

# **A funeral and four weddings: Theological engagement with Poverty and Sustainable Development**

**Dr Steve de Gruchy,  
Professor of Theology and Development,  
School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal**

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The challenge is clear: we need to make poverty history. We have the resources, the skills, the organisational capacity, the vision, the passion. What we don't seem to have is much progress! There are still so many people in the world who go to bed hungry, children who die long before their time, adults who suffer from curable diseases, refugees who live in dehumanising conditions, and victims of war who lie helpless and hopeless.

For us, as people of faith, the reality of this dehumanising poverty – in the midst of the unbelievable wealth of the world's rich people, companies, nations, and churches – stands as a judgement upon us: upon our belief in a loving God, upon our well-intentioned development programmes, upon our pious sermons and ecclesiastical resolutions, upon our failure to give bread and water to Christ who meets us in the poor person on the street, in the refugee camp, the shanty compound, the hospital ward, the remote village.

But judgement is also opportunity. If the church has anything to say to the world today, then it must flow from this recognition. There are more than enough politicians, economists, sociologists, and scientists who can present us with the depressing facts about the mess we are in. The church needs to know about these things and to understand them far more deeply than it does at present; but the role of the church is to preach the gospel, and if the gospel has anything worth saying to the world at this time, then it must be the good news about how we get out of the mess.

The judgement is clear. That is the bad news. But judgement is also opportunity. That is the good news. The surprising mystery of our faith is that our relationship to God is not determined by our capacity to do good things for others, but only by God's grace. And grace is always about opportunity. About new beginnings and new opportunities. It is

about hope. Grace is of course never cheap grace, it demands response and obedience. And so it comes to us as a challenge and task. If people are going to turn to the church for any assistance at this point (which, to be honest, is becoming less and less the case), and if the church has anything to offer the world that the world does not already know and understand much better than the church – then it has to be this: grace, hope, opportunity and new possibilities. Good news. Gospel.

That is what I am interested in. What could that opportunity, challenge and possibilities mean for us today in the face of both the poverty that overwhelms us, and the resources at our disposal? What is it that we as people of faith can offer a world that is locked in the bad news of poverty.

To begin to sketch out the opportunities that lie before us I want to draw on a couple of helpful resources. This will also give you an idea of where I am coming from. First, I draw on the resourcefulness of the people of faith which helped to bring down the evil of apartheid in this country, and in which your church played an important role. We know that in response to God's grace opportunities can be seized, and history can be shaped. Second, I draw on the theoretical work of a number of people around the theme of poverty, and particularly that of the Bangladeshi economist and Nobel prize winner, Amartya Sen who inspires me and reminds me that there is a great deal of wisdom outside the church. Third, while I am generally adverse to the instrumentalism of numbers and goals in development, I recognise the influence of the work of people like Sen upon the Millennium Development Goals, and see their benefit as the minimum we should demand from those in power in our world.

Fourth, I remain forever indebted to my many students from all over Sub-Saharan Africa whose own work, research and reflections have helped me gain a deeper understanding of the reality of poverty on the continent, but also of the many, many people who are seeking to make a difference to the lives of the poor. They think I am teaching them, whereas in fact they are teaching me. Finally, I was privileged to be deeply involved in the work that led to the publication of the *Oikos Journey, A Theological Reflection on the Economic Crisis in*

*South Africa*, and bring this to your attention as a significant contemporary theological statement about poverty. The thinking in that document shapes the thinking in this paper.

Drawing on these resources, I want to talk about the opportunities that the church can grasp and promote in the face of poverty. To structure what I have to say I'm going to draw on a metaphor about which the church knows a great deal: weddings and funerals; though I'm shaping it via the title of a contemporary movie, *Four Weddings and A Funeral*. But because I'm offering good news here, it would not be a good thing – rhetorically – to end with the funeral, the dead end. So I have turned it around in the title of this talk: “A funeral and four weddings: theological engagement with poverty and sustainable development.”

