

SOCIAL JUSTICE SUNDAY

28 September 2008

FACES OF POVERTY



National Council of Churches in Australia

Dear Friends,

We are familiar with images of desperate poverty from other countries and we know that there are billions of people in the world who suffer hunger and thirst every day of their lives. But do we know about the faces of Australian poverty? What is poverty? How should Christians respond?

This year on Social Justice Sunday, 28 September, or on another Sunday, with your Bible study or fellowship group, or during some quiet time on your own, we are inviting you to think about poverty through four special stories. Not all these stories are what you might expect but we hope that each inspires you to reflect on the meaning of poverty and be moved to offer a Christian response. Many of us can afford to give financial support to organisations which offer services to those who live in poverty and social isolation. That is vitally important, but as Jesus demonstrated there are many ways to live in solidarity with those who are vulnerable – sharing meals, making friends, challenging attitudes and structures that breed and perpetuate poverty.

Whatever we do, it is done in response to the love of Jesus, who brings good news – especially to the poor and the oppressed. He equips us to be God's hands and hearts in this mission of love and grace.



Revd John Henderson, General Secretary, NCCA

1. NOT ENOUGH MONEY



A woman in Dhaka, Bangladesh, looking for recyclables to sell. She is one of the 2.7 billion people worldwide who live on less than \$2 per day.¹

In 2000, the Blair family decided to live on the Australian poverty line - \$536.44 a week for a family of three.² Peter and Sharm made this commitment when they joined Urban Neighbours of Hope's (UNOH) Springvale community.

UNOH reaches out to people facing urban poverty in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. Most UNOH workers are supported by individual donations, but a few still work part time.

“Cutting back was a challenge for us and still is. Even when we're living on the poverty line, the temptation to spend and accumulate is still there –

it's not so much the limiting of our income, but the limiting of our lifestyle choices that's the hardest. We constantly face that, regardless of the amount of money we get, because the pressure to spend and accumulate is still there.

I've just recently become a father and it's a struggle, choosing to live simply as a family. There's this sense of obligation that we have to lavish gifts on our children or live extravagantly for them. It's like the world is nudging us one way; Christ is calling us a different way.

Living simply gives us more time. In our society we spend heaps of time pursuing stuff, or playing with our stuff, or chasing money so we can get more stuff. For me, choosing to live simply frees up our time, but it also keeps us light on our feet. We can respond to the needs around us better if we have less to worry about.

The choice to do that is actually not for ourselves. It's limiting our power so that we can help people that are powerless have opportunities to grow and stand on their own two feet. What's considered 'poor' in Australia is comparatively wealthy in the rest of the world. But living on the poverty line in Australia still excludes a lot of people from participation in so-called 'normal life'.

Poverty is usually defined as a lack of financial resources, but I also see poverty in terms of

marginalisation. There's lots in our society that marginalises people and limits opportunities to participate in 'normal life'. I see that in the people I work with, wanting to fit into something when they can't. I see it in newly arrived refugees, Indigenous people, people with drug and alcohol addictions and people with mental illnesses. We're passionate about seeing those people included, accepted, loved and brought back to life.

The Bible stories that inspire me are actually all the healing stories from the Gospels. I understand them as being more than just miraculous events; Jesus is restoring broken and marginalised people back to a sense of dignity and place within society."

Pray: God of grace, you call us to serve. Help us to be faithful.

Where there is hunger, may we bring food;
where there is thirst, may we bring water;
where there is despair,
may we bring your hope:
in your name, in your strength
and in your Spirit,
as signs of your love in the world. **Amen.**

Learn: Read *Affluenza* by Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss to learn more about over-consumption's effect on our society. Visit UNOH - www.unoh.org.

Do: Examine your spending habits. What don't you really need, and how could this money be better used?

Give what you don't need to charity.

2. NOWHERE TO LIVE

On any given night, more than 99,000 Australians are homeless.³ Kevin was kicked out of home when he was 14. He was homeless for 20 years.

On the streets...

"You wake up in the morning and you're cold. In the winter, of course, it's even worse. It's difficult even opening your eyes. You know it's going to be another long day meeting your needs. You know it before you go to sleep that night - you'll wake up to the same thing again.

But you get up and make your way to breakfast wherever you know that's happening. You try to get yourself fed and showered, and get yourself cleaned up and that. But it's difficult because a lot of the services are strained and there's only a small amount of services trying to manage a large number of people.

In the day, generally you try and keep yourself occupied. Guys will go and read the newspaper, or try and go somewhere they can sit and watch TV, or congregate or whatever. There's nothing exciting about it.

