



2007-2008 Annual Report

“The Poverty Initiative is having a great impact on my vocational and spiritual development. Working with this organization has given me increased confidence that I can return to my inner-city community in Brooklyn to organize for lasting change. Theologically the Poverty Initiative has given me the tools
“to preach good news to and about the poor.””

Onleilove Alston

Union Theological Seminary MDiv/MSSW Candidate

“We live in a world where millions of people suffer the reality of poverty and oppression while technology continues to advance and economic activity continues to dominate social priorities.

Society has turned its back on the necessity of global solidarity.

But the truth is, this cannot continue. We are by nature inter-connected beings and the existence of one does affect the lives of all. How then can society continue ignore the reality that the human rights of its people are being violated?

In a world that has the means to eliminate poverty, how do we create the will to do so?”

Charon Hribar

*Union Theological Seminary Alumni MDiv and
Poverty Initiative Coordinator of Curriculum and Education*

Poverty Initiative 2007-2008 Annual Report

Mission

The Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary's mission is to raise up generations of religious and community leaders dedicated 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.

Organizational History

When the previous President of Union Theological Seminary (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 program to Union's President Joseph Hough, the goal of which is to eliminate poverty. Since then, students and community leaders have been working with Union trustees, administration, faculty, and alumni to build the "Poverty Initiative." In 2004, we developed the Scholar-in-Residence Program, which today is the cornerstone of the Poverty Initiative. Willie Baptist, a formerly homeless father, involved in organizing amongst the poor for more than forty years, has served as the Scholar-in-Residence since its inception. Based on the success of the Scholar-in-Residence model, the Poverty Initiative began the Poverty Scholars Program in 2006.

The signature event of the Poverty Initiative has been the Poverty Truth Commissions. Inspired by Truth Commissions held in South Africa, Peru and other countries around the world, Poverty Truth Commissions are organized around telling the stories of those whose lives are in jeopardy due to economic injustice. Prominent religious, academic, and community leaders listen and respond to these testimonies.

The 40th Anniversary of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign

In 2007-2008, the Poverty Initiative focused its efforts on the **commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the Poor People's Campaign** launched by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In December 1967, Dr. King called upon all people of good will to "lift the load of poverty", in the United States and across the world. Forty years later, there are millions of people who still bear the burden of poverty – without food, water, homes, health care, education, meaningful or even living-wage jobs.

Major Accomplishments in Fiscal Year 2007-2008

The Poverty Initiative has had a busy and productive fourth year. Major accomplishments include:

- ***Poverty Scholars Program***
 - Poverty Initiative Scholar-in-Residence, Willie Baptist, served as a resource and lecturer in courses and as a bridge between the campus and the community
 - Poverty Scholars candidates from DAWG – Charleston, West Virginia, United Workers – Baltimore, MD, Poor Voices United – Atlantic City, NJ, Picture the Homeless – New York, NY, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization – Detroit, MI, Taxi Workers Alliance – Philadelphia, PA -participation in Poverty Truth Commissions, Bonhoeffer Lecture Series, Religions of the World and Poverty Symposium, Poverty Immersion Courses.
 - Development of Study-Work Projects focused on: Head Start and the Movement to End Poverty, the International Studies Project; and the Virgin Mary/Mary Magdalene/Welfare Queen Project
 - *Planning for 2008 – 2009 Poverty Scholars Program Strategic Dialogue Convenings* focused on re-igniting the Poor People’s Campaign – finishing the unfinished business of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- ***National Poverty Truth Commission (October 2007)***

Local grassroots leaders from around the county testified on the economic human rights abuses prevalent in their lives and home communities before an esteemed panel of Commissioners
- ***Support for poor people organizing***

Participation in and support for successful campaigns locally and nationwide including: the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (Burger King negotiations and victory!), Restaurant Opportunities Center – New York (prayer vigils, law suit and victory against the Fireman Hospitality Group), Picture the Homeless (Potter’s Field Campaign), United Workers (Camden Yards Living Wage victory) and more
- ***Faculty-sponsored Poverty-themed courses at Union Theological Seminary***

Two 2007 – 2008 courses featured leaders of poor people’s organizations as co-instructors and guest lecturers. Courses were:

 - Poverty and Poor People’s Movements: Social and Ethical Analysis taught by Willie Baptist and Jan Rehmann (Spring 2008),
 - World Religions & Poverty taught by Paul Knitter (Spring 2008)
- ***Field Education Seminars***
 - The Right to Health Care and the Health Care Crisis – Spring 2008
 - The last years of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life and the Poor People’s Campaign – Fall 2007

