

**Lutheran Church of Australia:
Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions**

POVERTY

Adopted by the Commission, August 1993

Introduction

This Statement on Poverty is a slightly amended version of the 1989 statement called, 'The Scandal of Poverty'. Following the release of that earlier statement, the commission received written comments from a number of pastors. These comments were reviewed initially by Dr D Ch Overduin, Executive Officer of the Commission, Pastor B H Schwarz, Secretary of the Commission, and Dr P F Lockwood.

Following Dr Overduin's death, Dr Lockwood made some changes to the text of the statement in response to certain criticisms. At the meeting of the commission held on 17 September 1992, the suggested amendments were considered and the current text of the statement accepted.

The study and reflection guide for the statement was prepared for the commission by Pastor R W Whittall.

Synopsis

Poverty is one of the great problems of our time. In a world of abundant resources, it is a scandal that roughly two-thirds of the people on earth live in dire poverty, many through no fault of their own. The poor are those who have insufficient food, shelter, clothing and education to meet basic human needs. Most poverty in the world is not the result of natural evils but of systemic and structural evils. These evils result from human policies designed to increase the profit and power of controlling individuals, bodies and nations. Our affluence in Australia is, by and large, an outcome of these evils.

Poverty in Australia is not nearly as harsh as in Third World countries. Yet some 2 million people in Australia live below the Henderson Poverty line established for Australian conditions and experience inadequate diet, shelter, medical care and economic resources.

In the Old Testament Yahweh is passionately concerned about the plight of the poor. His redemptive work involves the process of justice whereby equity and wholeness are restored in the lives of the poor and the evils which create poverty are overcome. Deliverance from social, political and economic evil is part of the process of divine justice for all and for the poor in particular. The deliverance of God's people from Egypt is the supreme demonstration of this process in the Old Testament. The covenant ideal, moreover, envisages a society with no poor. In the new age announced by the prophets covenant justice will be fully established and the poor delivered from their tragic lot.

In the New Testament Jesus announces that he has come to fulfil the promise of covenant justice, to preach good news to the poor and to set at liberty those who are oppressed. This charter for Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:18-19) is not to be reduced to a strictly spiritual interpretation; the poor are those who are also deprived socially, politically and economically. Jesus identified with the poor and the marginalised and challenged the values of the elite, the rich and the powerful.

The Gospel is the good news of God's redemptive work in Jesus Christ. That message is relevant to the problem of poverty in our day. The church's commission is to preach the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation to a lost and dying world and then to lead those who have heeded this message to a life of faith, love, and hope in the world. Union with God through Jesus Christ gives Christians freedom and joy to serve. All Christian ethics flows from this gospel source, and hence health and help for others are on the daily agenda of the true believer, indeed the daily agenda of the church.

Jesus is with the poor in their struggle against those forces in the world that entrap them and impoverish them. Jesus Christ died as the victim, not only of the sins of individuals, but also as the victim of systematised wrongdoing, and he arose as victor over all the forces of sin, death and hell.

The church is called, in its mission, to expose the depth and extent of poverty, oppose the forces which create poverty and struggle with the poor to gain freedom from poverty's vice-like grip. An effective ministry *with* the poor must include raising the awareness of church and society about the social dynamics which create poverty, and the economic imperatives which divert resources from the poor and allow the enjoyment of affluence at the expense of the poor.

If the church dares to reflect Christ's love for the poor in this way, she may clash with the powerful and wealth in our world. But then, this is an inescapable ingredient of the church's call to ministry in today's world.

Has the church in Australia viewed the poor as victims of enslaving forces which must be overcome, or only as the objects of wealth? Is the Lutheran Church ready to identify more fully with the poor in their struggle to be set free from the tentacles of poverty that hold them captive?

FOR FURTHER STUDY:

It is suggested that the following material should be worked through briefly before studying the individual sections, and then again in more depth after the entire Statement has been read and digested. Therefore one possible format for congregational/group study is to suggest that individuals are given the Synopsis (with these study notes) to read as a means of developing a personal orientation, before beginning in-depth study with the group.

