

On World Impact's "Empowering the Urban Poor"

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Since our founding more than forty years ago, World Impact has spoken prophetically regarding God's election of the poor, the benign neglect of the evangelical church of America's inner city poor, and the need for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting in unreached urban poor communities. We believe that credible urban mission must demonstrate the Gospel, testifying in both the proclaimed word and concrete action. In light of this, we have emphasized living in the communities we serve, ministering to the needs of the whole person, as well as to the members of the whole urban family. We have sought this witness with a goal to see communities reached and transformed by Christ, believing that those who live in the city and are poor can be empowered to live in the freedom, wholeness, and justice of the Kingdom of God fleshed out in local churches and viable urban church planting movements. All our vision, prayer, and efforts are concentrated on a particular social group, the "urban poor," and our commitment to "empower" them through all facets of our work.

While the phrase "the urban poor" may be misunderstood or misused, we have chosen to employ it with our own stipulated meanings, informed by biblical theology as well as urban sociology. We employ the term to identify those whom God has commissioned us to serve, as well as to represent God's prophetic call to proclaim Good News to the poor, both to the church and to our society at large.

It must be conceded, of course, that the term "urban poor" may be easily misapplied and misused. The American city is dramatically diverse, profoundly complex in its mixtures of classes, cultures, and ethnicities. Amid so much diversity, a phrase like "the urban poor" may, at first glance, appear to be too denotative to be suitable as a summary designation of those whom we serve, being somewhat dry and academic. Without clearly stipulating what you mean when you use it, it can easily turn to mere labeling, which tends to reinforce stereotypes, encouraging generalizations about city dwellers which are either too vague or generic to be useful.

Further, some might even suggest that such language is used for its sensationalized impact, for "tear jerk" effect, largely used to elicit donor response without providing clear information on a particular communities or grouping. It is argued that language like "urban poor"

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encourages over-generalization, and, using such terms to describe thousands, even millions of discrete cultures and communities is demeaning, sloppy thinking, and generally belittling to urban folk. Others suggest that such terms as “urban poor” should be replaced with other terms more sensitive to urban people, suggesting alternative phrases as “the disenfranchised” or “the economically oppressed.” Some might even suggest that using any language that asserts particular differences between and among urban dwellers on the basis of class is inappropriate, and unnecessarily creates division among those whom Christ died for.

While these and related arguments have some validity, especially for those who use phrases like this in an insensitive and unthinking manner, none of them, either separate or together, disqualify the legitimate use of that term. For more than four decades as a national missions organization, World Impact has boldly identified its target population as those who reside in the city who are socio-economically poor. We use the language of “the urban poor” in this light, informed by the demographics in the city and the teaching of the Scriptures regarding God’s commitment to the poor.

Poverty in the United States continues to rise. In data gathered as late as 2010, the poverty rate has been increasing to 15.1 percent in 2010 from 14.3 percent in 2009 and 13.2 percent in 2008. According to the research think-tank, the Urban Institute, there were 46.2 million poor people in 2010 compared to 43.2 million in 2009, with the poverty rater looming higher than it has been since 1993 (Urban Institute, Unemployment and Recovery Project, September 13, 2011). Sluggish job markets, high unemployment, and rising poverty rates have dramatically impacted urban communities, with literally thousands of families lacking income and access to the basic resources to live and survive. World Impact unashamedly focuses its time and attention on evangelizing, equipping, and empowering those in communities hardest hit by our recessions, economic blight, and all the by-products of violence, crime, broken family, and the overall desperation that poverty and hopelessness brings.

We do not use the term “urban poor” only to clearly identify the population to which we have been historically called. We also use the term because of the prophetic meaning of the poor in Scripture. Many dozens of text in both Old and New Testaments reveal a consistent perspective regarding God and those who are poor. They show that God has always had a burden for those who lack power, resources, money, or the necessities of life. The standards God gave to his covenant people regarding the poor reveal his commitment to the

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destitute, and all groups and classes associated with them. It is clear that the Old Testament includes a number of groups in close proximity to the poor, including orphans, widows, slaves, and the oppressed (e.g., Deut. 15; Ruth; Isa. 1). Those who exploited and took advantage of the vulnerable because of their poverty and weakness would be judged, and mercy and kindness was exhorted as the universal standard of God's people on behalf of the poor. The Law provided numerous commands regarding the fair and gracious treatment of the poor and the needy, of the demand to provide the hungry and destitute with food, and for the liberal treatment of the poor (Deut. 15.11).

The New Testament reveals God's heart for the poor crystallized in the incarnation of Jesus. Jesus proclaimed in his inaugural sermon that he was anointed with God's Spirit to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom to the poor (Luke 4.18; 6.20), and confirmed his Messianic identity to John the Baptizer with preaching to the poor, along with healings and miracles (Luke 7.18-23). The Lord declared Zacchaeus' justice to the poor as a sign of his salvation (Luke 19.8-10), and he identified himself unequivocally with those who were sick, in prison, strangers, hungry, thirsty, and naked (Matt. 25.31-45). Every facet of Jesus' life and ministry intersected with the needs of those who lacked resources and money, and therefore could be easily exploited, oppressed, and taken advantage of.

