

Section: Project HELP: Poverty  
Title: Power to Change a Life

by Jean Cullen

As I think back to when God began to turn my heart toward people in poverty, two moments stand out in my memory. The first was when my Sunday School class was helping prepare and serve breakfast at a soup kitchen. We wanted to do something for the poor, so we planned to help prepare and serve breakfast two times each year. I have to be honest with you. I felt pretty good about it. I was really stepping out of my comfort zone, and I knew I was following God's commands. I truly enjoyed the experience.

### **Power of Relationship**

I remember many faces of the homeless people we served, but one face continues to stand out in my mind. He was a man wearing layers of clothing and a coat that was too big for him. His long hair was matted and dirty. He said thank you as he went through the line. A man in our Sunday School class called him by name. Our classmate served at the soup kitchen often and had gotten to know several of the "regulars." The homeless man looked up and smiled. Later, I saw the two of them sitting at the table, eating together, and talking—really talking. Suddenly, the man was no longer one of the "regulars." He was a man who had parents, family, a history. He was a man who could, in that moment, have a relationship with the man in our class.

Standing there, watching the exchange, I was struck by the power of presence. The man from our class wasn't offering a job or money or anything. He was just there, listening and talking. He was present, which reminded me of what Christ did for us. God could have provided salvation for us through any means. But God chose to become present with us—to become one of us. The fact that we are saved through a *relationship* with Christ demonstrates the power of relationship in our lives, relationship with those who are near us every day and relationship with those far removed from us.

### **Power of Presence**

My second special moment came when I had to finish a project for my social work degree. Every student had to go and interview people who were dealing with poverty in some way. I went to a shelter for women and children, where one of the women had agreed to meet with me. This woman had two school-age children. She was single and struggling to get back on her feet. I went into the meeting with all kinds of preconceptions. I thought she would probably tell me how she was in an abusive relationship or how she used drugs and alcohol.

Little did I know how wrong I was to make assumptions about the woman I would meet. During the course of the interview, I learned that the woman was an English teacher with a master's degree. She had divorced and then been laid off during cutbacks. Without the financial resources or the personal support to deal with the lack of income, she found herself in a temporary housing program.

I found that while we spent time on my questions, our conversation really became about her fears, how her circumstances were affecting her children, her shame,

embarrassment, and loneliness. I couldn't give her anything, and I couldn't offer her a job. But I was present with her for two hours.

Now, the mother of two children of my own, I look back and realize that, in that moment, the woman I talked with that day simply needed someone to be present with her. She wanted someone to know her, not just her needs.

### **Power of Response**

The weekend of September 12–14, 2008, is going to be a special weekend. WMU® is seeking to capture the power of relationship and provide the opportunity for churches to live the ministry of presence through a poverty simulation experience. We have put together a poverty bundle which contains three items: *Trolls & Truths: 14 Realities about Today's Church that We Don't Want to See*; *Plunge2Poverty: An Intensive Poverty Simulation Experience*; and a WorldCrafts<sup>SM</sup> item made by an artisan group in Sri Lanka.

*Plunge2Poverty: An Intensive Poverty Simulation Experience* serves as the guide for conducting the simulation, providing an itinerary and specific instructions for activities. This bundle equips local church leaders to conduct a poverty simulation that allows participants to experience poverty for 24 hours. Leaders are able to guide participants in examining how churches embrace the ministry of presence with those in poverty. Churches, associations, and small groups around the country will be participating in this simulation in their communities that weekend.

By experiencing what it is to be in need and by seeking to understand the feelings and consequences of living in poverty, you can become present and develop the ministry of presence. Just as Christ calls us to follow Him through a relationship with Him, we can minister to people who live in poverty by learning to relate to them. This weekend is not focused on developing a clothing ministry or creating a new program. It is about stopping and becoming like our brothers and sisters.

Begin praying and planning now to be a part of this weekend.