



DATE DOWNLOADED: Fri Apr 30 12:36:15 2021

SOURCE: Content Downloaded from [HeinOnline](#)

Citations:

Bluebook 21st ed.

Tim Suenram, *Minority Poverty and the Faith Community*, 37 *Clearinghouse REV.* 154 (2003).

ALWD 6th ed.

Suenram, T. ., *Minority poverty and the faith community*, 37(3 and 4) *Clearinghouse Rev.* 154 (2003).

APA 7th ed.

Suenram, T. (2003). *Minority poverty and the faith community*. *Clearinghouse Review* , 37(3 and 4), 154-157.

Chicago 17th ed.

Tim Suenram, "Minority Poverty and the Faith Community," *Clearinghouse Review* 37, no. 3 and 4 (July-August 2003): 154-157

McGill Guide 9th ed.

Tim Suenram, "Minority Poverty and the Faith Community" (2003) 37:3 and 4 *Clearinghouse Rev* 154.

AGLC 4th ed.

Tim Suenram, 'Minority Poverty and the Faith Community' (2003) 37(3 and 4) *Clearinghouse Review* 154.

MLA 8th ed.

Suenram, Tim. "Minority Poverty and the Faith Community." *Clearinghouse Review* , vol. 37, no. 3 and 4, July-August 2003, p. 154-157. HeinOnline.

OSCOLA 4th ed.

Tim Suenram, 'Minority Poverty and the Faith Community' (2003) 37 *Clearinghouse Rev* 154

-- Your use of this HeinOnline PDF indicates your acceptance of HeinOnline's Terms and Conditions of the license agreement available at

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/License>

-- The search text of this PDF is generated from uncorrected OCR text.

-- To obtain permission to use this article beyond the scope of your license, please use:

[Copyright Information](#)

Minority Poverty and the Faith Community

By Tim Suenram

At its inception in 1989, the Evansville Coalition for the Homeless (ECHO) grew from the efforts of a portion of the faith community to address homelessness. It emerged in an environment predisposed to accepting several assumptions: *Homelessness is not a problem in our midsize Midwest city. It is rather relegated to urban centers of much greater population and much more profound social problems.* A relatively small number of people suspecting otherwise, among them members of a local interfaith chapter of Church Women United, began to challenge those assumptions and led to the incorporation of ECHO, the subsequent creation of several shelters, construction of transitional housing with supportive services, the development of permanent housing, and currently the development of a strategy to end local homelessness by 2012. The partnering of the local legal services organization's community development attorney with the efforts of this interfaith group was the impetus that helped a rather unclear perceived need grow into a dynamic coalition that has brought together many competing organizations to serve a common goal: to eradicate, rather than simply manage, homelessness.

The beginnings of the coalition are noteworthy because they validate, not without irony, what I propose concerning which sector of the community

should shoulder the greater responsibility of moving the discussion of poverty and race into the center of public attention and discourse. These observations are offered as broad brush strokes that can be contradicted at almost every turn by individual communities of faith. Much of what I propose comes from anecdotal observations of human traits and predispositions that relate to the way we seem to interpret and live out our faith. That being said, let me recognize that numerous churches, synagogues, mosques, and other congregations of the faithful have blazed trails into the generally uncharted territory of social change and advocacy addressing minority poverty. Nevertheless, such faith communities are more the exception than the rule. That is said neither to diminish their accomplishments nor to suggest they do not have a further role to play. But as our intent is to investigate how a dialogue on minority poverty can be brought to national prominence, I, as one who comes from and in some small way represents the faith community, believe that the faith community's role is necessarily limited.

Those limits derive from extensive internal and external factors that lead to disagreements concerning even what the *mission* of the faith community is. While some communities of faith understand their sole mission to be evangelis-

Tim Suenram is pastor at First Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 333 Jefferson Ave., Evansville, IN 47713; 812.424.8213; Tsuenram@aol.com.

tic, other faith communities are equally convinced that social justice is integral to their mission. Similar differences of opinion concerning faith communities' missions occur among persons outside those faith communities. Some would deny that the church has a social mission. As one who represents a Christian expression of faith-motivated social action and accountability, I hereafter refer to the faith community in terms of my own experience, that is, church or congregation. The reader, then, should note the biases that may be attendant to such an orientation.

