

# Christian Economics and Mercy In the Church

## Draft Proposal from Sub-Committee

### Introduction:

*Awe came upon everyone... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together with one accord in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And day by day the Lord added to them those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47)*

Such is the vision we get of the ascended ministry of Christ in the present redemptive age after Pentecost. It is the description of a Christo-centric, sacramentally formed, confessional, multi-cultural and organic kind of *loving* unity that was in, not of, *and* for the world to the “praise of God” *and* in “favor with all the people.” It was, in summary, the description of a *missional ecclesiology* wherein the church-- just being the church-- was itself a missionary enterprise, even that church that “believed together and had all things in common!”

The missionary value of the church *being* the church was John Howard Yoder’s point as well in *The Politics of Jesus* (1972). In it, Yoder re-examined the slogan of the 1948 Amsterdam Assembly “let the church be the church” wherein he described how the “centrality of the church” in ethics is in itself a “social strategy.” According to Yoder, to the degree that the church becomes a “restored society,” it does as a powerfully authentic witness within the greater society.

The church must be a sample of the kind of humanity which, for example, economic and racial differences are surmounted. Only then will it have anything to say to the society that surrounds it about how those difference must be dealt with.<sup>1</sup>

Since Yoder penned his idea concerning the centrality of the counter cultural church as a social strategy, the church in the West is beginning to understand its new situation as a disenfranchised minority in an increasingly post-Christian *and* post-liberal (individualistic) world. That is to say that while the *social* significance of northern hemisphere Christianity is undergoing a steady decline, however you want to measure it, there is an emergent rediscovery of the critical role of the local and counter-cultural positioned Christian congregation for the sake of ethical formation and even public contribution. David Fergusson has observed that “the emergence of pluralism and secularism in the late-twentieth century have led to the breakdown of any clear Christian consensus undergirding the standards, assumptions, and policies of multiracial and multi-religious societies.” He further acknowledged that the present social predicament “has led to calls for greater Christian authenticity “ wherein “we can no longer assume that Christian ethics simply endorses what everyone recognizes to be good for human beings *qua* human being.” And to the point of this present essay, Fergusson contends:

The time has therefore come to bear witness to the specific virtues of the Christian life through reference to its setting within the church under the guidance of Holy Scripture and the lordship of Jesus Christ. Christian witness in this social context bears the character not of seeking common ground with those who dwell *extra muros ecclesiae* [outside the walls of the church] but of articulating a vision that is distinctively and sometimes counter to the prevailing culture.”<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps even more to the point, notwithstanding the missionary aspects of an ecclesial ethic concerning wealth and poverty within the church, the impetus for a thoughtful policy and strategy for economic mercy within the church is mandated if by only a reassessment of true Christian spirituality. For instance, what does it mean to be a “Christian” in relation to our identity and ethics related to the Christian church? Richard Hayes

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<sup>1</sup> Yoder, John Howard, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, (1972), p. 150-152.

<sup>2</sup> David Ferguson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.1-2.

summarized the New Testament answer to this question this way:

Paul develops his account of the new community in Christ as a fundamental theological theme in his proclamation of the gospel. Indeed, the focus on community is a part of the gospel itself. How so? If we ask, "What is God doing in the world in the interval between resurrection and *parousia*?" The answer must be given, for Paul, primarily in ecclesial terms: God is at work through the Spirit to create communities that prefigure and embody the reconciliation and healing of the world. The fruit of God's love is the formation of communities that confess, worship, and pray together in a way that glorifies God (see, e.g., Rom 15:7-13). Such communities are palpable signs of God's reconciliation of the world. The conception of salvation as an individual matter between man and God is utterly foreign to Paul's preaching. . . . To be in Christ, in the Lord, in the Spirit means to be in the community of Christ, the Lord, and the Spirit. Hence, the will of God is always to be discerned by and for the community, not by individuals in isolation. This communal context of the believer's life is of the greatest importance for Paul's understanding of how the Christian is able to know what he ought to and ought not to do. . . . The believer's life and action are always in, with, and for "the brethren" in Christ. For him, moral action is never a matter of an isolated actor choosing from among a variety of abstract ideas on the basis of how inherently "good" or "evil" each may be. Instead it is always a matter of choosing and doing what is good for the brother and what will upbuild the whole community of brethren."<sup>3</sup>

For the present purpose then, wherein society is struggling with the issues of poverty and economic injustice, even oppression, within a highly individualistic oriented economic and ethical system — what is the policy and strategy of the church concerning poverty within its own ranks, albeit a policy that recognizes and practices a kind of practical, even economic *koinonia* that recognizes no social distinctions? It should be noted that this issue will become especially acute when CPC begins to reflect the holistic demographic of New Haven in its membership (both center city and edge cities combined) albeit as to reflect CPC's vision for a mono-congregational, multi-site strategy.<sup>4</sup>

