

WORSHIP, PRAYERS AND POVERTY

B.J. de Klerk

B.J. de Klerk is professor of theology at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education in South Africa.

Poverty as a phenomenon seems to have changed the evolutionary idea of the survival of the fittest to the survival of the weakest. This societal problem has existed since the time of creation and the fall. Whatever the financial system, economic model, form of government, political order or welfare scheme, poverty has always remained a problematic issue. The rhetoric of hope, however, has also remained. The poor are constantly promised that a better future does exist.¹ However, reflection on poverty can no longer afford to be the hobbyhorse of a few philanthropically minded supporters, or simply a subject for study by researchers. Poverty concerns society in its totality; it poses a threat to everyone. An example in this regard: poor people from rural areas constantly migrate to urban areas in hope of job opportunities. In cities, the work hoped for more often than not does not materialize, poverty-related conditions still prevail, and without money some people even turn to crime in order to stay alive.

The Bible teaches that the poor will always be with us (Deuteronomy 15:11; Matthew 26:11). Ironically, this truth discourages many people from attempts to alleviate poverty. We, however, have to convey the idea that where the church acts true to her calling, the poor will be able to survive. The church will always have to deal with the unavoidable task of helping the poor. Practical theology as a scholarly discipline should never fall victim to the practice of studying poverty solely as an object, as a topic for research, without realizing that poverty concerns human beings. Poverty strikes at people, at individuals. Poverty strikes at a human being – someone with a name and a unique personality; someone who suffers in various ways, *inter alia* a loss of human dignity, someone often without people or means of support. Perhaps the most vulnerable among the poor are children, women, the aged and the disabled.²

¹ C. W. du Toit, Empowerment of the poor: Changing our minds on affluence and poverty. *Misionalia*, 25 (3): 285–307, 1997.

² P. Alcock, *Understanding Poverty*. London: Macmillan, 1993, pp. 119–98.

Where should the church begin to address poverty – especially in churches and communities of faith where this pandemic has not received enough attention? The starting point for congregations and denominations that have not been involved in this problem can be to apply an obvious and very simple tool: serious and sincere prayer. This article aims to focus on this aspect.

Many illuminating books have already been written on various aspects of poverty.³ In most of them, however, the power of prayer in worship services is only vaguely hinted at as a point of departure in the addressing or alleviating of poverty.

I provide a brief overview of the extent of poverty and then explore empirically what the position regarding worship prayers focusing on poverty entails. The power of prayer in worship services is paid attention to and guidelines for such prayers with regard to the issue of poverty are given. Reflection on hermeneutical approaches in the field of practical theology has led to the realization that the message of the gospel should also be brought into interaction with a specific context.⁴ This method of theologizing implies the recognition of theological context and its embeddedness in the various domains of human culture.⁵

Definition of poverty

A working definition of poverty is essential for determining who the poor are and where they are. The conventional approach employed by economists aiming to assess the extent of poverty levels is to gauge the consumption of basic goods such as food, clothing and shelter in different levels of society. Those who cannot afford basic amenities are considered poor. The World Bank accordingly defines poverty as “the inability to attain a minimal standard of living.”⁶ Defining poverty is determined by presuppositions that vary from context to con-

³ For example, F. Wilson and M. Ramphela, *Uprooting Poverty: The South African Challenge*. Cape Town: David Phillip, 1989; W. F. Van Deventer, A congregation in a world of poverty. *Teologia Viatorum*, 1–135, 1991; J. O'Brien, *Theology and the Option for the Poor*. Minneapolis, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992; D. L. Harvey, *Poverty, Family, and Kinship in a Heartland Community*. New York: De Gruyter, 1993; A. A. Lichthelm, *Salient Features of Poverty in South Africa*. Pretoria: UNISA, 1993; M. Taylor, *Not Angels but Agencies: The Ecumenical Response to Poverty – A Primer*. Geneva: SCM, 1995; C. W. du Toit (ed.) *Empowering the Poor*. Pretoria: UNISA, 1996; D. Hughes and M. Bennet, *God of the Poor*. Carlisle: OM Publishing, 1998; B. L. Mayers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999; D. Dollar and K. Aart, *Growth is Good for the Poor*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2000; M. H. Taylor, *Poverty and Christianity: Reflections at the Interface between Faith and Experience*. London: SCM, 2000; H. J. C. Pieterse, *Preaching in the Context of Poverty*. Pretoria: ABC Press, 2001; M. Legum, *It Doesn't Have to Be Like This!* Cape Town: Ampersand, 2002; N. Hunter, J. May and V. Padayachee, *Lessons for PRSP from Poverty Reduction Strategies in South Africa*, 2003.

⁴ G. Heitink, *Practical Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, p. 6.

⁵ C. J. A. Vos, God's household and the poor in contextual ecclesiology. *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 57 (1–2): 49–69, 2001, p. 49.