It's dangerous all the time in the cities, living on the streets. Nighttime especially. It changes. It's like someone put on a different movie – in some cases a horror movie. It gets very violent, and if you do

isolate yourself, you can be in danger. If you pick a spot to sleep where there's not much light, not many people walking past.

Then there are the guys living in the park opposite me. They have to put up with abuse from people leaving the pub, causing fights.

Most people think you're a drunk or a hopeless loser because you're on the streets. But you're not, and that's what I had to learn about myself. I'm a person. Every homeless person is a beating heart. The general community don't see that. They see a hindrance, another drunk, a junkie in the way. But homelessness doesn't discriminate. Homeless people come from all walks of life. It can happen to anyone."

Kevin's situation changed when he met people from Hopstreet Urban Compassion. With their support, he found a home in Woolloomooloo. He now works part time, and volunteers with Homeless Voice, a network of homeless and formerly homeless people. Kevin has been off the streets for four years.

Off the streets...

"Even in that four years, it hasn't been perfect. There was many a time I just wanted to drag my swag and just go. Alright - put everybody in houses, but then what do you do? You've got a guy you've just taken straight off the street who's used to living on dirt. You put him in a house and say right, now manage all your bills, do all your shopping, cook your meals. I'm lucky in some respects. I got to learn a few things, like

how to cook when I got out of home. But there's a great need for continued support out there.

I think people in church could become more aware of homelessness, take it on board, pray about it and see where God leads them. Come and have a look. To see that homeless people are created in the image of God just like everybody else.

Not to say that the person with the million dollar home and the beautiful car has got everything. But to have a home and your own set of keys - it takes a lot of work, a lot of strength and support to maintain that.

I know this because the last thing I see when I shut my door is about fifteen homeless people getting ready for bed under the bridge. The first thing I see at 4.50 in the morning when I go to work is all those people starting to wake up and take up their beds."



3. NO PLACE TO BELONG

Jonathon Ngor was one of the lost boys of Sudan, 20,000 boys who were displaced or orphaned by civil war.⁴ Jonathon lost both parents by the time he was seven. His mother died crossing the Nile during the epic 3 month journey to a refugee camp in Ethiopia. His father was killed when Government soldiers attacked the refugee camp where he was staying. Only Jonathon and his sister survived. Jonathon came to Australia in 2002 as a refugee when he was 22, and now works part-time as a youthworker in Blacktown, Sydney.

In Sudan...

"Before the war, we have many people who call themselves cousins. We believe in extended families. Families that have to stay together. If something happened to one member, everyone has to help that situation. If something causes a problem in the

Pray: For those in this great country who tonight sleep on the street, in a refuge or on a borrowed bed;

We pray for safety and peace.

For those who work providing care to such people, and to make secure housing available;

We pray for safety, peace and perseverance.

For we who are content to pray and feel satisfied that we have done our duty;

We pray that you will help us to see with your eyes and live our obedience to your word.

Amen.

Learn: Find out more about homeless persons' issues by going to the Council for Homeless Persons' website - www.chp.org.au.

Do: Volunteer at a homeless shelter.

Next time you see a homeless person, don't ignore them. What you do instead is up to you.

Write to your local MP, asking them to make sure that homeless people are consulted as governments seek solutions to homelessness.

community, everyone sits down as a family and talks. If I was still living in Sudan, and I wanted to marry a girl, all these people – my cousins – would have to contribute so I can pay dowry.

Then the war came and people were scattered around the world. The war started in 1983, but the scattering began in 1990 when there was no hope at all that things would change. There was massive destruction. Almost everyone was displaced.

Sudan is bordered by nine countries, so the Sudanese went to all these different places. Today, almost everywhere in Africa, you find Sudanese there. And from there, they learn different cultures.

It is hard – even now, most of the people aren't connected to their families. People are really struggling to find their communities again, and living with the anxiety of not even knowing if their family is alive.

For example, myself I was separated from my sister when she was four and I was seven. It was in 2003 when I arrived in Australia – that was when I found out she was still alive. After 17 years.

In 2007 – that was when I saw her for the first time. I arrived at the airport in Khartoum and the taxi took me to her street. There were many people standing around. We stopped and I was just looking, looking, thinking ‘who would be my sister?’ Then I saw this lady, just looking down and people were murmuring. I knew she was my sister. I just ran straight to her, and she was just standing there doing nothing, then she was crying.

Most of the people standing there waiting for us – they couldn’t come to me and say hi. They didn’t know who this person is. I talked to them, and they started laughing and some people were crying. One of them – my auntie said to me, ‘let me first see your teeth.’ And she said ‘Your teeth look like my brother’s teeth. I believe that you are my brother’s son.’”

