

CHAPTER 11

Teach As We Fight, Learn as We Lead: Lessons in Pedagogy and the Poverty Initiative Model

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This book has focused on poverty as the defining issue of our time and theoretical and practical educational methods to address the root causes of poverty and build a social movement to eliminate it. The interview with Willie Baptist about his life in poverty and the lessons he draws from his over 40-year-long participation in social justice movements, as well as the other chapters, have been developed in classes taught by Jan and Will titled “Poverty, Social Theories—Alternative Models?” and “Poverty and Poor People’s Movements—Social Analysis and Ethical Reflection” at Union Theological Seminary. In addition to the lessons learned and shared in this extensive interview with Willie and the other topics taken up in these classes, the whole of the leadership development process that Willie has undergone through his life in the movement is an example of the leadership development necessary for these times and the kind of pedagogy that we wish to share in this book. The pedagogic specifics of these classes are also part of a larger pedagogical program of the Poverty Initiative and a wider network of organizations working to end poverty. That is why we conclude *Pedagogy of the Poor* with an attempt to lay out some other key concepts drawn from the poor organizing the poor on the importance of education and new methods of teaching and learning as part of a social movement.

Poverty with all its complexity requires practical engagement with the struggles of the poor as well as interdisciplinary scholarship to unravel its root causes and manifestations. For over 2 decades of organizing with the National Union of the Homeless, the National Welfare Rights Union/Kensington Welfare Rights Union, and now the Poverty Initiative, we have distilled lessons on the importance and role of education in our movement. We sum up some of these lessons here.

WHY EDUCATION?

In our work of building a social movement to end poverty, we have found that education is central. If we are serious about the work of ending poverty, we don't have to merely do more actions; we have to do smarter actions. We don't just have to be more active; we have to be more effective. We live in a very pragmatic society, and many of us think that if we just start one more program or effect one more policy change it will bring an end to poverty. But our experience has shown that poverty is more complex than that and it is going to take clarity, competence, and commitment to achieve real social change in this country. To outfight the forces arrayed against us, we must outsmart them. Nowhere in world history can anyone find where a dumb force rose up and defeated a smart force. Therefore, it is vitally important for anyone interested in ending poverty to develop an engaged intelligence that will outsmart, not only outorganize, the current conditions that cause poverty and misery.

LEADERSHIP IS KEY IN THE FIRST STAGE OF DEVELOPMENT IN BUILDING A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Before the elements of mass and velocity of a social movement are considered, its direction must be determined. This is what leadership of a social movement is all about. History teaches us that this leadership is twofold: (1) The unity of the leading social force for social change; that is, a unity on the basis of needs and demands incompatible with the status quo. And (2) systematically educated and trained core(s) of leaders sufficiently connected, clear, competent, and committed to enlighten and organize the leading social force. Today's society is defined by the problem of the ever-deepening polarity between wealth and poverty. Today the poor and dispossessed are the leading social force because they have the least or no stake in such a polarized society. Either they end this inhumane polarity or it will end them. In the last years of his life, the words and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. anticipated the present situation. His launching of the Poor People's Campaign in 1967-1968 inspires us today. The strategic concept introduced by this historic campaign was the need and possibility "to lift the load of poverty" through uniting the poor across color lines into "a new and unsettling force." The Poverty Initiative has taken up this mantle by working to reignite a new Poor People's Campaign in response to the present deepening economic and social crises. We believe that such a campaign adapted to today's economic and political situation is needed to build a broader social move-

ment to end poverty. The first step and requirement in organizing and building this campaign and movement is the development of a united and sophisticated core of leaders capable of analyzing and putting forth solutions that address the scale and complexity of poverty today. It seeks to carry this mission out by helping establish a multiracial, multifaith, multi-issue network of grassroots community and religious leaders. Central to this process is the identification and development of leaders who are emerging out of the growing ranks and struggles of the dispossessed. Learning from the crippling effects of Dr. King's assassination, the Poverty Initiative is clear that there is a need to develop many Martin Luther Kings. Such leaders are not developed spontaneously, but instead must be systematically educated and trained.