⁶ I. Woolard and M. Leibbrandt, Measuring poverty in South Africa. In Bhorat, H., Leibbrandt, M., Maziya, M., Van der Berg, S., and Woolard, I. (eds.) *Fighting Poverty: Labour Markets and Inequality in South Africa*. Cape Town: UCT Press, 2001, pp. 41–73.

text.⁷ May and Govender define poverty as "the inability of individuals, households, or entire communities, to command sufficient resources to satisfy a socially acceptable minimum standard of living."⁸ Williams says:

Poverty is never simple. It is a complex amalgam of physical and spiritual pain, which robs the person and the community of dignity and meaning as much as it deprives the body of nourishment, shelter and beauty. Poverty is about exclusion and power, about lack of choice and limitation of freedom. But all of these are related to lack of money.⁹

Dimensions of poverty include powerlessness, vulnerability, bodily weakness, financial insolvency (material poverty), social isolation and even spiritual deprivation.¹⁰

Another approach to poverty is to determine a minimum living level (MLL) as a poverty line. This minimum level of existence implies that someone has insufficient means to follow a nutritious diet, cannot afford efficient housing and basic medical services, and cannot pay for education. In conclusion, the parable of the last judgment may be applied to characterize someone who is regarded as poor (Matthew 25): such a person is hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, ill or even imprisoned.

The extent of poverty and the plight of the poor

What does poverty worldwide look like? All but 6 of the poorest 31 nations in the world are on the African continent. Five are situated in Asia, and the remaining one is Haiti in Latin America. The next category of poor countries representing 20 per cent of the world population refers to 32 countries of which 56 per cent are in Africa, eight in Asia and six in Latin America.

The gross national income in purchasing power parity (GNI PPP)¹¹ per capita (US\$) offers interesting data: for the world as a whole it is \$7,160. For North America it is \$33,510; Western Europe \$24,430; Oceania \$18,400; Eastern Europe \$7,170; Latin America \$6,820; Asia \$4,290 and Africa \$2,120. A worldwide phenomenon is that every 3.6 seconds someone dies of starvation, and three-quarters of these deaths are of children under the age of five.¹² At least 75 per cent of the world's population shares 25 per cent of the world's wealth and this fundamental economic inequality has left the majority of the world's population in dire

⁷ See Alcock, *Understanding Poverty*, pp. 57–74.

⁸ J. May and J. Govender, *Poverty and inequality in South Africa*. Report prepared for the office of the Executive Deputy President. Pretoria, 1998, p. 27.

⁹ D. T. Williams, *Capitalism, Socialism, Christianity and Poverty*. Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1998, p. 3.

¹⁰ See D. P. Brandt, *The poor and the lost: A holistic view of poverty*. *Missiology*, 23 (3): 259–66, 1995.

¹¹ GNI PPP per capita = gross national income in purchasing power parity (PPP) divided by the mid-year population figures. GNI PPP (i.e. gross national income converted to "international" dollars using a purchasing power parity conversion factor) thus provides a measure for comparing levels of income and living standards.

¹² N. D. Mitchell, *The amen corner: The rest is commentary*. *Worship*, 74 (3): 248–56, 2000.

need of resources. In Sub-Saharan Africa alone it is estimated that 40–50 per cent of the population lives below the world's estimated poverty line.

Poverty is endemic in Africa, where an estimated half of the population lives on less than a dollar per day. Seventy-five per cent of Africa's inhabitants live on less than \$2 a day. Roads, schools and other public services are collapsing and hospitals are mere shells without equipment, medical staff or personnel. In some African countries disaster and relief funds have never reached people in need, but have simply been transferred to the bank accounts of corrupt leaders.¹³ The income and consumption of some 60 per cent of the rural population in Sub-Saharan Africa fall below national defined poverty standards. Rapid urbanization – characteristic of the living conditions of approximately 10 per cent of the population – has been accompanied by a spiralling increase in urban poverty. The appalling conditions of the urban poor indeed present a depressing scene in most African cities.¹⁴ On the other hand, Africa is rapidly becoming *the* Christian continent. This fact alone necessitates a Christian perspective on poverty and emphasizes the importance of prayer in worship services focusing specifically on poverty.

In South Africa the increase in gross domestic product since the beginning of the 1990s is not in line with the creation of permanent and stable job opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers.¹⁵ Recent data from Statistics South Africa suggest that 36–40 per cent of the population is unemployed.¹⁶ According to data obtained from the 2000 census, 20.5 million of the 44 million South Africans live below the minimum living level, thus 46 per cent of the population is categorized as living in poverty. A further line is drawn at 20 per cent, representing those who live in grave poverty. This disadvantaged group of people is caught in a desperate struggle to survive.¹⁷ The figures for the poorest of the poor represent 10 per cent of South Africans and comprise the following population groups: 94 per cent are black, 5 per cent white and 1 per cent Indian. Households headed by females have a lower income than those headed by males. Studies based on 2000 data indicate that the average household income (per capita) is 27 per cent lower if a female heads a household. The HIV/AIDS epidemic will impact more severely on the poor because they are exposed to the virus to a greater extent, and have the fewest resources to fall back on. As a result of certain biological and physiological factors, women are more readily infected. Women in Africa do not have the right to refuse sex; they are thus exposed to the devastating effects of the virus to a greater extent.¹⁸ In South Africa the combination of poverty plus HIV/AIDS is a con-

¹³ J. H. Boer, External debt and the gospel. *Mission Bulletin*, 12 (2): 1–7, 1992.

