



Homelessness and Poverty in Phoenix, Arizona, USA: Reimagining the Church

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Abstract

Homelessness is a complex issue with multifaceted causes and global implications. Factors such as wars, genocide, and emigration contribute significantly to homelessness, especially in European nations and the United States. A doctoral study conducted in Phoenix, Arizona, found that despite increasing efforts and resources to reduce homelessness and poverty, the homeless population remains a concern. The study sought to inspire hope in those facing poverty by examining both historical and current ministry approaches in Phoenix and evaluating them against biblical principles to understand their theological significance. It used a combination of Appreciative Inquiry and Browning research methods and incorporated a mixed-method approach, gathering data through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions with forty-six participants who agreed to participate in the study. These participants included forty-six leaders from churches and para-church organizations, homeless individuals, and the working poor. The findings indicate that personal interaction, particularly when people are heard and prayed for, plays a crucial role in fostering hope and encouragement. The study highlighted the importance of ministries focusing on the real needs of the poor, advocating for a move from transactional to transformative approaches. It also suggested that collaborative efforts among ministries—providing counseling, job training, support, and prayer—are key to creating hope and improving the quality of life for those living in poverty.

Keywords: *Homelessness; Poor; Theology; Praxes, Churches; Parachurch Organizations*

Introduction

Contributing to global homelessness factors include wars, genocide, and emigration, which have a notable impact on homelessness, especially in Europe and the United States (Minnery and Greenhalgh, 2007). Who Are the Homeless (2009) mentions that, in the United States, homelessness is driven by a combination of issues such as rising housing costs, foreclosures, domestic violence, low wages, reductions in public assistance, substance abuse, and mental illness.

Homelessness affects a broad range of demographics, including families, women, children, youth, the elderly, and marginalized ethnic or migrant groups. Studies have documented the extensive social impact of homelessness across different groups and regions (Forrest, 1999), Wearing (1996), and Minnery and Greenhalgh (2007). According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, there were approximately 564,708 homeless adults in the United States. Of these, 69% sought shelter in residential programs, while the remaining 31% lived in unsheltered locations. Amongst the homeless population, those under eighteen made up 23%, including 45,205 children who spent at least one night without an adult. A further 9% were between eighteen and twenty-four, while the remainder were twenty-five years or older.

This is PhD study (Bagley, 2023) conducted in Phoenix, after obtaining relevant ethical clearance, aims to bring hope to homeless and impoverished populations through various strategies. Forty-six people, including fourteen leaders from churches and parachurch organizations and thirty-two people from the homeless and poor working community agreed to participate in the study. The latter included individuals from various ethnic groups, genders, ages, and marital statuses. The study takes a comprehensive approach, incorporating theological perspectives, practical measures, and input from the homeless community. The goal is to develop a holistic response that addresses spiritual, emotional, and practical aspects to achieve lasting change and restoration in Phoenix.

This study combines two research methods: Browning's approach (Browning, 1996) to practical theology and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2004). Browning's methodology, as described in his 1996 work, encompasses four sub-categories: descriptive, historical, systematic, and strategic. These sub-categories are used to examine the current context, understand historical beliefs and practices, and then compare contemporary practices with biblical scripture. This process helps to develop practical solutions grounded in biblical principles (Browning, 1996: 8). Integrating the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model, as outlined by Cooperrider and Whitney (2004), added another dimension to the study. AI focuses on identifying what works well in each context, emphasizing achievements, assets, unexplored potential, innovations, and core values. By exploring these positive aspects, the AI model aims to inspire confidence and promote action based on existing strengths (Hammond, 2013). This methodology allows for a constructive approach by focusing on successes and untapped possibilities, helping to build confidence in the group's abilities and encouraging forward momentum (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2004).

The study's main question was: How churches in Phoenix, Arizona, could actively promote a sense of hope among the homeless community in the area? The following subsidiary questions helped to identify practical ways to foster hope and positivity within this community.

- 1) What do biblical and historical theological perspectives say about ministering to those experiencing homelessness?
- 2) What is the theological stance of the church's ministry towards the homeless in Phoenix?
- 3) How does the current practice of Phoenix's churches compare to scriptural teachings?
- 4) In what ways can local churches in Phoenix, Arizona, work with the homeless community to develop a practical and theologically sound approach to ministry that brings hope?

Consequently, the article consists of four main sections related to the above-mentioned subsidiary questions. These are the poor in the Old Testament and Jesus' ministry, theologizing about the poor, the ministry of churches and para-church organization regarding the poor and the homeless in Phoenix,

Arizona, USA and a strategy to enhance ministry of churches and para-church organization regarding the poor and the homeless in Phoenix, Arizona, USA, and plan of action.

