

## My meeting with the poor at Cape Town 2010 Lawrence Hirsch – Celebrate Messiah Australia

When you arrive in Cape Town you are immediately confronted with the plight of the poor in Africa. As you drive from the airport to the city you pass through the largest shanty town in Africa called Khayelitsha. The name is Xhosa for *New Home* and it home to more than 1.8 million residents living in impoverished dwellings made from scrap materials of plywood, corrugated metal and sheets of plastic. Each week thousands of illegal immigrants from other African countries pour into Khayelitsha looking for work.

In the City of Cape Town, like the rest of South Africa, there are vast disparities between the wealthiest communities living in comfortable first world conditions, and the poorest, who live in conditions similar to the worst found in developing countries.

That fact that Cape Town was the host to the third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelism was not lost to one of the speakers, Rainer Chu, a Tax Lawyer from Manila who works amongst Urban Poor. In his address he mentioned that he had spent the night before in Crossroads, one of Cape Town's shanty towns and he lamented that the conference was held in such prestigious surroundings when the poor were just down the road. He said that "Ninety percent of the Church is urban poor, but the Church is ill-equipped to truly hear their needs. The problem is not poverty but greed. The solution is not legislation but requires spiritual input."

He also said that he had a concern to claim the cities of the world for God. The forces of urbanisation meant that most people in the world today are living in cities and that most people coming into cities will live in slums. Therefore, he said, ministry to the urban poor is the cutting edge of ministry in the world today.

I now live in Australia, but I grew up in South Africa and I know that it is all too easy to become completely numb to the needs of the poor around you. South Africa may be the most difficult place to live out the parable of the Good Samaritan in reality.

The title of this message given to me is "My meeting with the poor at Cape Town 2010. However, I will confess that I did not meet with the poor in Cape Town on a personal basis but avoided those areas like most of the Cape Town delegates. Yet, I came away from the conference being challenged to truly consider the poor in our endeavours to share the Gospel with all people and especially in our context of Jewish evangelism.

### **Social justice and the gospel**

The Church's engagement with social justice issues was one of the major themes of the Congress. We were made aware of the many social issues that are plaguing our planet and of what believers across the globe are doing to help. One of the major issues highlighted was the horrific problem of human trafficking and slavery. Unbelievably, there are more people all around the world in slavery today (an estimated 27 million) than 200 years ago when Wilberforce fought to abolish the transatlantic slave trade. In India alone there are an estimated 15 million bonded children.

We were also challenged through various speakers and presentations to embrace the witness of the whole Bible that shows God's desire for righteous and just government as well as for personal compassion, respect and generosity towards the poor and needy. There was a call

that came through loud and clear to care for the poor, providing medical care to the sick and going beyond evangelism and benevolence to tackling some of the more difficult social issues of our world.

Perhaps the key term was engagement—as the Congress planners were able to weave these themes throughout the Congress—encouraging believers to become more engaged in solving the social problems of our world through the power of the Gospel and as a witness to His grace.

The Cape Town Commitment (i.e. the statement that came out of the Congress) states in Section 10 (b):

‘Integral mission is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world, we betray the Word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the Word of God, we have nothing to bring to the world.’

### **The rejection of a false gospel**

Another topic that was presented at the Congress that had relevance to ministry to the poor was the rejection of a false Gospel plaguing the Church especially in Africa - the so-called Success Gospel or Prosperity Gospel. Nigerian scholar Femi Adeleye addressed this issue calling on the Church to repent as this teaching was unbiblical and hurting the Gospel amongst the poor especially since some African leaders were becoming prosperous while their congregants were becoming poorer.

### **The evils of materialism and a call to a simpler life**

The Congress called on all Christians to live a simpler lifestyle and to reject the evils of materialism and worship of mammon. The disparity between rich and poor—not only in general society, but also within the body of Messiah was discussed in many different ways throughout the Congress.

The Cape Town Commitment Section IIb says about this:

“The gospel challenges the idolatry of rampant consumerism. We are called, as those who serve God and not mammon, to recognize that greed perpetuates poverty, and to renounce it. At the same time, we rejoice that the gospel includes the rich in its call to repentance, and invites them to join the fellowship of those transformed by forgiving grace.”

I certainly do appreciate this statement as I felt that during the conference itself not enough was said about the preaching of the Gospel to the Middle Class and the affluent in our societies.

### **The balanced gospel**

Unfortunately it is all too easy that the proclamation of the Gospel can be high-jacked by a social gospel agenda. We have to work hard to maintain a balanced approach to holistic ministry.

In Section 7 (C) of the Cape Town Commitment states:

*We love the world's poor and suffering.* The Bible tells us that the Lord is loving toward all he has made, upholds the cause of the oppressed, loves the foreigner, feeds the hungry, sustains the fatherless and widow. The Bible also shows that God wills to do these things through human beings committed to such action. God holds responsible especially those who are appointed to political or judicial leadership in society, but all God's people are commanded - by the law and prophets, Psalms and Wisdom, Jesus and Paul, James and John - to reflect the love and justice of God in practical love and justice for the needy.

*Such love for the poor* demands that we not only love mercy and deeds of compassion, but also that we do justice through exposing and opposing all that oppresses and exploits the poor. 'We must not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.' We confess with shame that on this matter we fail to share God's passion, fail to embody God's love, fail to reflect God's character and fail to do God's will. We give ourselves afresh to the promotion of justice, including solidarity and advocacy on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed. We recognize such struggle against evil as a dimension of spiritual warfare that can only be waged through the victory of the cross and resurrection, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and with constant prayer.

### **The poor and Jewish evangelism**

I may not have had the opportunity to meet with the poor in Cape Town but I certainly have seen firsthand impoverished Jewish people in both Russia and in Israel. In the Far East of Russia and Siberia, places that I visit regularly, many Jewish people live in extreme poverty. In Israel 1 in 3 children lives below the poverty line and 28% of Israeli citizens live in a state of need. Today we have tremendous opportunities to show the love of Yeshua to our Jewish people in practical ways. As I have been exposed to poverty amongst Jewish people I have found it impossible to ignore their plight while sharing the Good News of Yeshua the Messiah.

I do rejoice that today more is being done in reaching out to poor Jewish people. Soup kitchens and distribution centres have opened up all around Israel, caring for the poor in Yeshua's name. In a soup kitchen run by our partner ministry in Israel, food and clothing is being distributed not only to needy Jewish people but also to African refugees and migrant workers. In the same distribution line it is not unusual to see Jews from the former Soviet Union as well as Sudanese refugees and Africa workers from Eritrea.

Yet, more can and should be done to reach out to poor and needy Jewish people around world and especially in Israel. I would like to see our LCJE network make a positive and balanced statement about our commitment to the poor that is in line with the Cape Town Commitment. We too should be committed to taking the *whole Gospel* to the Jewish people worldwide.

"Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings." (Romans 15:25-27, NIV)

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." (James 1:27, NIV)

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