

Individual, church response crucial to alleviating poverty

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ATLANTA—Breaking the cycle of poverty begins with taking seriously the Bible, people in need and the church's call to respond. And speakers reminded participants at a Baptist gathering that addressing poverty isn't optional for Christians and churches who are serious about following Christ.

These ideas, along with motives and models for alleviating poverty, were explored by panelists Jan. 31 during the "Breaking Cycles of Poverty" special interest session at the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant in Atlanta.

"I have begun to wonder whether we can follow Jesus without addressing poverty," said Tom Prevost, who works with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's rural poverty initiative in 20 of the poorest U.S. counties. "I'm not even sure it is possible."



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Citing the example of Jesus and the biblical mandate to care for the poor, panelists urged individual and church responses to poverty.

Individuals can help alleviate poverty by working in impoverished neighborhoods, by forming relationships with impoverished people or by urging elected public representatives to support legislation that reduces poverty, Prevost said. Individuals can also motivate their churches to act on behalf of poor people.

“Responding [to poverty] is something at the very heart of what it means to be a congregation,” said Diana Garland, dean of Baylor University’s School of Social Work. “It’s the responsibility of every Christian. There’s nobody

who is exempt. We're all called to respond to the needs of our neighbors. We're never exempt."

The importance of addressing poverty and social justice must be preached and taught in churches, Garland said. It must engage all members of the congregation, whether they assemble baskets of food at Christmas or form a relationship with someone struggling to financially survive.

"Those one-time Christmas baskets are a great place to begin, but it's not the end. It's just the beginning," Garland said. "Encourage the move from charity to justice. Start with those one-time events and move to the longer term ... move to justice."

While difficult, the move from charity to justice is possible, said Christopher Gray of FCS Community Ministries in Atlanta. Gray's ministry began with a long-term commitment to a neighborhood troubled with crime, drugs and prostitution. One way the ministry restores dignity and promotes self-sufficiency is by selling clothes at an affordable rate instead doing giveaways.

The ministry also has about 15 people living in the neighborhood to incite change from the inside out.

"We try not to minister from arm's length but rather live and serve among those who are challenged," Gray said.

In this ministry and other poverty reduction efforts, taking risks is the norm, and failure is common, Gray said, but a long-term, undaunted commitment to holistic ministry is necessary to transform communities and lives.

"You have to think long haul and determined," Prevost said. "These are not quick fixes."

Change is slow because poverty is so complex and far reaching. Often what slows individuals and churches from responding is feeling powerless and hopeless to make a change, Garland said. But the success stories from FCS Community Ministries and others are a glimmer of hope to the change one person or church can make.

"We cannot bring in the kingdom of God, but we can point to it with our action and our lives," Garland said. "We can do our best to make the way straight so ... God can come in."

"It's not beyond the capability of [the people in] this room to make an incredible difference," Prevost said. "We're the ones who are supposed to be carrying our candles and rushing to the darkness."