

James Hensley
Fort Worth Christian School

Abstract

This paper summarizes a project in which I led a group of students at Fort Worth Christian School in experiences that challenged them to rethink poverty and to be more engaged in their community. The presenting problem was a prevalence of troubling attitudes about poverty. Some students demonstrated ambivalence toward helping people who live in poverty, which is contrary to the teachings of Scripture. In response, I led a group of high school students in a 48-hour experience with CitySquare, a Dallas ministry to those experiencing homelessness and poverty. During this time we participated in a poverty simulation, which involved making meals with meager resources, sleeping in shelter-like environments, volunteering at various ministries, and meeting people who were experiencing poverty and homelessness.

Confronting Christian Students' Misconceptions about Poverty

Leading people toward change is a particularly complex challenge in the context of Christian education. My role as a Bible teacher at a Christian school centers on facilitating the spiritual formation of students, and this often involves calling them to change. Sometimes the need for change emerges from ordinary conversations like one I had with students after reading Matthew 25. Having read Jesus's instructions to care for "the least of these," I proceeded to make what I expected to be uncontested remarks about having compassion for people who are at an economic disadvantage. To my chagrin, several students objected to these remarks. Their comments revealed ambivalence and even hostility toward people who experience poverty. One student bluntly said, "Poor people are lazy, so why should I help them?" When I asked students if they would be open to participating in ministries that work with people experiencing homelessness, one student responded, "I might be okay doing that, but I would want to take a shower afterwards." I was stunned by the level of reluctance even to be in physical proximity to such people demonstrated in this comment. Many students echoed these sentiments, wondering aloud why they should feel any moral duty to help people who were, as these students saw it, only experiencing the consequences of their own poor choices. They suggested that whatever aid they might offer could enable addictions or other unsafe behaviors. Over the course of the conversation it emerged that some students thought that poverty in the United States was entirely attributable to individual laziness and poor personal decisions. As a result, these students felt no moral obligation to care for the people in their community who experienced poverty.

The above anecdote took place in a high school Bible class at Fort Worth Christian School and was one of several indications of a problem to which I needed to respond. In order to study this further, I conducted interviews with students, teachers, and administrators and later surveyed a broad sample of the student body.¹ The results showed

¹ I surveyed 100 students out of a student body of approximately 350 and interviewed eight students and four staff members. In the survey, I asked students to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about poverty, Christianity, and their experiences. In the survey I also gave students an opportunity to answer open-ended questions on these subjects. The ethnographic research model outlined by Mary Clark Moschella generally guided my research. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

that “caring for the poor” was not important to most students.² The surveys showed that students had little sense of responsibility toward people in their community who were at a disadvantage, and interviews showed a strongly individualistic perspective.³ In interviews with school administrators, one important factor that might have contributed to this problem came up frequently: students simply had little or no life experience with people who lived at an economic disadvantage. The experiences of students generally took place within the privileged bubble of suburban private school life. This research revealed an urgent need for change because caring for people at an economic disadvantage is an essential Christian value.

This notion that concern for people at a disadvantage is a central Christian principle finds support throughout Scripture, particularly in the ministry of Jesus. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus announces his ministry by quoting Isaiah as follows:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
And to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

This foundational statement constitutes a kind of mission statement for the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.⁴ Below, I will briefly survey the ways in which this passage corresponds with the rest of Luke’s Gospel as well as with the broader canon of Scripture. After establishing this, I will discuss how the values that emerge from this passage might shape contemporary Christian practices and how I attempted to cultivate these values within my own practice of ministry.

Jesus’s quotation in Luke 4 stitches together Isaiah 58:6, which frames religion in terms of compassion for the poor, and 61:1-2, which envisions an ultimate time of the restoration of Israel. In joining these texts together, Luke shows Jesus promising deliverance for the poor and people on the margins of society. Jesus presents himself as the one who brings about this promise, both in saying “the Spirit of the Lord is on me” and “Today this scripture has been fulfilled” (4:18, 21). In this text, Jesus not only conceives of the ultimate

² Nearly 70 percent of students indicated that they did not believe “caring for the poor” was an essential component of Christianity. In this survey, I used the term “poor” instead of a more respectful phrase such as “those at an economic disadvantage” in order to make it more easily understood by high school students. I also use the term “poor” below when discussing Scripture because that is how people at an economic disadvantage are described in many of the relevant texts.

