

CHAPTER 2

THE MANY HUMAN FACES OF POVERTY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Poverty is not just an issue for political, social, economic and theological debate and reflection. It is a human phenomenon that affects real people who have names, aspirations, feelings and hopes. It is about people who are desperate, whose images might be marred and whose dignity dented, even though they still remain the people of God. Former President of South Africa Mr. F.W De Klerk expressed his concern about poverty thus: "...Poverty, unemployment, housing shortages, inadequate education and training, illiteracy, health needs and numerous other problems still stand in the way of progress and prosperity and improved quality of life..."(Webb 1994: 120). Poverty is not a matter to trouble our conscience, but a reality that impacts deeply on the lives of real people. Most significantly, poverty is the context in which the Christian witness in South Africa functions. Christians should not just accept this situation as the norm, as if God's people were meant to be disadvantaged perpetually. Gutierrez condemned poverty when he said: "Material poverty is a scandalous condition... Then a witness of poverty cannot make of it a Christian ideal. This would be to aspire to a condition which is recognized as degrading to man" (In McLellan 1997: 117 – 118). Christians, if they are to be credible witnesses of the gospel, must vehemently denounce this abhorrent situation of poverty and seek to assist the poor in improving the quality of their lives, to equal their appropriate dignity as God's children. "The Christian community is to be a sign of the kingdom, in which evangelism, social action and the Spirit are present and inseparably related" (McAlpine 1995:2). We cannot just be bystanders who tolerate the unabated growth of poverty in our backyard. Our ministry must become relevant, real good news to those who live in poverty.

2.1 The Prevalence of Poverty

Even in post-apartheid South Africa deprivation still continues to be a major social challenge. The reality that people face is that some South Africans are still poor even

after several years of democracy. The quality of their lives has not improved meaningfully, even when statutory discrimination has been abolished. Questions on the status quo should not be dismissed as the cynical voices of the poor who just want to linger in a culture of dependency and entitlement. Some of these people are casualties of our insufficient socio-economic, political and spiritual models of societal restructuring. It is true that there have been social improvements in society that are visible. Yet, we still see increased joblessness, homelessness, poverty, crime, sluggish economic growth and graft in political circles. One cannot help but use a hackneyed expression: ‘the gap between the rich and poor is continuing to widen at a distressing pace.’ Giliomee lamented, “The vast discrepancies in wealth between Blacks and whites are simply not compatible with nation building. At the very least, a *progressive equalizing of life chances* is essential” (Vorster 1991: 26). If this inequality continues, it will derail us as a nation in achieving our vision of becoming a truly democratic, just, peaceful, reconciled and prosperous nation. We cannot afford to be a society in which only a few privileged citizens achieve affluence whilst the majority struggle for survival. This would mean that the poor would never be able to fully celebrate their freedom. Slovo pointed out: “The basic objective of liberation cannot be achieved without undermining the accumulated political, social, cultural and economic white privileges. The moulding of our nation will be advanced in direct proportion to the elimination of these accumulated privileges” (Vorster 1991:34). We have to ensure that the leftovers of skewed distribution, a feature of the past unjust dispensation, are removed. Consequently, life for the previously disadvantaged should change radically for the better.

The kind of poverty we refer to in this study is chronic poverty. It is when people continue to live under circumstances of deprivation for a very prolonged time without any sustainable means to support themselves. Aliber (2001:v) describes it as follows:

“Households or individuals are understood to be in chronic poverty when their condition of poverty endures over a period of time... Alternatively, and perhaps more meaningfully, chronic poverty can be understood as the inability of households or individuals, perhaps for lack of opportunity, to better their circumstances over time or to sustain themselves through difficult times.”

There is a vast majority of our citizens whose lives have persisted in poverty. Their daily existence is that of hunger, unemployment, poor health, lack of basic necessities and disempowerment. These people have continued to live below the poverty line even when others are fortunate enough to continue improving their quality of life. They are forced to accept chronic poverty as their normal way of existence.

South Africa is a country of abundance, yet essential resources are not readily available to the poor. The poor live shabby lives, even when our country is well resourced for them to experience a better life. It is poverty in a country of plenty that we probe and grapple with in its persistent growth. Julian May (2002:2) states,

“South Africa is an upper-middle-income country with a per capita income similar to that of Botswana, Brazil, Malaysia or Mauritius. Despite this relative wealth, the experience of the majority of South African households is either one of outright poverty, or of continued vulnerability to becoming poor. Furthermore, the distribution of income and wealth in South Africa may be the most unequal in the world.”

Even though we are a well-resourced country, the majority of our citizens are still in distress. “What people can or cannot do and how they survive in a market economy depends to a large extent on access to the necessary financial resources and assets to meet an increasing portion of their needs”(UNDP Report 2003:70). Many South Africans are still deprived of decent shelter, clean water, appropriate health facilities and many other necessary amenities. This does not imply that nothing is being done to tackle poverty. According to Aliber (2001: 3, 10):

“South Africa has many initiatives in place to address poverty, emanating both from government and civil society... The principal strategy of the new government for poverty alleviation appears to have been to promote economic growth, which in turn would expand employment opportunities and raise incomes. However, real growth in the economy since 1994 has been modest, and has failed to reverse the trend of formal sector job losses and that has been evident since the early 1990s. Meanwhile redistribution of assets has been very limited. The most tangible anti-poverty impact attributable to the post apartheid government is the

improved access to services and infrastructure in many areas, both rural and urban.”

The government has also initiated a move to supply certain limited quantities of water and electricity to poor communities for free. Yet, such attempts towards poverty alleviation do not seem to be enough, since the same communities have numerous real needs that exceed the support they get from the state.

2.2 The Causes of Poverty in South Africa

2.2.1 Poverty and Inequality

One of the reasons for the occurrence of poverty in South Africa is *apartheid*. The plethora of *apartheid* legislation, policies and repressive practices created an environment, which bred the poverty in the Black community of our country. Years of *Apartheid's* overt and covert practices systematically and progressively turned Black people into paupers and produced a racially polarized society that was founded on deplorable inequality. Chief Albert Luthuli berated racism in 1952 when he stated that; “the past thirty years have seen the greatest number of laws restricting our rights and progress, until today we have reached a stage where we have almost no rights at all”(Louw & Kendall 1986: 31). It contributed to a people being condemned to living in appalling conditions. Poor housing, inferior education, unfair and discriminatory labour practices, a biased judicial system and restrictions of movement, economic and political exclusion, racial and ethnic hostility, and spiritual repression adversely affected their lives. In contrast, Sider (1997:xii) said,

“I feel absolutely confident, however, that the biblical understanding of ‘economic equality,’ or equity demands at least this: God wants every person, or family, to have equality of economic opportunity at least to the point of having access to the necessary resources (land, money, education) to be able to earn a decent living and participate as dignified members of their community.”

It is clear that conditions in our society were previously unjust, not conducive to any kind of equality. This has resulted in the poor, having to be sidelined in such a manner that, they could not achieve economic empowerment.

One should be careful not just to generalize and put all the blame for the current state of affairs surrounding poverty, on the previous discriminatory system. Yet, it would be a serious oversight not to recognize that apartheid has fundamentally contributed to today's social problems in South Africa. According to Julian May (2000: 20):

“The specificity of this situation in South Africa has been the impact of institutionalised discrimination... The result was state-driven underdevelopment that encompassed dispossession and the exclusion of the majority of South Africans. An important outcome brought about by these policies was the loss of assets, such as land and livestock, and the simultaneous denial of opportunities to develop these assets through the limiting access to markets, infrastructure and education.”

The *apartheid* government action seriously disadvantaged the majority of Black people. It disrupted their potential for empowerment culturally, socially, politically, economically educationally and spiritually. It has had a multigenerational impact, which is being felt even today, in this era of democracy, human rights and freedom in South Africa. The damning effect of *apartheid* that is dead, is still lingering on those who are descendants of the disenfranchised in the past, when it was implemented. *Apartheid* deliberately stifled the progress of the Black community on many significant fronts. A brief review of this dark past is necessary in order to shape a better vision for our future as a nation. Thus, I agree with Barrington Moore Jr. who said, “But if the men [women] of the future are ever to break the chains of the present, they will have to understand the forces that forged them” (Louw & Kendall 1986:3). Some of the problems that we have as a nation such as poverty arise out of a sad history of inequity. Although we cannot put the blame for all of poverty on the door of on *apartheid*.

It is clear that in South Africa there is a correlation between inequality and poverty. One has however, to be prudent in defining inequality, since South Africa has transformed

significantly since the pre-apartheid era. Servaas van Der Berg alludes to this fact when he says, “It is useful to distinguish inequality between race groups from inequality within race groups”(Star Newspaper, February 25, 2004:22). In South Africa other race groups were more privileged than blacks prior to 1994. After 1994, the government introduced new legislations, policies and programs to rectify all the historical imbalances that created inequality. Some of the government’s policies like affirmative action, and economic empowerment, have had some success in that they have created a new group of the Black elite. In a positive sense, it seems that such interventions are slowly narrowing the gap of inequality between the races. But, at the same time these policies also are increasing inequality within the race groups, especially within the black community. When you look at the issue of employment within the Black community, you see unequal access to the labour market. Servaas van Der Berg says,

“Thus black South Africans with access to education and training opportunities (typically from the middle class backgrounds in urban areas) are benefiting the most from the changes in the labour market rules in their favour, while unemployment is more prevalent among the less skilled”(The Star Newspaper, February 25, 2004:22).

