

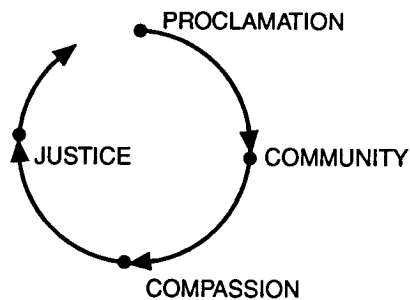
WALKING WITH THE POOR **A Challenge for Equity and Equality**

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Ps. 72 vs. 1-7, 12-14, 16, 18-19 ; 1 Kings 21:1-11, 16-19; John 10:10

THE CIRCLE OF MISSIONS

In “Presbyterians in World Mission” Rev. Thompson Brown describes how the circle of missions has developed from the experiences in the mission field. In short, that circle started



with the **PROCLAMATION** of God’s reconciliation of humankind in Christ: proclamation as a call for a binding commitment to the Word. This proclamation became incarnated in **COMMUNITIES** of Faith: communities for nurture of believers, sustainability of churches, education, leadership development and promotion of unity of Christ’s church. These communities in their turn attended to the direct needs of people through ministries of **COMPASSION**. Out of compassion health, agricultural and community development programs were developed, and programs

like hunger relief, disaster assistance and orphan care. Compassion calls us to provide food for starving people in Africa. But with hunger reoccurring and poverty aggravating we discover that we are only treating symptoms and not root causes of the problem. People may be suffering hunger or poverty because they are victims of land exploitation, a corrupt economy, or greedy corporations. Sin has not only affected us as individuals, it has penetrated the structures of our economic, political and social life. If we are serious about expressing our Christian love “not in word but in deed”, we must recognize, confess and deal with those sins of our society. To sustain compassionate ministries of charity, **JUSTICE** had to be added to the circle of mission: justice to advocate changes of systemic problems in society and in this world, which are at the basis of dire needs.

Mere societal changes may not be enough for a true change of heart. Returning to the Scriptures as source, guide and reference for all mission programs is indispensable for a deeper understanding and commitment to the holistic nature of the gospel.

LOCAL TRADE DYNAMICS

“They are cheaters”. The indignation of the tiny Catholic nun was clear through her gestures and facial expression. “Last time when the traders came to the village, the villagers decided to stick to a standard price for their plantains. But the traders just waited till the end of the day, when the women needed the money to still buy some cooking oil, and their merchandise risked going bad. The villagers ended up selling the plantains at a third of their original price, bunches, that will be resold in the cities for eight times the price we got.”

Women cooperatives in the South West Province took me to their communal farm plots. They explained how they would sell their cassava to help group members pay for medical needs of their families. I heard someone sigh: “Despite our hard work, we continue to live in

poverty. Even the coffee doesn't earn us an income anymore". I then realized: these women are coffee farmers. All along the road I saw large bags of coffee berries standing on the porches of the huts and the topic kept on coming back to coffee. The villagers told me: "We don't know whether the traders will even come. The other year we had to burn our coffee crops, because they stayed away. Now we live in poverty. If death doesn't come to ourselves, it will come to our children. Our teenage children have started blaming us: Who has asked you to deliver so many of us?". A village chief added: "There is food, but why are we poor? We find intermediaries just showing up on our parlor and have to accept whatever price they tell us. The coffee doesn't allow us anymore to send our children to school. Middlemen are people that like to grow in another's armpit".

GLOBAL TRADE

These stories of local trade in the villages mirror the powerlessness of the poor in the face of global trade.

In Northern Cameroon a partner explained me how communities organize themselves to build wells and to pay for extra schoolteachers. Upon our arrival in a village to visit with the community, I saw white piles of cotton contrasting against a crisp blue sky; I heard children singing and dancing in a shipping container loaded with this cash crop. The images told me these villagers are not poor and in need of a well or education merely by fate. As cotton-growing communities they are engaged in a global fight against protectionist policies of economic world powers.

LAND OWNERSHIP AND GLOBALIZATION

Soil in the Littoral province of Cameroon is fertile as Paradise must have been. There are food crops, palm groves and fruit trees wherever you look. No one would think that hunger and poverty existed here. But a few years ago ruthless globalization allowed 43 farmer families to be removed from their fields for the development of a banana plantation by a foreign export company. Without land, these families have no food and no income. One of the farmers has in the meantime died. His young widow told me that, without the income from their fields, she had no money for medical care when her husband fell ill. Having initially invested in the plots, the farmers are now unable to repay their debts and face imprisonment.

JOINING HANDS AGAINST HUNGER

The emphasis on justice has been part of the missionary enterprise since the early days of Presbyterian missions. William Sheppard was one of the first two Presbyterian missionaries sent to the Congo in the 19th century. His successful political campaign ended the gruesome exploitation of Congolese workers on the rubber plantations of the Belgian colonial master King Leopold. It is one of the greatest examples where justice was included in the circle of Presbyterian missions.

Today's issues that affect the mission of the church include corporate practices abroad, trade policies, government support for totalitarian regimes and human rights concerns. The current global trends have led the Presbyterian Church to more prominently incorporate the justice component in its international hunger ministries and the Joining Hands Against Hunger Program was developed as a ministry of justice in solidarity with the world's poor. Since its

establishment five years ago Joining Hands has sought to protect the interests of poor overseas communities by helping them to heal, to gain wholeness in life with dignity, to build self-reliance and to challenge local and global injustices in peaceful ways. But addressing justice issues in the missionary enterprise remains controversial as it seeks changes that appear to damage our self-interests.