It concerns then the missionary witness of the church and its correlation in ecclesial ethics as directed to the issue of poverty and wealth within the church that this study seeks to investigate resulting in concrete programs and strategies. In a culture of growing disparity between the rich and the poor and in a context wherein each individual values his/her own economic interest in the "lassie-faire" mores of economic individualism, can anyone doubt the profound missionary witness of the church when, in her counter-cultural mandate, she really manifest a counter-cultural ethic of love and communalism vis-a- vis Christian economics within the church. What impact, missional impact even, would there be if we at CPC really looked like Acts 2:43ff even as then to approximate Christ's mandate to the church:

*I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.* John 17:23

## I. The Biblical Mandate Illustrated:

### Communal Policies Related to Mercy for the Poor in the OC Church:

Deut. 15:1 "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts.

Deut. 15:7 If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. 8 You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.

9 Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hayes, *Ecclesiology and Ethics in 1 Corinthians*. See also Victor P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968)

<sup>4</sup> CT is the wealthiest state in the country. And yet, in New Haven, 1/3 (37%) of families with children under 18 live below the poverty level. (19,971 for a family of four, \$15,577 for a family of three, \$12,755 for a family of two and \$9,973 for individuals. Klepper-Smith observe *Though there have long been financial disparities within Connecticut, the divide between the state's wealthy and low-income residents has become more pronounced.*

10 Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 11 Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

Deut. 24:14 You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns. 15 You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt.

Lev. 19:10 You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

Lev. 23:22 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God.

#### Mercy to Poor and OC Wisdom:

Prov.14:31, He who oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker, But he who honors Him has mercy on the needy.

Prov. 22:9 He who has a generous eye will be blessed, For he gives of his bread to the poor.

Prov. 19:17 He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, And He will pay back what he has given.

Prov. 21:13 Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be heard.

Prov. 22:2 The rich and the poor have this in common, The Lord is the maker of them all.

Prov. 28:27 He who gives to the poor will not lack, But he who hides his eyes will have many curses.

Prov. 29:7 The righteous considers the cause of the poor, But the wicked does not understand such knowledge.

Prov. 29:13 The poor man and the oppressor have this in common: The Lord gives light to the eyes of both. 14 The king who judges the poor with truth, His throne will be established forever.

Prov. 31:9 Open your mouth, judge righteously, And plead the cause of the poor and needy.

Prov. 31:20 She extends her hand to the poor, Yes, she reaches out her hands to the needy.

#### Prophetic Anticipation of Mercy To The Poor and Promise of Renewal:

- Isaiah 58
- Amos 8

#### The New Covenant Church:

**John 13:34-35** *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

**Matthew 25:31ff 35** *for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37 Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

**Acts 2:43ff:** demonstrates the level of one-anothering in the early church that extended to real and substantial things as *they had all things in common.*

**1Cor.16:1-4...** "the collection for the saints" (16:1-4), which functions for Paul as the great symbolic enactment of the unity of Gentile and Jew, thus figuring forth the eschatological character of this new messianic community that Paul is laboring to create.

(Cf. James 1:17,27 2:14-16, 5:13-14, 2 Cor. 8:1-15, Rom. 12)

**James 1: 27** *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

#### Our Confessional Context:

**WCF**

26.1 All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship

with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory: and, being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward *and outward man*.

26.2. Saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, *is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus*.

### **Book of Church Order**

**9-1.** The office of deacon is set forth in the Scriptures as ordinary and perpetual in the Church. The office is one of sympathy and service, after the example of the Lord Jesus; it expresses also the communion of saints, especially in their helping one another in time of need.

**9-2.** It is the duty of the deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed. They shall have the care of the property of the congregation, both real and personal, and shall keep in proper repair the church edifice and other buildings belonging to the congregation. In matters of special importance affecting the property of the church, they cannot take final action without the approval of the Session and consent of the congregation. In the discharge of their duties the deacons are under the supervision and authority of the Session. In a church in which it is impossible for any reason to secure deacons, the duties of the office shall devolve upon the ruling elders.

**54:2** It is both a privilege and a duty, plainly enjoined in the Bible to make regular, weekly, systematic and proportionate offerings for the support of religion and for the propagation of the Gospel in our own and foreign lands, and for the relief of the poor...