The existence of the new middle class does not mean that interracial inequality has disappeared. “With little doubt we can say that inequality between race groups is less than before the transition, but the decline has not been spectacular”(The Star Newspaper, February 25, 2004:22). However, the laws, policies and practices of segregation have been abolished. The new dispensation is characterized by new values of equity for all the people of South Africa. All major statutory forms of discrimination have been outlawed.

We, South Africans must not allow ourselves to be prisoners of our dark past. Our legacy is quite horrendous, and all of us accept that fact. There are some individuals and groups who are always searching for scapegoats to bear the blame for their miseries. I think such an attitude is counterproductive and will stall progress in creating a better nation for all South Africans. Connor, OP (1998:12) stated,

“History cannot be undone. Those killed cannot be brought back to life, nor can lost years of suffering and anguish be given back. Though some people may be

returned to the places from which they were evicted, they cannot take their former lives up again. Reconstructing their homes, communities and work will often be difficult. Even those who can go back may still have bitter memories of being callously rejected at the time of their eviction or having had to run away in fear.” But, blame shifting creates resentment between those who have been oppressed and those who have been perpetrators and beneficiaries of injustice. Furthermore, this will retard all progress being made towards reconciliation. Without being naïve or simplistic or excessively optimistic, one has to be hopeful that better prospects for the poor in South Africa are possible. Connor, OP (1998: 120) says,

“Building up all facets of people’s humanity is a process that has to work from the bottom upwards. It must also be set in a far longer time-frame – over generations – than that currently used by either government or business. Here the non-governmental organizations, who do not have to show profit for shareholders or please an electorate, can play a special enabling role.”

All the civic structures that are committed to the national vision of social transformation can make a significant contribution in ensuring that the new values of our democracy, a culture of human rights and moral integrity are entrenched in society. Such socialization and education of our people are necessary in order create a new national psyche and identity that will foster unity and a new vision.

2.2.2 Poverty and Race

There is a high degree of racial disparity in South Africa today despite the current dispensation of democracy, and this is evident in the levels of the distribution of poverty that is prevalent in this country. Racial discrepancies can be seen in the quality of life of people within our society. “Living standards are closely correlated with race in South Africa”(May 2000: 31). The Coloured community has a significant number of poor people when compared to the White and Indian population, which have relatively low incidents of poverty. We are a nation of contrasts in which the very affluent and despondently hungry groups coexist side by side. “Race, then, is not the problem; racism is. Racism consist in a belief that one racial group is inherently superior to another racial

group”(Thompson 2000:102). The racial group that assumes its own superiority to the other groups feels entitled to better privileges than the so-called “inferior” racial groups. In this country, one finds these discrepancies in the quality of life of its citizens. Some live in opulence whilst others are in conditions of squalor. Within one nation, there are elements of the First World and the Third World, respectively. If one looks at just one indicator, like income distribution, one will see tremendous inequality. According to the UNDP Report (2003:70):

“From the perspective of the new economics of poverty and inequality, unequal income and wealth distribution become economically costly and growth reducing when the large numbers of a country’s citizens are unable or unwilling to work or engage in entrepreneurial activity, unable to save and invest, and unable to meet charges for provision of essential services.”

We need to eliminate all prevalent disparities that create distortions in the distribution of destitution according to racial lines. All South Africans citizens, in their diversity should share the burden of equal exposure to deprivation and access to resources essential for poverty alleviation.

The majority of those affected by poverty are black. There is a direct link between the incidence of poverty and the legacy of apartheid. The occurrence of poverty is distributed according to the racial divide in South Africa. Aliber (2001:5) says,

“Firstly, South Africa’s circumstances have shaped the present configuration of poverty and opportunities according to racial lines. Disadvantaged groups were systematically left with relatively little in the way of land and other resources, were not afforded education of a quality comparable to that of whites, and were compelled to adopt coping strategies – such as spatially divided households – which have left a complicated and painful social legacy.”

It is clear that through the agenda of the system of segregation, Blacks have been systematically marginalized politically, economically, socially, spiritually and culturally over a considerable time. Thus, the majority of Blacks were turned into the ‘have nots,’ whilst the whites became the ‘haves’ of the country. “Poverty [we see] is no accident; it is determined by the structures of society”(Boerma 1979:3). The current socio-economic

problems of our nation are related to how this nation was structured in the past. It was previously structured unjustly and violently for the disempowerment of the poor. We cannot just imbibe change without a proper understanding of our history. Pillay reminds us that:

“We are far more conditioned by our past than we can hope to understand. Many of our present crises (be they economic, socio-political or the daily trauma of violence and conflict) are the fruit of a historical harvest; a confirmation of the truism that in spite of the good intentions of the harvesters, one can only reap what one sows”(Vorster 1991: 1).

This does not necessarily imply that we are helpless prisoners of our negative past without a better vision of the future. Rather, we have to realize that our present reality with its good and bad elements has a link with our legacy as a nation. It would be delusional to deny this historical racial link to poverty. Grundlingh indicates,

“Even a cursory survey of the country’s socio-economic history reveals the stark division of wealth; is not too far-fetched to state that the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ actually form two nations which divide largely along racial lines”(Voster 1991:23).

For further reflection, lets examine some statistics, from the United Nation’s Development Programme report of 1998. The table below shows how different population groups are affected by poverty in varying degrees:

Table 1: Poverty Distribution

Blacks	Coloureds	Asians	Whites
61 %	38 %	5 %	1 %

This, demonstrates the fact that “poverty is not confined to any one race group, but it is concentrated amongst blacks, particularly Africans: 61% of Africans and 38% of coloureds are poor, compared with 5% of Indians and 1% of whites”(UNDP Report 1998:8). The challenge we face is to pursue developmental policies that may equalize people’s living standards and neutralize racial disparities in how people are exposed to the burden of impoverishment. It is not fair that only one section of the population should

be disadvantaged, whilst everybody else can afford to live a respectable life. The experience of poverty should not be reserved for specific people while others are excluded.

2.2.3 Poverty and Gender

The majority of those who make up the constituency of the poor are women. Largely, women in our society carry the burden of poverty. Poverty is unevenly distributed according to gender lines. According to the World Bank Conference, Nairobi 2002:

“Within Africa poverty affects women and children disproportionately. The voiceless and the powerless are most often women. The most vulnerable group affected by gender inequality and the access to the assets are women in rural communities and informal settlements”(Belshaw, Calderisi & Sugden 2001:9).

The situation of impoverishment for some black women is that of double jeopardy. Their marginalization is not only as a consequence of gender inequality, in a male dominated society, but also of their race. “In modern times, African women have struggled under the dual oppression of racism and sexism...”(Aliber 2001:7). Blacks and women have always received a raw deal in South Africa. The legacy of injustice is a society in which, when you are white and male, you are guaranteed a better life. Thus, we must create a society that is anchored on new values of justice that would eliminate gender inequality. Giliomee says,

“Nation-building means achieving an equitable but manageable redistribution of life’s chances... The concept of life chances embraces the entire spectrum of average mortality rates, income and employment rates and the quality of housing”(Vorster 1991:46).

This implies that all disparities between men and women in all aspects of the quality of life would be abolished. We have to develop a nation in which all citizens are afforded the right to live decent lives. With women attaining their genuine freedom, to live their lives with dignity having access to all the important resources they need to progress.

Some of the women living in poverty do not necessarily come from poor households. People should not assume that these poor women come from squatter camps and rural areas only. “In reality, there may be many women who, although they live in non-poor households, should be counted as poor because of the inequalities in intra-household allocations”(May 2000: 34). Due to unfair patriarchal structures that are endemic in families and broader society, they are worse off than men. They are deprived through the uneven distribution of resources. De Santa Ana (1979:28) says,

“Sexism is another form in which the values of the dominant find expression. In an exclusively male dominated society, women are accorded an inferior status, and prevented from developing their potential or freeing themselves from poverty.”

These women are more likely to be dependant socially and spiritually, having to rely on their brothers or other men for their welfare. It is encouraging to have our present constitution try to redress these gender disparities statutorily. “Sexism is characteristic of every society and culture on earth... Although some nations have made significant progress toward the goal of gender equality, no society has reached that goal”(Thompson 2000:98). In real life we still have a long way to go in addressing the repercussions of decades of sexism for women. They still live a life of dependency in male orientated structures such as family as well as religious, socio-political and economic institutions.

Also, there are many female-headed households that live in poverty. Most of these women have a low and unstable income as compared to male-led households. According to PSLSD (Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development) data: “The poverty rate amongst female-headed households was 60 %, considerably higher than the rate of 31 % in male –headed households”(May 2000: 34). The legacy of male domination has disadvantaged women even in the era of equality. Post 1994 there has been a concerted effort by government in its policies and programs to promote women empowerment. According to Julianne Malveaux view, “empowerment is simultaneously a political and an economic process”(Jennings 1992:46). To use her phrase, we need to look at the “feminisation of poverty”(Jennings 1992:44), since women are a significant

sector of a society beleaguered by poverty. Our society has a legacy of patriarchy, which has complicated women's struggle for emancipation from poverty.