First Reactions:

1. *The message of this Statement is a very challenging one. Try to identify your personal reaction(s). Does it make you feel angry, guilty, or confused? Would you prefer your church not to raise such questions?*
2. *Why have you reacted as you have? Is it because:*
 - a. *I have enough problems of my own, and in any case the world's problems are too big for me to solve;*
 - b. *the church's mission is to save souls, not bodies;*
 - c. *'Charity' and 'lifestyle' are personal decisions; it's not up to the church to tell me how to live or how to spend my money;*
 - d. *scenes of poverty and starvation on television upset and distress me: I'm angry about a world in which these things can happen, and feel guilty and helpless because of my failure to do anything to help?*

Deeper Understanding:

1. *Define for yourself/selves in concrete personal terms what you understand by poverty, wealth, justice, gospel, salvation, sin, evil, kingdom of God.*
2. *Does this Statement on Poverty appear to define these words/concepts in ways which conflict with your usual understanding of them?*
3. *Are you 'rich' or 'poor'?*
4. *[after group discussion/study of whole statement] How has your study of this document changed your understanding of poverty? Do you think that your attitude to the 'poor' has changed also?*

Further Research and Action:

1. *How aware is your group of the needs of the poor in your area/Australia as a whole/ the Third World? Where could you find more information?*
2. *Evaluate your personal/congregational/district/LCA budgets. Do they adequately reflect a Christian response to the problem of poverty? How would you change them to give priority to 'ministry among the poor' (6.12)?*

3. *The study notes after each section conclude with a brief quotation from Luther or the Lutheran Confessions. If time permits, read further in the writings quoted. Other useful works by Luther include: (i) 'On Temporal Authority' (Luther's Works, vol 45, p81-129); (ii) 'Commentary on Psalm 82' (Luther's Works, vol 13, p39-72); and (iii) 'Trade and Usury' (Luther's Works, vol 45, p195-310).*
4. *Helpful recent books for individual or group study are:*
 - "Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger", R. Sider (London, 1990 edition)
 - "Issues Facing Christians Today", J. Stott (London, 2nd ed. 1990)

1. POVERTY IN THE WORLD

- 1.1 Poverty is one of the greatest dilemmas of our time. In a world of great wealth, roughly two-thirds of the people on earth live in poverty, according to UN documents, the majority through no fault of their own. Most of these people experience life as an inescapable condition of misery, hunger, ignorance and despair. The poor are those who have insufficient food, shelter, clothing and education to meet basic human needs, in spite of the availability of ample resources on earth.
- 1.2 Poverty [non-voluntary] may be classified as:
 - a. *emergency poverty* brought about by a catastrophe such as an earthquake, flood etc;
 - b. *intrinsic poverty* caused by a lack of natural resources; and
 - c. *induced poverty* which human policy has imposed upon the weak.

It is also important to recognise that many Christians have chosen poverty as a voluntary life-style. Poverty is not inherently evil. Christ's call can be a call to poverty (Matt 19:21), to forsake everything for his sake. He sent his apostles into the world without money and possessions (Matt 10:9,10; see also Acts 3:6).
- 1.3 Most poverty in the world is not the result of natural disasters but of systemic greed; that is, poverty is linked to human policies designed to increase the profit and power of the controlling individuals, bodies or nations. Sometimes this problem continues to grow even under the guise of policies which are designated by titles such as aid, development, free enterprise, progress and defence.
- 1.4 Poverty in this statement means more than a dire lack of material resources. Poverty is also a form of slavery to social forces which prevent the poor from changing their plight so that they can obtain sufficient food, clothing, shelter and education to meet basic human needs. Often the poor are so 'enslaved' they are ignorant of, or incapable of believing in the possibility of change so that they can attain sufficient food, shelter, clothing and education. They are 'born losers'.
- 1.5 The gap between the wealth of the rich and the poverty of the poor continues to widen as rich people, companies and countries demand increased profit, productivity and expansion as a necessary ingredient of progress. The global debt is a case in point. In 1986 the rich nations 'gave' the poor nations \$14 billion dollars in aid and \$13 billion dollars in loans. The poor nations had to

give back to the rich nations \$54 billion dollars in repayment of debt and interest.

- 1.6 The affluence of the wealthy one-third of the world's population is therefore made possible at the expense of the poor; their high standard of living is maintained at the expense of the poor; their capacity to celebrate a full life is at the expense of the poor. National and global economic policies and practices tolerate the system which makes this injustice appear necessary and good for Australia. We too are the beneficiaries of that system.
- 1.7 The culture of affluence is characterized by power, privilege, education, success and access to resources and information. The culture of poverty is characterized by powerlessness, learned dependency, lack of education and information, dehumanising conditions and failure. The poor internalise their condition as victims and come to accept their lot as inevitable.
- 1.8 Social values and beliefs, such as those which support the caste system of India, are also promulgated to reinforce the condition of the poor as an inevitable reality in society. Christians have even mis-used Christ's words 'the poor you will always have with you,' to excuse their ready toleration of poverty.

For Further Study:

To help you understand and reflect on this section, read and discuss the following points, on the basis of the suggested quotations ...