### *1. The funeral: economic growth in our current world system.*

One of the most depressing aspects of the poverty that is experienced in our world today is that it comes in the midst of both incredible wealth and deteriorating environmental conditions. These things are connected. As the *Oikos Journey* points out, there are deep connections between economy and ecology. They both come from the same Greek word, *oikos*, which means house, household or home. Economy is *oikos-nomos*, the rules of the house, or the way we set up the house in order that all its inhabitants can flourish. Ecology, is *oikos-logos*, the wisdom of the house, or the way that the house is set up to function. These two things should be in harmony. Economy should resonate in harmony with ecology, and that is certainly the way we understand God's economy. As the *Oikos Journey* puts it:

For millions of years God has shepherded the earth into existence so that it can sustain life. To do so requires a delicate balance between human life and other life; between life, death and rebirth; between production, consumption and waste; between the needs of the current generation and the needs of the many generations still to come; and between our creative ability to shape and reshape nature, and our sinful desire to do so for selfish ends.

From God's perspective therefore, economy – *oikos-nomos* – is directly related to ecology – *oikos-logos*. Both concern the earth as our *oikos*, our home. God's economy concerns how the bounty of the world in terms of earth, water, air, plants, helps human life to flourish. It cannot be separated from ecology, from the intricate web that sustains life on the planet.

Since the advent of science, technology and the industrial revolution, however, the economy and ecology have split apart. Economy now means generating wealth, using the earth as natural resources or as a receptacle for our waste. The world economy has to do with seeing everything as a commodity to be bought and sold, removing the role of governments in supplying basic needs to their people by handing this duty over to private companies, and making maximum profit out of every single transaction that happens. It no longer sees the relationship with ecology, with keeping in harmony with the wider rhythm of the earth. And in so doing, it no longer seeks to keep in harmony with fundamental biblical principals to do with God's economy. (Durban: Diakonia Council of Churches, 2006. <[www.diakonia.org.za](http://www.diakonia.org.za)>)

The crisis that this draws attention to is simply this: we cannot solve poverty through the same industrial economy that is destroying the earth, because (1) first, the industrial economy turns the bounty of creation into raw materials, generates pollution, waste, and privatises the commons like air, water and land; and this always makes the life of people at the bottom of the spectrum worse – it shapes the conditions that we recognise as poverty. So we are led to ask, How can the system which generates the conditions of poverty be seen as a solution to poverty? (2) Second, we have to ask a very important question: if the carrying capacity of the earth is already dangerously stressed through current levels of industrialisation, consumption and waste, how can it possibly sustain the increased prosperity of another billion people? In other words, if the current lifestyles of the North are placing life on the planet at risk, can we honestly vision the solution to poverty as a raising of the lifestyles of the poor to those levels? And if this is not the solution, what are the implications: are the poor to remain poor, sacrificed to balance the environmental footprint of the rich?

As Al Gore has demonstrated, the earth crisis is an *Inconvenient Truth*. That is why the seventh MDG is “ensure environmental sustainability”. Poverty is also a inconvenient truth. That is why the first MDG is “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”. What strikes me as strange is that no-one seems to be putting these two truths together – and making the obvious connection: the current economic system is not going to solve poverty. That is an *extremely* inconvenient truth. More than that, it is a dead end. It is the funeral referred to in the title of this talk. And if the church somehow thinks that it must hitch its wagon to this economic horse, I would think that it would signal a great loss of moral wisdom. It

would be like trying to preach a wedding sermon at a funeral, and we should at least know the difference.

So if we are serious about poverty and serious about the earth; in other words if we as the church take seriously God's economy, our whole location and perspective on the debate about poverty and development has to be rooted in an alternative vision. This is not a time for scratching on the surface, but for drawing on the deep resources of our faith to speak to the contemporary human crisis. If we cannot do this; if we just see the church as the local delivery agent for a system of 'development' which is imposed from elsewhere; then we really have lost our bearings as the people of God, the body of Christ.

My funeral sermon is almost over. What I've been pointing to is the dead-end option to the solution to poverty, namely, cranking up more of the same kind of economy. If we put our hope in this system, we are going to be mightily disappointed. And as I've been saying, the gospel is good news. It is about hope. We have to think our way through this, and think about what the gospel is saying to us in this generation about poverty. We have to be midwives of hope for the billion people on the planet who are living in poverty, and that means what we say and do about poverty will either be experienced as hopeful, or drive people deeper into despair - with terrible consequences both for them and for the integrity of the gospel.