2.2.4 Poverty and Children

The other major victims of poverty in our society are children. Children are the ones who are also hit the hardest by poverty. Poverty devastates them because they are very delicate. They are still in their development stage that unfortunately gets compromised due to over-exposure to deprivation. Tshotsho states that,

“Children and youth account for over 50 % of the South African population of approximately 43 million people. The majority of these children and youth are from disadvantaged backgrounds and the majority of these children fall under the category of children with special needs.... The government considers the needs of the children to be paramount throughout its development strategies, policies, programs and services” (ISPN Website 2004).

They are the members of our community who are most vulnerable to poverty. These are the ones you see going to school barefoot, without provision, and walking long distances. The UNDP Report (1998:8) states the following:

“Three children in five lived in poor households, and many children are exposed to public and domestic violence, malnutrition, and inconsistent parenting and schooling. The risk of poverty varies widely by province: in the Eastern Cape 78 % of children live in poor households, compared with 20% in Gauteng.”

It is clear these innocent children are the ones who suffer the most from poverty and lack of adequate security. Yet, Jesus sternly said: “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better, if a milestone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea”(Mk. 9:42). These children, as a result of poverty, become exposed to other social problems that aggravate their suffering. They become vulnerable to sexual abuse, neglect, and violence. May (2000: 33) says,

“A child who experiences poverty is exposed to the risk of impaired physical and mental development... If hungry, they cannot concentrate properly at school. If their homes have no electricity, they cannot study easily in the evenings. If girls

have to assume domestic roles of cooking, cleaning and child-care, this leaves them less time for homework.”

Poverty creates an abnormal environment for child development. The kind of situation that complicate their upbringing because they will be disadvantaged by having lack of basic necessities, such as nutritious food which is important for their healthy psychological and physiological development.

The problem of dysfunctional family life goes hand in hand with poverty. Children are supposed to grow up in a loving and stable environment in a home with proper parental nurturing, guidance and discipline. Yet, dysfunctional families are common, exposing children to a host of other social problems that impede their growth. Many children are subjected to homelessness, disrupted education, inconsistent parenting, and poor nutrition and health hazards. At the Second Moral Summit organized by government and the civil society, concern was raised about the undesirable state of the family in the nation. Albert Nolan writes, “The breakdown of the family life has reached crisis proportions. So many children have never known a father or mother with the consequence of lack of parenting; role modelling and control”(Challenge Magazine, July 2002). This implies that their childhood has been deprived of the necessary socialization into the values, behaviour, and relationships of a healthy family life. These children lack critical basic education, culture, psychological affirmation, love, emotional support and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, children affected by poverty are becoming more vulnerable to abuse. They are ultimately forced into child labour and other vices like child prostitution, where they are exploited. Networks of paedophiles are taking advantage of these children for their own perverted pleasure. Pais (1991:16 –17) says,

“Children are innately powerless to do anything about their oppression. The only ‘actions’ available to children in reaction to their abuse, such as conforming to adult wishes, running away, dropping out, suicide, substance abuse, behavioural problems, and mental illness, tend not to liberate children, but rather to make their oppression worse.”

Today street children begging at malls and traffic lights are a common sight in our major cities. On the streets, they become streetwise and they experiment with crime for

survival. These children miss the chance to develop normally like other sheltered children, protected in functional homes. They struggle to survive in the company of other homeless children. Their destitution is on the increase in our society, and the Church must be moved and be involved in the plight of these powerless little members of society.

2.2.5 Poverty and Class

In post-*apartheid* South Africa poverty has mutated into an issue of class. In this developing democracy deprivation has evolved to as a factor that afford people a certain social status. It determines the kind of life they could enjoy. According to the United Nations Development Programme Report (2003:73),

“The upper class in South Africa consists of a small, wealthy and mainly white segment of the population. Its members dominate the top echelons of business and institutions and own a large proportion of all privately held corporate stock in the country... The wealth of the upper class gives it enormous corporate power and direct influence over the economic lives of the majority of South Africans.”

With the evolution of democracy, a sizeable Black middle class has emerged, as well as a very wealthy minority of Black elite who are benefiting from the current socio-economic and political transformation in our country. The Black elites are joining the ranks of tycoons of the previously privileged white community. These are the groups that are beginning to enjoy the benefits of freedom, and a better life. These are the people who are fortunate enough, to benefit from privatisation, affirmative action, Black Economic Empowerment and preferred procurement. Juxtaposed to that, one hears testimonies of land invasion, increased unemployment, hunger, homelessness and disasters befalling the poor. The poor, in contrast to the small elite and the comfortable middle class, continue to live in townships and informal settlements. In those overcrowded surroundings they live under harsh and inhumane conditions with inferior infrastructure and essential services. According to the WCC article titled, *Anticipation*, No. 19, p. 27, November 1974: “Poverty is consolidated in the class nature which our social structures take, to ensure the siphoning process of wealth created by the poor and the working masses to the privileged few at the top”(cited by De Santa Ana 1979:28). Meanwhile, the minority, the more

privileged community, lives a comfortable life. Their lives, then, become an envy of the poor, but remaining unattainable for the underprivileged.

2.2.6 Poverty and Education

In reflecting on poverty and class one has to realize that there is a link between poverty and education. Many who land the more rewarding positions in society, whether they are political, economical or social are those who are skilled and qualified. According to the UNDP Report (1998:9),

“There is a very strong correlation between the level of education and standard of living: the poverty rate among people with no education is 69%, compared with 54% among those with primary education, 24 % among those with secondary education, and 3% among those with tertiary education.”

This is the reason the government has been pushing the policy of free education to ensure that the poor are not marginalized at school level. But more still needs to be done for those who wish to further their education at a tertiary level. Tertiary education is not affordable for the majority of the youth who have completed high school especially those who come from a disadvantaged background. “The sheer extent of the backlogs in apartheid education demands an investment far greater than existing levels of budgetary allocation”(UNDP Report 2003:24). It seems some discrepancies created by that legacy would need an injection of resources greater than what has been spent since 1994. However, there are dissenting opinions that purport, education is not necessarily a ladder out of poverty. They argue that having education is laudable but it is not a guarantee to escape from the miseries of being poor. According to a Special Report on the Widening Poverty Gap, November 2003:

“Many black South Africans are now better educated, but this has not necessarily translated into better jobs. While studies have shown that the better educated an individual, the better off they are, in South Africa it is not only those without skills and education who struggle to find employment.”

Some of the poor and unemployed people are very skilled and well educated; yet, they struggle to make a living because they are unemployed. Race and gender, are critical

factors influencing employment, overriding an individual's skills profile. It seems there are still those pockets of subtle discrimination that have survived in our democracy. A Special Report on the Widening Poverty Gap, November 2003 states,

“A recent survey by the Human Science Research Council of South Africa found that while university graduates have a distinctive advantage in the country's competitive labour market, some historical hurdles remain. ‘Africans, women and those who studied at historically black universities still have the greatest difficulty finding employment.’ It conducted a survey of 2,672 university graduates who obtained their first degree between 1990 and 1998. The study revealed differences in racial lines. ‘About 70 % of white graduates found employment immediately, compared with 43 % Africans, 42,2 Coloureds, and 47% Asians. A higher proportion of graduates from historically black universities (65.4 %) experienced periods of unemployment compared to graduates from historically white universities (34. 65 %).”

This above-mentioned report gives facts about the disparities on the incidents of unemployment amongst the graduates from various racial groups in terms of their qualifications obtained from various academic institutions in South Africa. Whites graduates easily accessed the job-market more than their African, Coloured and Indian counterparts. It seemed that there was a perception that the quality of education offered at historically white tertiary institutions was better than the one offered at historical black tertiary institutions. We hope this issue will be resolved with the current merger of the tertiary institutions.

2.2.7 Poverty and Unemployment

This then brings us to the next link between poverty and unemployment. The more highly skilled a person is, the more he or she is expected to be employable. The outcome of good education is that it is supposed open opportunities for empowerment for all people. According to the UNDP Report (1998: 9),

“Poverty and unemployment are closely correlated: 55 % of people from poor households are unemployed, compared with 14% of those from the non-poor

households. Poor households are characterized by a lack of wage income, either as a result of unemployment or low wage income or low paying jobs, and typically rely on multiple sources of income to reduce the risk.”

The vast majority of poor people in our community, who are unemployed, lack essential vocational skills and entrepreneurial skills for them to be economically viable. There is a danger that if this social ill is not appropriately addressed, we will have an underclass in South Africa, the majority of whom will be Black people. Jones describes the Black underclass as follows:

“It is generally understood to refer to a growing number of Black persons who are uneducated, unskilled, unemployed and often unemployable, or employed in low paying jobs, living in unrelieved poverty, and immersed in a culture conditioned by such abject circumstances, with only limited chances or hope for upward mobility”(Jennings 1992:54).

Therefore, being in such an unfortunate situation means one has to live in inferior conditions. This poses a challenge to us to embrace the vision of eradicating poverty. We do not want to see inequality and injustice returning to our society and spoiling our democracy through classism.

2.2.8 City/Urban and Rural Poverty

When we discuss national income distribution, we notice a skewed distribution within our society. Within this democratic nation, one finds striking contrasts of high, middle and low-income earners. One sees disparities within one nation in terms of region, population group, class, gender and status. There is a bias towards investments in urban economic hubs rather than rural and inner city areas. I quote the testimony of the poor in low-income areas as highlighted by Wilson and Ramphela: “The countryside is pushing you into the cities to survive, the cities are pushing you into the countryside to die”(Bruwer1996: 9). This is the reason for commuting and migration from the low-income areas to the high-income areas. Tomasi wrote: “In fact, migrations are an inescapable aspect of modern societies and a sign of that interdependence that marks the global economy and that is greatly accelerated by technological advances in

transportation and communications” (Mieth & Cahill 1993:4). Yet, within the same towns there is poverty that is deplorable. Shorter (1991:1) had this to say about African cities:

“Towns and cities are centres for generating wealth, but African socio-economic realities ensure that the wealth created by urbanization is far from evenly distributed. On the contrary, there are unmistakable signs of impoverishment and disorientation caused by urbanization, and particularly by the gigantic influx of urban migrants.”

