



Reframing our view of Poverty

for local and global impact

“I feel sorry for poor people. I feel guilty that we have plenty when they have so little, so our church should give to them.”

“I feel angry with poor people. I think they are lazy and responsible for their difficulties, so our church should concentrate on others who show they can improve themselves.”

Both of these attitudes are represented in most churches. Perhaps our personal reactions to poverty also reflect both of these perspectives at times. Such attitudes may or may not be verbalized, but they can drive the way believers react in both local and global contexts. The problem is that neither attitude is biblical or helpful—for ourselves or for those living in poverty. Is there a third way, and how do we change deep-seated attitudes?

Fairhaven Church in suburban Dayton, OH, was a model missions church in many ways. The economically comfortable congregation supported local ministries, global missionaries, and a host of short-term teams. But people didn't often cross the river...the Little Miami River, that is. They were the “haves” on one side of the river. The economic “have nots” lived on the other side. The mission field was overseas, and the church's role was to pray, send missionaries, and give.

Kirk Lithander, outreach pastor at Fairhaven, knew that the congregation needed to change the way they saw others, especially the poor, but how?

Over a period of time, [the ACTS process](#) equipped staff, ministry leaders, and volunteers to reframe their view of poverty, and reshaped their outreach ministry to engage relationally with their underserved neighbors. What drove the change?



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First of all, the mission field came to Dayton. As immigrants poured in, the city chose to become a “refugee friendly city” spearheaded by an effort called [Welcome Dayton](#) that expanded people’s understanding of their new neighbors.

Meanwhile at Fairhaven, reading [When Helping Hurts](#) convicted a number of people that it was counterproductive to address poverty locally or globally by just dropping in with funds or a quick project. They needed a relational approach where they would actually work alongside those in need—whether in Dayton or on the other side of the globe.

Cost of Poverty Experience

One of the greatest forces for deep change at Fairhaven has been the Cost of Poverty Experience (COPE). This three-hour simulation experience lets middleclass suburbanites

see poverty through the eyes of the poor. In the COPE simulation, participants take on roles based on stories shared by real people living in poverty in order to experience some of the situations and barriers they face. It’s emotional. It’s real. “COPE takes the blinders off,” Kirk explains. “The experience helps believers see people in a new light. They realize everyone is created in the image of God.” COPE is where the reframing process began for many in the congregation.

The Cost of Poverty Experience introduces the complexities of poverty. Real-life stories begin to tear down long-held assumptions. People suddenly start to see how systemic issues as well as individual choices push people into poverty and keep them locked there. They see how the resulting hopelessness fuels anger and a sense of entitlement.

In the middle of one COPE simulation, a Fairhaven businessman became very angry at how others in their simulation

Trading Arrogance for Humility



Jeremy Hudson grew up as an MK in Mexico. Eventually he found himself as the pastor of Fellowship Spring Hill Campus in a Springfield, OH, neighborhood with the second-worst crime statistics in the city. Several churches had failed in the building before Fellowship launched their ministry there.

Jeremy looks back and realizes how arrogant he was then. He thought he knew poverty from his growing-up years in Mexico. Then his friend Marlo Fox started urging him to do the Cost of Poverty Experience. In late 2015, she told Jeremy she had registered him to go. Reluctant, he decided to show up late. Walking in with his Starbucks latte, he discovered that the whole group had been waiting to start until he arrived. Within a few minutes, Jeremy had shed his pastor persona and entered his assigned role as a poor head-of-household. By the time the COPE simulation ended, he was convicted of his ignorance. A new awareness was dawning of how his preconceptions had seasoned his past interaction with his urban neighbors.

Jeremy knew that he and his leadership team needed to rethink what they were doing. Giving out groceries might make them feel good about themselves, but it didn’t engage brokenness. They held a COPE simulation at their church. As attitudes changed, people at all points of the economic spectrum became more comfortable at the church. Those in name-brand clothes found themselves

sharing church life together with those who came in their pajamas.

“What we are doing inside the church is becoming infectious in the community at large,” Jeremy shares. “For example, we hold an annual block party. People from affluent backgrounds don’t just write a check, but come out and make snow cones or run the bounce house. The event will soon be turned over to the neighborhood association because we think empowering the community is important.”



Next, the church plans to begin offering a Wednesday evening service preceded by a dinner. Rather than just handing out groceries, middle-class church members will eat alongside those for whom daily food is a survival issue.

Jeremy cautions, “We admit we aren’t experts, so we listen to the people in our neighborhood who are experts on what they need.” He is eager to encourage other churches to change their perspective on abundance. His experience proves that it doesn’t take a large or wealthy church to be transformational at home or around the world.

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Turks as Neighbors

God brought 400 families of Ahiska Turks to Dayton. Displaced from Russia to Turkey in World War 2 and then facing pressure again in the 1990s, this people group was granted refugee status in the U.S. Eventually many landed in Dayton. In Old North Dayton they found a declining neighborhood where they could afford to buy houses. One of their neighbors was Pastor **Randy Chestnut** and his family.



Randy saw this migration as the hand of God: “We shouldn’t let the media set the agenda for our churches. Scripture must guide our thinking. Paul said to the Athenians, ‘[God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live’ (Acts 17:26). Rather than be fearful, I knew we needed to embrace this opportunity.”

