



Urban Ministry Feature Article

Diaconal Ministries of Justice and Mercy

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“We are friends!” exclaimed Miss Diana¹ to the bewildered grocery attendant. Diana, a 38-year-old woman who fled from Liberia and the Ivory Coast, was spending the day with my wife with the intention of teaching our family how to cook African food that evening.

“Do you know each other from ‘the institute’ or through social services?” asked the employee.²

“No,” replied Diana in a flustered tone, “We are friends!”

Given the questions, the reasons for confusion on the part of the employee were obvious. She was shocked to see a Caucasian American with a Liberian refugee for the sole purpose of enjoying one another’s company on a shopping trip. The worker did not seem to have a category for such a thing.

My wife’s relationship with Miss Diana is not a project, a source of pride, or a response to guilt. Jennifer simply loves Diana and Diana loves Jennifer. When this happened, I laughed at first. Then I cried a few tears of joy, celebrating my wife’s bearing witness to God’s heart for the poor.

¹ Names have been changed in this article for obvious reasons.

² The International Institute in St. Louis provides a wide variety of services to more than 8,000 international immigrants annually and serves as the community’s central clearinghouse for information about the areas many ethnic communities.

Introduction

All humans have dignity, including the poor, whom God loves deeply. This truth in many ways captures the heart of what I have learned over the course of my internship at New City Fellowship, a church that is committed to diaconal ministries of justice and mercy among the urban poor in St. Louis. It is in the context of love and respect for the poor that mercy and justice emerge. I have many stories similar to the grocery store moment. In many ways, the grocery clerk represents the eyes of the world, watching and wondering why a wealthy American would be a friend with an illiterate and broken refugee. When these elements come together, the world watches, gets curious, and gets a glimpse of the heart of God. In this way ministries of justice and mercy are a powerful witness to God’s character. One purpose for writing this essay is to give testimony to this power that I have witnessed in the life of my family, my church at New City Fellowship-St. Louis, and my new friends in the Liberian community.

Churches that do not experience poverty—for example, some of our own churches in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)—struggle to bear consistently this same witness to God’s love for the poor. Ours is a tradition of wonderful teaching, a heritage we must never abandon. Believing that God redeems all parts

of life, our PCA congregations have been used by the Lord to shape many families, college students, and professors in both rural and suburban contexts. It is my passion that the PCA hold strongly to its commitment to Word ministry, but at the same time break new ground in deed ministry to the poor.³

The purpose of this essay is not to present an airtight solution for all the weighty problems in churches regarding diaconal ministry. Instead, this writing is simply an effort to enter into the discussion as a seminarian and ask three key questions regarding diaconal ministries, namely:

- 1) What Scriptures inform a theology of diaconal ministries?
- 2) What is keeping the PCA from doing diaconal ministries more effectively.
- 3) With what attitude should a seminarian engage in diaconal ministries?

These questions undergird three corresponding elements of this paper. Specifically, I will attempt to lay a biblical foundation for diaconal ministries of justice and mercy, explore barriers to these ministries, and apply lessons from my internship and seminary studies to my future pastoral work.

The Nature of This Essay

Because the nature of this essay involves integrating academic and ministry experiences, I will purposefully use both an argumentative and a reflective tone as I raise these questions. Therefore, while I do reference the work of various practitioners, I unashamedly base many of my thoughts on my own work and ideas. Recognizing that a young seminarian's individual experience is not an authoritative source in itself, I concede that this essay is

³ Cf. Tim Keller, *Ministries of Mercy* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 56.

preliminary to but not a substitution for a more complete and authoritative presentation. Having qualified my purpose, I will freely weave into the argumentation my own observations and impulses.

A Theological Foundation for Diaconal Ministries of Justice and Mercy

The deacon team of New City Fellowship provided the main context for the principles in the forthcoming theological summary. I am indebted to head deacon Jodi Parker and associate pastor Mike Parker for supplying this “real life” context that confirmed these truths.

What are Diaconal Ministries?