These cities are market centres, which are surrounded by squatter camps that are images of poverty. They reflect those who have fallen out of the city’s prosperity. These are the ones who could not be absorbed in the wealth of the city. They have not been able to share in the spoils of that city. In fact, their living conditions are very different from the ambience of the city.

There is always a bias towards the development of cities or urban centres, at the expense of rural areas. There is better infrastructure, provision of essential services and availability of skilled professionals in urban areas; thus, people in rural areas are neglected. Again, in South Africa, we still have to consolidate our land reform programmes to correct the disparities created by *apartheid*. A large number of the poor are still in those previously neglected *Bantustans*, which were created to disenfranchise and subjugate Black people. In the global community there is a distinct bias towards industrial and technological development of cities, because it is where there is a hive of industrial and technological activity. Thus, rural areas are always lagging behind in industrial and technological development, especially in Africa. People are attracted to cities, which become centres of affluence. Poverty affects the rural population the most. “Most of the poor live in rural areas: while 50% of the population of South Africa is rural, the rural areas contain 72% of those members of the total population” (UNDP Report 1998:8). It is these very people who fall prey to the lure of the cities, who migrate from the rural areas in search of a better life in the city. Many of them unfortunately, ultimately join the ranks of the unemployed masses. Consequently, they are forced to live

within the sprawling informal settlements that surround every major city, settlements that are a health and social hazard.

The townships and squatter camps are the remnants of the *apartheid city*, created by the policies of segregation. People were meant to work in the cities but were not allowed to live and conduct business in them because they belonged to a despised race. Today many people are still unable to afford to live in the city. They see the glamour of the wealth that can only be enjoyed by a small elite and foreign tourists who have a strong buying power. They have become like Lazarus; who kept on eating from the scraps that fell from the rich man's table (see Luke 16:19 – 13).

2.2.9 Regions and Poverty

Certain regions within South Africa have a lower or higher incidence of poverty than others. The cases of deprivation are found in all the seven provinces of our nation. According to the UNDP Report (1998:8),

“Poverty is distributed unevenly among the nine provinces. Provincial poverty rates are highest for the Eastern Cape (71%), Free State (63%), North West (62%), Northern Province (59%), Mpumalanga (57%), and the lowest for Gauteng (17%) and the Western Cape (28%). Poverty is the deepest in the Eastern Cape, Free State and Northern Province, which together make up 36% of the population but account for 51% of the total poverty gap.”

There is a tremendous disparity in income distribution within the various provinces in our country. The provinces contribute in different degrees to the GDP of our country. Gauteng contributes the most. People in economically and politically advanced provinces live in better conditions than their compatriots in other provinces that are lagging behind. This is reflected in the standard of education in various areas. “The larger and poorer provinces continue to be plagued by high dropout rates and high repeat and failure rates” (UNDP Report 2003: 25). Thus, the vulnerability of the poor is again evident in the challenges they face in the various regions of South Africa. Learners from provinces with a low GDP, experience more difficulties than those in well-managed provinces that have

a higher GDP, and offer the best living conditions. They have limited access to essential resources like electricity, Internet and libraries. These are essential educational resources for any individual who intends to play a significant role in our world today.

2.2.10 Poverty as a Systemic Problem

It seems that poverty is a human phenomenon that will continue to plague humanity. One cannot imagine a single society without its poor. Even the most idealized democratic societies in the world are plagued by poverty. “They are found in all periods of history. Poverty is basically a systemic problem. In spite of development efforts over centuries, poverty is on the increase and it behoves us to investigate the process or the mechanism which makes this happen” (De Santa Ana 1979: 34). Our world has advancement in all sectors but it has also created conditions of deprivation for the majority who have to coexist with the affluent minority. Many poor people have become disillusioned when their new freedom from oppression does not deliver the promised relief from their conditions. Even politicians are surprised that despite their well-intended macro-economic, political and social interventions for poverty alleviation, impoverishment still persists. In South Africa the recommendations of the expert consultants on RDP (Reconstruction Development Program) and GEAR (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Macroeconomic Strategy), have not had much impact. We do not deny that there have been some notable improvements in some poor communities in certain areas like gaining access to social grants, education and health services, to mention but a few examples. The pastoral letter of the American Catholic Bishops reminds us that, “Each economic decision and institution must be judged in the light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person”(Tsele 1997:84). In the light of this, the struggle against poverty will continue to be part of the new society in South Africa.

Even though poverty is a systemic problem, we have to gather courage to see how we as Christians can become allies with the poor in their struggle against poverty. It is not a simple task and we cannot assume naively that victory will be easy. Humanity has lived

with poverty for centuries. We must resist the temptation to become complacent, to accept the prevalence of poverty as normal. Tsele (1997:82) noted this ‘spiritual crisis:’

“The crime and shame of our civilization is that it fails to solve basic problems of hunger and human dignity. We seem to be resigned to any hope of ever solving the urgent problem of human misery and poverty, and the ever-increasing gap between poverty and affluence. Our civilization is marked by a fatalistic acceptance of poverty and misery as the inescapable reality for some, indeed as the unavoidable, albeit regrettable side-effect of its functioning.”

We must refuse to succumb to this fatalism that would negate our ministry, and impede our efforts to face the challenge of poverty. Instead, knowing the complexity of the task ahead of us as Christian witnesses, we must show ‘critical solidarity’ with the poor in their struggle against poverty. We must respect their struggle because it is for their own survival. According to Boff (1984:ix),

“The grandest struggle of the human being is the battle for a bit of bread to be gained by your own toil, for a little piece of ground you call your own, a humble roof, a minimum social participation to be won through education. To adopt the place of the poor is to make a discovery. Here we discover the strength of the poor, their resistance, and the dignity of their struggles. They are the needy amongst us, to be sure. But they are also the agents of their own life and subsistence, the generators of their own dignity and liberation.”

Despite the complexity of poverty the poor are still committed to their own vision of attaining freedom from the poverty that dehumanises them. They need to be encouraged to vigorously pursue their course of poverty eradication.

2.3 The Experience of the Poor

The poverty that is our present preoccupation is a reality to real human beings. Poverty has an angle that is unique to the poor because it is their life that is at stake. It is the totality of their living experience, history and struggle. Theologians called this a view from ‘below.’ The poor have a voice through which they can articulate their perceptions, experiences and aspirations in terms of their desires. To them, poverty is not just raw

scientific facts extracted from a scientific survey. Poverty means the actual conditions that characterize their daily existence. Therefore, they have a right to define their social reality from their perspective. They have no other life beyond their present conditions of destitution. This familiar world defines and restricts their existence, opportunities, resources and power.

2.3.1 Basic needs

Poverty implies being unable to provide for your own basic needs. Poor people cannot afford to pay for their daily necessities. They have to face, each day, with the reality of being incapable of meeting their own basic needs. “Poverty for them means being hungry and malnourished; drinking unsanitary water; having no access to basic health care such as immunizations against childhood diseases; living in crowded, unsafe, inadequate shelter, having no shoes or shirt to wear; being illiterate” (Thompson 2000:31). The poor face hunger, are scantily dressed, and some live in squatter camps because they cannot afford to buy food, decent clothes nor can they build better houses. Decent shelter, in a context of rapid urbanization, continues to be an elusive dream for many of our people. “Based on the analysis of the 1996 and 2001 censuses, despite a 7 percent increase in the proportion of households living in formal housing, 36 percent of households (4.1 million households) were living in informal, traditional, backyard and other dwellings in 2001”(cited in UNDP Report 2003:34). The consequence of poverty is that people cannot live a life suitable for dignified human beings. The marginalized should not live a dog’s life, although in our unjust world dogs are better cared for than the destitute. Nyerere once said, “Life is the most basic human right; if justice means anything at all it must protect life. This should be the constant underlying purpose of all social, economic and political activities of government at all levels”(Guma & Milton 1997:81). All attempts must be made to ensure that all of God’s people have a decent life. They should live a life fit for human beings, with access to basic necessities. Poverty should not be accepted as a norm. No one should be living below the bread line. The poor should be freed from the shackles of destitution.

2.3.2 Vulnerability

Being deprived means living a life without security, a life of precarious vulnerability. Poor people are vulnerable to a number of harmful and potentially devastating threats, which they may not have the resources or power to avert. Amongst other threats are fire (for example, shack fires, which destroy homes and possessions); floods (because poorer people often end up erecting their shelters in flood-prone areas); job loss (due to retrenchments); crime (theft or burglary and bodily harm); poor agricultural conditions (for example, those who rely in part on food production for sustenance); illness and death in the family (often there are no adequate resources for medical care). It is clear that being poor robs one of the ability to deal with any potential disasters, whether they are natural or caused by humans. The poor are exposed to many disasters that might happen in their community. Poverty on the other hand, means being subjected to a life of insecurity. “The poor are anxious and fearful, constantly struggling to survive”(Thompson 2000:31). Their life is uncertain because they do not have the means to sustain themselves even though they have access to basic resources out of the poverty alleviation initiatives of the government and private sector. Some poor people living in low cost houses cannot afford to be consistent in adhering to their obligation to make regular repayments towards household electricity and water consumption, and housing loans. “The repossession rate (of houses) remains at about 12 per cent and banks often redline poor areas because they see them as risky”(UNDP Report 2003:36). This implies further marginalization with few opportunities for potential capital injection for further human development in poor areas. Since, the poor lack buying power, they are not a profitable investment market, not even attractive to highflying entrepreneurs in a market driven society like ours.

