

## Chapter Sixteen

# Squatter Culture and the Church

Oscar Lewis developed his theory of a “culture of poverty” in reaction to Redfield’s study of transitions. He studied groups of poor, migrant peoples within the city who had enough cultural integration to define some generalized characteristics. These he claimed to be universal to groups of poor in other cities. Much of Lewis’ theory was not new, having been generated by Lampman<sup>1</sup> and Harrington in their studies on American poverty.<sup>2</sup>

### Understanding the culture of poverty

Lewis’ theory is not truly about a culture in the classical sense of the word. Rather it is an excellent analysis of a subculture from a synchronic view—at one point in time—set in a much wider diachronic (historic) perspective—the continuum of change from folk to urban contexts. There are many criticisms of this theory, but it is not my purpose here to analyze these. Instead, I want to apply Lewis’ theory to the greater task of establishing the church among the poor.

Lewis lists over seventy characteristics of the culture of poverty, first differentiating it from poverty itself, which is generally seen as economic deprivation. He views the culture of poverty as a subculture within itself:

With its own structure and rationale, a way of life handed on from generation to generation along family lines . . . it is a culture in the traditional anthropological sense in that it provides human beings with a design for living, with a

ready-made set of solutions for human problems, and so serves a significant adaptive function.<sup>3</sup>

There are many groups of poor people that do not fit into this culture of poverty, because in Lewis' theory it is distinctly related to the emergence of a two-level economic system in capitalist cities. Poor rural or tribal peoples, some poor, low-caste urban Indians who are integrated into the wider society, and poor Jews in Eastern Europe who are highly educated and organized are examples of poor people who are not described by Lewis' concept.

The culture of poverty is both an adaptation by the poor to the contextual culture and a reaction to their marginal positions in a class-stratified, highly individualized, capitalistic society. Thus, the behavior and values of the poor are not determined by their situation but are a culturally learned response.

### **Limitations of Lewis' theory**

There has been a great deal of criticism of Lewis' theory. Nevertheless, while it may not be the most useful tool for those whose focus is the transformation of poverty, it is perhaps the most powerful tool we have for anticipating what the church in the slums should look like, and for analyzing what it does indeed look like.

Lewis' theory is also significant because it moved the emphasis away from the individual alone to the individual in context. It has also shifted the focus from the study of problem families among the poor to a more positive study of effective coping behavior in the environmental context and culture of the slum.

### **Disengagement from the larger society**

“The people . . . make little use of banks, hospitals, department stores, or museums . . . . There is a hatred of the police, mistrust of the government and of those in high positions, and a cynicism that extends to the church.”<sup>4</sup>

Lewis writes of fear, suspicion, apathy, and discrimination among the poor. He points out that the relationships of the poor to police, army, and public welfare officials reinforce these attitudes. A new missionary told me how she had explained to a squatter child that he could trust the police. She then walked out of the community to find a policeman at the corner taking bribes from passing traffic violators.

It would seem that Oscar Lewis has accurately expressed reality, but not entirely so. I have observed that in Manila, for example, as a part of their delight in the freedom of the city, Philippine squatters frequent the museums, department stores, and hospitals of a world that is different than theirs. I think it is safer simply to assume a predominance of the characteristics mentioned by Lewis in the midst of a wide spectrum of attitudes towards the institutions of the city.

The pastor needs to become what Gulick called a “culture broker.”<sup>5</sup> Or, Santos' economic term, redefined as a “cultural middleman” may be applicable also.<sup>6</sup> Daily the pastor has to help the people relate to the institutions of the city, and do battle against fear, suspicion and apathy. At the same time, the pastor has to fight corruption within the city's institutions in order to serve the people.

The pastor or change agent in the slums is a link between the culture of poverty and the industrialized sector. Despite the brutality of the police and the corruption of government officials, the pastor is in a position to foster trust and sound relationships between the poor and those in power who can assist them. Pastors also have moral power, which at times may be brought into play to compel corrupt officials to provide assistance.

