

GENERATIONAL POVERTY

-Rev. Ralph Mayhew

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The following is the result of a conversation I had with Julie Atkins, principal at the Seymour Special School. I went to speak with her about Generational Poverty. What she shared was very insightful so below is a summation of it.

To talk about this subject, unfortunately means a need for us to generalise and rely on stereotypes. You will see why as you begin to engage with this subject. May I ask that you use these generalisations and stereotypes as a tool to approach the cultural climate we are in, and not a means by which to cast value judgements on those people who may live, think, act and be very different to yourself. It should go without saying, however, that all of what follows needs to be handled with the understanding that each and every person and situation is unique. This paper will show you that there are invisible cultural barriers that exist between social classes and groups of people; between 'good Church folk' and people who are 'roughing it'; between what some may call 'nice' and others may call 'feral'.

This paper is written in light of the fact that I am very different to someone from a lower socio-economic situation. You will see as you read through just how different we (and perhaps even you) are. I use the term 'they' to refer to those who are different from mean, not in any way to belittle or denigrate them, but merely to highlight how two people who may well live next door to each other are actually residing miles away from each other.

The conversation began with Julie saying, "This is how they think, in muddled thoughts and plenty of tangents, round and round in circles that do eventually get somewhere." So I present to you the result of that conversation hoping that you can gain something of an understanding from the variety of thoughts that are to follow. Enjoy:

For people in generational poverty –those who are from or find themselves living at the lower socio economic end of the spectrum – people are their possessions. They have no desire to own a house, to save up money, to go on a holiday because they can survive without doing those things, in fact to do those things doesn't even make sense. Their primary goal is to see themselves, their family and their friends survive. This value alone, while hard for some to understand let alone accept, leads to a whole host of difficulties that have huge social, emotional, communal, psychological, physical and spiritual implications. If they are able to survive their next goal is similar to ours: To find happiness. This however becomes all encompassing, to the point where their striving for happiness occurs at the cost of their health, relationships and lives. More of this later.

They have a social responsibility but it is based on very different values than ours might be based on. We may say '*you shouldn't break the law*' or '*governments are wrong, but they are in place, so be it*'. They will say '*don't you mess about with my family or I'll get you*' or '*don't cross me, you should see what the last person did who crossed me.*' They see themselves responsible to and for the people whom they know and respect, and who know, respect and understand them. Thus they see people as their possessions. Meaning we value, hold onto and protect our possessions because we have worked for them. Their outlook is the same, only with people instead of possessions

They respect those who have the time to be with them, to hear their story, to love and accept them and NOT to judge them under any circumstances. This can be the hardest thing for someone who does not live in their world. We all judge another based on our values. Our values dictate what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and unacceptable. Their right and wrong, and acceptable and unacceptable isn't wrong, it's just different. It's different because their values are different. Hence the importance of realising their values are not misguided or wrong, they are just different, as mine are not right or well placed they are just different. In working with these people we should always be careful never to impose our opinion or values on them.

They will let people in who can be valuable to them (ie. Possessions) – but those people must be there because they truly care. If they don't care it won't work out and they'll be told 'where to go'. These people have a capacity to be truly and fully open about their lives. The things we may be ashamed of (drug abuse, domestic violence, alcoholism, etc) in our own lives, are spoken without reserve by these people. This immediately deepens the bond of trust but also means the person who is being trusted is expected to keep that trust.

In their thinking they will never think logically $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D$ they think in terms of stories. So they will share a story which seems to illogically jump from one person or theme to another. To them, logical thought and process isn't important, telling the story and having that story valued is what is important. Whilst the story may not even be true, or is embellished, that's not the point. The point of them telling it, is that it's heard with no judgement. In hearing the story we are welcomed into more of their world which leads to a deeper understanding of who they are and what is important to them.

Paper to them is not important. Where we would file neatly and protect at all costs materials such as receipts, financial documents, bills, letters, legal documents, etc. They do not, as they do not see these things as important. Their thinking is that if we get into trouble or in a jam because of that, then we'll deal with it when it happens. In light of this any paper they get, MUST stand out – Fluoro paper, bright graphics, photos, etc. It has to be visually stimulating otherwise they just won't both to even look at it. Some don't and can't read, however in this day and age there is no need to; they can listen and watch the news and most others things they can survive on because of audible cues. They appreciate pictures/photos and look for places where they themselves are valued in pieces of writing (if they are going to read it at all).

These people are very resourceful, only the resources that they have are very different to what ours might be. Their resource pool usually involves lots of diverse people whom they call on from time to time. If they need a weapon, drugs, shelter, food, legal advice, they will know who they can go to for this. This implies that what we have as a Church to offer needs to fit well with where they are at (the exception being the drugs and guns!).

There is an understanding that Church is caught in what is known as *Frozen register* – not a term they would use, but a concept they definitely understand. This means that the same things are said each week, in the same way, in language that is simply not engaging and beyond understanding (which of course includes the Lord's Prayer and hymns). The current situation is that our Church uses more formal register and less frozen register, which makes sense given lots of people will say "*It actually speaks into my life, it makes sense*". These people talk (as we also do at home) in casual register. Meaning that there is still a gap between where the Church is and what the people are comfortable with. There is however still a huge desire for the mystical, the magical, the extraordinary in the mundane-ness of life, which enables Church at least to appear (in some instances) appealing.