So, to take the conversation forward I want now to point to four signs of hope that could be the seeds of a new vision for the struggle against poverty, signs that resonate with the gospel. So, let us move to the four weddings.

## *2. The first wedding: poverty and health*

One of the things that is immediately obvious about the Millennium Development Goals is that a disproportionate number of them are focused on health. The first one connects to hunger and therefore malnutrition, and the seventh one has reference to safe drinking water, which is a key health indicator, but Goals 4, 5 and 6 are even more explicit:

4. Reduce child mortality
  - a. Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five

5. Improve maternal health
  - a. Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other disease
  - a. Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
  - b. Halt and begin to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases

The reason for this connection between poverty and development on the one side, and public health indicators on the other side lies in the recognition that the reality of poverty as a lived experience is not captured through purely economic indicators. Amartya Sen has written extensively on this matter, drawing from Aristotle the notion that wealth in itself is not the good we want, but is an instrument for the good. For a variety of reasons – convincingly demonstrated by Sen – there is no direct link between money and the good life, and therefore poverty is best understood not as merely lowness of incomes (although this remains a significant causal factor), but “as the deprivation of basic capabilities”.<sup>1</sup>

Significant for us is the fact that Sen consistently suggests that the denial of health is a valuable indicator of the deprivation of basic human capabilities, and he regularly makes use of public health indicators to capture the lived experience of poverty: undernutrition, health care, sanitation, clean water, morbidity, and premature mortality. Sen has had a strong influence upon the thinking of the United Nations Human Development Index, and so we can see the reasons as to why the MDG’s have come to have a strong reliance upon public health indicators as development indicators. And in essence what they are saying is that if we want to impact upon the lives of the poor, and if we want to make a difference against poverty, then one big area we can engage in is the area of public health.

This, it seems to me, is of great significance for the church. Is it not intriguing that one of the ways that Jesus connected with poor people in Galilee was through a healing ministry? Did he know something that has taken economists many centuries to discover, namely, that poverty plays out in the struggle for health? The church –and here one thinks strongly of the Church in Africa – has taken up Jesus’ healing ministry in many energetic ways; yet usually in an individualised or exotic sense. We fail to make the connections between poverty and health, and thus we fail to understand – as shown with great passion and precision by Paul Farmer – that in the social context of the global south the work of

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<sup>1</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 86

health and healing has to be rooted in the wider struggle for humanisation against the economic and political powers of injustice and exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Properly understood, and in respectful partnership with public health thinkers and activists, the work of health and healing is a work of hope and of resistance. It is the work of the gospel, and something that resonates with our scriptures and our faith. It is something to which the church can make a dramatic contribution in the struggle against poverty.

### 3. *The second wedding: poverty and education*

Health indicators are key for Amartya Sen in reflecting on poverty as capability deprivation, and education indicators rank a close second – for similar reasons. Education is a basic good, and literacy and numeracy make a decisive impact upon the lived lives of the poor. Likewise, they also appear in the MDG's as goal 2 which is:

#### 2. Achieve universal primary education

- a. Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Just as the church has been involved in the work of health and healing, it has made and continues to make a huge impact in education in the world. Owing to the fact that Christianity is a religion of the book, there has always been a strong emphasis on study, writing, and libraries, and we know that the missionaries were often more successful in sharing the benefits of literacy than of converting the heathen. But just as with the work of health and healing, the marriage between education and the struggle against poverty has not been consummated in the minds of many church people. Education remains a private and sometimes elitist good. It's radical impact upon the lives of the poor, and its role in social struggle has been lost.