The Poor in the Old Testament and Jesus's Ministry

The Bible does not explicitly address homelessness, but it frequently mentions the poor, poverty, the needy, the oppressed, widows, orphans, and foreigners living in Israel. Homelessness can be considered an outcome of these circumstances and might be seen as a subset of poverty. Therefore, this article discusses homelessness and poverty together.

Again, the Bible does not imply that people would be spared from events leading to poverty, like crop failures, natural disasters, or wars. Yet, it suggests that poverty should be a temporary state. If someone was at risk of losing their land, which served as their livelihood, extended family members were expected to step in to prevent ongoing poverty. Likewise, the people of Israel were expected to help each other. According to Noel (2017), "The Israelite family would face shame and dishonor if they didn't come to their neighbor's aid." Such aid could take many forms, such as interest-free loans, debt forgiveness, property restoration, freedom from slavery, gleaning from harvested fields, and ensuring justice (Exodus 22:25–28; Deuteronomy 15:1–2; Leviticus 15:13). Employers who hired poor people were required to pay them daily before sunset without fraud or exploitation, recognizing that the poor might not have the resources to store grain or other provisions in abundance, requiring them to buy food daily. Additionally, the Bible warns that the poor might cry out to the Lord if they are wronged (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14–15).

Amos reprimanded Israel for its social injustices, while Micah focused on the wrongdoings in Judah and Jerusalem (Boloje, 2019). Micah didn't specify names, but he criticized those plotting to seize their neighbor's land, houses, and property and creating unfair economic policies (Micah 2:1–5). His condemnations targeted the leaders, priests, and prophets of Judah and Jerusalem for their role in perpetuating injustice, accusing them of "detesting justice, taking bribes for judgment, teaching for a price, and practicing divination for money" (Micah 3:9–11). Gottwald (1993) describes the wealthy as greedy and morally corrupt, using a system that deprived the poor of their land, leading to their ruin (Micah 6:10–13).

Micah prophesied that the wealthy landowners who coveted others' lands would eventually lose their own. They would face scarcity, experience violence, lose their wealth, plant crops but not reap, and ultimately meet destruction (O'Brien, 2015; Micah 6:13–15).

Jesus lived in a socio-economic system described as an aristocratic empire, where a privileged ruling class, the aristocrats, governed over agrarian peasants and derived their wealth from the peasants' labor (Hanson & Oakman, 2013). There was little emphasis on equality between classes, and it was considered dishonorable for the elites to associate with the poor unless they needed their services or products (Hanson & Oakman, 2013).

The people Jesus ministered to could easily relate to many of his parables and experienced his compassion and mercy because they lived at a subsistence level. Hence, Hoppe (2004) argues that the gospel of Luke emphasizes that "the true disciple is to be compassionate and generous toward those in need."

Jesus brought hope to many lower-class citizens (Van Eck, 2016), as illustrated in the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14 and Matthew 22. At a dinner party, Jesus observed how guests vied for the seats of honor (Luke 14:7). The parable he told challenged this behavior, giving hope to the poor while cautioning the ruling elite. It indicated that God was open to accepting people of all social classes into His kingdom (Wright, 2015). The poor understood this as a sign that God would honor them by inviting them

to a feast (Luke 14:21–22). This was an act based on grace, mercy, compassion, and kindness, rather than social status (Van Eck, 2016).

Theologizing about the Poor

Clement of Rome emphasized that wealthy Christians had a duty to use some of their resources to help the poor, while the poor were expected to show gratitude to those whom God used to provide for them (Clement, §38). In his "*Epistula ad Corinthos*," Clement wrote, "Let the strong care for the weak and let the weak reverence the strong. Let the rich man bestow help on the poor and let the poor give thanks to God, that He gave him one to supply his needs" (Clement, §38).

Justin Martyr (2015) indicated that, while providing financial assistance to those in need was not mandatory, it was highly encouraged, particularly for wealthy individuals. These contributions were given to church leaders, who then distributed them to orphans, widows, and the sick (Martyr, 2015). Tertullian similarly advocated voluntary giving, encouraging people to donate alms monthly or as they felt moved to do so (Tertullian, 1954).

In the third and fourth centuries CE, a growing number of monks and lay Christians renounced their wealth and took vows of poverty (Finn, 2006). The wealth distributed by these individuals was managed either directly by the individuals or given to a monastery (Finn, 2006). Sermons of that era emphasized the importance of giving to the poor, outlining various benefits such as gaining God's favor, linking almsgiving with faith to receive forgiveness, promoting justice, and even escaping present dangers while securing rewards in heaven (Finn, 2006).