- a. *'The affluence of the wealthy ... is made possible at the expense of the poor ... We too are the beneficiaries of that system' (1.5). Do you agree? How could 'the system' be changed?*
- b. *'The poor you will always have with you' (Matt 26:11, etc). Establish carefully the exact context in which Jesus speaks these words (compare the accounts in the other three gospels). Compare Matt 19: 21(!) and contrast Jesus' attitude and actions with and for those in need ... make your own list of incidents from the gospel which show Jesus' concern for the poor.*
- c. *While insisting on a clear distinction between the functions of church and state (the doctrine of 'Two Kingdoms'), Martin Luther held that precisely because the state was instituted by God (Rom 13:1 etc), preachers of the gospel have an inescapable duty to call those in authority to govern in accordance with the will of God. How far could Luther's typically vigorous social comments serve as a model for us?*

Yes, we would even keep quiet here about the petty thieves if we could launch out against the influential operators and greatest thieves of all (with whom lords and princes work hand in glove), who don't just loot a city or two each day, but the whole of Germany.

(Luther's *Large Catechism*, LPH 1983, p78, on the Seventh Commandment)

2. POVERTY IN AUSTRALIA

- 2.1 Poverty in western countries like Australia is bound up with an economic context in which competition is fostered as a basic human drive. Economic competition inevitably means that some are 'winners' in society and some are 'losers'. The poor are frequently those who over generations of 'losing' are the victims of this competition.
- 2.2 In Australia poverty is seen as relative poverty as opposed to absolute poverty. Poor people in Australia may have food, shelter and access to social security. However, it is still conservatively estimated that two million people in Australia today live below the agreed Henderson Poverty Line established for Australian conditions. This means they have insufficient resources to meet their daily needs.
- 2.3 Groups most affected by poverty include a very high proportion of people receiving government benefits and pensions, single parent families especially those headed by women, aboriginal groups both in urban and isolated rural areas, unemployed people of all ages and elderly people who are totally reliant on pensions for survival. Children are the largest group of poor people in Australia. There are over 800 000 children being raised in poverty.
- 2.4 The poverty among Aboriginal people in Australia needs special emphasis. Like many other indigenous people around the world the Aboriginal people have been dispossessed of almost all their land, their numbers have been decimated by violence and disease and much of their culture crushed. These injustices, among others, have contributed to high levels of infant mortality and health problems, widespread unemployment, inadequate education, poor housing, high rates of imprisonment and a general cycle of poverty from which there seems little hope of escape. Caught in such poverty and deprived of their tribal bonds, culture and land, many Aboriginal people feel helpless and hopeless.
- 2.5 The affects of poverty on people in Australia are not dissimilar to the poverty experienced by people elsewhere in the world. It also means people cannot participate fully in society; many life choices are limited such as location of housing and access to credit facilities; dignity and hope fade and a sense of powerlessness, fatalism and boredom predominate.
- 2.6 The daily realities of poverty include being forced to miss meals and having inadequate diets; poor heating during winter; going without medical treatment, especially basic dental and eye care, being isolated because of an inability to afford transport; reliance on charity and emergency relief for day to day living; facing eviction and homelessness; family breakdown through financial and emotional stress; and having children placed in institutional care.
- 2.7 The symptoms of this social distress include a dramatic increase in the demand for emergency relief, the increase in domestic violence, increased demand for counselling services, increased demand for emergency shelter, and unprecedented waiting lists for public housing and a greatly increased demand for financial counselling.

For Further Study:

To help you to understand and reflect on this section, read and discuss the following points, on the basis of the suggested quotations ...

- a. 2.3 identifies single parent families, aboriginal groups, the unemployed and elderly and especially many children as being those living in poverty in Australia today. Discuss this experience of poverty as you have encountered and observed it. Who is to blame for this? Is this kind of poverty inevitable even in an affluent country? What can be done about it?
- b. Read Deuteronomy 26:1-15. Is the settlement of a 'promised land' ('lucky country'?) like Palestine in any way comparable to the European migrations to Australia? Do those who benefit take on similar obligations - see v.12, and similar passages?
- c. Luther, in his 'Treatise on Good Works', urged his readers to uphold the honour of God's Name (the Second Commandment, and First Petition of the Lord's Prayer) by working for true righteousness in society, as well as right doctrine in the church:

Look, there are plenty of good works to be done! Most of the mighty, most of the rich, most of the rich, and most of their friends are unjust and exercise their power over the poor, the lowly, and over their opponents. The more powerful they are, the worse their deeds. And where one cannot prevent this by force and help the truth, one can at least confess the truth and do something for it by our words, not the kind which please the unrighteous or agree with them, but those which speak the truth boldly.

