

What Can the Faith Community Do to Address Poverty? It Can Use a Human Capacity Model That Results in the Development of Resources

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A key issue for churches, communities, countries, and the world today is this: **How can we address the needs of the under-resourced without negatively impacting the resourced?** The words of the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians 8:1–15 are pertinent here: “*Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality*” (v. 13). What are the resources that must be identified and/or developed? Community sustainability depends on some resolution of this issue.

Adapted and reprinted with permission from *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, 1996, 2005

The continuum from poverty to wealth is the extent to which you have or can access the following nine resources:

FINANCIAL: Having the money to purchase goods and services.

EMOTIONAL: Being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource and shows itself through stamina, perseverance, and choices.

MENTAL: Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal with daily life.

SPIRITUAL: Believing in divine purpose and guidance.

PHYSICAL: Having physical health and mobility.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS: Having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. These are external resources.

RELATIONSHIPS/ROLE MODELS: Having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.

KNOWLEDGE OF HIDDEN RULES: Knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group.

LANGUAGE: Ability to use formal register, which is the language of work and school, in writing with specific word choice.

The extent and degree to which you have these resources determines your ability to negotiate an environment—and to take care of yourself and others. For a long time in social policy, poverty and

wealth have been defined against only one resource: financial. **Money does not build human capacity, and money does not change thinking.** The things that change thinking are:

- 1) Relationships with people different from you (social bridging capital)
- 2) Emotional personal experiences
- 3) Education
- 4) Spiritual awakening, which comes from 1, 2, and 3
- 5) Employment

What Causes Individuals to Be Under-Resourced?

Therein lies the rub and the basic debate about poverty. Alice O'Connor, in her book *Poverty Knowledge*, states that one of the reasons poverty has been such a difficult problem to solve is that there is little agreement on the cause or causes of poverty. In the research, there are four basic causes given for poverty: individual choices and behavior, absence of community resources, exploitation, and economic/financial/government systems.

In the early 1800s the prevalent theoretical construct in the United States was **genetic** determinism, i.e., who you were and what you could become were determined by what you had inherited. With the socialist movements in government and the women's movement came the theoretical construct of **social** determinism, i.e., who you were and what you could become were determined by systems and social access. Social determinism also became the underlying theoretical construct for many social justice and multicultural studies. Concomitantly, colonialism largely came to an end throughout much of the world.

From the 1960s to 1980s in the United States, many systemic, social barriers were removed through legislation—but not all. Starting in the 1970s, as the U.S. moved from industrial to knowledge-based economies, economic well-being increasingly was and is connected to education, social capital, and knowledge—i.e., human capacity. We talk about privilege being related to social class, race, or gender, and it is. Privilege also is heavily linked to the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. (1)

For the last 30 years in social policy, social determinism has been the underlying theoretical construct for legislation, and so a huge amount of blame has been placed on the “system.” The “system” is bad. All organizations and all systems have at their very essence two things: relationships and information (Wheatley, 1992). The human body is a system based upon the information (DNA) and the subsequent relationships (circulatory, muscular, nervous, etc.) to form the “system” that becomes your body. **All systems are limited by the capacity of the information and relationships within that system.** In other words, a system is only as strong as the individuals within the system and is very dependent upon human capacity.

Furthermore, all beginning learning occurs at a personal level in a “situated learning” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where we find context, relationships, tasks, and language. Human capacity development begins in a “situated learning” environment and depends on the relationships and information within that environment.

Human capacity development (in this message) is also limited in this way: Some individuals will always need to be cared for; their human capacity cannot be developed to the extent that they can be self-sustaining (mental illness, physical illness, handicapping conditions, age, etc.).

The issue for any community is this: What percentage of poverty can you afford? If too many individuals become under-resourced, eventually the resourced leave, and then virtually everyone is under-resourced. An example of this would be the country of Haiti.

What is Human Capacity?

When individuals have these resources, they then have human capacity as defined by these characteristics:

- The ability to create/enhance their own resource base: to be self-sustaining
- The ability to make choices that promote dignity, well-being, and continued development
- The ability to give back to others
- The tools to negotiate almost any environment to promote self-preservation, personal well-being, and the well-being of others
- The ability to grow spiritually

What Are the Characteristics of a Human Capacity Development Model?