Sen has noted that education, and specifically literacy and numeracy, is a good thing in itself. It is a worthy goal for society. But – and this is important in discussions about development – it is also an *instrumental* good, a worthy means for building a society, in the

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<sup>2</sup> See Paul Farmer, *Infections and inequalities: the modern plagues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of power: health, human rights and the new war on the poor*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 13

sense that a rise in education levels parallels a rise in the level at which people are able to engage with society, with those in power, with the wider world, and so are enabled to broaden their vision of the kinds of lives that they would have reason to value. Having a greater sense of what has been, what is, and what can be enables people to become more effective agents in determining the course of history. As Sen puts it:

With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programmes. There is indeed a strong rationale for recognising the positive role of free and sustainable agency – and even of constructive impatience.<sup>3</sup>

This agency aspect of education is nowhere more clear in the impact of the rise of educational standards amongst girls and women. The evidence suggests that female literacy is perhaps one of the most important indicators for a whole range of other social goods such as child survival rates and HIV infection rates. Thus again, it is no surprise that the only target of MDG goal 3, which is to “promote gender equality and empower women”, is an educational target: “to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.”

I wonder if we in the church are aware of this connection between education and literacy. We preach. We teach. We have so many connections to education, but we don't often see the connections between this and the social struggle against poverty. Perhaps our education is too closely tied to the promotion of the kind of instrumental rationality that fits the market, the very market that generates poverty. Our education often seeks to produce objects rather than the subjects of history, and is not geared enough to what Paulo Freire is his classic book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, called “education for critical consciousness”. It strikes me that this is closer to the content and method of Jesus' teaching. Surely a reclaiming of this kind of vision is something that the churches can do about poverty now.

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<sup>3</sup> Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 11.

#### 4. *The third wedding: poverty and assets*

The recognition of the need to promote the *agency* of the poor goes hand in hand with the need to build up and build on the *assets* of the poor. The importance of the agency of the poor lies in the fact that human dignity is rooted in the importance of both being and doing. Many of the poor are in our churches, and the church does not stand aside and apart from them. The poor are people of faith, and they are challenged just as much as the non-poor to put their faith into action; indeed, for the poor as for the rich, 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:26). It is crucial that our thinking about development in the church is rooted in this respect for the vocation of the poor.

Aside from the theological reason for taking this agency of the poor seriously, there is an important development reason for it too. The poor are always busy negotiating life, making ends meet, manipulating the circumstances of life, and engaging in livelihood strategies. What we are recognising is that in exercising their agency poor people, like all other people, draw upon an asset portfolio that is available to them, their household or their neighbourhood. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework suggests that there are five kinds of assets that can be accessed: human capital, social capital, financial capital, natural capital, and physical capital. This portfolio is located within a wider vulnerability context, and is thus often subject to shocks and stresses, and to laws, policies and wider social constraints that undermine this asset portfolio. The point of this analysis is that a key task in enhancing the livelihoods of the poor is to build the asset base from which they in turn navigate their own livelihood strategies.

Taking this asset logic one step further, the Asset Based Community Development approach championed by Kretzmann and McKnight, takes the assets of the poor as the starting point for the sustained building of community life. They point out that, "you cannot build a community on what people don't have"; and yet so much of development starts with needs analyses; with questioning people about their deficiencies, their lack of capacity, their weaknesses. Yet this kind of approach reinforces the very power dynamics that make people poor in the first place, for they suggest that the only way out of poverty is via dependency upon outsiders who can meet those needs. In research across the USA

they found that starting with assets, whilst not downplaying needs, was the single most important element in hundreds of successful community building processes. And by assets they mean individual capacities, social organisations and networks, and institutions that are owned by or can be responsive to the poor.

This kind of approach echoes the philosophy of Julius Nyerere, the first President of Tanzania with his promotion of *ujamaa*, and particularly of *kujitegemea*, or self-reliance. He recognised the importance of starting with what we in Africa have, rather than in seeking financial assistance from others, and perhaps it is this kind of innate recognition of the dignity of Africa and Africans that makes so many of my students excited about this approach. Recent research by some of them has shown the array of assets that still exist in difficult circumstances such as in rural Zimbabwe (Hlatwayo), and amongst people living with HIV (Sabushimike), and that building on these assets is the only way to build and sustain community life in the midst of poverty.

What is our vision as the church? Do we recognise that you cannot build a community on what people don't have, and therefore see our first task to be the identifying and aligning of these assets - rather than assuming that it is our role to arrive as outsiders with the knowledge and resources to 'develop' them? And do we recognise that the local church is itself a community asset, and that it has a powerful role in helping to unlock the other assets that lie dormant? This response to poverty immediately builds pride, hope and control - all the things that poverty seeks to undermine. In this way it becomes the work of the gospel here and now.