We work with an analogy of building a house to understand the stages of development of building a social movement. Building a house has to be done in stages and builders must have a blueprint or a strategic plan. No stage can be skipped, nor can we stop at any stage. Today with our remote control mentality we impatiently want to fast-forward to start with building the roof, to begin at the end. But before a building has a roof, it must have a strong foundation. Presently, we are at the foundation stage of building a massive movement to end poverty led by the poor as a united and organized force. This is the stage of building the large and expanding core of leaders who are connected, clear, competent, and committed. History teaches that every successful social movement has to begin with the development of such a core as its cadre base or foundation. The basic strategic content of this leadership is the recognition of the necessity of poverty being solved by the building of a massive movement led by the poor as a force united and organized across color lines. All our various activities, tactical as well as educational, must be coordinated as means toward accomplishing this task of the current initial stage of the construction of a movement to end poverty.

Organizing to unite the poor as the base of a broader movement to abolish poverty is necessarily founded on the concept of "commitment, not compensation." Commitment to build such a movement is the primary quality of leadership. This must be a commitment strengthened by clarity, competence, and connection to the emerging struggles of the poor and dispossessed. The other indispensable quality of leadership is the ability to learn and teach as well as to organize. This includes, most important for this initial stage, that the indispensable quality of a leader is the development of other leaders. "The more you know the more you owe" sums up this quality. Therefore, the cornerstone of our general education plan must be "educating the educators, training the trainers."

ORGANIZING WITHOUT EDUCATING IS MOBILIZING

Without education, organization is reduced to mobilization. We cannot afford to just mobilize bodies—we must move minds. Without a deep understanding of the causes and conditions of poverty, it is difficult to develop the commitment necessary to endure the hardships and inevitable setbacks of a protracted struggle. Despite the fact that the Kensington Welfare Rights Union was able to house over 700 formerly homeless families over the course of a decade of organizing work, many of those families left the movement when they got their house rather than staying committed to the fight to end homelessness for everyone. Simply mobilizing bodies, moving from one event to another, is not enough to counter the sophisticated and dangerous forces arrayed against us and to “stick and stay” the necessary course of ending human misery.

OUR APPROACH TO EDUCATION

We believe that popular conceptions about poverty are in most cases inaccurate, incomplete, and biased. Therefore, we have found that it is important to have education central in the struggle so people can acquire new information and understanding about poverty. Education is about teaching people that it is possible to end poverty. We have a saying in the Poverty Initiative: We have to first end poverty in our minds before we end poverty with our hands. We see the main playing field or battleground for a movement to end poverty as our minds.

Our basic pedagogical approach recognizes that the mind does not present itself as a blank tablet. The mental battlefield is littered with old and entrenched values and views. These values and views are held intact by emotion-laden myths and stereotypes. Our experiences, particularly in the work of the poor organizing the poor, have taught us that the process of education is at once one of uneducating and unlearning as well as one of educating and learning. “Plowing the field” of old ideas is indispensable to “planting seeds” of new ideas. The wrenching conditions of economic and social crises and the practical struggles in response to these conditions compel especially those embattled to question their deeply held beliefs and habits. This begins to clear the way for the introduction of new ideas, new consciousness, and the development of new leaders. The pedagogical principle of “plowing the fields and planting the seeds” is what is meant by the teachings that every action, protest, and campaign must be used as a school.

We have learned that, especially in an age of a profound information revolution, education is pivotal in developing leaders and organizing a broad movement to abolish poverty. Most of our work has been carried out in this new age in which people are rapidly and constantly bombarded with all sorts of information, all sorts of appeals to old ideas and images, and all sorts of miseducation and stereotypes. In such a period, leadership development in terms of imparting a true and effective epistemology (true and false), ethics (right and wrong), and expertise (capacity in strategy, tactics, and techniques) requires an educational process that focuses more on how we think than what we think, more on initiative than on imitation, more on commitment than on compensation.