(Luther's Works, vol 44, p51 [section 30])

3. POVERTY AND THE CHURCH

- 3.1 Today, by and large, the Lutheran Church in Australia is identified with, and dominated by, the middle class majority. That majority represents part of the small affluent minority in the world.
- 3.2 The Lutheran Church in Australia, until recently, has not attempted to develop a theology of, for or with the poor. The poor have no serious voice in the policy making or theologising of the church, as is happening in churches in other countries. The poor have been viewed primarily as those in need of the church's contributions and not as those who can also make an important contribution to the church. A policy limited to charity for the poor ultimately perpetuates a condition of dependency. By continually receiving handouts, the uneducated poor come to believe that this is their lot.
- 3.3 The Lutheran Church in Australia, in recent years, seems to have concentrated its mission in the middle and upper class suburbs and decreased its activities in the lower socio-economic areas. Today the church is struggling to maintain its ministries in these lower socio-economic areas.
- 3.4 In recent years the Lutheran Church has raised in its members the level of awareness of the massive presence of the poor in the world. Even in a time of

economic recession, Lutherans have been extremely generous in their support for Lutheran World Service and Board of Overseas Mission relief and development projects. Yet the church has not adequately educated members that among our primary concerns for the worlds poor are social and economic justice.

- 3.5 In evaluating its life and mission as the Body of Christ in an affluent developed country, must not the Lutheran Church seriously question its attitude toward the poor at home and abroad? Is the church called to repentance for its non-identification with the poor, its sometime patronising attitude toward the poor and its tolerance, or ignorance of the forces which cause and perpetuate poverty?
- 3.6 In the interests of a balanced presentation it is important to recognise that a large slice of the LCA budget is spent on overseas missions (the budget of the Board for Overseas Mission and Church Co-operation), much of which is used in material assistance for the poor, and members have been extremely generous in their support for Lutheran World Services and its various aid projects.

For Further Study:

To help you to understand and reflect on this section, read and discuss the following points, on the basis of the suggested quotations ...

- a. *Focus on para 3.5. Do you agree or disagree? Explore your reasons!*
- b. *Read James 2:1-17, noting carefully the points made. How far do these reflect the concerns of this Section (3). Consider the central issue here: the relationship between `right' faith and `good' works.*
- c. *Another thought-provoking comment from Luther's 'Treatise on Good Works':*

In this connection [upholding the honour of God's name] we must offer resistance to all wrong, wherever truth or righteousness are violated and abused. We dare make no distinctions of persons, as do some who fight most actively and busily against the wrong which is done to the rich, the mighty, or their own friends, but who are quite quiet and patient when wrong is done to the poor, or to those of low estate, or to their own enemy.

(Luther's Works, vol 44, p50 [section 29])

What could it mean here, `to offer resistance'?

4. POVERTY AND THE SCRIPTURES

- 4.1 God created our world to be `good', a place of peace (*shalom*), justice (*sedaqah / mishpat*), order (*miswah*), and empathy (*hesad*). Justice is that process in which God, because of his righteousness (*sedaqah*) and empathetic love (*hesed*) works at all levels in this world to overcome evil or wrong, deliver those suffering under these conditions and establish a right order where peace prevails.

- 4.2 Most poverty results from the evil desire for power, prestige and property of one group or individual at the expense of another. The root of this desire is the sin of selfishness and greed. Poverty is therefore contrary to God's plan for a good world.
- 4.3 The Old Testament frequently refers to the poor. They are the afflicted (*aniyyim*), the needy (*ebyonim*), the weak (*dallim*) and the indigent (*rashim*). Their miserable condition is not only economic, but also social, political and psychological. Poverty, however, must be seen not only in terms of the plight of the individual poor but also in terms of its reality as an evil in society to be overcome by the practice of justice. In some Old Testament passages, 'the poor' is apparently used as a term for those who stand 'humbly before God'. The unjust practices which create poverty, however, stand condemned.
- 4.4 Yahweh is the Lord of justice (Ps 99:4). In administering justice, Yahweh is passionately concerned with poverty and the plight of the poor. When Yahweh judges nations, gods or leaders, his expectation is clear:

Give justice to the weak and fatherless;
 maintain the right of the afflicted and destitute.
 Rescue the weak and the needy;
 deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Ps 82:3-4)

In this passage God commands that the poor be given not simply charity but justice. He commands those in positions of authority to rescue them, not just temporarily, but permanently.