³ Mary Douglas’s social game theory was especially helpful here. Douglas categorizes social behavior as falling into four categories: authoritarian, hierarchical, individualistic, and egalitarian. After interviews with eight students in which I posed a series of questions about these students’ families, I used this paradigm to plot answers on a grid according to Douglas’s theory. Six of the eight landed firmly in the individualistic quadrant and none in the more group-oriented egalitarian quadrant. Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 115; Charles A. Kimball, “Jesus’s Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke’s Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplemental Series* 94 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 97; James A. Sanders, “From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4,” in *Luke and Scripture*, ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 69.

deliverance of Israel as a ministry to the poor and the outcast but even defines his own ministry in terms of justice for the poor.

The theme of caring for the poor emerges throughout the Gospel of Luke, often exemplified through hospitality and charity. Jesus habitually identifies with the poor and shows solidarity with them.⁵ In the Parable of the Rich Fool in 12:13-21 and in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19-31 Jesus seems to identify with the poor against the rich. In the parable of the rich fool, the rich man is condemned for nothing more than storing up wealth for himself. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the judgment of the nameless rich man is contrasted with that of the poor man, Lazarus. The reversal of fortunes here exemplifies Luke's theology of caring for the poor, with the rich man condemned and the poor Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham. The Parable of the Good Samaritan in 10:25-37, the story of "a certain ruler" in 18:18-30, and the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in 19:1-9 also show Luke's emphasis on compassion for the poor and those who are marginalized.⁶ This focus on justice for the poor does not begin in Luke, but is deeply rooted in the Old Testament law and prophets.⁷

"Open your hand to the poor and needy in your land," says Deuteronomy 15:11. Similarly, Exodus 22:21-27 sets forth laws concerning the treatment of immigrants, widows, orphans, and the poor. Israelites were commanded not to take interest on loans given to the poor, and oppression or abuse of other marginalized groups was forbidden. Leviticus 25 sets further social safeguards and provisions for the poor and marginalized, with the year of jubilee inaugurating liberty from both slavery and debt. These values are even more evident in the Hebrew prophets.⁸ People who exploit the poor and marginalized receive some of the harshest criticism from the Old Testament prophets. The Song of the Unfruitful Vineyard in Isaiah 5 tells of a vineyard that was destroyed because of the bad fruit it produced.⁹ Isaiah then identifies the vineyard as Israel and Judah while the bad fruit represents injustice and violence (5:7). The prophet criticizes "you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you" (5:8). Jeremiah 22 echoes these sentiments. Here the prophet equates justice and righteousness with moral treatment of the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow (22:3). One final examples is found in Amos 5:11-12, where the prophet says:

Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your

⁵ Jesus does not speak from a position of wealth but as one of the poor himself. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 97.

⁶ Notably, however, the required responses by the rich are not identical in these various stories. Jesus tells the rich man in Luke 18 to give away all his wealth, while Zacchaeus gives away half his wealth and offers to pay back anyone whom he has defrauded. This disparity suggests that there might not be a "one size fits all" prescription.

⁷ Hays, *Moral Vision*, 113.

⁸ Hemchand Gossai, *Justice, Righteousness and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Prophets*, American University Studies Series VII: Theology and Religion (New York: Lang, 1993).

⁹ Cf. Luke 20:9-19

transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

Amos goes on to describe the “day of the Lord” as a time of ultimate retribution for these evils. As in the New Testament, the use (or misuse) of wealth and power, particularly as it relates to the poor and marginalized of society, constitutes a central element in God’s judgment of humanity.

Luke Timothy Johnson argues in *Sharing Possessions* that such passages describe not so much a set of firm rules as an “orientation to the world” that shapes the Christian life.¹⁰ Johnson argues persuasively that the sharing of possessions is a “mandate of faith,” but the specific ways in which that mandate is practiced can vary widely according to the context.¹¹ In the early church, we see various attempts to embody these values. In Acts, Luke describes the Jerusalem church as a community that shared wealth “as any had need” (2:44-45). A significant theme in Paul’s epistles is Paul’s collection for the poor (e.g., 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15). During the Patristic period, practices of justice and hospitality were so pervasive that, according to Amy Oden, “one encounters it at every turn, under every rock, around every corner.”¹² Oden contends that such practices were not only present in early Christianity, but they were the norm. Likewise, Everett Ferguson identifies eleven distinct examples in early Christian writings that convey the value of what he labels “acts of mercy” which were central to Christian worship.¹³ Early Christian communities saw practices of mercy, justice, and hospitality as a moral imperative.¹⁴ Promoting justice in society at large was not seen as tangential to Christianity but was an essential part of living out its core principles.¹⁵