In short, a human capacity development model is an interactive model of one-on-one relationship building, within a co-investigative knowledge experience, that results in the development of additional resources.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a cognitive model that focuses on knowledge, thinking, and understandings. All learning is double-coded: both cognitively and emotionally (Greenspan & Benderly, 1997). The emotional coding comes from the relationship.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a co-investigative, interactive approach that builds one-on-one relationships of mutual respect with individuals who are different from you.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It assigns a language to talk about the experience.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It mediates (tells <i>what, why, how</i>).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It relates to and reframes the individual’s personal life.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It provides the tools to move from a sensory, physical understanding to an abstract, representational concept through stories, parables, metaphors, analogies, and drawings.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It allows for personal choice.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It always has a future story at an individual level.

- It results in the development of resources.

For example, Habitat for Humanity is a human capacity development model. In the Habitat for Humanity program members of a family are given the ability to have their own home if they help build/rehab it. In the process, they develop one-on-one relationships with people different from themselves, they gain a knowledge base (how houses are built, how to repair/fix household items, how someone different from them thinks, etc.), learn about money, and so forth. It builds human capacity and in the process, develops relationships.

For example, members of a church in East Texas did this: In their larger community, when a child was born to a young woman under the age of 21, someone in the church would call the mother and tell the mother the church had a gift for the baby—and could she bring it over? The woman from the church would talk to the baby and the mother. Then the woman would ask if she could come back the next week to see the baby even though she didn’t have a gift this time. The church woman continued to come every week. In a three-year time period, the babies who had had that visitation were significantly superior cognitively to the babies who had not had the intervention, and each young mother had a mentor and friend. Both the mother and her baby had developed human capacity.

What Model Is Being Used in Many Churches?

The current model in many churches focuses on institutional development. Historically, the church has gotten derailed when it focuses more on institutional maintenance and development than human capacity development.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on institutional development, maintenance, and activity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumes most resources are in place; focuses on the development of spiritual resources.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Places heavy emphasis on “bonding” social capital (people like you) rather than development of “bridging” social capital (people different from you). Some churches actively exclude individuals because of their differences. (2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge is provided to groups by “authorities”; does not proactively build one-on-one interactions. Positions and knowledge are provided in writing, with little human interaction required.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language to talk about the spiritual experience is provided.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very few tools are offered to move from a sensory, physical understanding to an abstract, representational concept through stories, parables, metaphors, analogies, drawings.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of the knowledge into one’s personal life is haphazard and related to personal choice; not embedded into the institution.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asks church members to <i>give</i> resources to the institution. May or may not develop resources in the members.

To participate in most churches nowadays requires a fairly high level of resources and human capacity.

Why Do We Need a Human Capacity Development Model?

Many people believe that the world's first major revolution was the development of agriculture, when some individuals ceased their nomadic existence and began to farm in one place. Many also believe the second major revolution was industrial, when individuals began using machines to do their work. The next major revolution in the world may well be the development of sustainability—the ability to use resources (education, money, water/land/natural resources, etc.) and still have them for the next generation. To move to sustainability requires a human capacity development model. When individuals have limited resources, they need to develop them. The good news, according to the research, is that resources can be developed—at any stage of life. Yet the very nature of resource development is such that most people can't do it on their own. That's why the expression "Pick yourself up by your own bootstraps" tends to be a contradiction in terms. The larger community is needed. However, that community may have limitations of its own. When a society or a church has a critical mass of individuals in need of resource development it may not be possible for those who are resourced to continue to give indefinitely without depleting their own resource base. What the resourced individual understands is that as one human being, he/she cannot make enough resources to maintain everyone. Again, here is where the community or the larger religious body enters the picture because the resourced individual necessarily isolates himself/herself from the demands and needs simply for self-preservation. This dynamic is most common in large cities around the world where poverty is widespread and often quite visible. As a result, there is little community sustainability.

Another reason we need a human capacity development model: our young people. This is the model they have grown up with on the Internet—an interactive model of one-on-one relationship building within a co-investigative knowledge experience, e.g., Facebook and My Space. They will settle for nothing less.

A third reason is this: The primary model for the development of human capacity has historically been the family. In post-modern society, for numerous reasons, this form of development occurs less and less. The institution that makes human capacity development its mission will be the institution that rules the next century. Right now human capacity development happens primarily through the media, with very mixed reviews. Is that the model that will develop the capacity we need for sustainability?

Where Did We Get the Human Capacity Development Model? Jesus Provided It

Jesus did not go to the religious organizations, government agencies, or corporate sponsors and say, *Give us money and resources*. No, he went to the people themselves and said, *Let me tell you how you personally can have your own salvation*. And second, he instructed his disciples to provide basic resources within relationships: *"Love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mark 12:31).