Martin Luther, who grew up in a peasant family, was familiar with the struggles of poverty. As a monk, he saw the disparity between the church's vast wealth and the needs of the community seeking mercy and sustenance (Torvend, 2008). These experiences shaped Luther's concern for both the spiritual and social needs of the poor (Torvend, 2008). He also cited Galatians 6:2 to argue that Christians fulfill the law of Christ by helping bear one another's burdens, highlighting a link between the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and helping the needy (Torvend, 2008).

John Calvin believed that the responsibility to help the poor lay with the church's deacons, who, during the medieval period, were focused more on liturgical roles and less on the New Testament model (Tuininga, 2014). Calvin asserted that deacons should oversee the governance and care provided in Geneva's hospitals, with their ministry covering both physical and spiritual needs (Tuininga, 2014).

John Wesley believed that the English government's efforts to reduce poverty through laws and funding programs had limited success because government officials didn't understand what the poor truly needed (Bloor, 2015). To better comprehend the needs of low-income individuals, Wesley spent significant time, including nights, with them (Jennings, 1989). Meeks (1995) describes Wesley's approach as "doing life with the poor." He regularly visited those who were poor, sick, orphaned, or imprisoned, and urged his followers to do the same (Dayton, 1991). Wesley's philosophy emphasized that personal involvement and direct aid to those experiencing poverty were more effective than simply sending assistance through indirect means (Bloor, 2015).

Since the New Testament era, the Christian church has been active in aiding the marginalized and addressing social injustices (Woodbridge & Joynt, 2019). However, there have been times when the church failed to speak out against injustices that contribute to poverty (Ndukwe, 2008; Pillay, 2017). Yet, the church has historically corrected its course, resuming its mission to care for the poor (Pillay, 2017). Currently, global homelessness is a significant human rights crisis, with many seeking religious leaders for guidance and support to combat social injustice (Powell *et al.*, 2021).

Korten (1990) proposed that relief organizations should focus on four levels of aid: (1) provide immediate services to alleviate urgent suffering; (2) foster community efforts that enable the homeless to advocate for themselves; (3) implement policy changes at local, national, and international levels to create lasting positive outcomes; and (4) organize social efforts driven by a clear vision of a "better world." However, studies of churches and para-church organizations in South Africa found that most of them provided only immediate relief (level one) (Powell *et al.*, 2021). To reach levels three and four, churches and para-church organizations need to collaborate, setting aside denominational, theological, and religious differences to address broader policy changes (Swart & Venter, 2000).

The Ministry of Churches and Para-Church Organization in Phoenix, Arizona, USA

Leaders from church and para-church organizations took part in surveys and interviews to gather information about the range of services these groups offer. The findings revealed that these services varied widely depending on the ministry, often targeting specific segments of the impoverished population such as homeless families, working poor, or homeless teenagers. Among the support provided were food, clothing, medical care, counseling, housing, transportation, education, and job training. The study categorized people experiencing homelessness and the working poor into two distinct groups, each with unique needs and challenges.

****Group 1: **** This group consists of homeless individuals lacking proper shelter, who often rely on makeshift accommodations in various locations. Their primary needs are shelter, food, and employment, with 10% also requiring urgent medical attention. Their primary challenge is exposure to the elements, making secure shelter a top priority. Addressing the needs of this group requires a comprehensive strategy and collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders.

****Group 2: **** This group includes individuals who have some form of shelter, such as a vehicle or a hotel room. Their top two priorities are medical and dental care (66%) and full-time employment. This group faces systemic barriers to accessing healthcare and seeks full-time employment to achieve economic stability.

It is crucial to recognize the varied needs of these groups to formulate effective policies that address both immediate and long-term requirements. The study found that inviting poor homeless and working community members to church and related organizations can have a positive impact, but those invitations are more effective when they show genuine care, kindness, and meaningful conversations that provide hope, rather than focusing solely on religious services.

To create lasting social change, Christian churches are addressing the complex challenges faced by the homeless and working poor by forming genuine relationships, understanding the unique needs of these groups, and collaborating with other ministries. The study explored the role of churches and para-church organizations in a specific community, finding that para-church organizations showed successful collaboration, while independent churches often operated redundantly. The para-church entities offered a wider range of services, underscoring the need for coordination among different groups to increase their impact.

Focus Groups Reflections

The study also conducted focus group discussions to draw about possible ways of enhancing the ministry of churches and para-church organizations in Phoenix, Arizona. The focus groups challenged certain assumptions that influenced the church's approach to homelessness. The successful collaboration among para-church organizations demonstrated the potential for joint initiatives, suggesting that by pooling resources and efforts, churches and para-church entities could greatly enhance the effectiveness and transformative impact of their ministries.