## **Issues Related to a Policy and Strategy:**

### **Policy:**

#### **1) Who are the Proper Recipients of Financial Assistance in the Church?**

The Primary Issue: How does the church do mercy as a “special” grace ministry, as distinguished from the common grace services that are beneficial to all people of all faiths and none? We should distinguish between mercy within the context of the three marks of the church vs. mercy outside of this context. C.f. Lk.20:25, Jn.18:36)

The Secondary Issue: Distinguishing between Christian responsibility acting jointly as “the church” as members of the household of God vs. Christian responsibility acting severally as Christian individuals yet members of society at large. (BCO 3.2, 3.3)

So for instance, compare:

Luke 10:33, *But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity...*

Rom. 12:13 *Contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers... (stranger saints, or spiritual strangers??)*

**Heb. 13:2** *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

Note: “strangers” are “those outside the covenant community in Eph. 2:12, 19, “enemies” or persecutors in Phil 3:6, Gal 6:12, Eph. 5:44)

To:

2Cor. 6:14 Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship (*koinonia*) is there between light and darkness? 15 What agreement does Christ have with Beliar? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 17 Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, 18 and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

More specifically:

1Tim. 5:3 Honor widows who are really widows. 4 If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight. 5 The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day; 6 but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. 7 Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach. 8 And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 9 Let a widow be put on the list if she is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; 10 she must be well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. 11 But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, 12 and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. 13 Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say. 14 So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, and manage their households, so as to give the adversary no occasion to revile us. 15 For some have already turned away to follow Satan. 16 If any believing woman has relatives who are really widows, let her assist them; let the church not be burdened, *so that it can assist those who are real widows.*

Notes:

- Vs. 3, "honor" often has financial overtones in the NT (1Cor.6:20, 7:23, 1Tim.5:17)
- There was evidently even a "list" of those who were the rightful recipients (vs. 9) such as to reflect an organized ministry of mercy in the early church.
- Paul is distinguishing "real" widows from "false" widows. Whoever is a "real" widow is then recognized as a proper recipient of the church's assistance (vs. 16)
- Whereas we must interpret this passage in view of ancient family-system economics, one could therefore treat "widow" as "destitute" (*The real widow, left alone*) as then qualified in the following ways:
  - A destitute person is someone who is:
    - 1) Beyond the age or ability to support oneself through work (vs. 9)
    - 2) Without family resources (vs. 11-16) And by inference given the present wage-labor, vs. family-labor system of economics, someone who lacks sufficient financial support through their work related wages..
    - 3) Willingness to offer themselves in whatever capacity they can in the service of God, including service within the church and\ without (vs. 10).
- Throughout this passage, it is clear that the mercy fund of the church ought not to enable *idleness* (vs. 13) even as this could be substantiated both by a high regard for humanity in the image of God (c.f. Gen. 1 and the vocational mandate that is related to our imago dei identity, but also for the sake of responsible stewardship of limited resources within the church)

- It could be argued as well that there might be relative degrees of destitution that correspond to relative degrees of financial support by the church. Thus, the ideal of a supplemented assistance in order that a person could work, even if the work does not provide a sufficient income relative to need.
- The “widow” is here described as a person who at the very least is a Christian in good standing of the church. Note for instance vs. 5. 10, etc.

### Recommended CPC Policy on Proper Recipients of CPC Mercy Fund:

- 1) Whereas individual believers are encouraged severally to practice hospitality and mercy to those who are outside of the church in the use of their private resources, the use of church (CPC) resources jointly (the mercy fund administered by the church acting jointly as the mediatorial body of Christ through word, sacrament and government) will be directed to those who are members in good standing of any gospel believing church and currently residing within the jurisdiction of CPC.
  - a. This would include those under discipline short of excommunication.
  - b. This would include those not members of CPC, but members in good standing of some gospel believing church, albeit but residing in New Haven for a season and fully participating in the three mark ministry of CPC? Perhaps the church would want to utilize the “associate member” status allowable in BCO as a precondition to receiving financial assistance, for instance.
  - c. This would include those members of CPC as constituted in a multi-site congregation (a radical Presbyterianism — “city-church” vision — See Thy Kingdom Come — A Multi-site, Mono-Congregational Model...)
- 2) It should be noted that for those that do not “qualify” as per #1 above, the services/resources of a separate, albeit faith-based,” subsidiary organization through which to direct the several gifts of believers targeting those outside of the church with the mercy of Christ could be utilized.. (e.g. Hope for New Haven)
  - a. Toward this end, CPC receives a special annual collection a context other than covenantal giving at the Lord’s table for the purpose of supporting this subsidiary organization targeting the needs of those outside of the gifts.
- 3) CPC will direct its Mercy fund to those relative to their level of destitution as determined by an investigative process by the SLB.
  - a. Destitution relative to family resources. (vs. 4, 8)
  - b. Destitution relative to a good faith effort to work.  
1Th. 4:11 to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we directed you,  
Eph. 4:28 Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