Their understanding of the concept of money is entirely foreign to someone who may value saving, investing and using as a source of security. They live in the *always present*. If they get paid today they will have spent it in the next two days (Often this goes toward alcohol, drugs, smokes or technological purchases, such as a new TV, DVD player or X-Box for the kids) and realise on day three that they don't have any money. Due to the fact that when a need arises in the present they deal with that, with no long term understanding of where it places them. Which to them isn't a problem because people are their assets so they survive for the next 1 ½ weeks on what people can give to them.

Most in this situation are renters but this does not mean they will pay their rent. They may well intend to and be convinced in their own minds that they are committed to it, but if rent day doesn't fall close to pay day then their outlook is to say, *'Oh well! I'll deal with that when the landlord chases me down for it'*, they may have outstanding warrants but they don't worry about it till it catches up with them.

Some find it extremely hard to come and ask for help. Those who don't find it hard to ask for help have been asking for so long its how they operate; they are dead to the shame because it's all they have.

Their goal (like us) – as mentioned before - is to be happy. They achieve this through many different ways, but obviously one of the lures is drugs, especially alcohol. When they are engaging in these practices with like-minded friends, they consider themselves to be in a 'happy' place – which is the goal. When the affects of their behaviour wear off, their goal then becomes to get back to that 'happy' place, which promotes more dangerous behaviour. When they are caught in this cycle they never realise or want to realise that happiness can be attained a different way.

When thinking of how a family unit might work, we think in terms of a family tree, but for many of them it's not a tree, but a shrub or bush, with lots of alternate sexual relationships with children resulting from them, lots of step children and divorce situations, many neighbours who live under the same roof, parents and siblings coming back to live in the same house and all sorts of other things that complicate relational and family structures.

So the question has to be asked – how can we help? What are we to do? So luckily I asked it!

We need to be what they need, which is determined by them! How do we find this out? By being in relationship with them! All of this boils down to the need to know and love these people, and through that we can begin to see how they can be helped, which may well be different for every person. They, like all of us, will eventually grow tired in their pursuit of happiness, if they have not already, which presents them with an opportunity to search for something else. If they arrive at this point and they know a friend who seems to have their life together, who has loved them unconditionally, and who won't hesitate to help, then they begin to ask 'why?' and 'How does that work?' They begin to investigate who this Jesus is that has been loving and serving them through the lives of people who care. The goal of our service, cannot be that they come to faith in Christ. Even though this may well motivate us, if it them coming to know Jesus is the goal f our service then we are not love with pure motives but with a hidden agenda. We need to love like Christ who did not love and serve people hoping that they would follow him. His goal was just to love.

We need to be what they need, which is determined by them! Meaning we can never tell them what they need, even if we think we know what that is, because (like us) they will reject it. What needs to occur, is for them to own their decisions and be responsible for their lives. Something that for many is hard to do as there is a victim mentality present: *'The world has done this to me, or taken this from me, I'm owed something better.'* Part of our role is helping them to come up with an idea that they will benefit from. When this occurs they will be able to take responsibility for their part in it. We can help them arrive at this point by using questions, and directive statements to assist them at arriving at some positives solutions.

I asked what these people most need to help them. The answer given was: Responsibility. They need to be made responsible for something – the example of “The Choir of Hard Knocks” on the ABC– that they are required to be a part of something and that something relies on them being there (and no, this idea doesn't work with attending Church). It has to be something they are an active participant in, so if they don't show up it doesn't fall apart, but they and their input are also missed. Linking in with this, they therefore need expectations to be placed upon them, being taught what the cultural rules are and how this group works, so they know exactly what is expected of them.

They won't follow the rules until they know what they are, and can see how it benefits them. This means that when they don't show up, they need to be held account, but not to be told off. The most effective approach is not to value the excuses that will be given, but to say without emotion (as they will be able to use the emotional investment you have as a leverage point) “It's a shame you missed out, and here is the consequence.” That consequence may just be that they missed out on a great night, which needs to be made clear. But once it's spoken and discussed that's it, it's finished. The ultimate goal is to help them **own** it themselves. To help them attend the program or gathering, not *for you* but *for them*. They need to be taught to own situations, mistakes and decisions for themselves and in light of this, come for themselves.

In regard to encouragement, it is important to value and praise the process they went through to arrive at the place where they are, and not just the result. Therefore encouragement becomes naming and applauding the things they did to get the result not the result itself, as sometimes the result they arrived at wasn't what they had in mind. So by praising the process they feel valued for something that is authentic and realistic. An example might be saying to a child, after seeing them draw a picture “I loved the way you used the paint to get that colour.” Rather than “that's a great drawing.” This values their input in their work and not your appraisal of their effort.

Ultimately they need people who care and are interested in who they are and what they are doing. Sometimes it may feel as though they are using you, but ultimately it's the only way they cope. Its not that it is intentional or even that they know they are doing it, it's the only way they know. It will take a lot of love, care and endurance to be with these people as Jesus did. To stick with them even when the going gets tough. To wade through the massive mental illness issues (that I haven't even began to touch on) and to carry the emotional baggage as they search for wholeness that ultimately can only be found in Jesus. It will take a lot of love and care but Jesus would do it and is doing it! Shall we join him?