Merely establishing these biblical and historical precedents is a fairly simple task. Determining how to apply these values to contemporary contexts presents a much more difficult challenge. Contemporary Christian communities must take seriously the principles of caring for the poor through acts of hospitality, mercy, and charity. While there are instances of the contemporary church focusing on the poor, the major emphasis seems to be more on personal salvation. Luke Timothy Johnson asks why the church seems to only conceive of sin as “weaknesses of the flesh” and ignores economic injustices.¹⁶ If care for the poor is, as I have argued, such a central biblical ethic, then why does it sometimes seem to sit on the periphery of Christian praxis? Johnson also notes that the church has historically been an institution of wealth and power far more often than it has been one of weakness and

¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 31.

¹¹ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 138.

¹² Amy G. Oden, ed., *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), Kindle loc. 123.

¹³ Everett Ferguson, *Early Christians Speak*, 3rd ed. (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1999), 203-211.

¹⁴ Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, Kindle loc. 178-200.

¹⁵ Robert Louis Wilken notes that, at least by the time of Augustine, it was not viable for Christians to consider social justice “someone else’s responsibility.” Wilken writes that, for Augustine, true worship is not possible without justice. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 186-211.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus*, 95.

poverty. If the church takes seriously Jesus's statement that it is hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24), then perhaps the wealthy should be pitied instead of admired. This is counterintuitive partly because of the ways in which values of individualism and materialism have permeated American life.¹⁷ This problem led me to confront the attitudes and assumptions of students shaped by such individualistic attitudes and call them toward a more Christian outlook and practice.

In order to begin to make progress in this arena I needed to find ways to allow students to see and consider poverty as directly as possible. I attempted to do this by immersing students in a context in which they might see positive examples of Christian ministry to economically disadvantaged individuals and encounter people living in poverty who do not conform to some of the students' preconceived notions about such people. I hoped that if students engaged in this kind of experience and if sufficient reflection occurred during and after the experience, the desired change might begin to occur.

My ethnographic research revealed the students' attitudes about poverty were in large part due to lack of experience. Students simply had little to no experience with people who lived in poverty. As noted above, in interviews faculty members and administrators showed that the suburban private school environment isolates students from much of their community, perhaps working to maintain ignorance about poverty. Prior to this project, the most significant school-sponsored activities that might have countered this were short-term international mission trips. Although many students spoke about the value of international mission trips and how such experiences were eye-opening for them, these experiences did not seem to impact the problem. Such experiences may in fact have been counterproductive in that they established the notion that Christian mission and ministry should happen elsewhere, after a long plane ride, rather than in one's own community. Various groups within the school had occasionally participated in brief service projects in partnership with local churches and organizations. These, too, were ineffective with regard to the problem of this study. Simply painting a wall or stocking a shelf at a food pantry, though good and worthwhile, likely would not challenge one's basic attitudes about poverty. I wanted to find something more transformative for this project. My hope was to cultivate both a concern for and active engagement with those in the community who were experiencing poverty. In response to all this, I partnered with a local ministry to urban homeless individuals and conducted a "poverty simulation." This experience was designed with many of these concerns in mind. With nineteen high school students and three faculty members, we went on a 48-hour excursion to learn about poverty.¹⁸ We participated in a poverty simulation at CitySquare, a ministry in Dallas, Texas.

From the moment of our arrival at CitySquare, it was evident that this experience would take students outside their comfort zones and challenge them, perhaps even in ways

¹⁷ William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Jen Hatmaker, *7: An Experimental Mutiny Against Excess* (Nashville: B&H, 2012); Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann, and John McKnight, *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

¹⁸ All high school students were introduced to the project in a chapel service, during which I explained both the theological foundation of the project and the details of the experience itself. After several meetings and conversations, nineteen students eventually committed to participate. There were sophomore, junior, and senior students in the group. Some of these students had previous experiences with mission trips and service projects, but others had none.