Diaconal ministry is essentially a ministry of service which applies to deacons and congregations in specific ways. The deacon's job is not simply to manage facilities but also to minister mercy and justice, as the distribution of food in Acts 6:2 illustrates. The phrase “diaconal ministry” applies not only to deacons, but also to all congregants. While deacons do have the distinct role of equipping (Eph. 4:11–16), Jesus's words and many other passages listed throughout this essay suggest that all Christians are called to serve (Matt. 20:28).⁴ For the purpose of this paper, I will limit the discussion to diaconal ministries of mercy and justice; it is outside our scope here to analyze other diaconal categories.

Who Are “the Poor”?

During conversations with my PCA friends about the poor in St. Louis, I encounter a tendency to default to the notion of spiritual poverty to the exclusion of various other definitions of “the poor” in Scripture. The

⁴ While the apostles appointed deacons “to serve” (διακονεῖν in Acts 6:2), Jesus used the same Greek word to call all Christians to imitate Him through service (διακονῆσαι in Matt. 20:28). Both passages are contextually similar and use the word in a similar way.

former category seems to be validated as the place of focus for ministry. Certainly it is valid to speak of a church as materially wealthy but spiritually poor. John makes this distinction in Revelation 6:17 regarding the church at Laodicea. A problem emerges, however, when we limit our definition of “the poor” to this spiritual understanding to the exclusion of uses linked to issues of injustice, oppression, and material gain. For evidence of a broader set of definitions, I provide the following lexical survey.

In the Old Testament, לָרָע can refer to the poor who compose the lower class, אֲנִי to the oppressed poor, and אֲנִי צָדִיק to a person in dire want or a righteous person who has suffered loss because of wicked enemy.⁵ In the New Testament, πειλιχρός can refer to the working poor and πτωχός can refer to those so poor that they are reduced to a beggarly situation.⁶ In all, over 400 verses sprinkled throughout every genre of Scripture, from the Law to wisdom literature and from the prophets to the Gospels and epistles, speak about God’s passion for the needy.⁷ This diversity of words for “the poor” not only prohibits relegating poverty to an exclusively spiritual realm, but it also shows God’s broad-ranging concern for the poor.⁸ For the sake of discussion and based on contextual and lexical evidence, I will hereafter use “the poor” as a general term for widows, orphans, and aliens who are in need of God’s justice and mercy.

We need not look far to find modern examples of these scriptural definitions. For example, Miss Diana, whom I mentioned previously, was moved as a refugee from Liberia into a condition of poverty in the United States. She cannot read, struggles to speak English, and currently cannot afford to pay a

heating bill. This is not because of her laziness but is due to the acts of wicked military groups in Liberia. Diana fits the biblical definitions of “the poor.” Moreover, her needs are not characterized by a compartmentalized notion of spiritual poverty. She is a vibrant Christian. Instead, her limitations are based on economic, political, social, and racial issues that have bearing in the here and now.

How Does God Relate to the Poor?

A recent development with Diana illustrates God’s mercy, justice, and passion for the poor. In working with a deacon in our church, my wife and I discovered why Miss Diana does not redeem checks from the church’s Women In the Church (WIC) organization: She cannot read the expiration dates. There are dozens of limitations of a similar sort for Diana. She struggles to speak English and therefore fails to describe to the proper authorities how her employer unjustly withholds paychecks. She wishes to find new employment but literacy problems make this difficult. The difficulties go on and on.

Yet I see glimpses of God’s redemptive power in how He relates to Diana through other people. For example, because of her broken English, we sometimes have to ask Diana dozens of questions before we are able to complete a simple task for her. A case in point: We recently discovered that Diana is willing to see social services but cannot afford a bus ticket. To some, this may seem like a trivial matter. But given the language barriers that Diana faces, these little moments of communication are occasions for celebration! We bought her a bus ticket! This story demonstrates God’s love for the poor. He brought justice into Diana’s story just as He does with the poor in the biblical narratives, to which I now turn.