- ***Poverty Immersion in the Mississippi Delta Course (January 2008)***
 Nine-day course in the Mississippi Delta commemorating the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign. Fifty-five participants (faculty, students and grassroots antipoverty organizers) investigated conditions of poverty and built partnerships with local religious and community leaders
- ***"Train-the-Trainer" Immersion in Appalachia Course (January 2008)***
 Faculty and students from twelve academic and religious institutions participated in this week-long course focused on issues of replicating the Poverty Initiative's principles in their institutions
- ***Youth Immersion (May 2008)***
 Twenty participants from youth ministry groups and youth organizations from New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia met with community leaders from Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, St. Mary's Church Manhattanville, Restaurant Opportunity Center (ROC-NY), Philadelphia Student Union, Teen-DAWG (Direct Action Welfare Group), Scarsdale Baptist Church, and others.
- ***Arts and Culture Program***
 - 40th Anniversary Commemoration event celebrated the December 1967 launch of the of Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign on Human Rights Day (December 2007)
 - Poetry Reading by Susan Deborah King from her book "One-Breasted Woman" (April 2008)
 - Poverty Initiative Choir
- ***Priority Areas Project of the Church of Scotland in Glasgow***
 Poverty Initiative founding member, Paul Chapman and consultant Gayle Irvin work with the Church of Scotland in their Priority Areas Project in poor communities throughout Scotland and spearhead effort to hold a first Poverty Truth Commission in Edinburgh in the Spring 2009
- ***National conferences, lectures, and strategy meetings***
 - John Dominic Crossan Lecture (November 2007)
 - Bonhoeffer Lecture Series in 2007 featuring Jeffrey Sachs (October 2008)
 - Religions of the World & Poverty Symposium and Inauguration of Paul Knitter as Paul Tillich Chair of Theology, World Religions and Culture (February 2008)
 - New Testament & Roman Empire Conference (April 2008)
- ***Visits, exchanges, workshops and preaching engagement highlights***
 - Philadelphia, PA: Speaking at GeoClan sponsored Martin Luther King celebration at the University of Pennsylvania
 - Berkeley, CA: Consulting and support for Graduate Theological Union faculty and students who are replicating the Poverty Initiative and held their first Poverty Truth Commission in April 2008

- o West Palm Beach, FL: Preaching and lesson-sharing hosted by Urban Youth Impact and the Royal Ponciana Chapel
- o Detroit, MI: Commissioner for Truth Commission on Water Rights
- o Nairobi, Kenya: “Get Organized for Human Rights” gathering sponsored by Dignity International
- o Amman, Jordan: Trialogue with business and religious leaders from the Middle East and around the world
- o Philadelphia, PA: Media Mobilizing Project’s Leadership School at Villanova University Philadelphia, PA
- o New York, NY: Workshop for Philadelphia Student Union immersion participants who “replicated” their first immersion trip in June 2008
- o Old Lyme, CT: Preaching and gatherings at Old Lyme United Church of Christ
- o Washington DC: American Baptist Biennial Celebration
- o Knoxville, TN: Beloved Communities Initiative at Alex Haley Farm
- o New York, NY: Bible study and advising of the Beloved Community Initiative at Riverside Church
- o Columbia, MS: Strategizing with Charlotte Keys and Jesus’ People Against Pollution
- o Marks, MS: Commemorating the 40th Anniversary of the Mule Train from Marks to Washington DC in the Poor People’s Campaign

Honors and Recognitions

- Willie Baptist received the Alston/Bannerman Fellowship for long-time activists of color
- Onleilove Alston received a Beatitudes Society Fellowship to intern with Sojourners in Washington DC in the Summer 2008
- Charlene Sinclair received the Travelers Fellowship from Union Theological Seminary in May 2008

Poverty Initiative Staff and Interns

Over the course of four years, the Poverty Initiative has expanded from a small student-initiated project to a multi-faceted program with the involvement of dozens of students, faculty, administrators, staff at Union Theological Seminary, religious congregations and leaders, poor people’s organizations and community groups.

