



# COMBINED CHRISTIAN MINISTRIES TO THE POOR

NPO Reg. - 046-047

September 2007

In the final paragraph of my last newsletter, at the end of May '07, I spoke about sharing with you in a future letter some personal insights I have had while working among the poor. Well, this is the letter. I will not be sharing too much on our activities over the last while other than to say that the work we do is growing. Its impact on the community around the Ubomi Obutsha Centre deepens as does our impact over the city as a whole as we are able to support more community based organisations (doing great work in communities where we do not work directly) with donated food and clothing etc. People continue to be reached and the curse of poverty over their lives broken!



This is not a progress report but rather a personal letter in which I would like to share with you some of what I have learnt and what it is like working among the poor. We have a new monthly formal reporting format that you will begin to receive soon. But for now . . . . . wait until you have found a comfortable place to be and a few minutes on hand to read this one!

Firstly, why is it that God seems to favour the poor so?

Surely if we are all fallen and separated from Him, should it even matter how rich or poor we are? In many ways, this is true, but . . . I have come to realise something else. For those of us who are even able to read a letter like this, we have never (or probably will never) experience the full reach of the fall of mankind as someone living in a ramshackle shack on the edge of mosquito infested waters, knowing that something is very wrong but not having the capacity to understand exactly what it is!

By the grace of God, in cultures where (I believe) the work of Christ has been allowed to take root, and even in spite of all the distortions man has put to it over the centuries, something of the pinnacle of God's creation has remained in us. We have been able to create temporary lifestyles for ourselves that are far removed from our fall and I sometimes wonder if we have forgotten our real need for real salvation!

The poor have not forgotten! The torture of humankind separated from the purpose of God engulfs every moment of their lives. Although they may not understand it, they know it.

It makes sense then that God would reach more fervently for those who are furthest from Him and that we shouldn't be surprised to find him more present in between the shacks where HIV/AIDS and TB decimates life, and on the dusty streets where still innocent children play, rather than in our fancy buildings, organised programs and affluent lives. Yes, we have our share of problems and issues, but nothing like the poor.

Some of you may have heard me sharing some of the points in this letter in conversation or while sharing on the work of CCMP and many have had a 'CLICK' moment of understanding (like the many I have had) that has changed the way we view our lives and moved us to act. God is at work in us and amongst us and we need to keep responding to Him as we "work out our salvation".

This next point I want to make I feel is a sensitive one and has been a difficult one for me to deal with personally but it is also the one point that has produced the most 'CLICKS' for poor and not poor alike. Some of the middle aged "black" people I engage with most often asked me, "Why is it that when "whites" do something it works but when we try the same thing it doesn't work?" - those were their words! This question disturbed me, I felt embarrassed, uncomfortable and I did not have an answer! For weeks this question churned inside me until one day . . . 'CLICK'!

And this is the analogy I use that best explains the understanding of poverty (particularly in our South African context) that I have come to . . .

Its like each person is a torch made to have large D-cell batteries fitted but for many, many years, depending on our race, some were simply not considered by the “powers that be” to be worthy of a full capacity charge. And so, generally (a dangerous word I know!) speaking, those with the lightest complexions got the large D-Cells while those with the darkest complexions got little AAA’s!

Now the torches with the AAA’s will never be able to shine as bright or as long as those torches with the D size batteries! Not because they are a lesser type of torch, but because they were simply fitted with smaller capacity batteries. And this is where we find ourselves today!

“CLICK ! !”

This is not a racist viewpoint, it is just sad that in our country this analogy generally follows our racial demographic. Wherever you go in the world, you will find that the poor have small batteries fitted! It is why they are poor. I have made the point in a previous letter that the poor are not poor because they do not have; but rather they do not have because they are poor. (!) The big problem is that we cannot simply replace our batteries as you would a torch’s. Once they’re in, they’re in! This is why the children are most at risk because the poor simply do not have the “capacity” to “charge” their own children adequately for life and quickly a degenerating spiral sets in.