2.3.3 Crime and violence

Some poverty stricken communities are also characterized by violence and crime. Most poor people are decent, peace-loving people, but their areas harbour shady characters that use these communities to hide their mischief. An increasing number of unemployed

youth become potential agents for criminal syndicates and gangsters. Thompson (2000:58–59) highlights the devastating nature of poverty as he writes:

“Poverty is in itself a violence against human dignity, and it sometimes leads the poor to violently respond to their desperate situations.... Poverty can set a spiral of violence.... The overwhelming majority of the people on earth live in poverty, unable to meet their basic needs and fulfil their God-given potential. This reality is a tremendous obstacle to the dream of creating a just and peaceful world order. It is even more of a scandal because it need not be. The poverty of many exists in sharp contrast with the affluence of the few.”

In such a situation, women and children are the common casualties of that crime and violence. Most poor communities deal with high incidents of women and child abuse. Crime and violence have become the defining characteristic of marginalized communities. Aliber (2001:24) says,

“Crime and violence contribute to the experience of poverty at two levels. On the one level, the exposure to crime and violence directly detracts from the quality of life of its victims and those fearful of being victimized. On another level, the high incidence of crime and violence, which forms a salient feature of everyday life in South Africa, is symptomatic of a profound social malaise, in which the cycle of poverty and of violence are indistinguishable.”

It seems that violence and crime are the unwelcome guests in poor communities. Sometimes, this problem is compounded by high incidence of unemployment, overcrowding, and poor provision of municipal services.

Impoverishment also contributes to the erosion of the moral fibre of society. It creates scenarios of desperation where the quest for survival makes people to be less committed, to upholding the commonly shared social values that encourage moral responsibility. “Poverty was seen as unquestionably a serious threat to moral regeneration. Not because poor people as such are immoral, but because the greed of those who become rich at the expense of the poor and the emotional effects of continuous unemployment create the kind of conditions that can lead to crime”(Challenge Magazine, July 2002). This is the reason why, even when we still have high incidents of white-collar crime, that many of

the offenders who are incarcerated, are members of communities that face destitution. They are prosecuted for theft, housebreaking, mugging, smash and grab, car hijacking. Some of these crimes have fatal consequences and they erode our attempts to create a more caring community. As Nolan observed,

“The stumbling block is the growing tendency towards self-serving individualism. We have a rich tradition of *uBuntu*, of working together as families, as communities, as organizations. Today it seems to be everyone for himself or herself. There are rivalries, suspicions, backstabbing, backbiting, power struggles, careerism and greed. This is the kind of selfish individualism that stands in the way of God’s work in our country at this stage”(Challenge Magazine, April/May 2004:19).

Survivors of these nasty criminal activities are left emotionally and psychologically traumatized. Some have to battle the fears that continue to haunt them daily, infringing on their freedom to enjoy a peaceful life. Furthermore, “many small children are obliged to accompany their mothers to prison when they (mothers) are convicted of crime, and this experience may leave lifelong mental and moral scars”(Shorter 1991:115). The innocent who are supposed to be protected from these hardships are not spared, since, our society is still dysfunctional. We are still reconstructing the fabric of our society in many areas, and that includes our moral fibre.

2.3.4 Substance Abuse

We know that substance abuse is a serious social problem that entangles both the haves and have-nots in society. The increased occurrence of substance abuse further complicates systemic poverty. It traps those who have fallen prey to it in a vicious circle of poverty. These ‘stimulants’ become a crutch to escape from current difficulties. Drug abuse is one of the prevalent and easily identifiable vices that coexist with poverty. “Alcohol has always been the refuge of the desperate and the destitute, and there is constant demand for it”(Shorter 1991:50). Substances that are highly abused are the ones that are readily available and affordable like alcohol, glue or benzene and marijuana

commonly known as dagga. These are devastating snares for the poor. According to the Drug Master Plan report:

“President Nelson Mandela, specifically singled out alcohol and drug abuse among the social pathologies that needed to be combated. He referred to alcohol and other drug abuse as a major cause of crime, poverty, reduced productivity, unemployment, dysfunctional family life, political instability, the escalation of chronic illnesses, such as AIDS and TB, injury, premature birth” (1998 cited in ISPN Website, 2004).

The harsh conditions of poverty seem to create trigger factors for substance abuse. It is suffering that exacerbates the desperation of people to the point where it taxes their coping systems. People, due to difficulties compounded by poverty, lose their sense of meaning. Having lost their self-respect, they become despondent, and fall prey to substance abuse.

It is known that substance abuse can ultimately cause its users lives to spiral out of control into self-destructive behaviour. In our own country, some people have been using their social grants to feed these self-defeating habits. In our struggle to fight poverty we have to deal with these social vices that are part of the dependency culture of those whose images have been dented by poverty. Substance abuse also creates other social problems like increasing incidents of crime, violence, and anti-social behaviour when people are ‘high.’ Drug abuse aggravates domestic violence, and disturbs normal family life. This happens because drugs alter people’s behaviour and attitudes, once they have exceeded the safe limit in their consumption. We also have to note the effect of alcohol abuse by mothers during pregnancy on their unborn child. “Fetal Alcohol Syndrome”(ISPN Website 2004) causes children who have certain physical and psychological defects. Drugs harm addicts physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Poverty alleviation becomes extremely complicated if it is coupled with substance abuse.

2.3.5 Social Exclusion

Being poor implies being denied access to all the avenues of empowerment necessary for one to maintain a good quality of life. The poor are facing many socio-political and economic hindrances in their quest for emancipation from pauperisation. Some of impeding factors are structural and should be changed to promote the total advancement of the poor in society. According to the United Nations Development Programme Report (1998:5-6),

“Poverty may also involve social exclusion in either economic dimension (exclusion from the labour market opportunities to earn income) or a purely social dimension (exclusion from decision-making, social services, and access to community and family support).”

In South Africa, it means being unable to participate in the first economy where the actual economic power is vested. Even participation in the second economy continues to elude the poor, since; they have no money or skill to invest in small and medium enterprises. Cotton asserts that,

“The monopolies over well-paying jobs and career ladders in primary labour markets held by whites and their total and exclusive control of capital markets result in Blacks being underemployed, underpaid and undercapitalised” (Jennings 1992:20).

In a mature democratic society we all aspire to be productive and patriotic citizens, who can make a meaningful contribution towards the good of our country. But, it seems being poor marginalizes a person to such an extent that his or her chances of participating meaningfully in the development of his or her society are slight. There are stakeholders in society who are of the view that some of the political and economic policies pursued by the present government inadvertently perpetuate poverty. The UNDP Human Development Report (2003: 6) asserts, “However, the current strategy and policies for achieving growth are objectively anti-poor, on the one hand, the gap between economic growth and employment growth is widening and, on the other, given their capabilities, the poor are not able to integrate into the process of economic expansion.”

We need to address this social dislocation that is felt by the poor in their own country. This is in essence, is a political issue. “The problem of poverty and human suffering caused by unemployment and economic dislocation are primarily political phenomena, rather than processes that reflect individual or group inadequacy” (Jennings 1992:4). Thus, we have to look at ways of creating social policies that will significantly reduce the social exclusion faced by the poor. They want to be active members of society, not social burdens that cannot fend for themselves, and they want to add value to their own communities. Boff (1984:84 –85) said,

“When we go to the root of all these problems of oppression and injustice, we find that what has gone wrong is the overall system of societal disorganization. In other words, we find the ‘sin of the world,’ the collective sin of humanity. But societal organization is dependent upon politics (or policy). Politics, policy, is present everywhere. It envelops our whole life... If we hope to have a better society.... We are going to have to struggle. We are going to have to add some effort if we hope to change society’s distorted organization.... The change will come from bottom up.”

Change will require the mobilization of a politicised community consciousness among the poor, so that they might lobby for their own interests. There are, fortunately, public policies like affirmative action and Black economic empowerment, designed to deal with social exclusion in the economic sector.

2.3.6 Unemployment

Many of the poor are jobless, with very few prospects of permanent employment. The world of the poor is characterized by the realities of unemployment. Being poor means not having a job to go to, just watching your day go by without being involved in any productive activity that generates income. The Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA) executive director Graham said,

“In general the figures are pointing to continued high levels of inequality between the wealthy and the poor. The data does suggest that there’s de-racialization

among the wealthy. But poverty levels certainly have not improved and when we do our research, which asks people what they think should be the main public issues, jobs comes up as the key issue”(IRINnews.org 2004).