## **2. A strategic plan for dispersing of Mercy Fund :**

### **1. The Goal of Empowerment vs. Enablement:**

*We believe it to be an inherent aspect of the imago dei to have a vocational calling. A Holistic approach to mercy ought to empower God’s people to work, rather than enable them not to work, if at all possible. That is to say that human flourishing is related to human vocation. WE desire a strategy that reflects this in so far as possible. C.f. Bob Luptons, *Theirs is the kingdom “The Image of God”* p. 10, *Christmas Again, p. , Welfare Redefined, p. )**

### Driving Questions:

- How can the mercy fund be executed in order to encourage personal responsibility, accountability and esteem? What will encourage the recipient to discover a means of experiencing their imago dei in some vocation — even if the vocation is not able to sustain them financially
  - i. A preference for service related assistance — e.g. financial assistance that is tied to service either within or without the church.

- ii. A preference for supplemental assistance —e.g. wherein the church doesn't replace wage-labor or family system labor, but supplements it in order for the person to remain in a job worth doing albeit if the job doesn't sufficiently provide for the person's needs.
- What process will need to be in place in order to determine the relative level of destitution as per financial "need"?
  - i. An Application process to include:
    1. A full disclosure of financial situation
    2. Proposed Budget
    3. Gifts/ability inventory relative to possible services rendered
    4. Short and Long term vocational goals
  - ii. An annual review of the above
- What strategy should be put in place in order for Mercy to be Holistic, as to consider the needs of the whole person relative to a "systems" approach to mercy and care such as to include financial, relational, family, medical, counseling . Thus, it is recommended that:
  - i. Each recipient be assigned a "case manager" as to regularly meet with the recipient and to help guide them to whatever counseling or assistance they might need such as financial counseling, medical care, pastoral counseling, etc.
  - ii. That a team of counselors be assembled from within the church if possible as to include people who are capable of:
    1. Pastoral care and family counseling (pastors)
    2. Financial planning and budget counseling
    3. Drug addition counseling,
    4. Etc.
  - iii. Review: That the case manager be in touch with the recipient on approximately a monthly basis, and that the SLB would review the case on an annual basis as through the case manager.

**3. Execution of Mercy Fund by SLB with Pastoral Consultation under the jurisdiction of the Session**  
BCO 9.2 In the discharge of their duties the deacons are under the supervision and authority of the Session. In a church in which it is impossible for any reason to secure deacons, the duties of the office shall devolve upon the ruling elders.

- Recommend for the SLB to create a Mercy Fund sub-committee charged with the execution of the mercy fund in consultation with the pastoral staff. Perhaps eventually this sub-committee would consist of the SLB Mercy Coordinator together with the Small Group Mercy Coordinators and ex-officio pastoral staff.
- There will need to be a few people who are finance savy on this team as well? ..

**4. Funding:**

- a. **Congregational Giving through Sunday Collections (multiple communities within a multi-site, mono-congregational city church)**
- b. **Annual Special Offering**
- c. **Outside support (alumni, friends of CPC, etc)— this will especially be useful in a multi-site situation given the needs that might related to the multiple communities involved.**

**Conclusion:**

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn...*

Isaiah 61:1-2

Many years after the prophet Isaiah spoke these words, during a moment of intense personal crisis for John the Baptist, he inquired of Christ to give him some assurance as to the authenticity of His messianic ministry. Christ's response was to appropriate the words of Isaiah as stated above. (Luke 4:17ff) Today, these same words serve also to authenticate the church, whose founder and head is Jesus Christ. For whatever the gospel is, it is about the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of lives to the glory of Christ. The two, forgiveness and restoration, are together the aims of the gospel to the glory of God and making disciples of every nation. Restoration, is always a holistic endeavor, as related to what our confession describe as the both the *inward and outward* person. The Mercy Fund of CPC is an attempt to put real strategy and resources to this vision. To do less, would be to have less authentic witness, to have less of the full gospel as mediated in, with and through the church that really does share Christ's *koinonia* together both in the inward and outward ways of spirit and resources.

**Footnote: *Just Do Something!!***

The temptation is for the overwhelming need to discourage doing *anything* until we conclude that we can fix *everything*. This is perhaps the greatest enemy to helping the poor—an unwillingness to do anything in fear of failure, and the sense of hopeless that comes with this. I am reminded here of the vision that inspired the beginning of the Salvation Army, as per the exhortation of James 1:19-27 and William Booths subsequent exhortation, “just do something.” Whatever we do, it will not be enough, humanly speaking, but just “doing something” is to be the church, leaving the ultimate issue of poverty to God's perfect timing and will. Thus Mercy fund is our attempt at “being doers of the word, not merely hearers of it.” Might it be said about CPC that we love each other, and that this love is real and tangible by the way we increasingly *hold all things in common*.