¹⁴ Vos, God's household, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁶ T. Binns and R. Robinson, Sustaining democracy in the "new" South Africa. *Geography*, 87 (1): 25–37, 2002.

¹⁷ S. van der Berg, Business Report – Has SA really experienced jobless growth? Online. www.busrep.co.za/index.php?ArticleId=362464. 2004.

¹⁸ Vos, God's household, p. 53.

tributing factor to very low life expectancy: the estimated life expectancy indicated in 2004 was 48.5 years for males and 52.7 years for females. Furthermore, the infant mortality rate is estimated to be 56 per 1,000 live births. In 2004 a total of 1.1 million orphans (maternal orphans under the age of 18) was recorded, of which just over 250,000 were newly orphaned children.¹⁹

Poverty statistics often reflect only part of the picture. Factors such as education, health, social conditions, discriminatory market factors and stigmatization all contribute to the specific and overall picture of poverty in a given situation. Poverty may even be approached from the angle of ecology and the depletion of natural resources.²⁰ Illiteracy, malnutrition and ill health, plus general neglect, make the poor indifferent to society and polity. Judged by these realities, poverty and the growing gap between rich and poor are the most shocking and unacceptable consequences of the way in which dominant powers “manage” society.

The poor experience three dimensions of poverty: physical, psychic and social. Together, these dimensions entail intense suffering and lack of hope – which also has an influence on these poor people’s relation with God.²¹ The unsettling reality of poverty’s extent (especially in Africa) should lead to intense supplicatory and intercessory prayers to God. The church has the calling to intercede before God for the world and its distress. The heart of each congregation should thus reach out in prayer to the poor. Prayer as a means to cope with hardship is centred in and forms an important component of the relationship with God.²²

Emperical overview of the use of poverty-focused worship-service prayers as practised by a few ecclesiastical groups

In this section the feedback of three different ecclesiastical groups are explored and investigated. These groups were questioned as to whether prayers concentrating on the problem of poverty occur in the worship services they attend or conduct. The three groups comprised ten Tswana-speaking Reformed ministers (black clergy of African origin) with whom qualitative interviews (by mean of questionnaires) were conducted during November 2004, and a sample of 40 per cent of synod-goers (Reformed ministers and elders from all regions of South Africa, mostly white and of European descent) who completed quantitative questionnaires during the Synod of January 2003.²³ The third group consisted of 38 prayers that

¹⁹ Van der Berg, *Business Report*, p. 6.

²⁰ Du Toit, *Empowerment of the poor*, p. 291.

²¹ K. B. Kgosiwena, *Pastoral care and the dying process of people living with HIV/AIDS: Speaking of God in a crisis*. *Misionalia*, 29 (2): 200–19, 2001.

²² R. de Moor (ed.) *Prayer. Reformed Worship*, 52: 2–45, 1999.

²³ Only relevant questions used in the interviews and questionnaires relating to this article are considered. All questionnaires and notes on conversations are available from the author.

formed part of 20 worship services broadcast by radio towards the end of 2004 on Sunday mornings between 09:00 and 09:45.²⁴

The interviews with the Tswana-speaking ministers revealed that all ten of them are convinced that serious cases of extreme poverty exist among members of their congregations. They describe poverty in their congregations as a “terrible situation” because more than 80 per cent of the members of their respective congregations live below the breadline. Members of their congregations constantly become poorer and poorer as a result of a scarcity of jobs. In many cases whole families survive on state old-age pensions intended for just one of them. In the community at large the extent of poverty is likewise far-reaching and drastic: part of the population survives by cleaning out bags of refuse for possible morsels of food or items that can be sold. Poverty severely affects these people because they lose hope in the promises of God, and the desperateness of their circumstances can lead to theft, prostitution and even murder. Poverty influences people’s lives in their totality: housing, the education of children, health, diet and clothing. These are disturbing facts. Yet it is remarkable – even ironical – that not one of the ten ministers mentioned unremitting prayer as a possible answer to the problem of poverty. They rather recommended the supplying of food, diaconal assistance and help by other relief projects. In worship services the needs of people living in circumstances of extreme poverty are very seldom prayed for or touched on in any form.

Answers obtained from the questionnaires revealed that the synod-goers of 2003 shared the opinion that, according to accepted definitions of poverty, 90 per cent of society at large and 95 per cent of their respective congregations cannot be classified as poor. More than 50 per cent of them indicated that congregations should become involved in trying to alleviate poverty in society by means of special projects, training programmes for the poor, diaconal help and by supplying food. Only 53 of the respondents mentioned that prayers in worship services or prayers in general are essential for combatting poverty, or that prayer has the power to motivate members of congregations to assist the poor.