In our work, we are repeatedly coming up against the strong influences of old American pragmatism. Being pragmatic is often interpreted as being practical. This is not what we are referring to here. We are talking about a worldview, a philosophical way of thinking, that is deeply embedded in American culture and that results in separating theory from practice, knowing from doing. Although it affects all of us, this philosophy is an anti-intellectualism created by intellectuals from elite universities. It promotes an impatience with and resistance to study, educational discipline, and social theory that provides vital lessons from history and political economy. While at times giving lip service to the "long term" or strategy, it is consumed with the immediate, with "what works for the moment for me." For this reason, it is a very eclectic and categorical way of seeing the world, seeing only the superficial separateness of things and not their substantial inner connections. The poor cannot afford this pragmatism. We need to fight for an intellectual rigor and theory to guide our actions.

"Teaching as we fight, learning as we lead, talking as we are walking" is how we approach education. This pedagogy ensures that the fight teaches. Carrying out plans for using antipoverty campaigns, activities, and protests as schools has been effective in imparting transformative experiences that lead to a transformation of values. For example, the Homeless Union's nationwide housing takeovers (as discussed earlier) served as effective schools for developing leadership and membership. Other examples (also discussed in earlier chapters of this book) include bus tours and marches, which became traveling schools. These experiences have been effective in raising questions in participants, offering a space for mutual living and learning.

We have embraced the concept that "the struggle is a school" and that integrating education into daily actions and activities is a central way to raise consciousness among pragmatic people. One example of this was in October 1999, when organizations of the poor and homeless

from across the Americas marched from Washington, DC, to the United Nations in New York City. We marched in protest of economic human rights violations caused by the U.S. government around the world. We marched 10 to 20 miles a day for 32 days, sleeping in community centers and churches throughout DC, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. Each day we held press conferences, educational presentations, events, rallies and protests, cultural presentations, and so on to show the world how poor people from the United States, Canada, and Latin America were coming together to build a movement to end poverty. More than anything this march was a traveling school for all participants, as groups and individuals were able to share what lessons they had learned from their communities with others.

We have also found that the use of civil disobedience actions and schooling in jail cells has proved to be a particularly effective means for values formation and the development of commitment. Civil disobedience helps to produce moments where participants question the things that govern behavior and form their core belief system. Being prepared to go to jail because you understand the current system/status quo as unjust is a huge step in the development of a commitment to ending poverty and human misery and standing up for something bigger than just yourself.

TEACHING METHODS, FORMS, AND ACTIVITIES

In order to end poverty in our minds, we have culled lessons from our years of organizing and educating. These lessons are in the form of specific methods and activities as well as content of the teaching and learning. Following is a select but important list of methods of teaching and learning that we have used to develop low-income and other leaders dedicated to ending poverty. We know this list is not complete but hope that educators, social movement practitioners, and other people of conscience find these methods and insights useful.

Collective study and self-study. Our educational process involves collective study, including classes, retreats, conferences, schools, and seminars, as well as ongoing self-study and research. Both are aided by a general and individual library system, including books, articles, videos, audio recordings, and photo documentation. We take advantage of every opportunity to teach and learn together. We prioritize small-group and one-on-one conversations because in these situations barriers of distrust and insecurity are more likely overcome so that real questions and concerns can be grappled with.

Teaching in dialogue. We can sum up a key teaching method with one phrase: less monologue, more dialogue. In addition to lectures and presentations, which are important for conveying large amounts of knowledge, seminars and a culture of dialogue are important methods to convey respect and mutual learning as well as to help participants engage the material and apply it to their own situations.

Buddy system. To reinforce an inquisitive and participatory method of teaching, we have found it is important to use the “buddy system” to pair up less experienced participants with veteran leaders and educators so each participant has an opportunity to get more specialized attention. In this case, the new leader follows the veteran organizer around and “runs with” them as they go through their day-to-day organizing work. This offers the new leaders an opportunity to have new experiences, get mentored by someone with different experiences from theirs and in general, ask questions. Depending on the educational style of each person, it is important to offer educational opportunities in small, personal settings, including pairing people up.

Use of art, music, videos, theater . . . Use must be made of those arts and cultural forms most accessible to the poor for education purposes. Movies, street theater, music, pictures, and posters are among the most prominent fixtures in the lives of impoverished communities. Combining entertainment with education has proved to be a most effective way of engaging and elevating peoples’ thinking. We have found that new views and values are more easily and effectively introduced by a song, theater piece, or work of art than through hours of lecture and at the same time you can reach the heart and soul of a person.