Focus group discussions highlighted the critical role of training and congregational involvement in successful outreach efforts. These training initiatives covered a wide range of topics, including counseling, child daycare, and transformational ministry. There was a strong emphasis on encouraging church members to take a more active role in outreach and community engagement. Training ushers and greeters to assist in creating a safer environment and encouraging member participation were seen as ways to support these efforts.

The group suggested utilizing state-certified therapists to enhance counseling services and implementing liability disclaimers to ensure safety and accountability. Another proposal was to create a comprehensive website that provides a list of resources, making counseling services more accessible to those in need.

Child daycare services were seen as an essential part of supporting parents and guardians within homeless and working-poor populations. The focus group recommended that churches and para-church organizations work together to implement these services, emphasizing that collaboration was key. Initiatives like the "Find Help Phoenix" directory and partnerships with non-Evangelical organizations were mentioned as examples of successful collaborative efforts.

In addition, the group discussed the biblical basis for outreach and support to the poor. They referenced Acts 2:42–44 and 4:32–35 as examples of the early Christian community's practice of gathering and distributing resources to those in need. They also highlighted the biblical principles of tithing and giving, rooted in passages from Deuteronomy and Acts, underscoring the alignment of current practices with the compassionate aid described in biblical texts.

The focus group encouraged churches to use these biblical principles to guide their outreach efforts, suggesting that the early Christian community's commitment to supporting the impoverished could serve as a model for modern outreach programs. The emphasis on collaboration and the consistent theme of compassionate aid in these biblical passages aligned with the early Christian community's practices and provided a strong framework for contemporary church efforts.

The Recommended Strategy to Enhance Ministry to the Poor and Homeless in Phoenix

The section explores how biblical principles for serving people in poverty have been applied historically and assesses their relevance in today's ministries. It highlights that while many churches and parachurch organizations are still incorporating these principles into their outreach, they face certain challenges in modern times. The research shows that, despite these challenges, these religious groups are adapting and continuing to use these biblical approaches in their efforts to help those in need. Seven biblical principles are identified as key when serving the poor.

The first biblical principle involves allocating part of the tithe, especially the food tithe, to support specific groups, as described in several biblical passages like Leviticus 19:15, 23:22, and Deuteronomy 14:28–29, 26:12–15. This principle was notably used by the first-century Church and remains a common practice today. According to survey data, 85% of church leaders reported their commitment to this principle by providing aid to those experiencing poverty.

The second biblical principle underscores the importance of addressing injustice, fighting oppression, and promoting justice, as specified in biblical passages like Exodus 23:2, 6–9; Deuteronomy 24:17; and 27:19. Although survey data did not clearly show that churches and parachurch organizations are explicitly engaged in addressing injustices faced by people who are homeless or among the working poor, these religious groups expressed a shared commitment to treating everyone who seeks assistance with dignity, respect, and justice.

The third biblical principle focuses on the Church's role in showing compassion to all people based on their intrinsic value, as illustrated in scriptures like Matthew 14:15–21, Psalms 34:6, and Psalms 35:10. This principle was practiced by the Early Church, and modern churches and parachurch organizations continue to uphold it, with 86% of surveyed ministries providing practical assistance such as food, housing, medical aid, and clothing. Additionally, they are engaged in initiatives aimed at breaking the cycles of poverty (as referenced in Torvend 2008: 93–95).

The fourth biblical principle relates to appointing specific individuals to manage ministries focused on serving the poor. This approach follows the practice of the first-century Church, which established deacons for this purpose, as seen in Acts 6:2–4. In contemporary times, churches, parachurch organizations, and governments work together to address poverty, aligning with this biblical principle by appointing designated overseers to manage outreach and support for individuals with low incomes (as mentioned in Torvend 2008, 93–95).

The fifth biblical principle revolves around Christians showing love and providing care to individuals outside their own faith community, as referenced in scriptures like Exodus 23:6–9 and Mark 12:31. Contemporary research data suggests that this practice remains relevant today, with ministries in the study area indicating they do not deny services or aid based on whether someone is part of a particular faith community. This shows that churches and parachurch organizations continue to embrace the principle of extending compassion and assistance to all, regardless of religious affiliation.

The sixth biblical principle stresses personal responsibility and advises against providing food to those who are unwilling to work, as mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 3:10. This presents a challenge for ministries in the research area, as they aim to support those in need without encouraging irresponsibility.

The seventh biblical principle centers on the role of prayer in activating grace, with Christians praying for God's grace to powerfully guide their lives and ministries toward achieving a community with "no needy person among them," as described in Deuteronomy 15:7 and Acts 4:33b–34.