⁵ cf. Lev. 14:21; Exod. 22:25, 23:3, 30:15; Deut. 15:4, 15:7, 15:9, 24:15.

⁶ Sherman, Amy. *Sharing God’s Heart for the Poor*. (Charlottesville, Trinity Presbyterian Church, 1999), 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Biblical Overview of How God Relates to the Poor

More so than mere definitions of “the poor,” an understanding of God’s relationship to the poor through His mercy and justice informs a sound theology of diaconal ministries. God offers mercy and justice to the poor throughout the entire biblical narrative. In the OT, we find God destroying Sodom not only for sexual immorality but because “she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned” and “did not help the poor and needy.”⁹ Regarding the book of Genesis, Mark Gornik makes an interesting case for God’s heart for the poor by pointing out that the denial of sustenance and dignity harms God Himself because the poor are created in His image.¹⁰

OT law includes provisions for the poor, the alien, the fatherless, the widows, and orphans.¹¹ Injustice as the cause of social sorrow and the restriction of life is a basic biblical category.¹² The prophets of the OT bear witness to this category. For example, the prophet Amos exposes sin in a civic legal system that sells “the needy for a pair of sandals.”¹³ Isaiah 42:1–4 recounts God’s promises that the suffering servant will bring justice to the nations. God’s heart is to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke (Isa. 58:6). In Jeremiah 22:16, the Lord explains that “[Josiah] defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well,” and asks, “Is that not what it means to know me?” In Micah 6:8, we find the Lord requiring that His people love justice and do mercy.¹⁴ Indeed, the OT is replete with references to God’s mercy and justice.

⁹ See Ezek. 16:49.

¹⁰ Mark Gornik, *To Leave in Peace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 52. Also, cf. Gen. 1:26–27, 5:1–3; 9:6.

¹¹ Sherman, *Sharing God’s Heart for the Poor*, 11. Cf. Exod. 22:1; 23:9, Lev. 19:33–34; Exod. 22:22–23; Dt. 24:17, 14:19–21; 14:28–29.

¹² See Exod. 3:9; Ps. 94:3–6; Prov. 14:31; Mic. 3:1–3.

¹³ Gornik, *To Leave in Peace*, 51.

¹⁴ Gary Haugen, *Good News About Injustice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 175.

The NT continues this pattern by demonstrating God’s heart for the poor as it calls Christians to help the poor with great urgency. At the core of Jesus’s purpose in coming is to announce good news to the poor (Matt. 11:5–6). The context of Matthew 11:5–6 excludes an interpretation that understands the recipients of this good news as simply the spiritually poor. Instead, a physical dimension is in view, as “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor.”¹⁵ In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus reveals that God’s plan has always been to reach the poor, even in ethnically ostracized groups. When interacting with the Israelites in Nazareth (who hated outsiders), Jesus explains that Elijah was not sent to Israel’s widows but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon (Luke 4:26).

Luke continues his emphasis on the poor in his second act.¹⁶ Many have looked to Acts 6 as evidence for the Church to focus on Word ministry and prayer to the virtual exclusion of deed ministry. While it is true that the apostles’ primary responsibility, as given by Jesus in Luke 24 and Acts 1, is preaching, Word ministry must not eclipse deed ministry.¹⁷ Certainly, the apostles prioritize Word ministry, yet hard and fast distinctions for officers must be avoided. We should note that both Word and deed ministries are priorities for deacons, who are to be Spirit-filled, wise men, as the summary passages of Acts 2:42–48; 4:32–37 show. At any rate, the continued growth of the Church in Acts 6:7 results from both Word and deed ministry.

God reveals His passion for the poor with great clarity in the pastoral and general epistles, giving, for example, clear instructions regarding widows in 1 Timothy 5. We may observe an indirect concern for the poor in Paul’s warnings

¹⁵ See Matt. 11:3.

¹⁶ By this I refer to the book of Acts.