The prayers broadcast by radio were transcribed, and the lines numbered and consequently analysed by mostly qualitative and quantitative methods applying an interpretative approach. Of the 38 prayers, an element of intercession for the poor occurred in only three:

- Radio worship service 1: “We think of people in all South African communities who suffer economically.”
- Radio worship service 6: “We pray that everywhere where people experience need and distress, or where they are hungry or do not have clothes or a place to live, that you will use your children to make a definite difference.”

²⁴ Transcriptions of these prayers are available from the author.

- Radio worship service 10: "Lord, today in our prayer and service of intercession we think of everyone who is ill, who grieves or is in mourning, everyone in prison, without a job, those who are indifferent, aged or suffer from hunger."

In the remaining prayers the focus of intercession was predominantly the religious life of members of congregations, the sick and the elderly, the country in general and forgiveness of sins.

On the basis of this data two issues are clear. First, the lack of poverty-related involvement of affluent areas and congregations is reflected in the absence of worship prayers for the poor. Congregations seem to think that "poverty is not our problem; we don't need to pray about it." Second, it is clear that congregations in areas where extreme poverty exists should discover the power of worship prayers in order to be motivated in a pastoral and diaconal sense to assist the poor in their distress.

The power of worship-service prayers

In a worship service the prayers of a congregation reflect the character of collective dialogue in meeting with God.²⁵ Communication in a worship service, as well as in prayers, takes place within a pastoral context focused on healing and cure. A congregation can thus be propelled to activity by means of prayer. Communication in a worship service is directed at God meeting the congregation. This in turn affects the meeting between the congregation and God and with one another. Within such a context dialogue can develop in mutual understanding and empathy between worshippers, and to a certain extent in consensus on many things. If believers meet God and one another during a worship service and in God's presence, attitudes, perceptions and actions can change. Dialogue in prayer resembles a process spiralling upwards towards more spiritual growth, expanding mutual insight and understanding, and more involvement with one another, with people and the issues addressed.²⁶ The inherent meaning of prayer is classified according to the semantic domain of communication. "The most generic expression for prayer may simply be to speak to God."²⁷ When prayers are said on behalf of someone else, the intercessor acts as mediator and illustrates love, which may have an effect on the actions of those who unite in prayer with him or her.

Prayer, however, does not only imply communication, but also much more: *communion* with God.²⁸ The process of prayer implies communion and fellowship with those who pray and

²⁵ J. D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003, p. 260.

²⁶ D. S. Whitney, Private worship. In Ryken, P. G., Thomas, D. W. H. and Duncan, III, J. L. (eds) *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P. & R. Publishing, pp. 289–316, 2003.

²⁷ J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*. Goodwood, Cape: United Bible Societies, 1988, p. 409.

²⁸ J. E. Biersdorf, *How Prayer Shapes Ministry*. New York: Alban Institute Publications, 1992, p. 4.

communion and fellowship with those who are committed to God in prayer. God establishes *communio* and thus opens the possibility for prayer. In God's omnipotence and omnipresence God does not need our prayers, "but he wants ... thanksgiving and intercession, as the entering of his creatures into his loving will, by which he created human light in his communication of himself."²⁹ By means of prayer believers find themselves in the sphere of God's love and this situation implies that God also loves those for whom we pray – far more than we do.³⁰

In prayers for the poor, as with prayers for all people, the overarching aim is to honour God. In prayers like these the primary aim is not solely to ask that poverty should be alleviated or should not spread to other areas, but to stress that the power and honour of God should be recognized. And exactly because of this prerequisite it can be regarded as wrong to misuse prayer by not being in discourse with God, but instead using prayer as a means of trying to motivate a congregation. Present-day believers find it detestable that the Pharisees prayed aloud on the corners of streets to influence people, but a minister conducting a worship-service prayer can commit the same sin by the misuse of prayer in order to address the congregation or even try to manipulate them.³¹ The nature of worship-service prayers as a communicative act centres on the reaction of those who listen to the words. Members of the congregation should be able to understand what is communicated in prayer (1 Corinthians 14:15) in order to participate, otherwise they will not be able to unite wholeheartedly in prayer. Only if believers unite in prayer as *participants* will they be able to identify themselves with the prayer and thus be encouraged to act in accordance with its contents.³²

To pray about poverty in general – but especially for the poor – implies exposure to a certain extent, because to most people poverty also represents a stigma. Unfortunately, the pain of poverty is still a subject not voiced in churches and is even avoided in individual households. Prayer, however, presents a channel by which those who pray can expose themselves and their communication before God. Exposure is a painful process and leaves one vulnerable. However, once the wounds of poverty are cleansed by means of this exposure, the very process of exposure serves as a means of healing. Passionate lamentations and sighs contained in prayers rip open the wounds of the helpless who pray, as well as the wounds of communities of faith (Psalms 74, 79, 137). In such prayers the anguish and frustration, the troubles, distress and pain of people become audible – even if this process implies that believers in a worship service should express these feelings on behalf of the poor. Healing,

