

## ANSWER THE CALL

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

- James 1:27

As a community of believers seeking to imitate our Lord, we must be prepared to consider the “least of these” as the Bible demands. Throughout the ministry of nearly every prophet, from Moses to Jesus, poverty was at the forefront, and as the church has grown to be a major financial power, we have before us a significant opportunity to “put our money where our mouth is” quite literally. Will we answer the call?

Jesus was born into the small, rural village of Nazareth. He understood that the impoverished face unique challenges in their struggle for survival, and he derided the unmercifully wealthy for refusing to help. More than the privileged donating to the needy, though, Jesus constantly called us to love and community, so that among us there may be no division, even with money. Will we answer his call?

Rural poverty is a pervasive problem across this country, and there is relatively little attention paid to it. Overall rural poverty is higher than metropolitan poverty—15.1% of the rural population compared to 12.5% of the urban population.

There are demographic differences, too. While the majority of the rural impoverished is white (about 2/3, reflecting the general rural population), rural minorities are much more likely to experience poverty than are urban minorities.

Additionally, the rate of persistent poverty—defined as 20% or more of a county in poverty for 30 consecutive years—is disproportionately high in what are deemed “nonmetropolitan” areas. Per U.S. census data, of the 386 counties defined as being in persistent poverty, 340 of them are of the mostly rural, “nonmetropolitan” type. Certainly, the persistently poor are the “least of these” about whom Jesus spoke.

Not only is the percentage of people below the poverty line higher in rural areas, but rural persons also tend to earn less money than the urban employed, due to the preponderance of blue-collar and service industry jobs.

In this way, the federal poverty measure is often deemed inadequate for rural communities<sup>6</sup>. In the early 1960s, the federal poverty line was just under 50% of the median income for a family of four. By 2007 it was at 28%. The federal poverty measure is adjusted for inflation, but inflation may be a poor indicator of the income of persons in poverty since minimum-wage salaries do not rise with inflation. Even as the United States moves toward general inflation over time, minimum wage earners struggle to make ends meet. Will we answer the call?

Rural poverty presents its own unique problems<sup>1</sup>:

- Rural education is substandard, and rural adults are more likely to not have a college diploma than urban adults.
- There is little economic diversity in rural areas, making rural employment much more subject to market forces; if one loses a job, there are fewer options in finding another. Additionally, many rural jobs are low-wage.
- There is a general lack of infrastructure, including child care facilities, public transportation, and technology. Diverse geography complicates the matter, as the rural population is more spread out, increasing the dependence on personal vehicles and commuting for work.

There is hope. Because of the high rate of low-wage employees in rural areas, rural poverty may benefit greatly from the federal increase in minimum wage (\$7.25/hr. by 2009). Grassroots efforts and programs offer assistance to low-income families via countless after-school programs, adult financial education courses, and large-scale government reform (tax code, SNAP, WIC, etc.).

While large-scale reform is needed to alter the structural problems effecting poverty, expansive government programs can seem too unwieldy to affect small scale change. Local, community action is absolutely vital in order to end poverty, and the funds and/or organizational models for these programs exist (Share Our Strength, the USDA, Capital Area Asset Builders, and a host of others). Get in touch with nonprofits and your local and national representatives to find out what solutions exist for your specific needs. The help is out there, so Go GET It!

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<sup>1</sup> <http://web1.ctaa.org/webmodules/webarticles/articlefiles/razor.pdf>