Pray: Loving God, be with those who flee their country, family and friends in fear of violence and persecution. Be with the refugees who leave behind those they love, the country of their birth, the known for the unknown.

Be with those who undertake dangerous crossings and risky voyages in search of peace and safety.

Give them strength and the experience of knowing they are welcomed, cared for and supported. May they know the joy of a new life lived in peace.

We ask this in the name of Jesus our brother.
Amen.

In Australia...

Jonathon now runs programs for newly arrived Sudanese refugees, including a soccer tournament for boys, and he is working on a project to raise funds for a girls’ high school in Sudan.

“The Sudanese community in Australia is very strong. Every week there are meetings looking at how they can handle all the issues arising in the community, especially educational problems with the kids.

This also creates a positive relationship with the Australian community. People know if anything went wrong, it is not because of the Sudanese - it is just individuals.

Since we come here in Australia it’s been really good. The church creates an environment where we have brothers that really care about us. Our religion says loving God is to help your neighbour and to help the weak person. So it is true that the church must support them. They are a part of the church, so if the church helps them the church helps itself.”

Learn: Watch the documentary *Lost Boys of Sudan*, by Megan Mylan and Jon Shenk.

Visit the Refugee Council of Australia’s website - www.refugeecouncil.org.au.

Do: Volunteer as an English teacher for immigrants in your community.

Write to your Federal MP, encouraging them to make sure refugees are given practical support, especially in housing, language learning, and access to employment.

4. NOT ENOUGH TIME



Rob works for a large management consultancy firm in Sydney. He works 55 to 60 hours per week – more during peak times. He also has a busy social life, takes motorcycling lessons, goes to the gym and has just finished his honours thesis in Law.

“Some people take a vow of poverty. I’ve made the choice to be time poor. My spare time is pretty much limited to 20 minutes before bed reading a book. That’s it. That’s ‘me time’ for the day. It’s who I am as a person that I don’t leave much fat in the schedule. I work really hard during the week, and I’ll stay back really late. Working till midnight Monday to Wednesday is not a problem if it means I don’t work on the weekend.

I've learnt that the Sabbath is important physiologically and mentally. In the last few years, I've had two really significant breakdowns. The debilitating physical effects of the stress builds up, and you're just gone.

I haven't been to church for a couple of months. I was doing a law thesis, and my supervisor came back and said it could be better. I kind of thought that I should fix it. Seeing it as an urgent and temporary thing, I've let church fall by the wayside. In fact, reading the bible and prayer has also fallen by the wayside. When there's guilt about an outstanding task – that's probably what leads me to de-prioritise what's most valuable to me. But I'm going back tonight.

It's not even wanting to be successful financially that drives the pressure to do things. What I would say is that I want to do good in the world with my life. And that's a duty placed on me. And you want to have great friendships. And then there's a duty and a desire to have an interesting personal life – to go kite surfing and climb rocks.

I think my life would be poorer without that, and society encourages you to think your life would be poor without these things.

If you've got some choice about it, you can be financially poor, or time poor, and have a fantastic life. I feel quite blessed. I have all this flexibility to choose what to do with my life. I've got lots of options. I can quit being time-poor if I want."

Pray: Loving God, does your heart ache at our antics? As we rush from plan to action, do you long for us to stand still?

Thank you that we live in a society with so many opportunities to achieve. We want to be in your service; we say we crave balance, but too often we get in the way of ourselves. May we so experience your love that we can separate the urgent from the important. Put in us a heart for contemplation, O God, that we might be truly your children. **Amen.**

Learn: We often hear about people who are 'cash-rich, time-poor.' But what about people who don't have enough of either time or money? Read the UK National Consumer Council's booklet 'time-poor, cash-poor' at www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/poldocs/NCC193pb_timepoor_cashpoor.pdf.

Do: Review your time-commitments. Each day, each week, and each month, try to set aside some time to be still.

Notes

- ¹ The World Bank, *PovertyNet - Overview*.
- ² Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *Poverty Lines Australia – March Quarter*.
- ³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *2001 Census*.
- ⁴ <http://www.lostboysfilm.com/assets/LostBoys-PressKit.pdf>.

This resource is available for download at www.ncca.org.au.

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National Council of Churches in Australia
ABN 64 493 941 795

Level 7, 379 Kent Street, Sydney NSW
Locked bag 199, Sydney NSW 1230
Tel +61 (0) 2 9299 2215 Fax +61 (0) 2 9262 4514
Email secretariat@ncca.org.au
Web <http://www.ncca.org.au>



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