint’s Day contrasting images of poverty, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, and injustice with wealth, privilege and death. The Poverty Initiative also built an altar for the Day of the Dead celebration at Union Theological Seminary.

FE 226 – The Poverty Initiative has sponsored 3 one-credit seminars in the Fall 2005 semester including, “Ending Poverty: New Strategies and Skills for Community Organizing”, “Prison Ministry and Poverty”, and “Poverty and Worship: A Case Study of Potter’s Field” and one one-credit

seminar in the Spring 2006 entitled, "You Shall Plant Vineyards and Reap Their Fruit: A Case Study of the Coalition of Immokalee Worker's Taco Bell Campaign". Nearly 50 students have participated in these classes and have started on-going projects such as "Prayer Partners with Bedford Hills Correctional Facility", "Poverty Bibliography", "Fair Food Bible Study and Youth Program" and others.

Impacting Congregations and Denominations – The Poverty Initiative has consulted with major mainline Protestant denominations on economic justice and anti-poverty ministry. This has included day-long seminars with the American Baptist Church, meetings with the moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA), joint programming with the United Church of Christ, and afternoon workshops with the United Methodist Church. Poverty Initiative members have also led Bible studies at local congregations including The Riverside Church in New York. The Poverty Initiative presented at a day-long symposium at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia in honor of the installation of Rev. Dr. Raphael Warnock. The Poverty Initiative has received support from the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) Week of Compassion. Students and staff working with the Poverty Initiative have produced sermons, Bible studies, and book chapters for the American Baptist Churches Children and Poverty Campaign and will hold an art reception on poverty at the Biennial Conference of the ABC in Washington DC in 2007.

Katrina Project – Starting the week after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, the Poverty Initiative has coordinated an effort of the seminary, local congregations and other people of conscience to respond. Together with members of the Black Women's Caucus, the Union Theological Seminary faculty, especially the biblical field, the Social Action Caucus, the Columbia University School of Social Work and others, the Poverty Initiative responded in many ways -- a worship service in James Chapel, a community worship held at Broadway Presbyterian Church, participation in an urban ministry colloquium at the American Academy of Religion, numerous fundraisers and an Immersion Course of Poverty, Race, Ethics and Ministry. Students and faculty members involved in the Katrina Project held a week of chapel services February 27-March 2, an Art Exhibit in James Chapel, a series of Bible studies and sermons in local congregations and a public event on Friday, March 3, 2006 inspired by the Immersion Course. Students involved in the Katrina Project also got involved in the FEMA hearings in Washington DC, February 8 and 9, 2006 a Veterans for Peace March, March 14-19, 2006, and other on-going projects in the Gulf Coast. The Poverty Initiative is working with students and staff at the Columbia School of Social Work and School of Public Health to sponsor Katrina Anniversary events in Fall 2006.

Katrina: Listening with Our Hearts – Inspired by the January Immersion Course, in particular the journal and blog kept through the course, The Poverty Initiative published a 200+ page book with 90 photographs of the impact of Hurricane Katrina and personal and theological reflections on the issues of poverty, racism, and government responsibility raised by the Hurricane. The book has been distributed to hundreds of people across the country and will be used in courses at Ithaca College, Columbia School of Social Work and other universities in the 2006-2007 Academic Year.

Newsletter – The Poverty Initiative published six editions of a monthly newsletter describing anti-poverty programs at Union Theological Seminary -- Hurricane Katrina, Potter's Field, Wal-Mart, Living Wages and Income Disparity, Prisons -- as well as highlighting major issues of economic injustice in the land. The Newsletter is sent to a mailing list of 500 people including Poverty Initiative donors, Union alumni, local congregations and Union Board of Trustees members. Many new students got involved in writing and editing the newsletter.

New Student Orientation – The Poverty Initiative offered a series of events at the New Student Orientation in August 2005. This included opportunities for students to get involved in local anti-poverty ministries in New York City and a morning training on poor people and anti-poverty organizing. The Poverty Initiative is scheduled to offer a similar orientation program in 2006.

New Testament and Roman Empire: Early Christians, the Poor, and the Multitude– The Poverty Initiative participated in a dialogue with Michael Hardt, social theorist from Duke University.