We have written our own songs, including, “All of Our Rights Now” and “Rich Man’s House.” To this end we have even formed choirs and have hosted memorial services and art exhibits.

Use of the Internet. The Internet is a useful educational tool both for doing research and for sharing our educational principles with others. In fact, the Internet is the largest library system in the world and anyone who is serious about deepening knowledge of theory and history would see the importance of integrating the Internet into an educational system. New methods of communication make it possible for movement leaders and participants to learn from one another and to learn together using online tools, including the World Wide Web and social networking tools.

To see how the Internet can be used to educate and organize, we wish to share the experience of one of our partner organizations, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW). The CIW has had an award-winning Web page for over 10 years; with YouTube videos, photo slideshows, editorials, press coverage, and member highlights. Hundreds of thousands of people in countries all over the world have followed the activities, boycotts, and campaigns of the CIW on the Web (<http://www.ciw-online.org>). Many of their successful organizing campaigns were waged both online and off-line. The CIW posts information and educational materials on their Web site and thousands of students, religious allies, and other low-wage workers have made use of these materials to learn about the conditions of farmworkers, be informed about the organizing campaigns of the CIW, and get involved. This is possible in part because of their use on the Internet. In their case and many others, the Internet has played a key role in education toward social transformation.

Leadership schools. Leadership schools are intensive, weeklong training gatherings for organizers and educators involved in the movement to end poverty. The purpose of leadership schools is to bring together grassroots leaders from across the country to exchange and learn from one another's experiences, analyses, and lessons, drawn from struggles to secure economic justice in their home communities. To ensure that the flow of information is optimized in all directions, our leadership schools are guided by an understanding that teachers have the capacity both to teach and to learn, and that students have the capacity both to learn and to teach. This philosophy of equality among participants insures a maximum exchange of skills and information. These schools strive to create an environment of joy and fun, as well as a safe space for rigorous discussions and critique. Developed on a "train the trainer" model, leadership schools equip participants to further develop their own educational and leadership development programs within their local organizations. This groundbreaking effort is partly modeled on and inspired by the educational work of the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (MST), the largest social movement in this hemisphere. The 90-day training sessions of the MST create the foundation for their expanding collection of leaders. Based on the MST experience, our leadership schools are an immersion, with both staff and students expected to participate in all aspects of community life, including food preparation, child care, and recreation.

Immersion. Poverty immersion experiences are hands on and experience based travel seminars conducted over a period of a week or 2 that serve

to introduce participants to community organizations in different locales. Poverty Initiative immersions include dialogue with leaders of local and national poor people's organizations and local congregations engaged in mission work, human rights trainings and documentation in poor communities, Bible studies, video showings, and poverty reality tours. Significant time is spent discussing the theological implications of building a movement to end poverty, led by poor people and the role of religious communities in building a social movement. We have found that immersions affect participants on a holistic level, since they are intense experiences for all involved. Taking people out of their day-to-day environment and connecting them with other communities in struggle has a profound impact. (Please find a longer description of immersion courses below.)

Reality tours. We have used reality tours—activities in which leaders travel to historic sites as well as sites where significant organizing from within our movement has taken place—to study social movement history and reinforce shared values. These reality tours draw on at once multiple sense perceptions and the reflective capacities of people to think and feel. We have found that reality tours are important for both the tour guides and participants.

One example of a reality tour is the Poverty Initiative's Poverty Scholars Self-Guided Tour of Wall Street. This tour is both virtual and in person and dozens of grassroots organizers, students, and religious leaders have had the opportunity to learn about the connection between wealth and poverty and the relation of Wall Street to issues such as homelessness, low-wage work, and mountaintop removal through participation in this tour.

Personal maps. We have discovered the importance of doing personal maps or poverty life narratives in bringing to the forefront of our hearts and minds those life experiences that tend to reinforce poverty-ending values, self-confidence, and commitment to reestablishing the human dignity of all. In this activity, participants are asked to depict (through drawing, writing, imagining, and so on) their experiences and conceptions of poverty, in many instances in the form of how each person has come to be involved in the struggle to end poverty. This activity surfaces people's emotions and ideas about poverty and asks people to reflect deeply and personally. Many people come to see that they have personal connection to poverty and that they are not alone in their experiences. This connection to people's emotions is an important pedagogical tool for affecting the values as well as ideas of people. Connected to this, we have used biographies of important leaders (through videos and books) to teach history and especially the role of individuals in history.