Job creation is a major concern to the poor. Unemployment means they do not have a steady income that would make it possible for them to plan their future in terms of their aspirations. “Unemployment is a significant contributor to poverty....” (UNDP Report 1998:23). Sometimes you find healthy individuals in the community suffering hardship because they are unemployed. Joblessness continues to impoverish many of our people, regardless of their colour, creed and gender. The UNDP Report (1998:23) enumerates six basic categories of the unemployed poor, namely:

- a. Poorly educated rural unemployed (28%)
- b. Poorly educated urban unemployed (13%)
- c. Young unemployed with no labour market experience (36%)
- d. Long-term unemployed with no labour market experience (6%)
- e. Those with labour market experience and some education (15 %), and
- f. Highly educated unemployed poor (1%).

In terms of the abovementioned data, the unemployment levels tend to be the highest amongst the poorly educated rural citizens and youth with no work experience. It is clear that unemployment affects all members of the population in different degrees. “Unemployment rates tend to be the highest amongst Africans, in rural areas, among the women and youth, and those with no previous experience”(UNDP Report 1998:23). It is important that we should focus on eliminating all the factors that are compounding joblessness amongst the Africans.

Recent reports, although some of them are controversial, highlight the fact that unemployment is currently increasing at a disturbing rate. It is estimated that “thirty to forty-two percent of the labour force is caught in a vicious circle of unemployment” (UNDP Report 2003:20). Many share the view that meaningful employment of people is one of the critical contributory factors of sustainable poverty eradication strategies. For this reason the current high levels of joblessness would need to be reduced. “However, access to jobs that are appropriately remunerated and provide decent work is not only an

important means of improving living standards; it is also a means of exercising skills, creativity, making productive contributions to society, and enjoying self-respect, dignity and empowerment”(UNDP Report 2003:10). We need to create jobs in our country, for our people, which would affirm their humanity instead of degrading them. Sometimes the so-called job-creation programs are an insult to the poor because of the appalling conditions in which they are expected to work, conditions that even violate the labour laws.

2.4 The Dehumanising Power of Poverty

Poverty in our community cannot be envisioned as a desirable condition in which the poor should live as people of God. There is no way we can, today justify any attempt to romanticize the kind of life, of deprivation and suffering. The selective devastation of poverty, affecting only some of our citizens, makes it unethical. Poverty dehumanises people. “If to ‘dehumanise’ is to deprive of human character or attributes, then the evidence of dehumanisation can be found in the quantifiable facts concerning surplus or uprooted people(s), especially where they are already socially and economically marginalized”(Rumscheidt 1998:5). Deprivation dents self-esteem and the dignity of the poor. It makes them live a life that is degrading, therefore, robbing them of their full humanity. Living in poverty has devastating effects, since it distorts people’s identity and perception of ‘self’, as valuable citizens and God’s people, especially when they experience a quality of life that is far below that of the more privileged citizens, in the same country. This kind of meagre existence does not leave people with a sense of ‘pride,’ rather it makes them feel and think they are second-class citizens. They experience life as if they were living under a curse.

Poverty is more than just a material condition. It is true that the first recognizable indicators of poverty may be physical or material. But the phenomenon of poverty is multifaceted. Poverty as we have already indicated, damages people’s humanity. “The poor of today are those who have lost or are fast losing much of what they have, their pride, their identity and their dignity”(De Santa Ana 1979: xv). In our world today people

are valued on the basis of the size of their material endowments. They are not judged on their image as the people of God. In this era of globalisation, poverty means economic inferiority. Boerma (1979:19) says, “Because a person was poor, he became different, i.e. of lesser value”. Materially it reduces them to desperate basket cases of charity. Their destiny seems to hinge on the probability of benevolence from others, who are more advantaged than they are. Psychologically and spiritually it knocks their humanity as it traps people into dependency. The poor in society are despised and are treated as lesser beings. “He no longer counts. Poverty is like a disease. It stigmatises and humiliates” (Boerma1979: 76). Human dignity and pride are embedded in our self-reliance, in our ability to fend for ourselves, without becoming a burden to our fellows. Being poor, means being given inferior treatment, due to one’s inability to support oneself. Even in places of worship, the poor are treated shabbily, unlike the more affluent people. They are not given appropriate recognition that they are entitled to as followers of Christ, probably because they don’t dress appropriately, like the more affluent citizens (see. James 2:1 –6).

In fact, the poor are often reduced to faceless people. When some social analysts, researchers, politicians, theologians and other social activists talk about the poor, they do not necessarily perceive them as real people who have their own interests, opinions, aspirations and feelings. Tony Beck, the author of *The Experience of Poverty*, shows how “the development elite has not only reduced the world’s poor to a statistic but has defined that statistic”(cited by Rumscheidt 1998:26). The poor should not be regarded as sheer numbers and mere data that can be processed on our PCs, and graphs as we compile our scientific analyses, when in essence they are human beings just like us, who have dreams that they hope to achieve for their families and themselves. Samuel (1996:146) says in expressing his disapproval of such an insensitive attitude towards the poor,

“Development today has become a market commodity. Everyone worth his or her name is involved directly in the business of ‘development.’ The marginalized are a product on whom research is done, institutions are being built, publications thrive, banks survive and governments come to power. In fact most of them do

not care for the marginalized, and, on the contrary, most often secretly hope that they will always be with them.”

These are people who have real feelings, and identities and are citizens of their country although they might be forced to lead a life of third class citizens. They are people who have a culture and faith that should be respected, even when to some; their life is just a shabby existence. We need to remind ourselves that the poor are human beings who are alive and who experience life in their communities. They are real people who have families, who seek to shape their future, and to have security for themselves and their children.

The poor are vulnerable to exploitation, therefore they are exposed to injustice and oppression in society. The poor are the potential victims of those who, driven by self-interest and greed, misuse their power. They become victims of unfair labour practices, political abuse, and systematic exclusion from any significant participation in the socio-economic reengineering of society. “If it is the wealthy and the influential who make the rules and who run the economic and political institutions of society, no matter how well-meaning they may be, the poor cannot expect the rules and the institutions to adequately respond to their needs. Those who make the rules get the goods”(McGinnis 1979:14). Due to their poverty, they are likely to be undermined, intimidated, harassed and silenced by those who are more powerful than them. Poverty has a disempowering effect on its victims. Thus, many of them bear these injustices silently, with little protest. One may misjudge their silence as apathy. “Poverty is a culture of silence and to speak out is the first step out of acceptance and defeat. Speaking out means to start formulating and organizing your mind in the direction of a solution”(Bruwer 1996:67). It is not easy for the poor to resist the exploitation that has besieged them. They have always been disadvantaged by impoverishment. History bears testimony to this because it takes time for revolutions to ferment. “As well as being poor, the poor man is trapped, oppressed and being exploited; because he is poor.... Being poor becomes synonymous with being oppressed” (Boerma 1979: 20). Since those who are exploiting the poor are powerful and well established in society, it becomes difficult to confront them. Unlike their persecutors, the poor are disadvantaged, and have limited options. This brings us to the

conclusion that deprivation may be a bane to the poor but a boom to the exploiters of the poor. Although it might be difficult for some to accept this, there are those whose present socio-economic, political and spiritual progress was made possible due to advantages presented to them by the prevailing poverty. It has provided them with cheap labour, naïve customers and so on.

For many of the poor, poverty means powerlessness. It means one being unable to use one's human rights advantageously to improve one's welfare. The poor do not enjoy their human rights completely because they are preoccupied with a struggle for survival like where to get the next meal and proper shelter. Although these rights are enshrined in the nations constitution they are occasionally undermined. Beck writes, " The constructs of poverty tend to view the poor as passive objects of state planning" (Rumscheidt 1998:26). They continue to be subjected to the paternalistic attitudes of those who insist on helping them in their poverty, without involving them. They assume to be their voice even when they have not been nominated to speak for them. Meanwhile the poor continue to be ignored when they have views and grievances that they have not expressed. Powerlessness implies, the imposition of the reality of the powerful on the powerless, and that is not their reality. It means that even when they exercise their right to speak, no one listens. The poor need to reaffirm their confidence in facing the challenges of poverty, challenges that can be so overwhelming because they are so complex. The President of the Christian Children wrote an appropriate prayer that provides us with insight in the devastating influence of poverty on the poor and those involved in poverty alleviation:

“Merciful Lord, Hunger seems so massive,
So intimidating, that we feel helpless.
Because there is so much we cannot do,
Please save us from concluding that,
Therefore we can do nothing.
Help us, like children learning to walk,
To take one small step to assist the hungry.
Then show us how to take another step ... and another.
Free us from the captivity of seeing only what cannot be done,

And enable us to see what we can do.
Then give us the courage and the love to do it,
Lord, not as an unwanted burden,
But as an opportunity to celebrate life more fully
And reflect your love more completely.
We ask it in the name of your Son,
Jesus Christ, who came to save us from sin and death;
Yes, and to save us also for a life devoted to deeds of love.
Amen”(Sider 1997: 20).

The poor should never succumb to the threatening pressures of persistent poverty, although its prevalence may be daunting, and they may be tempted to feel so weak that they may think their efforts and those of their partners are just in vain. They have nothing to lose if they continue with their fight against poverty, since poverty has already marginalized them.