The justice of Yahweh arises out of his redemptive work. Yahweh heard the cry of suffering of the oppressed Israelite slaves in Egypt and intervened to set them free and lead them to their promised land. Throughout their history, Yahweh continued to deliver them from subjugation, oppression and evil. The justice of Yahweh is not an abstract ideal, but the dynamic of the redeemed community of Yahweh, responding to their own deliverance from oppression.

Deliverance from social, political and economic evil is therefore part of the practice of divine justice for all and for the poor in particular.

- 4.5 Yahweh's covenant with Israel was grounded in his mighty acts of deliverance on behalf of his oppressed slaves in Egypt. In response to God's deliverance the people of Israel were to uphold this covenant by maintaining justice for those who, like their ancestors in Egypt, were oppressed, weak and poor (Deut 15:15; Ps 72:1-4; Jer 23:5-6). The covenant ideal includes a society in which there are no poor (Deut 15:4).
- 4.6 The prophets continually warned Israel and its leaders against departing from the statutes of the covenant and using power for the selfish ends of the few rather than for the administration of justice for all (Amos 5).
- Samuel warned his people that the establishment of a monarchy would mean the concentration of power in the hands of a few and the creation of a community of exploited 'have-nots' (1 Sam 11-18). Under the rule of Solomon and his successors this potential hazard became a harsh reality.
- 4.7 The classical prophets, like Amos, confronted both individuals and nations with the sins of inhumanity and injustice. Nations too were judged by their

treatment of the poor and the helpless (Amos 1-2). The judgment of Amos on Israel reflected the attitude of Yahweh:

For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of shoes —
they trample the heads of the poor into
the dust of the earth,
and turn aside the way of the afflicted. (Amos 2:6-7)

4.8 The fabric of society is destroyed when poverty persists as the result of greed, exploitation, violence, indulgence, inhumanity and neglect of the fringe members of society. In the glorious new age governed by covenant justice the 'poor' will be delivered and 'peace' will again prevail (Isa 11:1-9). In that vision the prophet sees the conquest of injustice and the establishment of a world of equals, a world without violence and poverty.

4.9 Jesus is the Christ, the fulfilment of the promise of covenant justice. His mission includes both social and economic justice (Luke 1:52-53). He comes to fulfil (Isa 61:1-2) the promise of total liberation for all who are oppressed:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has appointed me to preach
the good news to the poor,
he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18-

19)

4.10 This charter for Jesus' ministry ought not be reduced to a purely personal, spiritual interpretation. While the poor may in some contexts refer to the pious or 'poor in spirit', they are also those who are deprived socially, politically and economically. Jesus comes to give life to those groups in society who are the victims of wrongdoing and injustice, including those caught in the grip of poverty.

4.11 In the tradition of the prophets Jesus confronted the rich who put their wealth before their God (Luke 6:24-26; 12:16-21; 16:19-31; Matt 19:16-21). Riches make entry into the kingdom of God difficult (Matt 19:23-26). As a test of integrity the rich young ruler was called to sell all and give it to the poor.

4.12 Property and possessions themselves are not condemned in the New Testament. But Jesus is caustic in his criticism of those obsessed with wealth (Matt 6:24; Luke 16:10-14, 19-31; see also 1 Tim 6:6-10). In the social order of Jesus' day such wealth was acquired at the expense of the poor; the wealthy and powerful depended on a social structure where poverty was viewed as an inevitable component.

4.13 Jesus gave no blueprint for a new economic order or social structure but he expressed principles and values which, if followed, would transform any society. In his own ministry he was willing to heal social outcasts, forgive public sinners and identify with those who were poor and disgraced. In this Jesus challenged the values of the elite, the rich and the powerful. Today

Christ continues to call the rich and the powerful to repentance, and to start employing their influence, their talents and their resources to beneficial effect.

- 4.14 While the New Testament launches no campaign to eradicate slavery or poverty, it emphasises that we are all children of God and therefore our fellow human beings are our brothers and sisters (Matt 23:8-10; cf Gal 3:27-29) whose well-being is our responsibility. In the presence of God our equality before Him is to be recognised (James 2:1-6).
- 4.15 St Paul says relatively little about poverty or money. He was, however, concerned about relief for congregations who were in dire straits. He praises the Macedonians for their generosity; 'giving' is a charis like faith (2 Cor 8:8). To share in the spiritual blessings which come through Christ involves sharing in the material blessings (Rom 15:26,27; Jas 1:27).
- 4.16 Sharing with those in need is a universal principle which applies to all peoples. When the nations are summoned before God in judgment they will be judged by whether they have met the needs of the hungry, thirsty, stranger and imprisoned (Matt 25:31-46).