- It is a cognitive model that focuses on knowledge, thinking, and understandings. All learning is double-coded: both cognitively and emotionally. The emotional coding comes from the relationship.

<p><i>"Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9).</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a co-investigative, interactive approach that builds one-on-one relationships of mutual respect with individuals who are different from you. <p><i>Jesus' 12 disciples could not have been more different—in personality, in occupation, in background. Furthermore, from the lepers to the Samaritan woman at the well (with five husbands) to tax collectors to prostitutes, even to the dead (Lazarus), Jesus interacted and made deep connections with everyone he met.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It assigns a language to talk about the experience. <p><i>"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16–17).</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It mediates (tells <i>what, why, how</i>). <p><i>"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It relates to and reframes the individual's personal life. <p><i>"But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control ..." (Galatians 5:22–23).</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It provides the tools to move from a sensory, physical understanding to an abstract, representational concept through stories, parables, metaphors, analogies, and drawings. <p><i>Jesus used these tools constantly, often telling parables and other stories: "I am the vine; you are the branches" (analogy, John 15:5), the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–31), etc.</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It allows for personal choice. <p><i>"Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50).</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It always has a future story at an individual level. <p><i>"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 5:33).</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It results in the development of resources. <p><i>"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Luke 20:25).</i></p>

Many people, including church people, have not understood the brilliance of this model. What Jesus understood was that thinking and the subsequent choices, not compliance, are critical in the development of human capacity, love, and discipleship.

Why Do We Need the Resources and Prosperity This Model Develops?

One of the most damaging interpretations among some in the faith community is that prosperity, by definition, is bad. How incorrect. One person's prosperity helps another prosper and, furthermore, serves as a model for what is possible. Why would anyone want to move out of poverty if there were no better models to move to? I will argue that it's better to have food than to starve. It's better to have shelter than to have no protection. It's better to be healthy than to be ill. It's better to have relationships than to be alone. Quite simply, the better resourced a person is, the more the whole community is sustainable. There is greater opportunity for learning and development because you can focus time on that and not constantly on survival.

Often quoted in this context is what Jesus said to the rich young ruler, a man who had asked Jesus about eternal life, noting that he followed all the commandments. Jesus said, "*Sell everything you have and give to the poor ... How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*" (Luke 18:22,24–25). At that time, to be wealthy was thought to ensure one's entry into heaven. This story often gets interpreted as "It's bad to be rich." Jesus was examining where the man's attachment was—to the physical reality or to the spiritual reality. Often in churches, wealth is seen in polarized terms: either/or. If you have wealth and resources, you cannot go to heaven. Jesus doesn't say that. Rather he says it's difficult to experience spiritual growth when you're too comfortable physically.

Furthermore, a basic rule in nature is this: To receive you must give—and vice versa. The ocean ebbs and flows. Plants take in the air and water and give back food. Prosperity allows for the process of giving and receiving. That includes the giving and sharing of information: "*Give, and it will be given to you*" (Luke 6:38).

What Does the Christian Community Have to Offer Individuals from Poverty?

The faith community has a *huge* pool of individuals who have incredible human capacity—knowledge bases, talents, understandings, language, and resources. The faith community has the potential, if the human capacity development model is utilized, to provide the cognitive, spiritual, and emotional tools for individuals in poverty to become resourced. People ask, *Should I give money?* Money gets you past survival (shelter, food, health), but it doesn't change thinking, and it doesn't develop capacity. I recommend that resources be provided when it's about survival, but all of these resources come with a required component of human capacity development. Knowledge bases are lost over generations. You cannot teach what you do not know. The only way you can get that knowledge and language is for it to be taught by someone who knows.

For example: *food*. Many resourced individuals become frustrated in the grocery store when they see individuals with food stamps or electronic cards buying prepared, expensive food. To prepare food from scratch requires the following: electricity, the ability to plan, pots and pans, a knowledge base about preparing food, measurement tools, math and reading skills, time to prepare foods, a working refrigerator, utensils, plates, and recipes. If you've moved three times in the last three months or you are homeless, you don't have most of these basic resources.

Does the Human Capacity Development Model Work to Help Adults Make the Transition Out of Poverty?