It has been interesting to see how this understanding has affected some of our volunteers themselves. Realising that they will probably not be able to live out some of their own dreams, they see the great need to build into the lives of the children within their reach while there is still time. With the limited charge they have, they can supply a certain level of stability so that their children can be in a position to receive the highest capacity charge possible within their situations. From this understanding has come a drive to put BIG BATTERIES into every kid that comes to the Centre! It is where we can really make the greatest impact if we can support those who were short-charged in the past and now care for these children, we can help make up some lost ground in their lives!

But frustration sets in so quickly. Unaccustomed to the debilitating effects of poverty, the expectations we have are usually set a little too high for what is realistic in the situation. When we find ourselves having to constantly repeat, reteach, redirect the same things over and over and over again we can feel that the situation is hopeless and decide not to bother wasting our time and give up too early.

But the battery analogy goes further . . . ☺! When you buy a new cell phone the salesperson usually tells you to charge the battery until it is fully charged **before** you unplug and use it! And if you are silly enough (like I have been!) to unplug it early (just to see what happens) you discover that the charge in your phone’s battery will never last as long as it should! With the result that you have to charge your phone twice as often and it *frustrates* you! In the same way, the poor also need to be charged more frequently! And it does get very frustrating – often when I get out to the Centre I often feel like a fully charged battery that gets plugged into and drained by lesser charged batteries day after day! Not that I think I am a better person but because I was privileged enough to be charged with a higher capacity. It is not the fault of the poor individual that they were not charged to their full capacity. Just as it is not your phone’s fault you pulled the plug too early and it would not be your own child’s fault if he could not finish primary school because you did not have the means to support him and now, as an adult, he does not have the capacity to function effectively or support himself in his life! The poor need a recharge far more often than we do. It is just the way it is! And we are the ones who need to accept this and quit expecting the poor to be able to function at our level before we are prepared to help them or expect unrealistic results.

Another battery analogy: Your doorbell rings and it’s your neighbour asking if you have jumper cables! (And you’re thinking, “Why now?”) You work through your selfishness and decide to help and you quickly realise that this is going to take some effort on your part! You cannot leave your car in your driveway, no . . . you have to take your car to where his car is. You have to get your car as close as possible to his and let your engine run while you connect your battery to his so that he can start his engine. It is the same if we are going to answer God’s call to care for the poor! We cannot stay where we are and offer our advice, or our prayers, or expect them to bring their “car” to us. We need to go to them because **we can** – we have petrol in our tanks and so by the grace of God we are able to keep our batteries charged. Not so for the poor.

This all involves a few things a bit trickier than driving your car next door though. Firstly, we need to deal with our perception that in giving to the poor we will eventually lose everything we possess. We are taught to give freely and then logic tells us that eventually we will run out!! So we don't give as we should. But, it doesn't work like that. We do not realise the abundance we possess, and only when we make it available to God's purpose of redemption and manage it wisely (not miserly!), like the examples Jesus gives in some of his parables, we discover that there is truly no end to the wealth we possess as God's children. Secondly, we sometimes need to deal with embarrassment. And it is embarrassing! Arriving day after day in a decent car having slept warm, comfortable and dry; having had a choice of meals that filled your stomach for breakfast; having dropped your kids off at a school where they are safe and will receive a good education and then greeting the same people each day while they are lining up for our leftovers! It is embarrassing. But you learn to deal with it and then thirdly, you realise that as embarrassing as your wealth may be, God doesn't need more poor people in the world! His plan is to restore the wealth of His creation. True wealth is a blessing from God. The whole purpose of His salvation is to restore the wealth of all He had made. I don't agree with "prosperity gospel" teaching but I do believe that we are not meant to be poor! I no longer feel uneasy about my relative wealth when I am among the poor. I use it as an instrument of hope and I share it freely. In the Epistles Paul describes us as co- or fellow workers with God. And after 2½ years I have not run out of my wealth.