Every poor person in need is our brother Christ, whether recognised or not. Overcoming the evils of poverty is part of our ministry to Christ and with Christ.

- 4.17 The kingdom of God which Jesus announced has been interpreted as a spiritual reign, (Rom 14:17) a future age, a heavenly realm or a material political order. The preceding passages suggest a more holistic perspective. Just as the prophets and Jesus did not separate spiritual, social and material realities as discrete domains, so the kingdom of God involves both the spiritual and material dimensions. To serve God means to subjugate mammon; to follow Christ means to share all; to be a disciple means to be involved in the battle against oppressive poverty at all levels of existence.
- 4.18 As a response to the gospel of the kingdom, the early Christian church participated in an important experiment in which all shared their material goods and supported each other as a community. This model, however, is but one of several lifestyles which are found in the early church (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16). Yet this experiment suggests a principle of equality, support and service consistent with a living expression of the gospel.

For Further Study:

To help you to understand and reflect on this section, read and discuss the following points ...

- a. *This whole section is fundamental to arriving at a understanding of the issues involved in the matter of 'Poverty' and the proper Christian response. The material presented could form the basis for a series of Bible studies, which would need to come to grips with three key themes, considering especially how a fully 'spiritual' understanding does not mean 'other-worldly' or 'heavenly', without any reference to everyday life:*

1. *Justice, in the Old Testament — and Jesus as its fulfilment;*
 2. *'Rich and Poor' in the New Testament;*
 3. *The Kingdom of God (both Testaments).*
- b. *Luther makes clear for us how justice on earth should mirror that which is administered in heaven, and how our earthly governments can (should!) point to the hope for God's perfect rule:*

[in human courts] a poor man is inevitably hard done by, is put in the wrong, and is punished. ... Anyone who is to make the right judicial decisions in all cases, and win respect for his verdict, will often have to offend good friends, relatives, neighbours, and rich and powerful people who could do him a lot of good or harm.

(Luther's *Large Catechism*, LPH 1983, p85: Eighth Commandment)

God wants the government of the world to be a symbol of true salvation and of his kingdom of heaven, like a pantomime or a mask.

(Luther's *Works*, vol 18, p197: Psalm 101,5)

How, then, would you exercise right judgement in these cases:

1. *A bank applies to evict a farmer for defaulting on a loan?*
2. *An aboriginal tribe decides to seek compensation for lost land?*

5. POVERTY AND THE GOSPEL

- 5.1 The gospel is the good news of God's redemptive work in Christ Jesus. Jesus Christ, through his life, death and resurrection, has won the victory over sin, death and hell for all people (Rom 5-6; John 16:33).
- 5.2 The redemptive work of Christ also has present and future dimensions. The victory has been won, but the struggle continues. Our sins are forgiven, but we continue to sin and do battle against sin. Our eternal life is assured, but we still fight the forces of death. Evil has been conquered, but we still meet evil in ourselves and our world. Christ continues to overcome sin, death and hell for us until the end of the world when all powers will be totally subject to him as Lord of all (Eph 1; Col 1).
- 5.3 God's redemptive work in Christ involves the forgiveness of sins and the removal of guilt before God. We are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. For the guilty sinner, Christ became the guilty one that the sinner might be declared innocent (Rom 4-5; Gal 2). This redemptive work of Christ in us and for us is also the impetus for participating in the ongoing struggle against sin, death and hell (Rom 8, especially v 37).
- 5.4 For those enslaved in poverty, the overwhelming reality of their lives may not be their own sins but their victimisation at the hands of others. They look for a God who not only frees them from their own sins but from the sins of others which enslave them.
- 5.5 On the social/communal level the redemptive work of God involves breaking down the walls of hostility both between God and humankind and between one human group and another (Eph 2:41-45). In Christ we become one, all

children of God our Father, all free, all heirs, all equal before God (Gal 3:26-29). Christ works in and through his church to make these realities effective in people's lives.