##### *5. The fourth wedding: poverty and food sovereignty*

The first of the MDGs draws our attention to the link between poverty and hunger, and for good reason. As we have noted from Sen above, poverty means something more than just the lowness of income; it is the deprivation of human capabilities - and hunger signals a problem with the most important of the basic capabilities because having the physical strength to be and to do is the foundational capability. We should not be surprised then to note that the provision of food stands powerfully at the intersection of economy, ecology,

health, gender justice and human agency. Access to decent food could be considered a development touchstone.

On the one hand, the earth crisis is a crisis precisely because it has a direct bearing on the ability of the earth to produce, while at the same time many of the mechanisms to produce food in the south and transport it away from the poor to the markets of the north directly contribute to climate change. Alongside this, the economy faces its greatest moral crisis in that it is incapable of distributing the global food surplus which currently exists - scientists tell us it stands between 110% to 150% for all the world's people - to meet the needs of the 800 million hungry people on the globe. Then, we have noted that food is the *sine qua non* for human health, and thus for human engagement and agency, and thus for participation in any for of social struggle.

Now what the social statistics make clear is that more food does not mean less hunger. The issue around hunger is not about the quantity of food, but about how that food is distributed, and about who has an entitlement to it. This is true both within wider society, *and* within the household, where patriarchal cultures persistently exhibit a bias against women, reminding us how gender inequality is mainstreamed throughout all aspects of poverty. Food security is a justice issue, both in the public and domestic spheres, and it is this that is causing more and more people to shift from the language of food security to that of food *sovereignty* - to ask questions not just about the presence of food, but about who controls it, and who profits from it. Establishing control over one's food entitlements is a crucial step in the struggle against poverty.

As people of faith we should know that. At the heart of our prayer life is the petition, 'give us this day our daily bread'. It is a recognition of the importance of food for daily faith and functioning, but also a statement of God's position the matter. Whatever else Jesus was teaching us in that prayer, it is clear that he assumed that God is concerned about food, and about who has access to it. That much is made more obvious as one reflects on the role and place of food throughout the Bible. We often forget, for example that the early church pictured in Acts was genuinely concerned about sharing food, and that Paul's writing about the eucharist in 1 Cointhians 11 was in the context of a lack of food sharing.

The theme of food, faith and justice is picked up in many ways in the Christian tradition, captured in two powerful aphorisms. Nicholas Berdayaev was right when he said, “food for myself is a physical concern; but food for my neighbour is a spiritual concern.” Likewise Doris Day once pointed out, “when I gave food to the hungry they called me a saint. But when I asked why they had no food they called me a communist”.

What all of this means is that while food parcels and soup kitchens might be crucial in ameliorating hunger, if that is the sum total of our response, then we are avoiding the struggle against poverty. Once again, we disconnect our work from the wider struggle against poverty. We fail to see how the depth of the gospel speaks to the depths of the human condition with a word of opportunity and hope. We don't need to be drawn into all kinds of quick fix cunning development projects, that are not rooted in God's economy, and that do not respect and nurture the *oikos* which is our earth. We really just need to live out our faith; but with a wisdom that sees that what we do in taking the gospel seriously, in health, education, food and the respect of all people is and must be rooted in the wider struggle against poverty, and for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

#### 6. *Concluding thoughts.*

To say something is always to not say something else. In the limitations of a talk like this, we can't deal with the sheer width and depth of everything to do with poverty, development and God. Clearly I've left some important stuff out, and I apologise if I've not mentioned your particular passion in the struggle against poverty. The point is that while I really do believe that the funeral is a definite dead-end, these four weddings are not the only weddings that we can participate in. There are other weddings. Remember, too, that weddings are only the first step towards the creation of children, and new life. And that really is at the heart of what I have been saying – that the contribution of the church to the struggle against poverty is not to be found in it playing a role as an appendage of other development visions – but of living out its own faith and calling within the wider economy of God, here on this earth, our *oikos*.