Levels of education. Popular education forms have been very useful especially for orientation and introductory education for those just getting involved in organizing and advocacy work. However, our experience is that they must be applied with the view of advancing especially the prospective leaders to intermediate and more advanced educational forms. Paulo Freire exposed himself to higher levels of education, which he then used to creatively formulate and apply popular education approaches. The sophisticated leadership development of the cadre of the powers-that-be requires in our leadership development process more than simply popular education-level graduates. It requires nothing less than the training of many more Paulo Freires, which translates into higher levels of education development methods.

IMPORTANT THEORETICAL CONCEPTS IN OUR PEDAGOGY

In educating leaders for a movement to end poverty, we have found that the content of our education is as important as the methods used to educate. We have developed innovative ways and means to educate, including the use of participatory activities, in addition to teaching through conferences, schools, and public events. We have also focused on certain theoretical concepts that are central to our curriculum. These concepts include an investigation into an understanding of the leadership of the poor, of poverty as a moral issue, and the concept of rights, as detailed in the Declaration of Independence and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We explore these three concepts in what follows.

The Leadership of the Poor

The poor and dispossessed today differ from the poor and dispossessed of the past. They are compelled to fight under qualitatively new conditions and to creatively wield new weapons of struggle. In other words, the socio-economic position of the low waged, laid off, and locked out is not that of the industrial poor, the slave poor, or of the colonial poor of yesterday. The new poor embody all the major issues and problems that affect the majority of other strata of the country's population. Its growing ranks are filled with people economically "downsized" and socially dislocated from every walk of life. Therefore, the massive uniting and organizing of the poor across color and all other lines has "a freedom and a power" to create the critical mass of the American people needed to move this country toward the abolition of all poverty. Dr. King called this leading social force the "non-violent Army or 'freedom church' of the poor."

Presently, we are experiencing the wholesale economic destruction of the “middle class” in this country. This is huge in terms of political power relations and of strategy and tactics. This “middle class” is beginning to question the economic status quo. The point here is not that the economic and social position of the poor is one to be pitied and guilt-tripped about, but that it indicates the direction in which this country is heading if nothing is done to change it. Poverty is devastating me today; it can hit you tomorrow.

If poverty is to be ended, the minds of the bulk of the nearly 300 million people who make up this country need to be changed. The united actions of the poor across color lines serve greatly to break down the stereotypes and unsettle the thinking of the mass of the people. We are building a big movement to solve a big problem, and we need a lot of leaders, coming from different social strata and bringing different social skills and resources to carry this out. Central to the uniting and organizing of the poor as a social force is the identifying and training of massive numbers of leaders from the ranks of the poor. This has to be our point of concentration at this initial stage of building a movement broad enough to end poverty. However, for this very reason we must challenge all people committing themselves as leaders, including those coming from other important social ranks to be trained as leaders as well. Only leaders can ensure the development of leaders. This is no easy task.

Here we must understand the strategic difference between leadership of the poor as a social group and leadership of individuals from the ranks of the poor as well as from other ranks. History and our hard-won experiences have taught us a lot in this regard. Leadership of the poor as a social group is secured primarily through united actions and organization. The development of individual leaders is secured primarily through political education and training. The content of the development of individual leaders is the acquiring of the clarity, competence, commitment, and connectedness necessary for the development of the leadership of the poor as a social group united around their immediate and basic human needs. For example, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who initiated the organizing of the historic Poor People’s Campaign, was himself not poor. However, he was a highly insightful and trained leader committed to organizing the poor across color lines and giving his life to the struggle to end all poverty everywhere. His words and work contributed greatly to the development of both kinds of leadership, social and individual. A very important lesson for us today from his life, especially his last years, is that we can and must develop “many Martins” especially from the ranks of the poor.