- 5.6 Wherever people are enslaved by poverty, disenfranchised by those in power or dehumanised by fellow human beings, God calls the community of the faithful to respond in love. God is with the poor in their struggle to take hold of the freedom, dignity and rights which are theirs as human beings made in the image of God. And so God constantly calls on the community of the faithful to join in the continuing battle against all those forces in our society which lead to poverty, oppression and dehumanisation.
- 5.7 On the material/economic level the redemptive work of God in Christ impels Christians to join in the work of restoring creation and healing human lives. God has created us to celebrate life in all its fullness. Those trapped in poverty are not only deprived of the basics of life, but usually also lack the will and the resources to change their situation.
- 5.8 In Jesus' ministry, those who were outcasts, sick, poor and disenfranchised experienced new life. Those who are in Christ are called to join with the poor in their struggle against the economic forces which oppress them.
- 5.9 Jesus Christ died, not only as the victim of the sins of individual human beings but also as the victim of systemic sin or evil. That evil was evident in Jesus' day as part of the Roman and Jewish structures which led to the death of Jesus as an innocent victim. In that world Jesus identified especially with the oppressed powerless, poor and outcast.
- 5.10 Jesus continues to be one with the poor, not only bearing their individual sins but also bearing on the cross and hence overcoming the systematic exploitation and oppression from which they suffer. Those who are incorporated in his body, the church, through faith are inevitably caught up in the drama of healing and new creation that Jesus' life, death and resurrection have set in motion. We are given Jesus' own eyes to see the plight of the poor, and his will to address the causes of poverty at their very source.
- 5.11 On the cosmic and political level the redemptive work of God involves overcoming all the enslaving powers of this world. The battle of Christ was cosmic, the principalities and powers he encountered were more than flesh and blood, and the victory he won was over powerful spiritual forces. Now all forces, kingdoms, and powers are being contained or conquered until they are finally all subjugated to him as Lord of the cosmos (Eph 1; Col 1; cf Eph 6:12).
- 5.12 Today these powerful anti-godly forces still operate in the political, economic and social structures of this world. Nations, political bodies, institutions, commercial enterprises and financial organisations are permeated to a greater or lesser extent by the unseen powers of darkness. Such forces have a spiritual dimension which feeds on human greed and controls the destinies of millions of people. They work to keep the wealthy in power and the poor in their place as disillusioned, deprived and powerless. The forces are integral to the very structure or system of our modern international world.
- 5.13 The work of new creation which God has accomplished through his Son Jesus Christ gives the believer a glimpse into the future when the principalities and powers, defeated on the cross, will succumb to God's

authority once and for all. Meanwhile the renewed believer and the empowered church are given a clear vision of their task in the here and now. In the power of the Holy Spirit, those who are 'in Christ' are called to identify and struggle against everything that creates and sustains poverty as a form of social, political and spiritual oppression in our world. The God who overcame the forces of Pharaoh for his people continues to work against the equivalent forces of darkness in our world. And the cosmic Christ, who is Lord of all lands and victor over death and the devil continues to do battle with these forces until he totally destroys all evil at the end of time.

For Further Study:

To help you to understand and reflect on this section, read and discuss the following points, on the basis of the suggested quotations ...

- a. *Read carefully 5.6 — 5.8: how does this section present liberation from the power of sin ('salvation')?*

Read carefully 5.9 — 5.12: what is the view of sin and evil here?

Do you understand what is meant by 'systemic evil or sin' (see 5.12)?

- b. *Read Colossians 1, and use a reference Bible to find other passages which tell of Christ's victory over the 'cosmic powers', and other references which relate to the power of evil at work in the world.*
- c. *While our Lutheran Confessions usually focus on the individual aspects of sin and salvation, the corruption of society at large is by no means ignored:*

World history itself shows the great power of the devil's rule. Blasphemy and wicked doctrines fill the world, and by these bonds the devil has enthralled those who are wise and righteous in the eyes of the world. In others, even grosser vices appear. Christ was given to us to bear both sin and penalty and to destroy the rule of the devil, sin, and death; so we cannot know his blessings until we recognise our evil.

(Apology, Augsburg Confession, "Original Sin", *Book of Concord* p106 para 49)

Is there a difference between the sin of individuals, and evil at work within an entire social system?

6. POVERTY AND MISSION

- 6.1 God's redemptive purpose for the whole cosmos provides the impetus for mission. God sends his servants to struggle with those in bondage and lead them toward freedom and fullness of life. This mission culminates in God sending his Son to give up his life to redeem all people and all creation and by his resurrection to open the way to freedom and fullness of life.
- 6.2 The biblical writers stress that God's rescue mission in Christ specifically includes those who are prisoners of poverty. Jesus says that he has come 'to bring the good news to the poor', and 'to set free the oppressed' (Luke 4:18). The evangelists present a picture of the Son of God who, in his life, birth,

teaching and death, identifies especially with the poor and lowly. He becomes one of the world's poor in order to suffer with them and so raise them to hope, dignity and new life. Today, we still encounter Christ among those who experience poverty (Matt 25:31-46).