I have found this to be true: - It **is** by the grace of God that we live the way we do!

Talking to one of the teenagers who make use of our Centre about his constant struggles with exams at school he made a statement that has been resounding in my thoughts for weeks now. He said, "The problem is not that we do not know the answers to the questions. We have the information but we do not know HOW to answer the question!"

I hear that there are in the region of 200 000 vacant jobs in South Africa yet we have an unemployment problem! This may sound confusing but I have begun to realise that it is not unemployment that is the problem but rather the unemployability of so many of our people. Coming back to the low charge I was talking of earlier, it is not just a lack of workplace skills but rather a lack of basic personal attributes that is at the root of the problem. The lack of a sense of responsibility, respect, perseverance, self control, general knowledge & understanding, vision, a sense of self worth, support, love and fulfilment. Illiteracy, the inability to apply method and a poor understanding of consequences . . . . . – this is poverty! It is sad that many children living in poor communities today will live out their lives unable to even support themselves, depending on others to supply their needs, unless we who are able, do something about it!

There is something of the life of Jesus Christ that stands out to me more and more as I work among the poor. He would restore a person's dignity (a traitorous tax collector, a despised prostitute, or outcast lepers) and he would restore abilities where they had been lost, often before even addressing the issues of sin and forgiveness. In following the example of Christ, I believe we too need to work at restoring people's dignity and empowering them with abilities that will help them function constructively in a real world. This is how we 'work out' our salvation. The poor also need to know that they are worth something and that they are able to contribute meaningfully. I have witnessed the effects of this approach in people's lives as the curse of poverty over their lives begins to fall away and they find hope!

- I think of the once drunk, dirty and bent people now sober, clean and proud who tend our food garden! One woman recently came to thank us for what we have done for her and then informed us that she will not be coming to the garden on Tuesdays and Thursdays anymore! She used to drink heavily and neglect her four children (two orphaned from her deceased sister). She began working in the food garden and attending our programs after our community awareness campaign in July and she has since stopped drinking, put on a little weight (!) and is caring for her children better. People in her area have noticed all this are now asking her to work for them again – doing washing etc. She's putting Tuesdays and Thursdays aside for this!

- I think of the 18 individuals we have identified from those working in the food garden, and attending our workshops, to be developed and incorporated into our group of volunteers. They will greatly increase our ability to be effective within the community. They will take on different responsibilities from being a caregiver in our pilot educare program that is slowly coming together to identifying and making a difference in other desperately poor households closer to their homes.

- I think of the 83-year-old gogo (granny) who can't read or right but has been given the opportunity to run the soup kitchen. She told us a while back that she never knew that she could be of value! The 145 hungry kids who came for a cup of soup this afternoon can tell you just how valuable she is!



- I think of an orphaned young teenager who has grown up in difficult circumstances living with three drunken, irresponsible, and abusive uncles but with the help of the Centre has risen above his circumstances and works hard to build his life. He now also contributes to the lives of his peers and younger kids in the community as he helps in the running of some of the Centre's programs.

There is HOPE. Especially when we who by the grace of God have well charged batteries are willing to pull right up next to someone else with a dead battery, pull out a pair of jumper cables, and use them!

It is difficult, I know. But we do it anyway because, by the grace of God, we are able to.

