

# The Poor with Us and in Us

JESSICA VAN DENEND

I came to Union Theological Seminary in the fall of 2003, and like a lot of my liberal Protestant cohorts, I thought that Christians could and should save the world through their social-justice programs. My application essays to Union contained phrases like “Christian responsibility toward the world,” “learning how to serve the community,” or “learning how to help people.” I grew up in a fairly evangelical community, and it was almost as if I had replaced a more spiritual-based proselytizing with just-as-certain answers from the social gospel; those who did not dedicate themselves to “making the world better” were, not necessarily damned, but certainly not “good” Christians, either.



That mindset began to change during my first year at Union after I attended a planning session for a new program called the “Poverty Initiative.” It was the brainchild of Liz Theoharis, a doctoral student at Union, who had come out of ten years of experience organizing with poor people in Philadelphia, and Paul Chapman, a long-time organizer and activist. They concluded, based on their work with the Employment Project, including a survey of seminaries across the country, that seminarians were not being adequately prepared for issues of economic injustice. The Poverty Initiative was an attempt to provide a model for a new way of learning, one that would provide the voices of the people immediately affected.

And yet, I still didn’t understand the radical nature of what the Poverty Initiative would be. I didn’t understand what it would mean to have the voices of the poor at the table. I still thought in terms of “doing good. It’s hard to pinpoint when I finally caught on to the fact that the Poverty Initiative was not just a “nice idea” but a radical commitment to changing the way I thought about money and life.

Perhaps my changed understanding came through encounters with Willie Baptist, who arrived at Union the next fall, as the Poverty Initiative’s scholar-in-residence, perhaps a first for a U.S. Protestant seminary. Willie, a self-identified formerly homeless, “poor” person, has fought for economic justice for over a quarter of a century. At age 17, he participated in the Watts Riots. In the eighties he became part of the National Union of the Homeless and today works with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, a powerful, multi-racial organization of poor and homeless families advocating and agitating for social change. I have memories of him talking about the otherness of poverty and race in a psychology class, discussing the Panthers’ organizing principles in tangent with the features of the Jesus movement for a New Testament class, and helping me with a paper on Gramsci for a social theory class.

On the other hand, perhaps the change in my outlook really occurred in the immersion class facilitated by Liz and Willie during the January intercession. We fifteen students spent two solid weeks learning more about the systematic issues behind poverty, thinking about the role of religious communities in building a social movement, and visiting with leaders of poor peoples’ organizations in New York and beyond. To our conception of poverty as specifically racialized and urbanized, speakers posed the presence of poor whites, of issues connected with the growing use of immigrant day laborers. Countering our myths of the homeless as lazy, as drug-abusers, as stupid, we heard the stories of and met homeless men and women who are college educated—former lawyers and businessmen—who speak eloquently on social theory or political issues, and who are often working one or more jobs. We began to think not of how people are too lazy or ill or unfit to succeed in our society, but of how our society has wronged them.

Perhaps my internal change came when, after that class, I helped organize the Truth Commission hosted by the Poverty Initiative. The event, modeled after similar commissions in Peru and South Africa, tried to invert the traditional paradigms. We invited local preachers, teachers, academics, “experts,”—people all used to being keynote speakers—to attend, but to say nothing, to sit and listen. Leaders of grassroots and poor peoples’ groups gave their “testimony” powerfully and eloquently as they shared their experiences their ideas on what the next steps might be. It has only been a couple of months since the event, but there are some signs of change – churches and religious leaders becoming more involved in advocacy movements, a flourishing of student-initiated projects at Union on a variety of related topics, and most important, an increase in relationships and conversations among people who don’t always get to talk to each other—students, professors, professionals, church leaders, and leaders of poor peoples’ organizations.

Perhaps conversion is something that happens again and again. Although the Poverty Initiative hopes to keep pressing for further institutional commitment, Union has already been gracious in finding ways for people to participate in classes for free, in granting office space in which meetings can occur and work can take place, and in finding space in the course schedule. There have been more classes offered, led by poor peoples’ groups, such as Picture the Homeless or the Immokalee Workers, the worker organization of largely Latino, Haitian, and Mayan Indian immigrants in Florida that just won a major settlement from the owners of Taco Bell. There have been new student-led task forces focusing on such issues as prisons, immigration, arts and culture, the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s last years. There have been sponsored exhibitions of art by homeless or formerly homeless artists. And there has been an increased presence at Union of people from the community, attending or leading worship, talking with students, enrolling

in classes, just being around.

And so perhaps the process is also communal. The most amazing thing about this work has been the ways in which it has rejuvenated and strengthened our own specific vocation, be it ministerial, academic, political, artistic, or focused in another way. Indeed, some of the most productive and creative processes have occurred in departments that seem unlikely to benefit from a relationship with poor people. Professor Hal Taussig, who studies the New Testament time period, is working on a book linking some of the advocacy work that Picture the Homeless is doing around the conditions of burial in Potter's Field for the indigent or unidentified dead and the funeral associations that existed during the Roman Empire.

But if I had to delineate the exact moment of "conversion," when I began a new way of looking at the world, it was probably at a panel discussion the Poverty Initiative led last spring, entitled "Who is Poor?" This discussion was about the artificiality and the social construction of the gulf placed between "ourselves" and "the poor." We define the world in such a way so that we can close our eyes to the poverty already en-

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trenched, albeit hidden, in our own churches, our own neighborhoods, our own selves. We forget that within the pews of the wealthiest, most politically connected, most ornate churches are people who are poor, homeless, without health insurance, fighting to pay their next bill. We forget that those of us making six or more digits can be plagued by what we are lacking, can live in fear of the uncertainty of our own status, can be enslaved by the need to accumulate.

An organizer from Poor People United asked listeners to raise their hands if they were on any kind of government assistance. Several did so. He then asked any students who had taken out federal loans to add their hands to the mix. Several more hands went up. That night, I saw everything in a new light.

When we listen to the stories of the poor, we realize that it is our lives that are being talked about, it is our liberation that is linked to theirs. We are bound up in this mess with each other. We *all* live, as Willie Baptist points out, in a world characterized by "increasing abandonment in the midst of increasing abundance." The divide then is not that of blue state or red state, of poor or rich, or of oppressed or oppressor in any clear-cut way. The divide is, rather, between those who recognize the problem of poverty as one that is connected to their lives and those who think they can go on operating independently, bestowing their money and solutions from above.

*Jessica Van Denend is a candidate for a Master of Divinity degree in June 2006 from Union Theological Seminary, New York City, and a Poverty Initiative Student Member. For more information about the groups mentioned in the article, visit [www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org); [www.picturethehomeless.org](http://www.picturethehomeless.org); [www.ciw-online.org](http://www.ciw-online.org); [www.poorpeopleunited.org](http://www.poorpeopleunited.org); and [www.povertyinitiative.org](http://www.povertyinitiative.org)*

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