

Ending Poverty: Real Questions for the Interfaith Community

By Kim Bobo

Ending poverty is without question one of the top issues facing the world today.

The reasons for addressing and seeking to end poverty are obvious. First, especially for most religious people, allowing people to live in poverty when we are capable of addressing the problem is morally repugnant. Second, reducing poverty is good for democracy: when people feel invested economically in their societies, they are willing and eager to be engaged in the commons. Third, reducing poverty creates consumers who can participate in economic life: especially in this time of economic turmoil, it is pragmatic to find ways to engage more people in economic life in ways that can stimulate the entire economy. And finally, reducing poverty – perhaps eventually ending it – will reduce violence, both within and between countries. Those without hope and opportunity, who feel excluded from economic and political structures, are the spawning grounds for gangs and terrorist cells.

There are few issues on which the interfaith community is more united than on the need to reduce poverty. All religious traditions are committed to reducing and fighting poverty. This commitment is evident through the thousands of soup kitchens, shelters, relief and aid programs, work camps and special collections provided for those in need. Those in the religious community are concerned, willing to help and usually generous in giving to and aiding those in need. This concern and generosity cuts across religious traditions: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others unite in supporting charity and relief efforts.

The challenge for the religious community is how to seek justice in addition to supporting charity efforts. Many more people of faith are involved in setting up and supporting shelters than in advocating just and fair housing policies for poor families. Similarly, thousands – perhaps millions – of people of faith collect food for soup kitchens, but only a small portion of them advocate national food policies, such as school feeding programs or food stamps, that enable poor families to feed themselves day in and day out. My own congregation is affiliated with a soup kitchen, Good News Community Kitchen. The kitchen has a huge network of diverse congregations that support it with food and volunteers. Parents especially want their children to have the experience of helping poor people and so high schools students often make up half the volunteers at a given dinner. Although I'm glad that these young people from more affluent backgrounds are exposed to others' hardship, volunteering a few times a year in a soup kitchen will not do much to change poor people's situations, nor will it stop or reduce poverty in our society.

Why aren't people of faith more engaged in justice concerns – addressing the structures and systems that keep people poor? Why aren't more people of faith leading school reform efforts to ensure that poor children have as much access to quality schools as rich children? Why aren't more people of faith advocating job policies that pay people living wages with good benefits? Why aren't we advocating just trading policies between

nations? Why aren't more people of faith, with their demonstrated concern for poverty, making poverty a top policy concern for our nation's leaders?

The answers to these questions are complicated, to be sure. But as someone who works daily on engaging the interfaith community around economic justice issues – supporting campaigns that will improve wages, benefits and conditions for workers – I have come to believe that there are four key reasons for our proclivity toward charity efforts and against justice work:

Inadequate analysis of poverty. If we don't understand why people are poor, we are unlikely to address the causes of their poverty. Few religious communities help their congregants study history or economics or examine public policies that can help us explain and understand why so many are poor in our society. Without adequate analysis and understanding of the systemic roots of poverty, we don't appreciate the significance of challenging current economic structures for addressing poverty.

Poor training for civic engagement. In order to be engaged in challenging unjust economic structures that create and continue poverty, one must understand how to be engaged in civic society – how, for instance, does one lobby effectively in a democratic society? For 10 years, I served on the staff of Bread for the World, a religious lobby on hunger issues. A common question asked was, “How many Senators do I have?” If you don't know how many Senators you have, you probably don't know who they are and how to lobby them. If these skills for civic engagement are not taught in public schools, we must teach them in our religious communities. We can't be effective advocates if we don't understand the structures of decision-making in our societies.

Aversion to controversy. Most charity work is uncontroversial. No one is opposed to giving food to poor people. But challenging unjust structures can generate controversy. If a nation has policies that benefit rich people at the expense of poor people, challenging those policies will be controversial. Everyone supports, in principle, the notion that workers should be paid living wages, but efforts to raise the minimum wage to levels that can sustain families are controversial. Perhaps because avoiding controversy is viewed as critical for keeping congregations together, the religious community in general is quite averse to controversy. Most of the world's religious leaders were controversial in their day. Somehow, we must get over our fear of controversy and equip people to withstand criticism and push forward in the midst of controversy.

Complicity with unjust structures. Although I hate to admit it, sometimes I think our unwillingness to be engaged in justice work is due to our complicity with unjust structures. We want to give money to soup kitchens, but we don't want our taxes raised to pay for programs to help poor people. We want to help poor children in developing countries, but we don't want to consider more fair trading arrangements. We want workers paid living wages, but we don't want to pay overtime for our own children's caregivers. Although we are all complicit with unjust structures by the very fact that we eat food picked by farm workers who are exploited and we wear clothes made in sweatshops, our congregations must help all of us push ourselves to figure out in what

ways we are complicit with unjust structures and, perhaps even more importantly, how can we extricate ourselves and push for justice.

As the Parliament of World Religions gathers, the real question is *not* “Should we end poverty?” The real questions are: “How do we create a serious, shared analysis of the causes of poverty?” “How do we train people to be engaged in civil life?” “How do we get beyond our fear of controversy?” and “How do we extricate ourselves from unjust structures?” If we don’t answer these questions, we will never be able to move beyond charity, to justice. These are essential questions that will be addressed at the upcoming Parliament of World Religions.

Kim Bobo is the Executive Director of Interfaith Worker Justice, a national network that mobilizes religious support for the struggles of low-wage workers, and is the former Director of Organizing for the organization Bread for the World. She is the author of *Lives Matter: A Handbook for Christian Organizing* and *Wage Theft in America: Why Millions of Working Americans Are Not Getting Paid - And What We Can Do About It*, and co-author of *Organizing for Social Change*, the best-selling organizing manual in the country. She writes a column for the online magazine Religion Dispatches (www.religiondispatches.org).