Interfaith Organizations

The broad variety of expressions of Christianity in the United States, along with their recognition of the advantages brought about by cooperative activity among those expressions, has led to the development of organizations that bridge diversities of worship, doctrine, and polity and supply differing means of addressing common goals, concerns, and principles that different traditions share. Campus Crusade, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Young Life, and Church Women United are but a few such endeavors. Some are evangelistic; some offer social and fellowship opportunities; others are motivated by social action and advocacy. Some have even broader areas of concern that include these and other aspects of faith expression.

These organizations offer opportunities for particular emphases or expressions of faith that may not be available to individuals through their own congregations. For that reason, they tend to draw together like-minded people from different faith communities. As it happened in this community, the national attention upon homelessness of the late 1980s constrained the national organization of Church Women United to urge local chapters to investigate whether homelessness was becoming as problematic in smaller, less attention-attracting communities as it was in larger metropolitan areas such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and the District of Columbia,

where activism and advocacy had brought homelessness to the headlines.

Interfaith organizations tend to reach into their constituent faith communities for program support, both in terms of funding as well as human resources, a capacity that individual congregations lack. But they are also less fettered when it comes to reaching out to the broader, so-called secular community, because they are not so encumbered with what may be a distrust of motives that a single congregation might bear. Twenty churches banded together to address minority poverty are not as likely to be liable to the same level of suspicion that an individual congregation might bear in terms of perceived self-promotion, paternalism, values imposition, or membership enhancement. Economic justice in such a consortium not only could be a believable motivation for congregations to work together for the sake of the community but also becomes the identifiable characteristic that gives such a consortium its purpose. That is a distinct advantage that an individual congregation cannot replicate, no matter how pure its motives or intentional its efforts. Nevertheless, competition between congregations, and regrettably between clergy of competing congregations, tends to impede the kind of cooperation and collaboration that a consortium requires; the very motives attributed to individual congregations mentioned above often prevent successful collaborative efforts.

Social Responsibility and Faith

That being said, there is still a considerable dearth of effective religious organizations and affiliations that address economic justice in America, and not because economic justice is not worthy of attention from the faith community. I believe that rather it is due to two phenomena of religion's role in our society. The first has to do with a rather general disconnection between religion and peoples' faith decisions. To use an example that is not directly connected to poverty may help illustrate my point.

Recent studies indicate that the vast majority of Protestant mainline churches have made formal statements against the imposition of the death penalty in America. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches have also made formal statements against capital punishment. Yet the same studies show that almost two-thirds of persons who claim membership in those churches *favor* the death penalty. Although membership in a particular faith community would suggest consistency with its dogma, at least in terms of the imposition of the death penalty, this is clearly not the case. Not only so, but recent surveys of Protestant clergy demonstrate that almost two-thirds of clergy—those who, one might suspect, would demonstrate a greater tendency toward making personal-value decisions based upon the teachings of scripture and doctrine—also favor use of the death penalty, against the doctrinal statements of their own faith communities. My intention is not to promote dogma or argue against the death penalty here but to illustrate that, despite what our particular faith may say that we believe or should believe, whether or not we adopt that belief or behavior is apparently more a matter of personal preference rather than perception of divine instruction.

Americans tend to have an aversion to being told—even by the witness of their own faith communities, or by how they individually interpret and understand God's self-disclosure—what they should believe, or how they should act. A fourth grader discussing the doctrine of the incarnation once disagreed with me when I suggested that having God present in the flesh might be a good thing. "What if He told us to do something we didn't want to do?" the youngster queried. "If He were really God in the flesh, wouldn't we have to do it?" We tend rather to do what seems or feels best to us, and even that, inconsistently.

I offer this observation not to be critical of the church or of its faithful but to illustrate the disconnect between religious faith and the practice thereof in our culture. To ignore that disconnect only exacerbates the disappointment

many experience from their expectations of the church to be more proactive in its efforts to address poverty at all, and especially to address the disproportion of poverty among minorities.