²⁹ O. Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament, with Answers from the New Testament to Today's Questions*. London: SCM Press, 1995, p. 143.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³² J. L. Duncan III, Foundations for biblical directed worship. In Ryken, P. G., Thomas, D. W. H. and Duncan, III, J. L. (eds) *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P. & R. Publishing, pp. 51–73, 2003.

cure and involvement can then be established in the lives of the poor and the congregation, because God as Healer lays both divine eyes and hands on wounds inflicted by life itself.³³ As well as being part of the social involvement of the church in society, exposure in prayer as part of the liturgy of a worship service can play a role in facilitating change. The critical involvement of the church in alleviating poverty can propel believers to acts of trust, thanks, confession and praise. Prayer can also set poor people's circumstances of suffering in a new light: God's command and task for the church of the twenty-first century.³⁴

D. A. Carson states that the overarching aim of prayer is the believer's union with God and his will.³⁵ In the New Testament the Holy Spirit acts as the mediator of prayer, fathoming the deepest stirrings of our thoughts. The Spirit is the Person who brings our thoughts in line with God's will (Romans 8:26, 27). The power of prayer is also evident in that God takes prayers in consideration when he executes his judgments (Revelation 8:3–4). Prayers thus effects action in those who pray and in God. Communion with God influences the person who prays.³⁶ This act of influencing should not however be interpreted as manipulation by means of prayer, because prayer does not merely concern human needs, but primarily the power that communion with God exercises in the life of those who pray. The inner life of those who pray is brought into contact with an objective reality: spiritual salvation in Christ as an indication of a new state of redemption and deliverance. As a result of this state of redemption, those who pray are moved to express love that springs forth from salvation. This attitude and concomitant deeds can heal those who pray from their blindness to the suffering of the poor. Moses serves as an example: in the blaze of God's wrath, Israel was in danger that their sins would lead to the extermination of the nation. As a result of Moses' pleadings, disaster was avoided. His prayer also led to a reaction from the Israelites: they committed themselves to live henceforth with God (Exodus 32:11 – 33:16).

Precisely as a result of the character of prayer as communicative act in a worship service, understanding and involvement in the situation of people and issues develop in the minds of those who pray. Prayer entails more than communication: it implies communion with the omnipotent God. God in communion with those who pray changes their attitudes and behaviour towards those for whom they pray. The content of prayer should not be misused to manipulate a congregation. When the aim is to honour God, those who unite in prayer will not remain untouched; they will be stimulated to act. While prayer also implies exposure, it rips open the wounds of uninvolved and apathy that may be present within a con-

³³ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, p. 295.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 299.

³⁵ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and his Prayers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992, p. 101.

³⁶ W.R. Godfrey, Worship and emotions. In Ryken, P. G., Thomas, D. W. H. and Duncan, III, J. L. (eds) *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P. & R. Publishing, pp. 358–74, 2003.

gregation. Likewise, prayer can facilitate change in a congregation's attitude and behaviour. Those who pray in communion with God are empowered by the redemption and salvation in Christ. They are moved by this redemption to exhibit love that is sparked off by salvation. Prayer thus concerns the power that communion with God exercises in the lives of those who pray. Prayer has the power, through the activity of the Holy Spirit, to sensitize people. In this sensitizing process the aim still is that God will be praised, thanked and pleaded to, and that guilt will be confessed.³⁷

Guidelines for worship-service prayers focusing on poverty

While the pandemic of poverty has such a radical impact on society (especially in Africa), every congregation should concentrate regularly in their prayers on the various facets of poverty. Churches, as the body of Christ, have a calling to concretize Christ's love in their society. This does not necessarily mean that the issue of poverty should be addressed in every prayer or every meeting of the congregation. It should not, however, be ignored. The necessary information to enable every participant in a worship service to pray together sincerely may be made available in congregational newsletters handed out before services or communicated by other means. If someone who suffers as a result of poverty, or someone caring for such people, testifies to the extent of poverty, it will also contribute to unity in prayer. Members of a congregation can also be supplied with relevant reading matter or video material.³⁸

Given the scale of the problem, it would not be inappropriate for churches nationwide to hold a day of prayer. In the USA, for example, 7,500 churches hold an annual week of prayer focusing on all aspects of poverty and HIV/AIDS. As a result, over the past 11 years congregations have grown more aware of these problems. They have applied their gifts and talents in an attempt to halt the spread of poverty and HIV/AIDS and to reach out to those who suffer.³⁹

True prayer should be guided by the Holy Spirit and focused on Christ –in the sense that prayer should be true to the nature of that which has been revealed in Christ. The approach and attitude towards prayer should be in line with the requirements given in John 4:23–24: prayer should be in spirit and in truth and conducted in childlike sincerity.⁴⁰ Prayer implies a true and selfless directedness towards God, trust in God and a spirit of forgiveness. Additional guidelines for prayer in a worship service include reverence for and adoration of

³⁷ V. S. Parrish, *Praying as reformed Christians*. *Encounter*, 57 (3): 231–43, 1996.