In Latin America or in the Philippines, by an incarnational lifestyle among the poor, the Christian worker can deal a death blow to the prevailing distrust of the church.

The attitudes of distrust and fear are also tempered by the dominant attitude in the city towards the poor. In Brazil, two decades of military oppression of the favelados have resulted in a general public perception of the favelas as places of great evil, violence, and fear, breeding mistrust and fear among the favelados. This is in contrast with a city like Lima, where the pueblos juvenes are perceived favorably.

### **An alternative economic system**

“People in a culture of poverty produce little wealth and receive little in return. Chronic unemployment and under-employment, low wages, lack of property, lack of savings, absence of food reserves in the home and chronic shortage of cash imprison the family and the individual in a vicious circle.

Thus, for lack of cash, the slum householder makes frequent purchases of small quantities of food at higher prices. The slum economy turns inward, showing a high incidence of pawning of personal goods, borrowing at usurious rates of interest, informal credit arrangements among neighbors, and use of secondhand clothing and furniture.”<sup>7</sup>

The economics of church life are going to reflect these characteristics with frequent cash shortages and different expectations between members and the church about the repayment of loans. A credit cooperative approach has been found to be successful by a number of groups.

Equipment for the church usually is bought in fits and starts. Most pastors’ build churches themselves with help from members. Often, they are completed years after worship is begun. Obtaining secondhand equipment from middle-class churches is a realistic way to speed the process.

### **Low level of organization**

Since residents come from highly structured rural societies and enter highly organized and complex urban societies, slums exhibit a severe breakdown of organization. There is a lot of socializing but only within the nuclear or extended family. Yet there may be a strong *esprit de corps* because of enforced isolation. This *esprit de corps* of many slums is a plus factor for the outsider who becomes an insider, since it forms a natural parish.

On the other hand, the disorganization and breakdown of family life in a squatter area implies that a church there will lack strong organization. Where there are no extra resources to manage from day to day, people do not develop skills of management. Since building and maintaining a church larger than about seventy people requires management skills, most squatter churches will stay small.

Wider issues of community organization, beginning with small things such as obtaining water or garbage clearance, need to become an important part of building the community. They provide a way of identification with the people in their needs.

### **Disengagement in marriage values**

People talk of middle-class moral values but on the whole do not live by them. Common-law marriage avoids expense and gives both man and woman freedom in a context where futures are uncertain. It gives the woman a stronger claim on her children and rights to her own property.<sup>8</sup>

Marriage values of the imported European culture are often in conflict with the submerged values of a far older culture. By becoming involved with the people, the church planter can assist in marriages, providing support and counseling without charging the costly fees they normally would have to pay. Indeed, marriage values are often one of the first issues after conversion.

There are many complexities concerning who is the rightful husband and father of which children. The church planter needs to be discerning about how to apply the Scriptures, encouraging people to remain in the state in which they were called (usually married to a second or third husband or wife with children from each), or to seek reconciliation and restitution. The culture has its own morality by which biblical principles may be applied to various situations. The church planter needs to teach from the Bible, and then have the people themselves determine the ethical courses of action.

The role of men is the key to the transformation of these families. Strong leadership and good biblical teaching of men concerning their family life is critical for family development and the long-term establishment of a church.

### Shortened childhood

“The family in the culture of poverty does not cherish childhood as a prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle. Initiation into sex comes early. With the instability of marriage by consensus, the family tends to be mother-centered and tied more closely to the mother’s extended family. The female head of the house is prone to exercise authoritarian rule. In spite of much verbal emphasis on family solidarity, sibling rivalry for the limited supply of goods and maternal affection is intense. There is little privacy.”<sup>9</sup>

Protection of children is a difficult problem in these families. As they grow up, many lose the emotional capacity to respond because of the traumatic experiences they have had to pass through. Often, people are seen only as a way to acquire things. The solution to such problems is not for the church planter to get deeper and deeper into counseling but to develop a strong and healthy church structure where the members minister to each other.