Scholar-in-Residence, Willie Baptist responded alongside professors Hal Taussig, Brigitte Kahl and Gary Dorrien. The event was attended by about 200 people. An event on Poverty, Empire and the New Testament is scheduled to occur each year. This evening dialogue coincided with the publication of the most recent USQR (Union Seminary Quarterly Review) on New Testament and Roman Empire that includes two articles by Poverty Initiative members.

Peace Council – The Poverty Initiative and the New Testament Department at Union Theological Seminary, along with Picture the Homeless in East Harlem, presented an evening dialogue with the Peace Council chaired by the Dalai Lama and Tannebaum Center International Peacemakers on “Poverty, Homelessness, Potter’s Field and Early Christianity”. The event was attended by 75 people from Union Seminary and beyond, including international peacemakers from around the world.

Potter’s Field and Picture the Homeless – Poverty Initiative members have been involved in the day to day activities of Picture the Homeless (PTH), an advocacy group for and of homeless people based in East Harlem. The Poverty Initiative is sponsoring a work-study student at Picture the Homeless. The Poverty Initiative has been an active partner in the Potter’s Field Campaign. Presently the City of New York disposes of the bodies of indigent and unknown 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 gravesites. Recently, PTH and interfaith leaders in New York City, including Poverty Initiative members gained access to Potter’s Field where they have been holding bi-monthly memorial services for those buried there.

Poverty and Immigration – The Poverty Initiative has hosted a series of meetings and projects focused on the interconnection of poverty, immigration, and Spanish language issues this semester. These meetings have resulted in a major event that was held March 1, 2006 sponsored by the Social Action Caucus, the Latino/a Caucus and the Poverty Initiative featuring border and immigration ministry. This group is also planning new ways of supporting Latino/a students and Hispanic ministry at Union Theological Seminary including Bible study in Spanish, a Hispanic Ministries course, and other programming.

Poverty in the Parish, Pew and Pulpit Series – Co-sponsored with the Ministerial Formation Caucus, this series includes issues such as, “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”. The Poverty Initiative held an eleven part series in the Spring Semester 2006. The United Church of Christ of Metro New York is also a co-sponsor of this series.

Preaching Academy – In January, Poverty Initiative students attended the University of the Poor School of Theology Preaching Academy held at Community Homeless Alliance Ministry (CHAM) in San Jose, California. The University of the Poor School of Theology is a web-centered, community-based educational arm of the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign. At the Preaching Academy, Poverty Initiative members had the opportunity to learn from and share experiences and lessons with the Women’s Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) from Oakland, California, United Workers Association (UWA) from Baltimore, Maryland, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) from Immokalee, Florida as well as students and faculty at Yale Divinity School, the University of Texas and the Graduate Theological Union.

Replication – The Poverty Initiative aims to be model for other seminaries, universities, and religious institutions to replicate. Columbia University School of Social Work has started a Poverty Initiative. Two CUSSW students will be interns with the Poverty Initiative at Union for the 2006-2007 Academic Year. Also, following a travel course to Germany, students and faculty are starting a Poverty Initiative at Marburg University in Germany. Other seminaries that have expressed interest in starting Poverty Initiatives include: Harvard Divinity School, Graduate Theological Union, Yale Divinity School, Drew University, and others.

Resource Center – The Poverty Initiative opened an office and Resource Center at Union in August 2005. The Center is used to host meetings (with students, faculty and community members), do office work, create art and music, and maintain a library of books, newsletters, and videos for those interested. The Resource Center is staffed by seven field education interns and work-study students and others that volunteer. Students and others have started using the library to research poverty issues and theology. We are hoping to expand and organize the library in the coming year.

Restaurant Opportunities Center Worship Services – Responding to claims of job discrimination and mistreatment work of immigrant workers in New York, the Poverty Initiative, along with students from the Preaching for Social Transformation Class, have led weekly worship services for worker's rights in front of restaurants across New York City. These services have been in support of the worker's rights campaign of the Restaurant Opportunities Center.

Screens on the Green – The Poverty Initiative sponsored showings of the movies, "The Motorcycle Diaries", "Bread and Roses", and "Dark Days" for the Union Seminary community.

Wal-Mart and Living Wages – The Poverty Initiative sponsored a showing of "Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices" during Wal-Mart Watch's week of activities. Nearly 100 people (from Union Theological Seminary and beyond) attending the movie showing and discussion afterwards.