Yes, in our work at aha! Process we have been successfully using this model for five years. We find that it takes two to five years for an individual in poverty to successfully build a resource base that is self-sustaining. We call such resource bases Bridges Communities; they're built upon "Getting Ahead" training. This training provides the knowledge bases and social bridging capital relationships for the development of resources. If you wish to know more about it, go to our website: www.ahaprocess.com. The YWCA announced that a Bridges Community was its model women's empowerment program of the year in 2008. In Youngstown, Ohio, 300 adults in poverty went through the Bridges program and, within six months, 58% had gone back to either technical school or community college for more training and development.

Conclusion

The brilliance of the human capacity model is that it develops resources, provides empowerment, and fosters community sustainability. From that development, we have "systems" that are truly responsive to human needs. In Christianity, discipleship is the call to develop capacity in ourselves and in others. In Matthew 25:35–36 Jesus said, *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."* I believe that Jesus meant this, not only at a physical level, but also at a very cognitive level:

- Hungering for information
- Thirsting for knowledge
- Developing social bridging capital (a stranger)
- Providing comfort and support (sick at heart ... emotional well-being)
- Giving belonging and identity (clothing)
- Giving new ideas (no longer imprisoned); for many individuals, the greatest prison they live in is their own mind.

Furthermore, in the parable of the talents, Jesus calls us to develop our talents, saying, *"For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance"* (Matthew 25:29).

As Jesus developed human and spiritual capacity by going directly to the people, by providing information and relationships, he also developed community and, among his disciples and other followers, planted the seeds of the church. M. Scott Peck says, "In and through community lies the salvation of the world." We can do no less.

Endnotes

The Serendipity Bible for Groups, New International Version, gives these stages of Christian conversion:

1. Indifference (who cares)
2. Atheist (I know there is no God)
3. Agnostic (I don't know if there is a God)
4. Seeker (I'm searching for God)
5. Commitment to ideas (my church's teachings)
6. Commitment to ethics (clean living)
7. Commitment to persons (doing good)
8. Discovery of fellowship and community
9. Growth in truth (understanding my faith)
10. Changes in my world view and life purpose
11. Changes in my relationship with others

(1) Increasingly, research is looking at the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. A study done in Australia, which followed the children of more than 8,500 women (mostly from poverty) from their first clinic visit for pregnancy, again at age 5, and again at age 14 (Najman et al., 2004), found that the child's maternal grandfather's occupational status independently predicted the child's verbal comprehension levels at age 5 and his or her verbal reasoning scores at age 14.

(2) M. Scott Peck in his book *A Different Drum: Community Building and Peace* says there are four stages of spiritual development: amoral, rule/religion-driven, agnostic, and spiritually driven (see humankind as a whole—not dependent on a particular religion). Peck says churches have individuals in them at each one of these stages.

One of the patterns in some churches is to exclude individuals by assigning "morality" to certain behaviors. For example, some churches exclude divorced individuals, gays/lesbians, by appearance, race, ethnicity, social class, etc. To justify the exclusion, often a Bible verse is given. Yet within that same church there are individuals who are honored who are pedophiles, liars, cheats, domestic abusers, gluttons, etc. The key questions are these: How does any human being move along the continuum of spiritual development if you have no access to those who are at different spiritual levels than you are? How can a human being, in his/her limited understanding, assign value to one of God's creations? When does exclusion protect versus isolate? What does exclusion do to the development of community?

The stages of community building generally include (M. Scott Peck. <http://communityx-roads.org/about>):

Pseudocommunity

An initial state of "being nice." Pseudocommunity is characterized by politeness, conflict avoidance, and denial of individual differences. Let's be honest; most of us can't keep this up for long. Eventually someone is going to speak up, speak out, and the dam breaks.

Chaos

In the stage of chaos, individual differences are aired, and the group tries to overcome them through misguided attempts to heal or to convert. Listening suffers, and emotions and frustration tend to run high. There are only two ways out of chaos: retreat into pseudocommunity (often through organization), or forward, through emptiness.

Emptiness

Emptiness refers to the process of recognizing and releasing the barriers (expectations, prejudices, the need to control) that hold us back from authentic communication with others, from being emotionally available to hear the voices of those around us. This is a period of going within, of searching ourselves and sharing our truths with the group. This process of “dying to self” can make way for something remarkable to emerge.

Community

“In my defenselessness, my safety lies.” [The Apostle Paul says in II Corinthians 12:10: “*For when I am weak, then I am strong.*”] In this stage, individuals seek to follow the example of Jesus and accept others as they are—and are themselves accepted. Differences are no longer feared or ignored, but rather are celebrated. A deep sense of peace and joy characterizes the group.

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