Morality

Poverty in a land of abundance is a moral outrage, yet society, including our religious leaders and institutions, has learned to tolerate it. In fact, many people use the quote “The poor will always be with you” from the Bible as an excuse for why religious congregations and even society at large are doing very little in the face of growing poverty. This passage has been used to explain the “futility” of doing antipoverty work because poverty is “inevitable.” Many people have been immobilized by the extent of poverty and their inability to imagine a way to address it. Too many have conceded that poverty simply cannot be ended. In fact, we have institutionalized this view with soup kitchens and charity programs focused on the alleviation, rather than the elimination, of poverty.

Society, including our social service agencies, is set up to administer antipoverty programs, not build a movement to end poverty. Many continue with Band-Aid solutions and charity programs because they are concrete actions that seem as though they are addressing the problem—when someone is hungry you give him or her some food. But statistics in metropolitan areas across the United States state that a person becomes homeless every 30 seconds. The severity of this problem means that the tremendous effort put into building a house (where one religious congregation mobilizes enormous resources to build a single house for a homeless family over 6 to 8 months) will never be enough to meet the ever-growing need.

Charity programs also often maintain a relationship in which there are “helpers” and “those who need help” and in fact set up institutions and agencies in which people’s jobs rest on the continuation of poverty. For this kind of effort to promote justice, our social services and Band-Aid programs need to really meet the needs of poor people (rather than giving canned goods to a person with no place to open and cook them); they need to be available all the time in a holistic manner so that people’s housing, health care, food, and education needs can be met (or at least in a network of other services where people can get what they need when they need it rather than limiting such programs to once a month or every 3 months), and they need to be viewed as a means rather than an ends (so that at the same time as people receive housing or food, legislation that will improve housing or health care options for poor people is being advocated for and community organizing and education to develop leadership for a social movement is taking place). Our work is showing us the need to develop a new morality. This morality promotes justice over charity and human needs over corporate greed. It asserts that poverty is

immoral and a sin rather than seeing poor people as immoral and sinners. This morality is a new language and foundation for a social movement to end poverty, led by the poor as an organized and united force.

We can see the need for this new morality in the following example. Some years ago, there were three deaths that occurred in the New York transit depot in the period of a week: the death of a dog, the death of a maintenance worker, and the death of a homeless person. Within that week, nearly 100 calls came in concerning these deaths. Ninety-three of the calls came in for the dog, one call came in for the maintenance worker, and no calls came in for the homeless person. This story shows the moral direction this country is going in. This moral direction reflects an economic direction in which every day, more people are downsized, impoverished, and made homeless. The direction is morally and economically devaluing human lives. And in order to change this direction we need to win the hearts and minds of the American people to end poverty once and for all. Each of our educationals, each of our activities must keep in mind that we are building unity and organization among the poor in order to win the hearts and minds of the people to a vision of human worth and dignity.

Using a Human Rights Framework

In May 1967, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We have moved from an era of civil rights to the era of human rights, an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society." Following this shift of Dr. King's, we have found that rights and especially human rights are important concepts in our educational process. Economic human rights offers a framework to unite poor and working people across color lines into a common struggle, appealing to certain core values of the U.S. tradition and culture. These core values are drawn from the historical struggles in this country to define and redefine the meaning of its founding creed. The tactic of using the demand "Economic human rights for all!" allows us to raise the basic question of why poverty exists in the richest country in the world, and to raise another basic question of the relation between the growth of poverty in the United States and its growth worldwide.

In underscoring two of the most important historical influences on the thinking of the American people, the poor white abolitionist John Brown once stated, "The two most sacred documents in the world are the Bible and the Declaration of the Independence." The U.S. Declaration of Independence anticipated and influenced the formulation of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It states, "We hold these truths to be self-

evident, that all [human beings] are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

History teaches that the success of any social struggle requires moral and political legitimacy, that is, a mass public sentiment that the struggle is right and just. Today that legitimacy for the struggles of the poor is not going to come from the federal government or from any section of the powers-that-be, as has happened on certain occasions in the past. History and our recent experiences show that legitimacy can come from reference to the emerging international struggles of the impoverished world majority, from reference to those core values of the United States that affirm the basic human rights to life, and from reference to this moral affirmation in international documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed by all the member nations of the United Nations.