³⁸ J. Tihan, *Ideas for congregational HIV/AIDS ministries*. Unpublished newsletter, June 2002, pp. 2, 3.

³⁹ J. Veenker, *African American focus on AIDS outreach*. *Christianity Today*, 44 (5): 22–3, 2000.

⁴⁰ H. O. Old, *Calvin's theology of worship*. In Ryken, P. G., Thomas, D. W. H. and Duncan, III, J. L. (eds) *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P. & R. Publishing, pp. 412–35, 2003.

God (doxology), thankfulness towards God (thanksgiving), the realization of sin and repentance (humiliation and the confession of guilt), pleading (which may even imply penitential prayer), a sense of dependence and a Christian approach of love.⁴¹

Doxology

Praise-giving can be regarded as recognition of who God *is* (God's virtues) and thanksgiving as recognition of that which God *gives* and *does* (God's deeds). Praise-giving is at the heart of biblical prayers and can be defined as the central aim of all prayers.⁴² For believers as well as for people suffering from grave poverty God is sovereign, the king over deficiencies, death and evil forces. Many poor people believe that evil forces and sorcery cause their poverty. God is the Healer and Physician who took all disease upon himself in Christ and thus removed the sting of suffering and poverty. God is the Comforter of the dying and the huge numbers of next of kin who mourn in Africa. All power belongs to God and can thus empower those who cannot or do not want to continue further. God embodies life itself and is the giver of new life in Christ and thus also grants eternal life to the poor believing in him. God is Creator and sincerely involved in our history and present suffering. God is love and bows down in love in aid of broken people and those who are stigmatized by others.⁴³

Thanksgiving

In prayers of thanksgiving God is thanked for deeds of salvation, help, protection and gifts of grace.⁴⁴ God's deeds of salvation centre on the life, death, resurrection and intercession of his Son. Poverty is not too radical for the radicality of the risen Christ. Christ's triumph of resurrection also removed the sting from the hopelessness and bleakness of poverty – things that sometimes lead to despondency and death. The church thus disposes of a message of hope that can transcend and transform the radicality of poverty and direct it towards the radicality of God's grace.⁴⁵ Hope gives meaning and points to God's everlasting presence, ceaseless caring and support in the most difficult circumstances of human existence. Thanksgiving for God's deeds thus also includes thanksgiving for his mercy and empathy bestowed on us through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In his kindness God is always ready to give people that which is good. The climax of God's gifts as fruit of the victory of Christ over the powers of death is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit sighs together with people suffering from poverty and brings the unspoken prayers of those who do not know how and what to

⁴¹ For an overview of the meaning of intercession, see De Moor, *Prayer*, p. 13.

⁴² Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, p. 40.

⁴³ Kgosi kwena, *Pastoral care and the dying process*, p. 213.

⁴⁴ H. Schaller, *Asking and thanking – a meaningful unity*. In Duquoc, C. and Florestan, C. (eds) *Asking and Thanking*. London: SCM Press, pp. 1–19, 1992.

⁴⁵ Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, p. 42.

pray unto God's throne. If someone does not know what to pray as a result of their need and pain, the Spirit brings these unspoken thoughts in line with God's will. In its worship-service prayers a congregation has abundant reasons to be thankful. Believers can indeed boldly approach God as intercessors for others⁴⁶ – even for poor people living in conditions often regarded as brought upon themselves.

Humiliation, confession of guilt and forgiveness

Embedded in a congregation's humiliation before God is the important element of recognition that worshippers are also sinners. Congregations should also identify with the sins of society, the sins of a nation. Isaiah does not only confess that he himself is sinful, but also that he lives within a sinful nation (Isaiah 6:5; cf. also Nehemiah 1:5–7). God's wrath is directed to sin in general – the sins of the poor as well as the sins of those oppressing them and ignoring their distress. The latter sin should thus be confessed by a congregation at large. There are also people who are poor because they have not parted with the sin of indiscriminately spending money. Worshippers should plead to the Holy Spirit to awaken repentance in their hearts when sinful attitudes exist in the congregation and in society. Sincere and wholehearted confession will follow upon repentance; this confession the leader in prayer should express in humility and in identification with other sinners. God promises that sincere confession of guilt will be followed by forgiveness. Those who pray will thus experience immediate forgiveness and a new relationship with God's will.⁴⁷ The hopelessness of conditions relating to poverty cannot be separated from the sins of society, even if a situation cannot directly be linked to a specific sin. Any prayer for the country, the continent or the world should be supported by wholehearted confession of guilt. The Bible, however, teaches that till the end of this world disasters, war, famine, poverty, disease and hopeless situations will exist and will even increase in intensity. Perseverance in faith thus cannot be supported simply by prayers that the misery people experience should be removed. Prayers of humiliation should also open a perspective on the expectation that – notwithstanding distress and misery – the coming of the Kingdom will eventually dawn, bringing complete peace, righteousness and glory.⁴⁸

The radical aspect of poverty is that it makes one conscious of one's own insignificance, mortality and depravity and can thus bring one to humility. Anxiety as a component of poverty compels a congregation that loves its neighbours to understand its own transitoriness better and to remain humble before God. A congregation can, on the one hand, identify itself in

⁴⁶ Biersdorf, *How Prayer Shapes Ministry*, p. 88.