- 6.3 Christ has chosen his church to continue God's mission. He sent his disciples into the world in the power of his name and under the guidance of his spirit to minister according to the pattern he laid down and in the same servant mode he exemplified (John 20:21). That pattern involved healing, forgiving, changing lives, confronting powers, feeding the hungry and teaching; the servant mode of Jesus' ministry also involved working closely with the poor, the outcast, the needy. Consequently, the church's ministry among the poor is not to be regarded as an optional activity but as an integral part of its total ministry.
- 6.4 In order for the church to represent Christ effectively to the poor, the church needs to learn to identify with the poor, listen to the poor, and join in the struggle with the poor. To do this the church must repent of un-Christ-like attitudes toward the poor, especially superficial and hasty judgments. Rather than blaming the poor for their lot, as so many do, the church is called upon to seek out the poor, stand with them and learn to share in their suffering.
- 6.5 An effective ministry *to* the poor is a ministry *with* the poor. Just as the church has developed its medical ministry on mission fields in ways which decrease dependence on outsiders and in the promotion of community based health care, so also the church's ministry among the poor must involve working with the poor to change those situations and structures which perpetuate and promote poverty. The method of operation employed by Lutheran World Service in Third World countries provides an outstanding example of such an approach.
- 6.6 In following the pattern of Christ's ministry among the poor, the church is called to minister at a number of levels and in a variety of ways, as it fulfils its prophetic function of being God's voice in the world.

On the personal level the church must joyfully proclaim to the poor the good news that Christ, who died as the victim of our individual and corporate sin, has risen as victor over all oppressive and unjust powers. In him the poor grow in dignity and hope.
- 6.7 On the economic level, the church is challenged to give generously and sacrificially of its resources to alleviate deprivation, without being paternalistic. It must also critically examine those economic structures which may be seen to contribute to and perpetuate poverty.
- 6.8 On the social level, the church must awaken the poor to the causes of their poverty, and in particular raise their awareness of exploitative social and economic structures and processes. The church must also educate the poor so that they can learn what their rights are and how they can work together to press for greater justice and fairness. In this respect the church must also work to raise the level of awareness of its rich and affluent members. They must be led to realise that poverty is primarily not a result of personal inadequacies but of distinct policies. Involuntary poverty is a social malady which the church and its members must name as such and confront in faith.

- 6.9 In awareness that the affluence of rich countries is being subsidised by the poverty of the poor countries, the church is exhorted to challenge affluent people, including most Christians in Australia, to reconsider attitudes and re-evaluate lifestyles, reject wasteful consumption and selfish accumulation and adopt life-styles characterised by simplicity and the satisfaction of needs rather than the attainment of wants.
- 6.10 On the political level, the church's ministry will involve the critical evaluation of policies and programs, the exposure of exploitative and oppressive structures and the continual projection of a vision of a society in which the poor are protected, given dignity and justice and enabled to share in the basic necessities of life.
- 6.11 Accordingly, the church's ministry among the poor requires the church to speak out on behalf of the poor, drawing the attention of the wider community to their need, protesting against exploitation and gross inequality and calling on the community to practise justice and to give all a 'fair go'.
- 6.12 A comprehensive ministry among the poor, such as this, takes the church into areas that are unfamiliar, difficult and dangerous. The concerns of the church for the poor and her stand with the poor will inevitably bring about a clash with the powerful and wealthy interests of society. Nevertheless, such a prospect must be joyfully embraced for only then can the church give an adequate witness to Christ's love for the poor and be a herald and sign of the kingdom to come.

For Further Study:

To help you to understand and reflect on this section, read and discuss the following points, on the basis of the suggested quotations ...

- a. *Focus on understanding these key ideas:*

*... the servant mode of Jesus' ministry (6.3);
 ... repenting of un-Christ-like attitudes (6.4);
 ... ministry with the poor (6.5);
 ... the re-evaluation of lifestyles (6.9);
 ... A comprehensive ministry ... difficult and dangerous (6.12).*

- b. *The biblical teaching about the Incarnation of Jesus (Matt 1:23; John 1:1-18 etc) is the basis and motivation for mission 'among' and 'with' the poor.*

Salvation is not a remote transaction in the courts of heaven (consider the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37) and its fruit is seen in a life of practical service (read Matt 25:31-46).

- c. *Luther uses Jesus' words in the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25) as a commentary on the Fifth Commandment, 'You shall not kill'. In conclusion he writes:*

You should know that the proper, holy deeds that please God are those he has given us to do, and they are the ones that make him and all the angels happy.

(Luther's Large Catechism, LPH 1983, p69)

What are these 'proper, holy deeds'?