Economic human rights are therefore a powerful source of legitimacy for local and national antipoverty struggles and the urgent and basic issues that unite the poor as a social group. As a tactic, using the struggles of the poor along with human rights documentation to expose the fact that every issue of poverty in a time of plenty is a violation of human rights can be an effective means to awaken the consciousness of the “sleeping giant,” the mass of the American people.

THE POVERTY INITIATIVE MODEL

Our pedagogical lessons from past decades of organizing and educating in poor communities have culminated in the work of the Poverty Initiative. In particular, both the Poverty Scholars Program and the poverty immersion courses (which are described at more length below) are attempts to sum up and integrate best educational practices for building a social movement to end poverty. They weave together the content, methods, and educational approaches summarized above.

The Poverty Initiative was founded in May 2004 with the goal of bridging poor people’s organizations, religious leaders, and the academy in an attempt to build a national movement to end poverty. It began as a project of mainly students at Union Theological Seminary to connect religious communities and poor communities but has grown into a multifaceted program led by community leaders, religious leaders, and others across the United States. Since 2007, we have focused our efforts on reigniting the Poor People’s Campaign and finishing the unfinished business of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In December 1967, King called upon all people of goodwill to “lift the load of poverty.”

Over the years, we have worked to implement our vision for the role of religious communities in a movement to end poverty that brings together critical analysis and prophetic witness to the realities of poverty and oppression. Emphasizing the belief that the voices of those most affected by the problem must be in the forefront of a movement, our educational model seeks to establish and strengthen relationships between poor people's organizations and religious leaders, institutions, and communities so that they can be partners in efforts to end poverty.

The Poverty Initiative offers an antipoverty pedagogical paradigm different from models of other professional graduate schools by bringing students and faculty into direct contact with leaders of poor people's organizations in their homes and neighborhoods as well as in the classroom. It provides a multidisciplinary curriculum—integrating theoretical, theological, and experiential learning that incorporates the analysis, practice, scholarship, and faith that exists in poor communities with graduate level seminary courses. This new pedagogical paradigm posits the people with lived experience of economic injustice as the intellectual and experiential leaders whose scholarship, when placed in dialogical conversation with the academy, creates solutions to systemic problems.

Since its inception, the Poverty Initiative has had both an educational and an organizing mandate. First, our signature events from 2005–2007 were three National Poverty Truth Commissions inspired by South African and Peruvian truth commissions. Here, low-income leaders testified to the economic human rights abuses (the lack of health care, housing, adequate food, education, or living-wage jobs) before an esteemed panel of religious, academic, and community leaders who served as commissioners. Dozens of testifiers from across New York State and the United States have been heard. Following this history of truth commissions and community meetings, the Poverty Initiative hosted a New York City Town Hall Meeting with Raquel Rolnik, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, to discuss concerns about public housing, Section 8 availability, homelessness, and the foreclosure crises in New York City. The Poverty Initiative was an active part of a citywide coalition of groups charged with coordinating the visit (the first official U.S. Housing Mission from the UN in history) and links to grassroots voices.

Second, the Poverty Initiative has developed the pedagogical methodology of poverty immersion courses, leading a total of six courses since 2005 including to the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Appalachia to explore the effects of welfare reform and resource extraction, the Mississippi Delta to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign, and New York, New Jersey, Mary-

land and Pennsylvania, visiting local low-wage worker, health care, and public school student organizations. Each immersion course enrolls Union students and Poverty Scholars (as many as 60 participants depending on logistical capacity, funding, and interest) who investigate conditions of poverty, visit and form partnerships with local churches and social service agencies, and participate in trainings and biblical reflections. The short-term goals of the immersion experiences have been to develop the leadership capacity of low-income leaders; equip all participants to develop their own leadership and education program; and establish new partnerships, trainings, and collaborations between all those involved. The long-range goal is to help develop commitment on the part of these budding leaders (low income, religious, social work, and so on) to a lifetime vocation of overcoming poverty and, toward this end, to build long-lasting relationships between impoverished people and communities we visit and the communities the participants represent. Upon their return from these trips, participants have time to reflect on the theological and practical implications of the visit and the course overall.