they had not experienced before. As soon as the bus exited in CitySquare's South Dallas neighborhood, the mood on the bus immediately quieted as students looked around and saw tents beneath the overpass and homeless people sitting on the sidewalk. Conversation immediately stopped as students somberly and pensively surveyed the neighborhood. Upon arrival, we began with a group discussion about poverty. This included a budgeting exercise that demonstrated how challenging it is for, as an example, a single mother who works full-time at minimum wage to earn enough money to support herself and her children. After writing out a realistic budget, students were divided into groups and asked to come up with ideas for what one might be able to do in such a situation. This exercise alone began to erode some of the assumptions with which students had entered. Students' comments indicated that they learned from this conversation that poverty was more difficult and complex than they had previously thought, with no easy solutions. One student said, "All our best ideas were bad ideas." Another student observed that "there's no way to win," and still another made the comment that "there's no way out, at best you're just getting by."

Following this introductory exercise, students were given five dollars and two bus passes, which constituted the entirety of their resources for food and transportation for the remainder of the experience.¹⁹ Students were divided into three groups, and one person in each group was given no money and no bus passes. This person had to work with their group to figure out what to do. This immediately presented a problem because the neighborhood was a 'food desert,' where grocery stores were few and far between.²⁰ Because not everyone had bus passes, students chose to stay together and walk two miles to the nearest store to buy food. Each evening after dinner we had a group discussion about the experience and what students were thinking and learning. In response to the experiences of this first evening, one student said, "It was different to look at prices and have to think about the value of a dollar. Going to the cash register and being nervous about calculations, instead of paying and just letting it be a surprise, was nerve-wracking." Other comments at this point further illustrated that participants were beginning to rethink previous assumptions about poverty. For example, one student said, "Poverty isn't as black and white as I thought. I used to think they were doing something wrong." Another said, "I'm starting to think about them more as people." During these conversations we also explored the relevant theological issues and considered some of the biblical texts mentioned above.

The first night everyone slept on cold concrete floors in a multipurpose room, which was intended to simulate the experience of sleeping in a shelter. The following day the three groups rotated through three experiences. One was a "homeless experience," which involved a tour of the area and a conversation with the ministry's neighbor specialist. This included passing by a "tent city" underneath a nearby overpass, where dozens of homeless people lived in tents. The following three hours were then spent doing nothing, which, according to the ministry's representatives, is typical of a homeless neighbor. This time was intended to help students imagine what it might feel like to have nowhere to go and nothing to do. The second activity was the "living in poverty experience," which lasted approximately three hours. This experience included touring the ministry's Opportunity Center and hearing an

¹⁹ This amount was chosen to approximate the value of four meals using only funds from SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, colloquially known as food stamps).

²⁰ Nathan Berg and James Murdoch, "Access to grocery stores in Dallas," *International Journal of Behavioural and Healthcare Research* 1, no. 1 (2008): 22-37.

explanation of the programs available to those who are working but live in poverty. The group also toured a downtown vertical resident community, with units reserved for formerly homeless people and the people who were working but still experiencing poverty. The third activity was the “working experience,” which involved volunteering for three hours at a thrift store and food pantry. This activity was intended to allow students to reflect on how a difficult night’s sleep in a shelter, taking public transportation, and possibly not having sufficient food can all affect one’s productivity on the job. After these three activities, the groups then reconvened at the Opportunity Center for dinner and a time for reflecting on everyone’s experiences of the day. That night, the group experienced a simulation of homelessness by sleeping in the outdoor courtyard of the Opportunity Center. The following morning the experience concluded with a group breakfast and a few hours of discussion and reflection.

In order to evaluate the efficacy of the experience, I collected data from three different points of view. These three provide a researcher angle, an insider angle, and an outsider angle, allowing for a triangulated data set.²¹ The primary advantage of this approach is that it prevents the researcher from making unsound conclusions due to having a limited vantage point.²² The first of these three angles, the researcher angle, consisted of field notes. These field notes catalogued my observations, impressions, and initial analyses shortly after the event.²³ The second angle, the insider angle, consisted of data from informal interviews with students. Informal interviews are essentially casual, open-ended conversations.²⁴ I planned for these interviews to be unstructured and to take place in the school hallway, after class, at lunch, or whenever students were available for a conversation. This strategy was preferable because students would likely not be available for more formal, in-depth interviewing. For the outsider angle, I arranged to ask an independent expert to assess the project’s impact.²⁵ The value of an outsider’s perspective is significant because he or she can look at the context and the intervention without many of the biases that might limit the researcher or insiders. Furthermore, the outsider may have expertise that enables a more accurate evaluation the project. In this case, I arranged for someone who had experience both with students groups like mine and with our CitySquare partners. After the trip, he came to our school and led a conversation with the students. Following this, he wrote a brief summary of his analysis. This summary was the third data set for triangulation. Because

²¹ Triangulation is a way of gathering data from distinct sources in order to cross check potential conclusions. Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 75; Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation*, 187-8.

²² Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (Thousand oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), 267.

²³ For a discussion of the value and legitimacy of field notes as a data set, see Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 387-89.

²⁴ “The strength of the informal conversational approach is that it allows the interviewer/evaluator to be highly responsive to individual differences and situational changes.” Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation*, 281-82.

²⁵ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 223; Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 172-73.

qualitative research data can often be difficult to analyze and evaluate in meaningful ways, I coded the results in order to find patterns and filter the information.²⁶

These three angles of evaluation all indicated that the experience challenged students in ways that I had hoped it would. My field notes were full of quotes from students such as, “Poverty is a lot harder than I thought,” and, “There’s no easy answer.” One student commented, “I always thought getting out of poverty would be easy, but it’s actually not.” This comment, in particular, caught my attention because it showed that the attitude with which I was concerned was present in the group, and it showed that this attitude was challenged by our experiences and conversations. Some statements indicated that what they experienced helped them to see people at an economic disadvantage as real people rather than subjects of argument. One said, “We have these ideas about our rights, but yesterday, when I looked at those people, I realized that God thinks about them the same way he thinks about me. Once you understand that, the other stuff does not matter.” Others were connecting what they saw to their own life experience. After sleeping uncomfortably the first night, I heard one student ask another, “Can you imagine what it would be like to have to go to school after sleeping like that every night?” After seeing the “tent city,” one student asked, “How many bridges have I gone over not knowing that there were people living underneath?” At one point, as the group stopped to rest for a moment, one student reflected on how this experience felt different from previous mission trips she had participated in because it was local. She said, “being this close to home and seeing all this makes me really uncomfortable.” She went on to use the word “fearful,” though she did not clarify what it was that made her afraid. Another student seemed to agree with this sentiment and said, “It’s easier to brush off when it’s far away. This hits closer to home.”

Near the end of the experience, I asked students what surprised them. One student answered that he was surprised by “how ‘out to get’ the homeless the city is.” This was partially in response to a conversation we had with CitySquare staff about the city’s plans to remove the “tent city” under the I-45 overpass, where approximately eighty to one hundred homeless people lived. These plans were, according to CitySquare staff, a response to complaints by middle- and upper-class people who did not like seeing homeless people there or having to drive by them. Students’ comments indicated that they objected to this “not in my backyard” mentality. Similarly, after hearing that a downtown Dallas church had removed the benches in front of its building to discourage the homeless from loitering there, one student said, “Thinking about how they treated these people, it’s crazy. That’s what Jesus talked about!” Here he seemed to be connecting what he had observed with what we had read and discussed. Others also referred to Jesus as a moral example with regard to issues of poverty and justice. One commented, “I appreciate that CitySquare is thinking outside the box to try to love others like Jesus did.”

Some student comments showed that they were thinking about broader issues than just their experiences on this trip. For example, one student said, “White privilege does exist and we need to be more aware of it.” We did not have any significant discussions about race and poverty, but this comment suggests that it was nevertheless on the mind of at least one student. Other comments demonstrated a newfound empathy and understanding. For example, one student spoke about a man he had met and pointed out that “everyone has a story.” He seemed genuinely moved by hearing this man’s account of how he had fallen on hard times. Another noted, “They have hopes and dreams too. I think I usually just dismiss

²⁶ Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 55; Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2013), 3-6; Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 56-57.

them, like only certain privileged people get to pursue their dreams.” Perhaps the most frequent comment I heard was simply that living in poverty would be exhausting. It was not lost on students that they were experiencing only an imitation of poverty and only for two days, but they nevertheless were struck by how tiring their experience was.