¹⁷ It is also helpful to note that the apostles had been involved with the distribution of goods at the end of Acts 4 and beginning of Acts 5.

about those who want to become rich, an exploit that in first-century Palestine often required unjust treatment of the poor. James refers to pure and undefiled religion as helping the widow and orphan (James 1:26–28), rebuking those who show favoritism to the rich (James 2:1–7), and even calling the rich people in his audience to weep and wail because misery is coming upon them (James 5:1–6).

When John gives us a glimpse of the eschaton, the theme of concern for the poor is sustained as the redeemed of the earth sing a new song in response to God's bringing forth justice and reconciliation (Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3).¹⁸ John portrays in vivid detail the perils of economic greed and injustice as he bears witness to the judgment of Babylon (Rev. 18:1–24).

This broad sweep across the pages of Scripture only scratches the surface of all the references we could mine and discuss to evidence God's unrelenting commitment to loosing the cords of injustice that strangle the poor.

Barriers to Diaconal Ministries of Justice and Mercy

If it is true that God intends to protect, serve, and heal the poor, what keeps churches such as those in the PCA from cooperating more actively with this mission? Two main barriers may be keeping us from more thoughtful engagement: the first is the debate over the importance of diaconal ministries of mercy and justice, and the second involves sociological forces that shape our thinking as a denomination.

A Debate That Is Flawed on Both Sides

After conducting many interviews and holding conversations about diaconal ministries over the

last six months, I have recognized a trend among congregants and leaders to react to one of two fallacious views as we wrestle with the need for diaconal ministry. It may be that the haughty and judgmental attitudes we assume as we discuss the PCA's efforts in this area are presenting a strong barrier to change. Tendencies toward reactionism, arrogance, and impatience can be seen in every position on the spectrum, ranging from those who have given their daily lives to serving the poor to those who have very little interaction and/or little passion for this purpose. Both sides have failed to some degree or another.

On the one hand, those who are passionate for restoration of urban centers can sometimes, in their frustration and sense of being overwhelmed, seek to "guilt" others into embracing a comparable commitment to their own or alienate those who do not share their passion. This view has many problems, but we may address two particular flaws at this point. First, instead of calling people to biblical norms, some diaconal pioneers attempt to create and hold others to their own made-made laws, thinking that if everyone would do diaconal ministry in the way *their* church does it, our denomination could change drastically. Tim Keller explains the error of motivating others through guilt by pointing to the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, where Jesus's purpose is to confound the legalist.¹⁹ Sadly, there are times when we act as the lawyer in Luke 10. While we should be fervent in doing mercy, we must not let that turn into a reason to be legalistic about the manner in which we do it. We must account for the diverse ways in which God allows for diaconal ministry to take place. Moreover, we must refuse the temptation to demonize wealth in the name of mercy. Keller develops a helpful perspective about the good of wealth by explaining that it is not a sin to acquire money.²⁰ This is an important point

¹⁸ Gornik, *To Leave in Peace*, 66. Cf. Ps. 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; Isa. 42:10

¹⁹ Keller, *Ministries of Mercy*, 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

to express in any dialogue with PCA constituents, as many of our congregants are wealthy.

A second trait that emerged in some of my interviews is an apparent lack of trust in God's sovereignty. In truth, it is easy to understand why someone in the fray of diaconal ministry can see so many needs and feel helpless. Even still, diaconal ministry requires trust in God's providence—a willingness to look to him to provide where there are places of need.

There is another side to the debate. Many in the PCA are not directly involved in daily relationships with the poor but are gracious, God-fearing people with perfectly valid means of serving through their financial giving. But occasionally a discouraging subset of people emerges in our ranks that relegate diaconal ministries to the sidelines completely. They may view it as capitulation to secularism or, even worse, a distraction from true Gospel ministry. After all, they say, "What people really need is salvation, not materials, education, and health benefits!" This approach is as fallacious as the first. First, it fails to account for the broad scope of God's redemptive plan, including restoration of neighborhoods, educational systems, employment policies, and family training. As Keller points out, though diaconal ministry aims at physical needs, it is a spiritual ministry to physical needs, driven by a spiritual motive and supplying a spiritual impact.²¹ As Reformed congregations, we should be the first to stand for the redemption of all things. We believe that God's promise to "bind up the brokenhearted and heal all their wounds" is not a referent to heaven alone. Yet for some reason, ministry to the poor can at times fall off the radar.