In summary, the study explores the implementation of biblical principles, examining their historical roots and relevance to current ministry practices. The findings suggest that churches and parachurch organizations continue to integrate these principles into their outreach programs, adapting to contemporary challenges in their efforts to address poverty and related issues. Despite the complexities of the modern context, the survey data shows a consistent commitment among these organizations to apply biblical teachings in their work with people experiencing poverty. Hence the suggestions of the focus group discussions, below.

Suggested Biblical Praxes

The focus group proposes various strategies, including congregational involvement, counseling services, child daycare, transformational ministry, and collaboration between churches and parachurch organizations, each aligning with key biblical practices.

The group emphasizes the need to appoint leaders to manage ministries and ensure fair resource distribution, reflecting the biblical approach to congregational involvement (Acts 6:2–4). Counseling services are deemed essential, with an emphasis on compassionate care, irrespective of religious background. This care can be provided by either professional or lay counselors, offering support for mental health needs.

Church-based childcare programs are highlighted as critical, aligning with biblical principles of compassion, evangelism, and community service. These programs also play a role in enabling full-time employment, especially for single parents, which can help break the cycle of generational poverty.

Prayer is identified as a key component for supporting the working poor and homeless. Praying for individuals and incorporating private prayer times create a sense of validation and recognition. This practice aligns with biblical teachings on the transformative power of faith and hope in God.

The focus group also endorses a transformational ministry approach that encourages empowerment and self-sufficiency. This method fosters individual growth and aligns with multiple biblical principles, promoting a shift from a transactional to a transformational model. Such an approach enhances holistic growth, accountability, and universal love. Collaboration between churches and parachurch organizations is seen as vital to address challenges comprehensively and offer effective support.

In summary, the study outlines a comprehensive strategy for church ministries to effectively serve people experiencing poverty. This approach encompasses meeting immediate needs while guiding individuals toward lasting self-worth, growth, and hope. The recommended foundation for a successful ministry includes collaboration, compassion, accountability, universal love, and the transformative influence of prayer. The ongoing challenge is to implement these strategies in a way that overcomes any negative perceptions, ensuring a holistic and impactful ministry.

Conclusion

God consistently emphasizes compassion and justice for the poor, focusing on meeting their physical needs and addressing systemic injustices that contribute to their suffering. In the Old Testament, God's anger is evident when Israel allows inequity to persist. Similarly, the New Testament calls on Christians to actively care for those in need while holding accountable those who shirk their responsibilities or avoid work.

Protestant Reformers recognized the biblical mandate to care for the poor, often partnering with governments to meet various needs. Christian leaders such as Martin Luther and John Calvin championed reforms, underscoring the importance of personal interaction to validate and inspire hope among those experiencing poverty. This doctoral study supports a current global perspective that advocates for amplifying the voices of the poor in discussions about poverty solutions.

Church leaders genuinely strive to uphold biblical principles in caring for the poor, but smaller churches often face resource constraints. In contrast, larger churches and parachurch organizations generally have more resources for broader support. Collaboration with state agencies can increase effectiveness, but a more comprehensive partnership among churches, parachurch organizations, and state agencies is needed to create a more unified approach to addressing poverty.

The study's findings suggest that individuals experiencing homelessness and the working poor yearn to be treated with human dignity. The interviews revealed that when Christians engage with them on topics beyond spirituality, it fosters trust and strengthens relationships. This human approach is crucial for building a meaningful connection with those in need.

The study also highlights that churches and parachurch organizations often have misconceptions about the needs of the homeless and the working poor. These needs vary, and assumptions about what is most important to these groups can be inaccurate. Additionally, the needs of homeless individuals differ from those of the working poor. This indicates that churches and parachurch organizations should ask more questions and take time to understand the specific needs of those seeking assistance, rather than relying on preconceived notions.

Another challenge identified by the study is that Church members often fear interacting with the poor and homeless, which limits the effectiveness of their ministry. To overcome these fears, churches should broaden the scope of their outreach to the poor and encourage their members to engage more actively with those in need. However, the reluctance of Church and parachurch leaders to collaborate is also a significant barrier to effective ministry. When churches and parachurch organizations work together, share resources, and pool their expertise, their effectiveness in helping the poor increases.

Overall, the study suggests that churches and parachurch organizations can enhance their impact by building relationships based on dignity and trust, tailoring their approach to the unique needs of those they serve, and fostering collaboration among church members and leaders. These steps can help overcome fears, break down barriers, and create a more effective and compassionate ministry to those experiencing homelessness and poverty.

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