⁴⁷ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, p. 207.

⁴⁸ E. P. Clowney, Corporate worship: a means of grace. In Ryken, P. G., Thomas, D. W. H. and Duncan, III, J. L. (eds) *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P. & R. Publishing, pp. 94–106, 2003.

prayer with the powerlessness of uncertainty that the condition of poverty causes in the lives of people. On the other hand, a congregation can also identify with the far-reaching consequences of poverty.⁴⁹ Thus, it is not inappropriate to intercede for people living in extreme poverty and to wrestle sincerely with God in prayer. Prayers seriously seeking God's will are accompanied by much wrestling. In divine omnipotence God can sometimes change his plan, as was the case with Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:1–6) and Jonah (Jonah 3:3–10), but sometimes God does not change plans: think in this regard of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36, 39) and Paul's prayer about the thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12:1–10). There is no contradiction between God's sovereign rule and God's willingness and openness to listen to the prayers of a congregation.⁵⁰ Paul did not know in advance the limitations on what he could ask – what God's will entails, especially concerning suffering. He had to learn it during the process of prayer. This process could also be applicable to a congregation's wrestling to know the meaning of suffering as a result of poverty. Christian prayers in the New Testament have gradually been shaped by a theology of the cross, according to which the hearing of prayer does not so much exist in the granting of requests, but rather in the revelation of God's grace and power in circumstances of suffering.⁵¹

In ecclesiastical circles accusations are sometimes made that poverty implies God's punishment, and specific punishment as a result of the lack of willpower to escape from the condition of poverty. This accusation may also be made against Christians who have no eye or heart for the poor. In wrestling with God to provide a way out of poverty, a solution should be sought that would not leave the poor, or the community of faith that perhaps neglects the poor, with a never-ending complex of guilt. The poor and the congregation will become conscious of their condition of sin and should confess it in honesty before God. It is not required that the poor and the congregation should first confess guilt before God forgives them. Grace implies unconditional love and complete forgiveness of sin, because forgiveness is grounded in the mediatory work of Christ. Worship-service prayers for forgiveness should come to the fore in the form of pleas focusing on God's promise to sinners.

Job's wrestling with God indicates guidelines for a congregation's wrestling with the issue of poverty during worship-service prayers. Unlike his friends, Job did not speak *about* God – he spoke *with* God, because he knew that only meeting God in prayer and communion with God would enable him to endure his incomprehensible suffering. Wrestling and protest in faith offered Job a means of expressing his hope and faith in God, in spite of his experience that had no positive outcome. He therefore was able to exclaim: "My Saviour lives!" Often, no solution exists for the issue of poverty except by means of personal communion with

⁴⁹ Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, p. 293.

⁵⁰ De Moor, *Prayer*, p. 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

God, who can change people.⁵² It remains a temptation for congregations to speak of God and divine judgements in abstract terms and so not see the need, suffering and despair of the poor. In communion with God and directly approaching God in prayer, surprising answers can be made. Job wrestled in prayer, using language of lamentation and even accusation against God, but exactly this element of his prayers expressed his pain and also his hope as fixed on God. A congregation should know that God's omnipotence is not only demonstrated when the misery of the poor is alleviated, but also when the poor are healed spiritually. God can guide someone suffering from poverty and even want of bread towards the realization that God's power can be performed – even amid the crippling and devastating effects of poverty.

Intercession

Intercession implies mediating on behalf of someone else. In the Bible, intercession deals with an individual or a nation, society at large, or the heathen or heathen nations (Jeremiah 14:1 – 15:2; John 17:1–26; Romans 15:30).⁵³ Those who pray ask God's intervention and plead for deliverance in a crisis. In distress, the bleakness of the situation and an inability to change it are foregrounded. Dependancy on God and God's power of deliverance are assumed.⁵⁴

Intercession on behalf of the congregation

Leaders in prayer should intercede for one another and plead that God will guide the congregation to a change in attitude towards poverty. Poverty should lead a congregation to humility and a spirit of compassion (empathy for those living in poverty). Integrating someone living in poverty into congregational activities will have a healing effect on them and the congregation.⁵⁵ Intercessory prayers should plead for a sense of *koinonia* in a congregation, so as to assist the poor in restoring them to their social and religious environment and to restore their feeling of identity and human dignity. A consequence of true *koinonia* within a congregation will be that the fears and frustrations of the poor will be dealt with within an ethos of love.

A congregation should also pray for a biblical view of material possessions. The church as a community of faith does not always encourage honest and open discussion of materialism

⁵² G. H. Wittenberg, Counselling Aids patients: Job as paradigm. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 88: 61–8, 1994.