Second, the PCA is not immune to American individualism, which can lead to a denial of corporate responsibility for living off of a materialistic culture that necessitates injustice. It is hard for those of us who are privileged to admit that we participate in systems of injustice

that promote poverty.²² Keller refers to Achan's sin in the book of Joshua to show the reality of corporate responsibility.²³ Gary Haugen confirms Keller's point by developing an instructive case for the Lord's hatred for injustice.²⁴ To have resources is to not have to think about poverty. Consequently, it is hard for us to have compassion for the poor, in part, because of our ignorance about how culture shapes our theology and sociology. Despite what our pride tells us, our interpretive grid is not neutral. For example, we may say, "Everyone ought to wear a nice suit to church," without stopping to think about whether that is a biblical mandate or whether a poor man could afford such a garment. Consequently, we struggle to see life through the lenses of the poor. We have a hard time understanding why they cannot just get a job and fix themselves. After all, we are Americans and love self-sufficiency.

No matter where we find ourselves on the opinion continuum, we all have flawed thinking because of the presence of sin in our flesh. Suffice it to say that we honor God more faithfully and promote healthy dialogue by first admitting our need for greater self-awareness and humility as we engage in diaconal ministries together. I do not think of myself as standing outside of this problem while analyzing it. I am mired in the problem as well. Therefore, in the third and final section of this paper, I will reveal more personal applications, particularly regarding my own increasing awareness of the need for humility.

A Failure to Identity How Culture Shapes the PCA

To press deeper into the heart of the PCA's struggle, we may analyze a second barrier that undergirds the first. Many practitioners suggest that the awkward impasse at which many

²¹ Ibid., 57.

²² Ibid., 176.

²³ Ibid., 176.

²⁴ Haugen, *Good News About Injustice*, 68.

denominations find themselves is rooted in ignorance about the way culture shapes us. Peter Berger makes this profound point by explaining that though humans shape culture, it is also true that culture shapes humans. He calls this phenomenon “externalization”.²⁵ Internal values become externalized to the extent that they shape a whole society. Materialism in America provides a salient example. Any review of the history of man shows Berger’s point to be valid. If we agree on Berger’s point, it is instructive to ask how the very structures we have created in society may be distorting our view of diaconal ministry. Such a distortion may be expressing itself in the PCA in the form of at least five unspoken barriers to which I will now turn.

First, we are ignorant of ways in which we subtly subvert the dignity of the poor with our condescending approach to diaconal ministry. Mark Gornik masterfully unpacks this point. Gornik explains that instead of working with the resources of the community, in tune with the Spirit and people who are working in that community, we import resources and a vision for a neighborhood that may not fit a certain parish’s needs. In telling the story of Sandtown, where Gornik served, he makes an important distinction between the delivery of social services and the deepening of a sense of family, community, dignity, and self-sufficiency. The point is not to establish unhealthy codependence but rather a sense of dignity that is a core human trait that God wants for all people. Humans have dignity.

I was surprised when I saw how ignorant I was about this point in my work with New City. A need arose and my first question was, “How can we grab some furniture, cash, and food to deliver to someone’s doorstep?” Our senior pastor opened my eyes to the kind of crippling effect this thinking can have on someone in certain circumstances. At New City Fellowship, I have had to learn the hard lesson that

withholding diaconal resources from a lazy or rebellious person can be a way of loving him or her. Diaconal ministries serve the whole person, even in cases of discipline. In other cases, I have had to learn not about discipline but empowerment. Sometimes diaconal ministry means training someone to work for income rather than giving him money. This is not to say there are never appropriate times to bring in outside resources, whether through paying an electric bill or even giving someone a new house. However, effective leaders of diaconal ministries, such as Mark Gornik, understand that we are restoring more than material *shalom*. There is a need to restore a sense of dignity and respect in the hearts of people who suffer the ill effects of ghettos, poor educational systems, inadequate housing, gentrification, and corrupt government systems. The people of Sandtown are Gornik’s family not his projects. The point is to recognize that our culture is built around a hierarchal system that engenders this kind of condescending view of the poor. Hierarchal language infuses the fabric of our culture.²⁶ More work and study is needed to uncover how a greater awareness of this dynamic in the PCA may propel us forward for more effective diaconal ministries.