COUNTRY NETWORKS

Through the Joining Hands Against Hunger Program, the Presbyterian Hunger Program partners with overseas networks of churches and ecumenical and secular non-governmental organizations. Through these networks the program creates a forum for the voice of the powerless to be heard. In their meetings network member organizations share and discuss their concerns with each other and cross-fertilize their knowledge and skills. As they study root causes of hunger and poverty in their communities, systemic injustices surface as common source of the perpetuated struggle of the poor and marginalized. Some of these have global links. The Joining Hands Program is valued by the individual network members for the mutual encouragement it provides, a sense of solidarity and friendships among the member organizations. Together they grow towards a common strategy to more effectively tackle issues.

PCUSA CONGREGATIONAL NETWORKS

The PCUSA also acknowledges the need to educate its own members about the hardship of the poor Two Thirds population in this world. The Joining Hands Program invites congregations to engage in relationships with overseas partner networks and to learn first hand about the hopes and the struggles of overseas communities. A closer walk with the poor allows them to take in realities that normally are kept hidden from our eyes, ears and hearts as they challenge the very fabric of our own society. On their journey American Presbyterians may open up to otherwise voiceless people, whose stories are living testimonies of an unfair world; a world where powerful governments, businesses and financial institutions in the North determine the fate of powerless people in the South. Looking at this world through the eyes of their overseas companions, American Presbyterians may gain new perspectives, let themselves be transformed by their experiences, and change their involvement in hunger ministries. Covenanting relationships in the Joining Hands Program between PCUSA congregations and national networks are called companionships and aim at peacefully changing structures that keep the poor bonded.

COMPANIONSHIP

I have become fond of this model of companionship. It is descriptive of the very way Joining Hands ministries take place and recognizes the enormous value of that closer walk. In my role to facilitate the so-called accompaniment between my Cameroonian partners and their American companions, I first have to become a companion myself.

And so, I travel alongside my Cameroonian partners. They show me the projects they have helped to establish: agricultural activities in rural areas, drinking water projects in the North, handicrafts in urban centers, fish ponds in the forest, and piggeries around people's houses; all interesting and admirable projects, that answer to the immediate needs of the population.

But it is particularly the stories and images along the walk to or from the projects that unveil the realities of people's daily lives. My observations lead me to deeper conversations with my companions throughout our journey. These discussions give me an insight in the larger context of the population's struggle and the relationship between comforts in our own society and the suffering of the world's poor. The stories I carry home can testify.

SLICK OIL

Oil has stirred some major American interest in Central Africa. In the year 2000 plans were finalized for an oil- and pipeline project to exploit oil from 300 wells in Chad and transport it through a 600-mile pipeline to the Atlantic Ocean in Cameroon. This project is just the beginning of what deems to become a booming oil industry in all of Central Africa.

With a Joining Hands delegation from Chicago Presbytery, I visited the fishermen of Ebome, a village at the Atlantic coast, where the works for the pipe's terminal were in full process. No language barrier stood in the way to read the despair in the fishermen's eyes that had shortly before seen their future blown away with the dynamiting of their traditional fishing grounds. For generations this village had lived off fishery. The ocean is not only of social and economic importance: it also plays a role in the population's spirituality. "The ancestors have left us and taken our luck with them". As with Naboth, these people's very being is rooted in their ancestral inheritance. No payments can compensate the loss of their spirituality. The fishermen in Ebome did not get the chance to refuse, like Naboth refused Ahab. The oil companies never asked them.

We visited several communities disrupted by the pipe, and the American travelers faced some tough challenges from the non-traditional paradigm of their Joining Hands' mission. The most confrontational moment of their itinerary in Cameroon was our stop at a pygmy settlement that had lost its livelihood because of the works for the pipe. Appalled to see the level of poverty, the travelers felt compelled to sooth the victims' pain and to appease their own uneasiness with hand-outs-----that in no way stood up to the disruption of the pygmy's traditional way-of-life by the oil companies. As facilitator of the Joining Hands Program I had to discourage that gesture and reminded the visitors of the Program's challenge to discern a personal commitment to hunger ministries without resorting to acts of pure charity. These vulnerable moments proved to be most powerful and transforming. It was for the American Presbyterians a turning point that generated a growing desire to become compassionate advocates of the voiceless.

A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP

How much longer do we allow ruthless economics to impoverish this world not only in a material, social and environmental sense, but above all deprive it in the spiritual sense of the Source of Life? How can we co-exist, walk together on this globe in a way that contributes to sustainability for all and for creation? What responsibility do we have in the pick of our coffee and chocolate brands, the fruit labels, the decisions taken by our leaders on agriculture, and the practices in the oil business?

Psalm 72 points to the connection between just rule, peace and food security

In a new paradigm of mission, the Joining Hands Against Hunger Program is a ministry of solidarity and advocacy for the poor, hungry and the oppressed for social, economic and environmental justice. I invite you to look at this world through the eyes of our Cameroonian companions, and to read Scriptures in light of their struggles. Join their efforts and let your lives be transformed so we all may know Life in all its fullness as Christ meant it to be.