In 2007-2008, the Poverty Initiative paid staff included: seven work-study placements, two field education interns from Union Theological Seminary and one Columbia University School of Social Work intern (including Onleilove Alston, Kimberlee Auletta, Adam Barnes, Katherine Clark, Anne King, Derrick McQueen, Drew Paton, Ben Sanders III, Charlene Sinclair, John Wessel McCoy); and three part-time recent UTS alumni staff members (including Jessica Chadwick, Charon Hribar, Colleen Wessel-McCoy). The Poverty Initiative Coordinator is Liz Theoharis. The Poverty Initiative was very excited to welcome part-time Development Consultant Dawn Plummer in January 2008. The Poverty

Initiative full-time staff includes Scholar-in-Residence, Willie Baptist and Program Manager, Alix Webb.

Looking Forward

In 2008-2009, the Poverty Initiative is focused on re-igniting the Poor People's Campaign launched in December 1967 by Martin Luther King, Jr. by bringing together leaders of poor communities across racial, gender, and religious lines. Beginning in September 2008, fifty Poverty Scholars Program candidates will gather in New York City for three strategic Dialogue Convenings that will serve as preparation for a week-long Leadership School for more than one hundred community leaders from across the nation.

In addition to focus on the Poverty Scholars Program, the Poverty Initiative will continue to:

- impact theological education by sponsoring immersion courses (in New York City and State), one-day field education seminars, and faculty-sponsored courses
- support religious and community organizations and educational institutions to replicate the principles of the Poverty Initiative
- develop the "Reading the Bible with the Poor" Bible Institute
- reach out internationally through participation in efforts in Scotland, Kenya and Haiti and through dialogue with leaders of social movements in South Africa and Brazil.

Thank You

More people than we could possibly list here create the vision for, and the reality of the Poverty Initiative. We offer gratitude to all those who have inspired; who have forged paths; who have made generous contributions – financial, time, labor, creativity, knowledge and experience, leadership; whose hands are joined in ours and whose shoulders we stand on. Thank you for making the Poverty Initiative possible.

Union Theological Seminary Board of Trustees Poverty Initiative Ad-Hoc Committee

The Poverty Initiative thanks all of the members of this committee for their many contributions and great generosity in 2007 – 2008. Members of the Poverty Initiative Trustees Committee include: Art Trotman and Mitchell Watson (Co-Chairs), Douglas Ades, David Callard, Aiyoun Choi, Barbara Fiorito, Susie Hermanson, Steve Hudspeth, Emma Jordan Simpson, David McAlpin, Ted Pardoe and Mary White.

Union Theological Seminary

The Poverty Initiative receives tremendous support from the President's Office, the Faculty, Administration, and Board of Trustees of Union Theological Seminary. A very special thank you for our unique collaboration and for all their continuing support.

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The United Workers has worked closely with the Poverty Initiative since its beginning.

The Poverty Initiative is a unique and invaluable organization with a mission that has had a meaningful role in work that the United Workers has undertaken, the recent major successes we have enjoyed, and the development of the leaders **who are the future of this fight for human rights and the end of poverty for all people.**

Todd Cherkis

Director, United Workers, Poverty Scholars Program Member Organization

“Without the Poverty Initiative the theological knowledge that I have gained at Union would have had no “legs”.

The Poverty Initiative has provided a learning community where commitment, theory and passion meet action. Where social and individual transformation grounded in faith is not a theoretical inquiry **but a quest for the development of a practical reality.”**

Charlene Sinclair

Union Theological Seminary Ph.D. Candidate

“Last night, through a series of unfortunate events, I ended up walking home from the Harlem train station in eleven-degree weather. The only thing I could think of, as I complained to myself, were the many homeless people that had to spend so much of their day in this deadly cold weather. This class, as well as the rest of the works of the Poverty Initiative, has had an indelible effect on my outlook.”

Jessica Chadwick

Pastor and Union Theological Seminary Alumni MDiv/MSSW

“Those 96 hours we spent with our Poverty Initiative friends were very special. Kate and I talked at dinner Tuesday evening about that time being so valuable and so inspiring. We told ourselves that it was what we should try to be about each day if we are to add real value to our lives and to other people... For me these are six powerful people from Union doing God’s work and I simply thank God for all of them.”

Mitchell Watson

Union Theological Seminary Board of Trustees, Co-Chair Poverty Initiative Trustees Committee

I graduated from seminary in May, and part of my ministry has been my on-going involvement with the Poverty Initiative, since I went to the Gulf Coast with the group two years ago...

The Poverty Initiative has huge potential to change the potentially devastating drift of our country toward a two class society, one with a vast and insurmountable chasm dividing the very rich and the very poor. I really believe that this polarized world with such radical **inequality of opportunity and means is a blight on all and diminishes society, rich and poor alike.**

Susie Hermanson

Union Theological Seminary Alumni MDiv