Second, we are ignorant not only of our condescension but also of our trust in materials over God Himself. One of the tragedies of modernity and the Enlightenment is a kind of greed and gluttony that makes us resonate with the doctrine “Excess is success.” So our impulse when starting diaconal programs is to plan everything in advance with all necessary resources lined up without asking whether the community even needs the resources we offer. One of the lessons I learned during my New City Fellowship internship was that we do not need 30 computers, a board of directors, and five chalk boards to start a tutoring program. As one of the first ministries of New City Fellowship

²⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Publishers, 1967), 4.

²⁶ Cf. Gornik, *To Leave in Peace*, 56, where the author critiques the effects of problematic words such as the “underclass.”

that started 13 years ago, the tutoring program began with a few pencils, a few volunteers, a kerosene heater, and a cold basement. This program has seen ups and downs but remains a foundational aspect of God's work through New City Fellowship. The PCA does not need excessive material resources to walk by faith. What our widows, orphans, and aliens need most is our respect, our listening ear, our flexibility, and a willingness to jettison cultural values of materialism when they emerge.

Third, our Greco-Roman roots cultivate a kind of Gnostic dualism that informs how we think of spirituality. We would never ascent to this in our sermons and Bible studies, but functionally we still tend to think that saving souls is a separate endeavor from urban renewal. Thus it is hard for some of us in the PCA to understand that it is very spiritual to beautify a neighborhood. Again Gornik's model provides a refreshing counterpoint to our usual thought patterns.²⁷ The New Song community has renovated buildings, brought in Jimmy Carter to help work on homes, and joined with foundations to supply funds, but not without first building upon the resources of the people already in the community.

Fourth, our modernistic background facilitates a view of time that leaves us very impatient in a diaconal journey that requires years of "staying with it." Gornik is quick to point out that his arrival at Sandtown was not the key to change in the community. Instead, he repeatedly reminds his readers that it was the staying power of people in the community who did not leave even when times were tough. If we are going to make change in the realm of diaconal ministries of mercy and justice, Gornik contends that we are going to have to be committed for the long haul. Mo Leverett applied this principle with great wisdom when students did summer internships at Desire Street Ministries in New Orleans. When college and seminary interns came to learn about justice and

mercy under his guidance, Leverett did not permit them to work with youth because of the relationships they would form that would necessarily evaporate at the end of the summer. Instead, students served behind the scenes. Relational interaction is reserved for long-term staff alone. It behooves the PCA to take cues from Leverett because our hunger for instant gratification and results may be impeding effective ministry.

A fifth barrier may be described as denominational memory. My conversations with commissioners in the PCA General Assembly reveal an interesting pattern that I think Dr. Philip Douglass of Covenant Theological Seminary confirms. Douglass explains that the men who now have the most visible responsibility in our denomination remember the days when their colleagues were excommunicated for upholding the Word of God. They also remember the abuses of presbyteries that would go into churches and remove entire governing bodies to overhaul a church. Hence the PCA has at the very core of its personality an unrelenting commitment to guard truth and fight against liberalism. Regarding the authority of Scripture, this tenacity was necessary.

However, a problem emerges for diaconal ministries. The PCA represents a convergence of wounds from our past, ignorance concerning urban demographics, and an association of diaconal ministries with secular liberalism that is entirely unbiblical. This confluence of history and values compels us to raise the drawbridge around our castles of conservatism and fold our arms in stubborn resistance to urban pioneers who are crying out for help. Some may say that I am being too pessimistic. After all, are there not many efforts at all levels of the PCA to take strides in diaconal ministries? The answer is "yes." I do think many key PCA leaders value diaconal ministries. However, my research does not demonstrate that the General Assembly as a whole reflects yet the values of key leaders such

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

as Mo Leverett. We are still deciding whether diaconal needs are truly important.