On campus at Union Theological Seminary, the Poverty Initiative has worked with Union faculty to develop and coteach nearly a dozen poverty-themed courses offered at Union to current students, alumni, and local Poverty Scholars; among these courses are Reading the Bible with the Poor, Women's Experience as a Resource for Worship, Poverty and Poor People's Movements: Social and Ethical Analysis, the Gospel of Paul: Poverty and Spirituality, and World Religions and Poverty.

Third, to further our mission, itself inspired by King's historical and strategic conclusions about the poor needing to unite across color lines into "a new and unsettling force," the Poverty Initiative launched our cornerstone Poverty Scholars Program, a leadership development training program and network for a leadership core of 250 grassroots low-income, religious, and community leaders from over 50 poor communities nationwide. The Poverty Scholars Program organizes Strategic Dialogues and Leadership Schools; themes and skills covered at program gatherings include a comprehensive study of the economic crisis and its impact on our communities; the history of Martin Luther King, the Poor People's Campaign and the shift from civil rights to human rights for all; theories of impoverishment; using human rights to organize; history of past conditions of poverty and social movements in the United States and abroad; technical training on the use of communication tools such as the Internet, Flip cameras, and blogs, for human rights violation documentation; sharing campaigns and lessons learned from local organizations; and sharing of arts and cultural practices.

The program seeks to lift up the hidden genius of existing grassroots leaders most affected by poverty, while further developing their leadership voice, organizing skills, and capacity for intellectual engagement. Our program engages organizers with proven success in winning local level campaigns on issues of unemployment, community revitalization, housing and homelessness, immigration, water privatization, ecological devastation, eviction and foreclosure, health care, hunger, low-wage workers' rights, organizing poor youth, public education reform, grassroots media production, and living wages. The Poverty Scholars Program seeks to make an impact at three levels: (1) to provide leadership development and skills training for each individual leader or Poverty Scholar; (2) to inform and sharpen existing and future local campaigns conducted by each partner organization; and (3) to nurture a national network that unites across lines of race, religion, geography, and issue-focused organizing into a social movement to end poverty.

The Poverty Initiative also provides technical support, ongoing training, and strategy development for garnering support from faith-based allies for poor people's organizations and their successful campaigns, including the Restaurant Opportunities Center—New York (prayer vigils and Fireman Hospitality Group law suit), Picture the Homeless (Potter's Field Campaign), Domestic Workers United (Domestic Workers Bill of Rights), the United Workers (Living Wages at Camden Yards Campaign), the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (Fair Food Campaign), and others.

Fourth, the Poverty Initiative serves as a clearinghouse and resource center and released our third book, titled *A New and Unsettling Force: Reigniting Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign*. This book, which grew out of the Poverty Scholars Strategic Dialogues, immersion courses, and Poverty Initiative-sponsored seminary courses, features chapters on the history of the Poor People's Campaign of 1968, the role of religion, the importance of art and culture in the struggle to end poverty, and an interview of Bertha Burris (Queen of the Mule Train) and 16 essays submitted by organizations we call the modern-day sanitation workers' struggles. Two other Poverty Initiative publications that grew out of immersion experiences include *Katrina: Listening with Our Hearts* (2006) and *Appalachia: Listening with Our Hearts* (2007). Both contain reflections by immersion participants and photographs taken as we traveled. These publications drew from blogs that the Poverty Initiative set up as part of that pedagogical experience. These online spaces were integrated into the reflection on the immersion and served to deepen this reflection process for the students.

A survey conducted of 30 major U.S. seminaries found that very few offer courses in economic justice, despite our biblical and ecclesiological tradition that places major emphasis on justice for poor people. Therefore, since its inception, the Poverty Initiative has worked with faculty and students from other seminaries and universities to replicate the Poverty Initiative. The impact at other schools includes Poverty Truth Commissions, immersion programs, and participation in our Poverty Scholars Program. Through this work and the replication of our efforts, we hope to develop the leaders and methods for a social movement to end poverty. We invite all the readers of this book to join us.

Check out our website: www.povertyinitiative.org.