Interviews with students similarly demonstrated that the experience had an impact. Several students indicated that they had been talking with family and friends about what they could do to make an impact in the community. Without prompting from me or the other adults involved, a group of students organized a trip back to CitySquare in order to participate in a worship service for those experiencing homelessness in that neighborhood. Others spoke of organizing donation drives and local opportunities to spend time with people experiencing homelessness. Some students said that the experience had caused them to rethink how they spend their money and expressed dissatisfaction with their previous habits. Some answers even showed engagement with the theological side of this project. One student said, in reference to homeless individuals, “I think about that Scripture where the rich man is told by Jesus to give up everything and he has such a hard time. I think these people might be closer to God than we are.” Others made comments that alluded to Matthew 25 and Luke 4.

Not all the comments were encouraging. Immediately before our time walking around the neighborhood, we spent approximately one hour listening to a CitySquare staff member tell us about the “housing first” initiative, which offers housing to the homeless without any preconditions, even if they have addictions or other problems. One student strongly disagreed with this idea. She asked, “How does that really help people? It encourages them to just keep living a homeless lifestyle just inside a house instead of on the streets.” I found this to be a troubling example of precisely the kinds of judgments and attitudes I had hoped this experience would challenge. However, one could argue that this comment does not reflect a callous disregard for the poor but simply a disagreement over how best to fight poverty and homelessness. One does not need to agree with the methods of the “housing first” initiative in order to care about these issues. Several other members of the group responded to this student with comments about how access to housing might actually go a long way toward encouraging people to straighten out their lives. The student who initially objected again asked, “But how is just having a house going to do that?” There were also some negative comments from students about their own impressions of how these experiences might impact them. When asked what they might do differently because of this experience, one student said, “Honestly, we’ll probably think about this for a while but then just go back to our normal lives and not change anything.”

Beyond these comments, one particular obstacle to broader change emerged clearly. The students who volunteered for the poverty simulation already had some level of compassion for people who experience homelessness and poverty. I knew from the outset that the composition of the group of students who participated would be limited by self-selection. I wondered if some of the other students, perhaps those who had expressed ambivalence toward people who are economically disadvantaged, would have had the same reaction as the students I observed. “No way,” one student responded when asked this question. “The people who signed up for this trip already had their eyes open to see what we’re seeing. The people who really need to go would stand in the corner and make fun of people.” She paused and said, “But I think that’s just how they deal with things like this. They don’t know what to do, so they just make fun of stuff.” Several other students agreed

with this comment.²⁷ However, this fact does not lead me to conclude that the experience was a failure. Christian leadership should never be forced, and spiritual formation cannot be coerced. By design, this project would always be limited to those students who were willing to learn and change.

The majority of the data suggested that the experience was a positive one. The independent expert concluded his evaluation of the project by writing, “The students, in my estimation, understand that the problems of poverty are complex. They understand that poverty can happen to a whole host of vulnerable people and that poverty is not always directly caused by individual choices. They appear to be emotionally involved in the reality of poverty.” Although the scope of this project precluded complete resolution of the problem at hand, it was an effective first step towards deconstructing long-held beliefs and attitudes toward poverty.

This experience was richly meaningful for me as I look toward the future of my ministry. It has given me hope that I can influence positive change, at least on a small scale. I learned that many of my students are eager grow and change, given the opportunity. The next steps for Fort Worth Christian School include building this experience into a regular practice and expanding to other similar activities. In 2017, the entire high school student body participated in a week of mission and service, during which small groups of students worked with various ministries, and some of these groups had experiences similar to those described above. For example, one group worked with a local charity that provides household goods to people living in poverty. I hope to continue to influence positive change and facilitate the spiritual formation of students through these kinds of experiences.

One lingering question about the efficacy of this project is whether it was broad enough to have a meaningful impact on the school. My evaluation of the experience was limited to those who participated, but it is much more difficult to evaluate its impact on the school at large. As stated above, I knew from the outset of the project that it would be limited according to which students would be willing to participate. However, this presents an obvious problem. If this self-selection limitation meant that those students who most needed to be challenged to think differently would not choose to participate, then it may not be possible to reach the students about whom I was most concerned. To put it another way, conversations with one group of students helped me identify a problem, but my response ended up reaching a different group entirely. Reflecting on it now, I wonder if there were other opportunities to make a significant impact on the first group. On the other hand, Christian leadership should not force change in an authoritarian way, so perhaps my approach of simply leading those who volunteered was the only viable one. I nevertheless continue to look for ways to influence change in the school, even if it is only with one small group at a time.

²⁷ Two students also expressed cynicism about the long-term impact of the experience for those who did participate. Unfortunately, the long-term impact was beyond my ability to assess within the timeframe of this project.