Personal Application of Diaconal Ministries of Justice and Mercy

Recognizing My Need to Learn How to Serve

“Who would have thought two years ago that we would be involved at New City Church?” my wife, Jennifer, once asked me with a surprised tone. After all, New City Fellowship looks very different than many of the churches we have attended. Among its members are Latin Americans, African Americans, and Africans. Beyond and perhaps more profound than the ethnic diversity of New City, is the socio-economic diversity. This is our first experience of worshipping alongside the urban poor. In some ways, it makes no sense that we joined a church like this. We are not familiar with the languages, parenting styles, and backgrounds of the people. We don’t understand one another’s jokes. We can feel lonely here. And the leadership structure appears strange to a hyper-organized person like me. So why come?

Jennifer and I have come to New City because we desire to learn about God’s heart for the poor, to serve their needs in some capacity, and to grow in understanding of how God wants to use them to teach and mold us. So how has that taken place specifically?

I wrestled a long time with how to set up a pastoral internship at a local church. Of course, my first thoughts were of finding a pulpit to fill, a leadership position to assume, or something that would match my credentials. While such jobs are godly things to do, I did not find God leading me to pursue such tasks. He had something different in mind.

So in this season, we find ourselves following and learning from the poor. And for me, that has taken the form of my working along with the deacons at our church. Unlike my jobs in the past, there are very few “strokes.” I vacuum. I clean buckets for community workdays. I drive around in pickup trucks to the homes of widows to deliver power tools. I

listen.²⁸ My prayer is that these roles will shape me in a way that keeps me from becoming a victim of the very traps I have sought to expose in this essay.

Learning to Discern Dignity and Points of Connection

This internship revealed a second trap regarding a failure to see the dignity of the poor. A story will illustrate this weakness. I was surprised to find an unfamiliar man waiving at me recently outside our church offices. At first it did not hit me but as he walked toward me I realized he wanted to cut grass for money. “I just want some cigarettes and food, man,” he explained.

I felt that strange feeling of wanting to help but not knowing how to help. “Do I simply give him some money? How can I scrounge up some food for him?” I did not know what to do. I often do not know what to do with the urban poor.

In my confusion, I simply said, “I’ll be right back.” Thankfully, one of our church staff, Cindy, knew what to do. After giving Tom some certificates to a local grocery store, she did something gloriously basic. She introduced herself and struck up a conversation about their common neighborhood.

One surprise remained. Tom insisted that he cut the grass. I was sure that Cindy would have to break the bad news: We contract with someone else to cut the lawn. Yet she still said, “Go ahead.” As we returned to the building, I realized why she “broke the rules,” so to speak. She was acknowledging the man’s dignity as a human being. This story of dignity captures a core principle that I learned through writing this essay and walking through the New City internship: the problems, barriers, and solutions to poverty are linked to the need to discern the dignity of our fellow human beings.

²⁸ Cf. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Cross Road Publishing Co, 1989), 16, where Nouwen begins a beautiful story of service.

Conclusion

Having attempted to provide a scriptural backdrop the importance of diaconal ministries of mercy and justice, I have sought to place the biblical theme of poverty in the context of our denomination's desire to be faithful to Scripture. By delineating what seems like two sides of the debate, I hope that this essay will decrease any polarization between those who have given their lives to helping the poor and those who are skeptical of the PCA becoming overtaken by a social gospel. Both sides have good points and

both sides have blind spots. It is my prayer that by outlining five barriers to diaconal ministries of justice and mercy and by providing a window into my own self-imposed barriers, representatives from both sides of the debate will have categories to use as we engage in self-critical dialogue and faithful action. May we pursue God's Kingdom together as a denomination knowing that nothing can hinder His mission!

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