⁵³ T. L. Johnson and J. L. Duncan III. Reading and praying the Bible in corporate worship. In Ryken, P. G., Thomas, D. W. H. and Duncan, III, J. L. (eds) *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P. & R. Publishing, pp. 140–69, 2003.

⁵⁴ S. Guthrie. Petition. *Christian Century*, 13, 1993.

⁵⁵ A. M. Somlai et al., The response of religious congregations to the spiritual needs of people living with HIV/AIDS. *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 51 (4): 415–27, 1997.

and the effect globalization has on the poor. These issues have thus far received little attention in most ecumenical (ecclesiastical) discussions on the issue of poverty. The values of honesty and openness cannot be forced by kindling feelings of guilt and fear, but can only be activated by renewed commitment and dedication to God and obedience to scriptural norms.⁵⁶ Worship-service prayers should also plead to God to change the cultural perceptions of possessions in congregations, and especially in societies: God can change a mindset and bring about conversion.

Intercessory prayer for people living in poverty

A congregation's prayer should imply that people's identity and sense of low self-esteem should be re-established because their existence is also grounded in God. Poor people are also created in God's image and Christ's atonement means that such people can live through faith in Christ and Christ can live in such people. A congregation should therefore pray that perceptions in church and society should change and that the poor should not be stigmatized and rejected. The psychological distress of the poor can be immensely intense and they often suffer from the fear of being estranged. Their communication with others is often only on a small scale, and sometimes even totally broken off on account of stigmatizing. It should thus be prayed that an open-hearted relationship be established in which the poor will have the confidence to share their fears and consolation with other members of the congregation.

It is imperative that a congregation should pray that they themselves (as well as others) perform practical acts of charity and love to people living in poverty. Poverty is not a problem that congregations can sidestep; it is an opportunity God creates to display love to the poor and thus to Christ (cf. Matthew 25:34–40). By ministering Christ's unconditional love to those who suffer and die, God's grace can be manifested by the actions of the church. Such practical acts of charity and love can mean supplying meals to the homes of the poor, offering transport to medical clinics and creating opportunities for recreation. Personal care and financial aid to obtain nourishing food and vitamins are other means by which churches can fulfil their calling towards the poor. Only prayer will open the eyes of congregations and inspire them to become involved in the situation of poor people in a practical way. Ministry groups to advise, guide and act as examples to the congregation can be valuable.

From time to time worship-service prayers may also include the element of intercession for the poor in order to understand, manage and discover meaning in suffering. Someone living in grave poverty experiences different stages of suffering. Louw identifies four phases: impact, regression, internalizing and reconstruction.⁵⁷ Prayers should consider exactly what

⁵⁶ Johnson and Duncan, *Reading and praying the Bible in corporate worship*, p. 150.

⁵⁷ D. J. Louw, *Ministering and counselling the person with Aids*. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 71: 37–50, 1990. Cf. Kgosiwena, *Pastoral care and the dying process*, pp. 201–9.

kind of support someone suffering from poverty needs and experiences in each of these phases.

The *phase of impact* is characterized by shock, negation, severe anxiety and a feeling of helplessness. Basically, distress requires support in the form of acceptance, understanding, love and especially the art of listening from those who want to offer help. Knutson expresses this requirement thus: "The willingness to listen is the willingness to remove the risk for others so that they may receive the gospel at the deepest level of life. It is a willingness which requires time, effort, energy, and above all, the love which tunes in to another person's situation."⁵⁸

During the *phase of regression* the reality of the problem starts to dawn and a person experiences some of the following emotions: anger, isolation, passive apathy. Escape mechanisms are sought, but the person is not prepared to take action. Support during this phase entails friendship and making someone aware that they are part of a community of love.

During the *phase of internalization* a person comes to terms with the consequences of poverty and undergoes in this way a process of mourning. These emotions can lead to depression and bargaining with God to escape from the situation. It is important to help someone during this phase to discover the unconditional love of God and to understand that God regards them as someone with value for now and eternity.

During the *phase of reconstruction* a person can make decisions, plan their future and even develop new aims to use time effectively. In this respect guidance should focus on motivating a person to testify to God's power in the process of suffering.

Prayers relating to poverty and the suffering of an individual should take the specific needs of these phases into consideration.

Conclusion

It is clear that most churches – to a large extent – are not yet actively involved in the alleviation of poverty and do not sufficiently regard support for the poverty-stricken as part of their Christian calling. Churches are sometimes inadequately informed about poverty or do not realize its consequences. However, it is also evident that worship-service prayers play a significant role in instances where congregations actively steer projects related to poverty. The stigmatization of poverty can be so harsh that the poor suffer further from humiliation, pain and isolation. Churches should expose this distress before God in prayer. Worship-service prayers that concentrate on the issue of poverty can have a definite effect on a congregation's disposition towards, involvement with, and active care and support for people living in poverty.

⁵⁸ G. Knutson, *Ministry to Inactives: A Manual for Establishing a Listening Witness to Inactive Members*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1979, p. 20.