Charity Versus Economic Justice

A second phenomenon related to religion's perceived role in American culture is really closer to the question of whose responsibility it is—or, perhaps better stated, what segment of the population is best suited—to lead the effort to bring serious attention to the existence of vast pockets of minority poverty in America. The current administration contends that it is self-evident that the faith community not only should but in fact is capable of assuming this role or, if not assuming it, at the very least being an equal partner in the effort. Some of the rhetoric attached to the public reasoning behind this predisposition discloses not just a naiveté concerning poverty—that poverty is due to some moral deficiency, for example, or the idea that persons living in poverty are to blame for their economic condition—but an untested assumption that charity and economic justice are the same thing.

That assumption seems to have been stated in a variety of ways: "The church is good at charity—let the faith community provide what has been heretofore missing in the way we have dealt with poverty." "Our lack of success in eradicating poverty is that we have left the faith component out of human services endeavors." Not only are such assumptions untested; they are erroneous.

That Christians have a responsibility to "help the poor" is generally accepted. Many adherents find some of their most meaningful connections to the church through service that relates in one way or another to alleviating the material as well as spiritual needs of those less fortunate. Numerous passages of scripture motivate, guide, and even validate both programs and individual endeavors of persons who find spiritual purpose and expression through helping others. Congregations

run the gamut from developing very organized and conscientious social outreach and advocacy programs to offering very unstructured and informal ways of meeting the needs of occasional persons who may ask for help. Most assume that a church is one place a person can go at least on an occasional basis to receive help.

Yet the persistence of poverty, it seems to me, is not so much an economic issue as it is one of justice, which is to say that its remedy is not a matter of infusion of dollars only—even charitable dollars given with the best of intentions from generous sources under a system of enforced “responsible behaviors.” The truth is that our society has the economic capacity to do almost anything to which it grants importance. We have the economic capacity to address poverty. What seems to be lacking is the political will; poverty is simply not granted priority.

What seems clear is that addressing that lack of will requires not only the usual players—they are already at the table—but perhaps the less-often considered key components necessary for bringing this conversation about. Other articles in this special issue of CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW address the role of the public-interest attorney and community lawyering and the part that institutions of higher education have to play in the big picture.

Further attention needs to be given to the role of the media. Perhaps as in no other time in history, the media have almost unparalleled capacity for effecting social change. How can that capacity be employed to bring the issues of race and poverty to prominence in the public arena? It is not simply a matter of learning to use the media better, or so it seems to me. It is more a matter of the media bearing the social obligations inherent in the privileges that their access to power affords. Considering the ethical obligation that the media bear to report the news rather than create it—and, despite

recent tendencies, segments of the media have demonstrated to lean toward news as entertainment—expecting the media to lead in beginning this dialogue seems unlikely and even undesirable. Clearly, however, the media have an obligation to enable the dialogue to be heard, fairly and factually represented, and understood.

There remain two institutions which, by their nature, should be concerned with the *injustice* of poverty because, as I see it, they are or should be concerned with justice: the faith community and the legal profession. Given my observations above, I believe that we cannot count on congregations to lead any wide-scale movement to address poverty. While faith communities may have the capacity to address poverty—or at least bring tremendous resources of talent, energy, and economic influence to bear—the faith community may also be generally disinclined to recognize such a role as relevant to its purpose and mission. While faith communities may indeed “do charity,” this appears to be the limit of their self-understanding of the moral imperatives related to the poor. Indeed, in my judgment, few in the faith community draw the distinction between charity and working for economic justice.

That leaves the legal profession. Whether it has the political will to assume leadership in addressing minority poverty, or the capacity to capture the attention of the populace, may depend upon public-interest lawyers bringing the remaining members of the legal profession into the discussion. Up until now, the faith community seems to have abdicated much of its responsibility; the legal profession cannot so easily shrug this burden. On the contrary, the legal profession is not just one vehicle that can create and drive the partnerships needed to address a national consideration of institutionalized poverty: in my judgment, it appears to be the only one.