Randy had been praying that God would connect him to an unreached people group in the city. Suddenly he discovered they were right in his neighborhood. Like Fairhaven, Randy started out by listening and establishing relationships. He saw the head of the Turkish community on the news and made an appointment to meet him. Bridge-building began.

Randy used the Cost of Poverty Experience (COPE) to help people overcome fears. An early partnership effort involved urban gardening. The site of a former school provided land; other churches contributed for an irrigation system. A [4-H approach](#) provided structure. Immigrants and non-immigrants volunteered help.



They also launched a neighborhood National Night Out event and expanded it with an international food court. Now held annually, this event recently included 30 booths representing nine nationalities offering a wide variety of ethnic foods. Everyone felt like they contributed.

Today Randy serves a congregation a few miles away but is still engaging his people with the Turks in his old neighborhood. Recognizing that many of these refugees have been through very traumatic experiences, Randy plans to take his church through trauma training. God is using churches in the middle of the US heartland to impact an unreached people group from Asia. A reframed understanding of poverty plays a key role.

roles were cheating him. By the end of the experience, God had opened his eyes to the fact that he worked with real-estate developers who had the power to treat the poor fairly or unfairly. He determined to leverage his influence for justice in helping the poor obtain better housing in Dayton.

While the COPE simulation was just the starting point, for Fairhaven, it **was** a beginning of the reframing process.



COPE stimulates perspective-changing interaction.

Listen First

Whether in an underserved community in Dayton or an impoverished village in Guatemala, Fairhaven realized that

they had to stop exporting solutions and instead to start listening to what the locals were already doing and wanted to do. Respecting the poor meant taking the time to build relationships and really listen to their hopes and dreams without judgement. Rather than one-way, transactional giving, Fairhaven began moving toward transformational, two-way, long-term relationships. For instance, merely giving bags of food was replaced by a relational focus of coming alongside to teach people how to develop a family budget.

As they listened, Fairhaven people realized that financial poverty wasn’t the only issue. More holistic solutions were needed. Historical race issues were uncovered. Government played a part. Educational discrepancies were to blame. Lack of employment or under-employment was a factor.

Fairhaven also began to realize that local and global ministry must be holistic. At the core is brokenness—first, broken relationships with God, then with others and within themselves. Fairhaven people began to see themselves as broken and just as much in need of God’s grace as the poorest

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of the poor. That part of the reframing process combats the savior complex and replaces it with an attitude of humility and a readiness to receive from the poor as well as to give.

One of the encouraging things Fairhaven discovered as they moved through the re-

framing process was that **the Church of Jesus Christ is equipped to address all of the areas that relate to poverty.**

All around the world, the Church has tremendous people resources. And believers can use their social capital and leverage their relationships to establish strategic partnerships that can break down systemic barriers and obstacles that keep people locked into poverty.



Train-to-sew student (above) and proud graduates (left)

Let local leaders shape the plan

One high-impact aspect of Fairhaven’s reframing process was that wherever they went, they began to focus on identifying and promoting local leaders. As they listened well, they were able to identify key leaders and make sure those people had a major voice at the table.

They found ways to encourage and support those leaders as they began to lead the way forward—whether it was in Quito where they partner with an Ecuadorian church that runs a medical clinic, or in Dayton where they helped bring together the leaders of various refugee groups to address needs.

One initiative was a train-to-sew collaborative. Sewing machines were donated. Someone with community connections used the trust he had built to encourage refugees to come and learn. Church people who could sew became instructors. Businesses and churches provided vans for transportation. Some of the early graduates have been hired by a local company making firefighter uniforms.

“The gospel has to be at the center,” Kirk emphasizes. “It’s essential to lead with good deeds which creates good will, which earns the right to share the good news of the life-changing gospel. One woman with no church background was involved for three years in one of our outreach programs. As her life improved, she accepted an invitation to attend an Alpha course and began following Christ.”

Hundreds of people are coming to faith at Fairhaven, and for a significant number of them, their contact with the gospel has come from members of the congregation living out transformed viewpoints. Reframed attitudes are allowing people to move outside their comfort zones.

Some of those high-impact relationships are on other continents.

For example, Fairhaven’s reshaped Quito partnership has resulted in deep friendships between Christian physicians in Dayton and Ecuadorian doctors who are not-yet-believers in Quito. The impact of these relationships has been so profound, they even made national TV in Ecuador.

Adopt reframing as a process

Reframing attitudes about poverty and introducing healthy ways to respond is an ongoing process. Fairhaven is part of the [Acts Communities](#), a larger effort to develop additional training for those willing to take the next step. Besides [COPE](#), there are courses in trauma; mental health; and poverty, race, class, and culture. “Change takes time,” Kirk notes, “but life-on-life relational engagement has definitely changed Fairhaven’s DNA. The focus is now outward, and what we are practicing locally is also reshaping our global partnerships.”

[Interchange Conference](#)
May 16 and 17 in Wayne, PA
 At this conference, hear more from this month’s *Postings* contributor, Kirk Lithander, about equipping your church for healthy outreach to the poor.

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