In the actions and writings of the Apostles, we also see clear statements regarding God's election of and care for those who are economically poor. James 2.5 says that God has chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith and to inherit the Kingdom he promised to those who love him. Paul told the Corinthians that God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things of the world to shame the strong, the lowly and despised things of this world to nullify the things that are, in order that no one might boast in his presence (1 Cor. 1.27-29). This text and others thicken our view of the poor as merely lacking goods, services, and resources: more than that, the poor are those who need make them vulnerable to the effect of their need and the world's exploitation, and are desperate enough to rely on God's strength alone.

In using the term "urban poor" we make clear both the target population that guides the decisions and outreaches of our ministry, as well as unashamedly testify to the biblical perspective of God's election of and commitment to the most vulnerable, needy, and exposed people within our society. Urban dwellers outnumber all other populations today, and our cities have been magnets for massive migrations of

urban peoples looking for economic betterment. We believe that “empowering the urban poor” therefore is missionally strategic and prophetically potent. Missionally, the phrase is strategic because it rightly denotes the vast numbers of people who remain unreached with the Gospel of Christ who dwell in our cities. Prophetically, it is potent because it reveals our bold and unashamed call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, our respect for the poorest of the poor, our belief that God is calling the poor to be members of his church, and our confidence that the urban poor have a significant place in raising up leaders who will reach the cities of our nation, and beyond.

What of the use of the term “urban poor” and World Impact’s prayer partners and donors, and our friends and neighbors in the city? To begin with, we have used the term clearly and circumspectly to help anyone interested in our mission agency know precisely those whom God has called us to reach. We love the families and individuals that we serve in the city, and ought never use language (this phrase or any other) to shame or exploit our relationship with them. We do not use this term as a stereotyping label, some pejorative stamp to limit the potential of the communities where we live and work. Rather, we use the phrase in our materials in order to communicate clearly, forthrightly, and persuasively argue the priority of this long neglected field in evangelical mission. From the beginning we have unashamedly committed our lives and resources to making disciples and planting churches among America’s urban poor. This is a stewardship, the outworking of our individual and corporate call as missionaries of Christ. God forbid that any one of us would use such language to denigrate the very ones for whom Christ died, those to whom we are called, and those which we believe are the key to future mission in America, and beyond! Speaking clearly regarding our calling is our duty, which never includes shaming or belittling any person to which we are called. For the sake of our mission, our donors, and those whom we serve, we must be unequivocal regarding our target population; likewise, we must never shame nor denigrate them in our use of any communication, ever.

“Empowering the urban poor,” therefore, as our adopted language, is neither just a tag-line nor a catchy motto. Rather, for us it functions as a representation of our single vision, the integrating mission of our work as an interdenominational ministry in the city. We believe that empowerment is neither merely meeting needs, dealing only with the mere symptoms of underlying structures of poverty, nor is it being hegemonic patrons to the poor, making them forever dependent on our charity and service. As missionaries of Christ, we believe that the poor,

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like any other people, can be redeemed, transformed, and released to be the people of God in their own communities. When God wanted to empower his people, he sent his Holy Spirit upon the apostolic company, and formed a community which he entrusted with the life of God and the Word of life. The answer of God to systemic poverty and neglect was to form a people who embodied the very life of the Kingdom where freedom, wholeness, and justice reside. These communities are entrusted with a mission to gather the elect from among the poorest, most broken people on earth, and, through the power of the Spirit and Christian community, see the Kingdom come to earth in new relationships of hospitality, generosity, and righteousness, right where they live. Every healthy functioning church is an outpost of the Kingdom of God, and can be a place where true transformation takes place. Nothing “empowers” the poor like a simple assembly of believers, obedient to the Lordship of Christ!

Armed with this perspective, we wholeheartedly believe that no organization in the history of the world can recognize the dignity and value of the poor like the Church of Jesus Christ. In light of this conviction, World Impact strives to plant as many churches as fast as possible among the various cultures represented by the urban poor, in all of our cities and beyond. We are convinced that no other social organization has the endorsement of God, the headship of Christ, and the power of the Spirit like a healthy functioning local church. And, nothing empowers a community like facilitating church planting movements among the urban poor, where the life and power of the Gospel of Christ can reach and transform entire communities as outposts of the Kingdom. All that we do in mission and in justice (from our camps, our schools, our businesses, medical and dental clinics, our work in the jails and the prisons, and most important of all, our missionary church planting and leadership development efforts) contribute to this empowerment work. Rather than merely meet needs or serve as patrons to the poor, we believe that the Spirit of God can win them, raise up leaders, empower them to lead, and release them as laborers in their very own communities as ambassadors of Christ. More than being recipients of care, we believe they can receive investment to be God’s servant leaders, transformers of their communities and co-laborers in God’s Kingdom work.

In conclusion, while the phrase “empowering the urban poor” may be misused and misapplied, we at World Impact wholeheartedly embrace the phrase not only because it clarifies the target population of our mission, but also because it unequivocally states our prophetic call to represent God’s unchanging commitment to the most vulnerable and least resourced among us. Let us allow Jesus’ challenge given so

many centuries ago to continue to be our model and vision of ministry today as we seek to fulfill the Great Commission among the world's urban poor:

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

~ Matthew 25.34-40 (ESV)

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