### Psychological characteristics

“The individual who grows up in this culture has a strong feeling of fatalism, helplessness, dependence, and inferiority . . . Other traits include a high incidence of weak ego structure, oral-ity, and confusion of sexual identification, all reflecting maternal deprivation; a strong present-time orientation with relatively little disposition to defer gratification and plan for the future, and a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all kinds. There is widespread belief in male superiority and among the men a strong preoccupation with *machismo*, their masculinity.”<sup>10</sup>

The extent of wounds in people’s lives mean that the emotional components of worship and the Lord’s Supper are critical contexts for healing to occur. As healing is occurring by the power of the Holy Spirit, there is often weeping and other emotional responses. The dynamics of worship in the slum must provide a freedom for this to occur if the people are to be set free.

The extent of these emotional needs means that they will not be healed over a short period of time. The pastoral structure needs to be developed in such a way that long-term progress is assured, but short-term patience with failure lays a foundation of grace. Feelings of fatalism and helplessness dissipate under the regular inspiration of the preached Word and as brothers and sisters in a healthy church help one another grow.

The weak ego structure among slum dwellers means that the church planter in the slums must constantly deal with disputes between members. There is often the need for church discipline in cases of immorality. The *machismo* that Lewis mentions is only an obvious characteristic in a few places. On the whole, men have to be encouraged to take responsibility and begin to redeem their lost sense of dignity and leadership.

## Conclusion

My father-in-law recounts his first contact with Christianity in Brazil, when fundamentalists came to preach the good news and a few people converted. These converts seemed to become isolated from the rest of the town.

“A couple of years later, the Assemblies of God entered the town,” he remembers. “With their noise and their open worship and their miracles—things very Brazilian—the whole town knew what was going on.”

A prototype emerged that was not only identifiable but also desirable to the people.

Despite the theoretical and tentative nature of Lewis’ work, its core rings true to the experience of workers among the poor. Lewis’ culture of poverty provides a useful set of characteristics that enables us to reflect upon effective patterns of ministry among the poor—patterns that are desirable to the people.

### Notes

1. Lampman, Robert V., *Poverty: Four Approaches, Four Solutions*, Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Press, 1966.
2. Harrington, Michael, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States*, Penguin, 1965.
3. Lewis, Oscar, “The Culture of Poverty,” *Scientific American*, Vol. 215, No. 4: 3-9, October 1966.
4. Ibid.
5. Gulick, J., “Urban Anthropology,” *Handbook of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, J. Honigman, ed., Rand McNally, 1973, pp. 979-1029.
6. Santos, Milton, *The Shared Space* (tr from Portuguese by Chris Gerry), Methuen: London and New York, 1979.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Lewis, op. cit.

## Chapter Seventeen

### From Churches to Movements

The aim is not missions.  
Nor is it the planting of churches.  
The aim is not multiplication of churches.  
The aim is to multiply fellowships  
in such harmony with the soul of a people  
that movements of disciples are established  
who know this movement is Christ’s answer  
to the cries of this peoples’ heart.

The 4,000 men and women whom Saint Francis of Assisi gathered in ten years constituted a movement like the one described above. So did John Wesley’s urban poor churches, which multiplied to scores, with seventy-five thousand new believers in his lifetime. From 1955-1970, the Conservative Baptists in the Philippines grew from zero to 1,500 members. These are patterns of reproductive believers and churches—i.e. movements. A movement is defined by Gerlach and Hein as: “People who are organized for, ideologically motivated by, and committed to, a purpose which implements some form of personal or social change; who are actively involved in the recruitment of others; and whose influence is spreading in opposition to the established order within which it originated.”<sup>1</sup>

They list factors that are crucial in movements:

1. A cell-like structure involving various personal, structural, and ideological ties.