

Seeing God at Work

Discuss these questions as you read this week's introduction.

- If Alisa showed up at your church door next Sunday asking for help, what would you do?
- How would you define success in your efforts to help Alisa? What would her new “story” look like?

Are We There Yet?

During the 1990s, Alisa Collins and her family lived in one of America's most dangerous public housing projects in inner-city Chicago. Alisa got pregnant at the age of sixteen, dropped out of high school, and started collecting welfare checks. She has five children from three different fathers, none of whom help with childrearing. With few skills, no husband, and limited social networks, Alisa struggled to raise her family in an environment characterized by widespread substance abuse, failing schools, high rates of unemployment, rampant violence, teenage pregnancy, and an absence of role models.

From time to time, Alisa tried to get a job, but a number of obstacles prevented her from finding and keeping regular work. First, there were simply not a lot of decent-paying jobs for high school dropouts living in ghettos. Second, the welfare system penalized Alisa for earning money, taking away benefits for every dollar she earned and for every asset she acquired. Third, Alisa had child-care issues that made it difficult to keep a job. Finally, Alisa felt inferior and inadequate. When she tried to get vocational training or a job and faced some obstacle, she quickly lost confidence and rapidly retreated back to where she was comfortable—public housing and welfare checks. Alisa felt trapped, and she and her family often talked about how they couldn't get out of the ghetto.

Watch video

www.helpingwithouthurting.org/smallgroup-2 or Rightnow Media (When Helping Hurts: The Small Group Experience)

You may not be materially poor, but what evidence do you see in your own life of the four broken foundational relationships? In what areas do you need to repent and pray for God's healing?

Broken Relationship with God:

Broken Relationship with Self:

Broken Relationship with Others:

Broken Relationship with the Rest of Creation:

Read through the definition of poverty alleviation below:

A process in which people, both the materially poor and non-poor, move closer to living in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

- Think back to a situation in which you tried to minister to people who were materially poor. Did your approach reconcile the four broken relationships in each of you? In what ways?
- Were there any ways that your approach actually contributed to greater “poverty” in the four relationships in each of you? If so, what could you do differently in the future?

“If you go back to what is poverty, poverty alleviation isn’t just about fixing their circumstances. It is about helping them discover that they are an image bearer and that they have tremendous value as a human being, that they are called to be a steward of their resources and opportunities.”

Look back at Alisa’s story at the beginning of this lesson. Given what we have talked about so far, including the quote above, what do you think “success” would look like in her story?

- In what specific ways would her life be different?
- What personal choices would Alisa need to make, with God’s help, to move out of poverty?
- What changes in systemic factors or circumstances— challenges Alisa has no control over—would aid Alisa in the process of moving out of poverty?
- With this new “story” in mind, how could you or your church help people like Alisa when they walk into your church?

Rest of the Story

After decades of living on welfare checks, Alisa Collins started finishing her high school degree, working full-time as a kindergarten teacher, and getting up at 4:00 a.m. to wash her family’s clothes before she was due at work. What happened?

It all began when Miss Miller, the principal of the local school, hired Alisa to work part-time as a teacher’s aide. Miss Miller soon observed that Alisa had natural teaching gifts and took the time to encourage Alisa to pursue a teaching career, guiding her to the education and certification she would need. With Miss Miller’s relational and nurturing approach, Alisa began to gain confidence. And while her view of herself was changing, two important changes also occurred in Alisa’s economic environment. First, Congress passed welfare-reform legislation, making welfare more “pro-work” and placing limits on the length of time people could stay on it. Alisa knew her days on welfare were coming to an end and that she simply had to find a full-time job. Second, Miss Miller offered Alisa a job as a full-time teacher.

Churches are uniquely positioned to provide the relational ministry on an individual level that people like Alisa need. Of course, churches can also offer Alisa something that Miss Miller could not: a clear articulation of the gospel so that Alisa can experience the profound and lasting change of material poverty alleviation—the ability to fulfill her calling of glorifying God through her work and life.

“Jesus Christ transforms both of us ... Poverty alleviation is about walking side by side, hand in hand, and saying ‘I’m broken, you’re broken’ but Jesus Christ can show up and bring healing to both of us.”

Spend time this week praying that God would reveal your need for His miraculous reconciling work in your own heart, and that He would show you ways you can be a channel of that work to others in your community.