Poverty damages the psyche of the poor significantly. The situation of poverty scars the minds of the poor, undermining their humanity. It limits the potential of the poor in using their intellectual capacity for their advantage. “Underdevelopment, or poverty, is a state of mind”(Bruwer 1996:27). An environment that is characterized by impoverishment often has a negative influence on the shaping of the minds of those who live in it without exposure to a more conducive environment. They become subjected to conditions that are not even considered fitting for animals, in our eco-sensitive world. Being disadvantaged results in their freedoms, dignity and the right to self-determination being violated. Chambers rightly observes that, “lack of independence, self-respect and humiliating subservience causes greater pain than high interest rates and debt” (Christian 1999:139). It causes people to adapt their lives mentally to the conditions of squalor and to accept them as an inescapable reality. Thus poor people’s mindset becomes ensnared in the life-world of poverty. Therefore, they ultimately offer little resistance to being subjected to the adverse circumstances of poverty. They become powerless in the context of their pauperisation. “Years of poverty leave a negative imprint on the minds of the poor. This is more than the stunting of aspirations and awareness. The ability of the poor to reflect

critically and to analyse their situations has also been retarded”(Christian 1999:140). Poverty will systematically subjugate people until they become so downtrodden that they will offer little or no protest against their disempowerment. Consequently, other so-called champions of the needy, in a condescending and paternalistic manner, claim to be the voice of the poor. Freire advocates that, “Each win back his right to say his own word, to name the world...Years of intergenerational poverty seriously cramps the ability of the poor to even name their reality”(Christian 1999:140). It is the poor who must articulate their own aspirations and vision of their lives. They are the ones who feel the heat of poverty and know what kind of a better life they aspire to. The poor have a right to transform their world according to their thoughts, philosophies, culture and faith, which they must express without being restricted. These must engage our development and theological paradigms, as we become Christian witnesses amongst the poor. We must respect their intelligence and their ability to shape their community life positively, in line with their thinking. It is unjust for any outsider, in the name of development and evangelism, to continue to impose their perspective on the poor.

Being poor subjects the disadvantaged to a life of limited options. Many lack the appropriate education, and employment or entrepreneurial skills they need to become successful. They are hamstrung in their efforts to participate effectively in any significant political, economic, social and spiritual transformation that conforms to their aspirations. They cannot enter into meaningful debates and engage in forums that ultimately result in societal reengineering. Poverty has a dehumanising effect since it traps people in a vicious circle of deprivation. Global economic growth is creating societies that are increasingly becoming too sophisticated and complex for the poor to participate in, as they currently are. They need to reach a certain level of social awareness, of political and economic literacy, to participate meaningfully in them. De Santa Ana (1979:xv) said; “The economic systems that prevails in the Third World countries creates poverty and locks people in a state of deteriorating poverty.” In our country, certain economic fundamentals have been proclaimed, and have been told by the experts that they are great, but poverty and unemployment have remained as a scourge. Unless the gap is closed the poor will continue to be systematically sidelined politically, economically, socially and

spiritually. Therefore, without meaningful participation multigenerational poverty will become an inevitable outcome.

Persistent poverty creates hopelessness amongst the poor. The deprivation it makes the atmosphere to be characteristically deplorable and gloomy. Those conditions of squalor are painful and humiliating for any normal human being who has to live under them. According to Aliber (2001:3),

“The literature confirms that many poor people feel resigned to poverty – that is, to being chronically poor – and also that many of the day-to-day experiences that contribute to the perception of being poor are attributable to the economic or social environment, over which the poor has little or no control.”

The conditions of poverty instil a sense of desperation, a struggle for survival amongst the poor. They cannot manage the many socio-economic, political and spiritual forces that are haunting them as the poor. This may in time dash their hopes, unless there is a significant intervention that would help them to alleviate their poverty. When you are accustomed to daily suffering your hope dims with every passing day, unless there is a convincing sign that things are taking a turn for the better. Hopelessness is an undesirable state for the poor since it undermines their ability to put up a vigorous resistance against the antagonistic forces that perpetuate their impoverishment. We read in the Scriptures that, “hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when a desire comes, it is a tree of life” (Prov. 13:12). Hope is life giving, since it instils the faith to be optimistic and the courage to fight for your aspirations. Meanwhile hopelessness sows the seeds of discouragement and resignation that would destabilize the poor in their struggle against poverty. Once an attitude of hopelessness has been reinforced, it tends to keep people down. It extinguishes the expectation of a better future that they might otherwise seek for themselves and their children. This attitude is detrimental because it can cause the poor to neglect their potential as individuals and as a group to improve their living conditions. The disadvantaged also need to win the psychological struggle against disillusionment. It would have fatal consequences if they succumbed to despondency.

Poverty perpetuates alienation. It stratifies society in categories of the rich and the poor, educated and uneducated, employed and unemployed, homeless and homeowners, privileged and the underprivileged. It disturbs social harmony by creating a society that is characterized by exploitation, envy, greed, suspicion, tension and violence. The poor inevitably are the most unwelcome people in our metropolitan cities since they are likely to spoil the beauty of the city. They are accused of turning posh suburbs and towns into slums with their low-class standard of living. They cause the devaluation of properties in which many privileged members of the community have invested their life savings. In fact, they have become aliens and intruders in the country of their birth, just because they cannot afford better housing. Therefore they become victims of discrimination for being poor in an environment of affluence. They become subjected to all kinds of inhumane treatment. Thus, poor people have to resist all the negative agents that seem to compound their suffering. They have to wage a struggle against discrimination. Tension between the rich and the poor increases further when the deprived refuse to be oppressed. When the oppressed begin to question and resist inequality, tension can escalate, especially if the oppressors insist on maintaining the status quo. “The poor societies are in ferment. Many among them are becoming aware of their potential and the strength of organized mass struggle. They are realizing that there is no power (other than God), which is greater than people’s power. They are affirming the historical subjectivity of the people in social transformation”(De Santa Ana 1979: xx). This awareness has caused communities of the poor throughout the country to mobilize themselves into groups such as the homeless, landless, unemployed and marginalized students, in order to promote their own interests. Some have even expelled politicians who have ignored their concerns, from their constituencies because they refuse to renew the political mandate of those who do not deliver on issues of importance to the poor.

2.5 Poverty, Illness and Death

Poverty has a death dealing effect on those who are poor. It subjects them to death through hunger, exposure to disease, unhygienic living conditions, violence and crime. Poverty means to be forgotten when it comes to your needs, interest, rights and freedom.

These are only significant as long as they serve to advance the interests of the powerfully rich. You become a non-person who exists to maintain the system of the wealthy and the rulers of this society, a structure founded on disparity. Gutierrez (1988:xxix) refers to the poor as, “those who are ‘nonpersons’- that is, those who are not considered to be human beings with full rights, beginning with the right to life and to freedom in various spheres.” The well being of the destitute has ceased to be important in our unjust world today. Their welfare is ignored and their grievances are not prioritised or viewed seriously. De Santa Ana (1979:xix) says,

“It must be admitted that there are governments, intergovernmental bodies and voluntary agencies, including churches, with the support of well-meaning people from the ranks of the rich and powerful, who have genuinely tried to do their best for the poor and the oppressed. But often they tend to look on the poor as objects of their charity and good efforts, the passive recipients of their goodwill...What they [the poor] are fighting for is recognition of themselves as people having potential to change their own situation and society as a whole. A people who are fighting against marginalization in society do not want to be marginalized in the efforts made for their own well-being.”

They should not be treated as non-entities who are just pitied in their miseries, but ignored when solutions to assist them are explored. People are already humiliated by poverty; therefore they must not be treated as if they were incompetent to speak for themselves.

Poverty means being subjected to the death-dealing blows of preventable disease. Being poor also means being subjected to poor health. The poor continue to be infected and affected by disease that could have been avoided. “Human health cannot be an afterthought to Christians who wish to extend the kingdom of God. The God who made us in the beginning, took view that the human being was ‘very good.’ We are a pleasing creation to God. Anything that reduces this ‘goodness’ has to be overcome”(Stuart 1996: 83). Yet nowadays we see the opposite, many of the poor make it into the statistics of the epidemics and pandemics. They do not experience life as ‘goodness’ but as pain and suffering through sickness. In South Africa many of those who have contracted HIV/Aids

are poor. They are the ones who are dying prematurely, who have limited access to anti-retroviral drugs, relevant medication, or suitable nutrition and whose children turn into orphans in great numbers. “HIV/Aids is eroding Africa’s achievements in its development. Two thirds of the world’s HIV/Aids pandemic is in Africa”(Belshaw et al 2001. 11). A significant number of the two thirds of HIV/Aids sufferers are in Southern Africa, and South Africa leads the world with the largest number of the infected.

This HIV/AIDS infection compounds poverty. HIV/AIDS is not a respecter of class, race, creed or gender. We reject the widespread misconception that; “Aids is a problem of the poor and the uneducated; the rich and middle class people, who have access to information, education and good medical facilities, this will be spared the ravages of the epidemic”(Saayman & Kriel 1992:11). Anyone, regardless of his or her background, could be infected and affected by HIV/AIDS. It makes no difference how respectable they might be or how they might be despised in society. HIV/AIDS is a disease that does not discriminate, although the risk to exposure may vary in society. Nicolson (1995:13) says,

“The figures show that Black people are the most at risk... Where people are already in poor health, malnourished or have had their resistance lowered by malaria or venereal disease, they are more at risk of contracting AIDS. It is therefore not surprising that AIDS grows most rapidly amongst the African and Coloured communities in South Africa since they are also communities which include the very poor.”

The disadvantaged are the ones who are more exposed to the devastation of this virus. Once people have been infected by this epidemic, the negative impact on their lives is tremendous. UNDP Human Development Report (2003:7) states that,

“Many studies have clearly demonstrated that HIV /AIDS contributes to the rise of poverty, and that poverty reduces the ability of the poor living with HIV/AIDS to cope with the disease. Moreover, AIDS generates new poverty as people lose employment and housing tenure. Household incomes fall due to loss of wage earners and rising spending, particularly on medical care and funerals.”