I get concerned sometimes that my focus on "social" issues more than "spiritual" issues is a problem to some people but I think we often seem to have this perception that being "spiritual" has more to do with intangible than tangible things. I have discovered though that the spiritual life is as physical as it is ethereal. E.g.: Telling me that the most important thing that I need to do is to pray (and please understand that I say this with respect) is like telling me to balance when I walk! Yes, prayer is important but just as we do not stop to concentrate on our balance when we walk (we simply do it continually and naturally as we walk) we need to learn to learn that the "spiritual disciplines" are there to keep us "balanced" as we work for the Lord. Scripture shows us that it is the steps we take and not the prayers we pray or songs we sing or promises we make, that count in the end. As difficult as it has been, I have learnt the meaning of praying without ceasing! God has given us a task to reach out to those who are still lost, with His good news of salvation for all humankind (and through us all creation) through Christ. Yes, spiritual disciplines like prayer are crucial but it is the task God has given us that we should be busy with. This is not easy for me either; I am not naturally a task-orientated person but prayer without action, faith without deeds, is like balancing but not walking. In our work among the poor, every act we do in service is a prayer for them; every word of encouragement, each lesson taught and word of wisdom given is a word of prophecy into the lives of those who need direction; and very hug given in love is a healing in a broken life and every tear shed for them is an offering of worship to God who has sent us to reach for them! It's not exactly "church" the way we may know it but some of you know exactly what I am talking about because you have experienced the raw power of God in this way. Christ's example and charge to us was to act physically in a physical world. We need more of that.

"Thank you." to all of you who support the ministry or have made yourselves a part of it in some way, and thanks to those who are supporting me financially (some of you are still unknown to me!), I really do appreciate it. Keep praying for me (the work often gets taxing) and please spread word of what we're doing. We all have opportunities to do so much.



Some news on our programs:

- We have 2 more regular food collection donations that have enabled us to increase the number of other support projects to 18.
- The food garden is going exceptionally well!
- Our community volunteers at the Ubomi Obutsha Centre are developing well and taking on more responsibilities.
- We have had some valuable input from the outside – Theatre for Change Drama Workshop for teenagers, donations of seedlings for the garden, preparations by a group from Lighthouse Family Church to do some physical work at the Centre and the continual mentoring and workshops with the Barnabas Trust.
- We have had a successful community awareness campaign, which has helped us build stronger relationships with local schools and community leaders, and helped identify a significant number of homes that need some kind of intervention.



- Some of our programs, Sunday School and Teen Youth, have seen a drop in attendance due to different circumstances. (It is not always plain sailing!)
- The teenagers are making rigorous use of the Teen Resource Library for homework etc.
- We have embarked on a fresh round of household assessments (close to 200 to do) which are already proving valuable and identifying areas of great need.
- Our volunteers have intervened in a number of child neglect and abuse cases and, through referrals to social services, have been able to rescue one baby from possible death due to neglect.
- We are collecting our weekly ton of donated oranges from the Sundays River Valley area.
- Some of our Centre kids had not had their school fees paid yet for this year but some of you have paid them via CCMP. Thank you very much! And some of you are working on strategies to raise funds to help kids through their schooling next year! - more on this later.



#### Some needs:

- A group of around 6 or 8 people to lead our Sunday School next year. It will involve a commitment to between 35 - 40 school term Sunday mornings and could be done in a "relay" fashion that would only require half the group to be there every other week.
- Someone who is knowledgeable on plants and insecticides that would be prepared to come out fortnightly to have a look at the condition of the plants in the garden and give advice.
- Someone to join me in what I am doing (even if it is only for a year)!

I have been working with CCMP for just over 2½ yrs now and as frustrating and challenging as the nature of the work may get, it has been an honour and a real privilege to serve you in serving the poor as we have answered God's call together. It has been a humbling time, a time of growth, a time of new understandings and a time of realising the great potential we all have to meaningfully co-work with God and impact the lives of those around us who are not nearly as well off as we are . . . if only we would get on with the job!

Again, thank you to everyone who has contributed over the last while. I know this letter has been long (and long overdue) but I hope it has given you some fresh insight into the lives of many of our own neighbours who we share this city with and what we face each day working to reach and help them.

#### Blessings

Mark Lawler  
CCMP, Ministry Director

"He has showed you, O man, what is good.  
And what does the LORD require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God." - Micah 6:8

"To care for the poor is not an act of charity;  
it is an act of justice!"  
- Nelson Mandela