It creates secondary health problems, since those who are infected become more vulnerable to other opportunistic infections. Consequently, it also generates other social problems that drain the limited resources of those affected and infected by it.

The rapid growth of this sexually transmitted disease in our country is linked to the negative legacy of *apartheid*. It was a factor that disrupted the family unit of many oppressed people. “In South Africa, for example, the social devastation caused by migrant labour and apartheid laws, which prevented families from settling as families near their places of work, has been a major cause of sexual behavioural patterns which form the basis of the epidemic among black South Africans”(Saayman & Kriel 1992:24). This disease is destroying the social fabric of communities, further complicating their problems. It leads to joblessness and increases the number of orphans, widows and widowers, disrupting family life. Families struggle to cope with caring for their infected members. Unaffordable treatment is one of many other problems they encounter. “The gap between the rich and the poor is likely to grow, since the latter will be the most affected by AIDS”(Nicolson 1995: 14). Yes, unless we succeed in preventing the spread of this scourge, the prevalence of HIV/AIDS is likely to multiply the misfortunes of the poor socially, economically, politically and spiritually. It seems that for them, “if it does not rain, it pours”(African saying).

2.6 Hope for the Poor

Being poor means being exposed to continual emotional stress and fatigue. The impoverished are anxious about mundane matters: where to get the next meal, fear of eviction due to illegal occupation or failure to pay rent to the landlord, transportation of water, and labouring hard for a meagre wage. These conditions deprive them of peace and quiet, a gift that so many take for granted. Yet God desires that people should live in peace. Peace, which is necessary for sanity, continues to elude the destitute. Living in abject conditions robs them of their wholeness. These harsh conditions will have an impact on the Church’s efforts to spread the gospel, and God’s peace in these weary communities. “Evangelisation is to be undertaken from below...from the depth of human

suffering... with a view to the transformation of a world of fears and tears into a new order of peace and justice, laughter and joy” (Costas 1989:xiii). Poor people are also aspiring to moments when they would be able to genuinely rejoice, because they have been freed from the fetters of poverty. They hope to see the day when they will be able to smile, because they have been relieved from the hardships of poverty. We need to understand that poverty is depressing. Just the sight and smell of squalor are horrid. Imagine how obnoxious it must be to those who live their lives in such a dismal environment. It is in such places that they have their homes, *spaza* shops, makeshift playgrounds and entertainment centres. To them this has become the atmosphere in which they, ordinary people, continue to live daily.

Some of the poor we know, have, despite adversity, not allowed their lives to spiral into pessimism. They still live with a sense of hope, notwithstanding abject poverty, humiliation and suffering. The poor have continued to draw strength from their faith and their spirituality to face their adversities. Fackre says about them, remembering their tribulation:

“To live in the Spirit is to experience joy when all around seem so sad, to hope even where there seems to be so little to be hoped for... That is what the message of the cross is all about: life through death and hope beyond it... Where there is hope there is certainty of love, because there is God – the Alpha and the Omega, the great One from whom no one, nor anything, can separate us” Rom. 8:31ff (Costas 1989:xii).

They still continue to survive even when their living conditions are scandalous and below the level of human dignity. When one observes their situation, one is left wondering at the resilience of the human spirit. They do not succumb to despair because of their hope. “That hope as an evangelical antidote to despair cannot be practiced triumphantly but requires an ecclesial sense of vulnerability, formed by the truth of the cross as an ecclesial marking”(Brueggemann 2001:6). It is hope that for some comes from the strength of knowing that they are members of a faith community. They have brothers and sisters in Christ who stand in solidarity with them, sharing the challenges of the struggle

against poverty with them. In that community they find support and assurance in times of need.

This is not the kind of hope that will maintain the status quo of suffering, inequality and oppression. Rather, it is a hope that encourages the poor to intensify their fight against marginalization. The danger exists, however, that hope may lead to apathy. This is how Botman (2001:75-76) describes this hope:

“The category of hope has itself often led to quietism, passivity, and paralysis. The gift of God becomes something that one should wait for. One is challenged to be patient and willing to endure suffering until it comes to pass. In such situations, hope functions as a narcotic of the people. We therefore have to ask whether there is a relationship between hope and action... We are not merely called to act in anticipatory hope. Our mission in the twenty-first century is to confess hope in action following God’s actions in our times... We are called to confess hope in action.”

Hope should not be allowed to emasculate the poor in their struggle against poverty. They must not just become ‘submissive’ victims when deprivation is giving them a death-dealing blow. Hope should steer their just wrath against subjugation. We salute the poor for their courage to combat poverty. “Poverty in Africa presents enormous challenges. The quest for dignity depends on how successfully Africa’s people manage to struggle out of the dehumanising poverty that afflicts the majority of them”(Belshaw, Calderisi & Sugden 2001: 26). The struggle against penury should restore the humanity of those that have been marred by it. Hope means drawing strength from God’s accompanying presence, and trusting that in the struggle against poverty God’s justice will ultimately prevail. It is the conviction that the poor are not meant to be perpetual casualties of deprivation.

When one looks at the reality of poverty in South Africa, however, one might be tempted to be cynical. It is evident that poverty eradication is a daunting task for all the stakeholders within our nation. We know that the disparity that is present in our society cannot be redressed overnight. The levels of impoverishment are phenomenal and ever

increasing. Botman (2001:77 –78) suggests, “The world needs prophetic imagination. Only prophetic imagination will be able to look for and see the new acts of God in this world, here and now.” We must always be able to see God engaged in shaping our future to have better possibilities than our present realities. We cannot resign ourselves to the morbid factors of poverty as an ultimate and unchangeable reality for the poor in Africa. We must not undermine our potential as Africans to attain fundamental transformation of our continent and individual countries in the context of the present and future challenges. Africa is fortunate to be rich with all the necessary resources in terms of land, water, vegetation, minerals, people, climate animals, culture and spirituality. We should be using these resources to our advantage to eliminate poverty. There are a lot of negative factors, both internal and external to Africa, which have created this widespread of destitution. Nevertheless, this does not legitimise the view that poverty in Africa cannot be alleviated, since Africa has the potential to provide a decent life for the majority of its people. Ortega (2001:119-120) proposes:

“We also have to proclaim that God can create new social possibilities beyond ‘the shrunken horizons of defeat and submissive docility.... The movement is emotional, liturgical and imaginative: it requires forming a vision of the future free of the fearful dreams of entrenched power.... We have to fashion a vision of the future with new ways of talking and acting to express the new social possibilities of community transformation in terms of the neediest. We have to listen to the call God has made for us to re-enter into the pain of the world and the possibility of renewal and salvation.”

We have to develop that consciousness in the face of many negative forces, and assume that poverty is not the eternal destiny of our country and continent. It is would be a travesty of our evangelical tenets to assume that the bad news of impoverishment cannot be redressed by our just God.

2.7 Conclusion

We have provided a panoramic view of the reality of poverty in South Africa, with some reference into the historical factors that have contributed to the making of our nation, and

the extent of poverty. In trying to understand impoverishment in Africa, we have cited some statistics; some of that data provided by scientific research is controversial, however, because some of the findings and conclusions of the researchers are disputed by policy-makers and government agencies. But, controversy does not cancel the fact that the extent of poverty in our community is extremely high, even before we attempt to analyse the negatives in our society. Whether we are researchers, civic leaders, professionals, theologians, politicians, entrepreneurs or just ordinary people, we cannot deny the occurrence of poverty in our community. We may have conflicting opinions in our analysis of this deprivation but the truth is that we continue to see disturbing levels of poverty in our country. It would not be helpful to minimize the problem, when it is such a serious socio-economic, political and spiritual issue.

Poverty in South Africa is the general context in which we, as Christians have to be engaged in Christ's ministry and fulfil the Lord's mandate of salvation. Padilla suggests:

“We begin... by analysing our situation, listening to the questions raised within it... Lack of a good understanding of the real issues involved in living in a particular situation will be reflected in inadequate or misdirected questions, and this will hinder our understanding of the relevance of the biblical message to the situation”(cited by Costas 1989:8).

The pertinent question is how do we fulfil that mandate in the face of poverty and how do we minister to the poor? The prevalence of poverty in our community is so damaging that we cannot ignore it if we are to be faithful to our calling as witnesses for Christ. Grasping the realities of destitution can help us to shape our perception of our society, as well as our approach and ministry to our people. This insight can be very significant in transforming us to be compassionate ministers of the gospel amongst the poor, and enabling us to join them in their struggle as they deal with issues that emanate from their world. The socio-historical context of poverty has implications for evangelisation. As Tsele (1997: 85) stated, “The salvific measure and moral content of our faith should be judged by the human victims it seeks to salvage from poverty, suffering, sin and death.” Our witness is amongst people whose lives have been devalued by years of marginalization. Through our ministry amongst the disadvantaged we must contribute

towards them being emancipated from the ravages of deprivation. They must ultimately reach a state of blessedness where they may experience life in its wholeness: in dignity, peace, health, justice, unity, liberty and reconciliation with God. I share the perception of ‘mission as transformation’. Our missionary activities must result in an improvement in personal lives and societal issues. Conditions that are not consistent with the demands of the gospel should be transformed to become commendable to God.