BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY
By Lorraine Minor

When President Johnson declared war on poverty in 1964, he did so believing government could solve the problem. Under the Bush administration, government again has a goal, asking governors to develop ten-year plans to eradicate homelessness in each state. But is this a problem that government will ever solve? Or is this a concern that Jesus came to address? And is it a broader picture than is addressed in solutions proposed by government? Rescue Missions across the United States and City Missions around the world have been actively involved in this challenge for hundreds of years.

In 2000, a Gallup Poll found that 5 percent of Americans believe poverty and homelessness are important problems for the country. Another study showed that nine out of ten Americans believe the federal government has a responsibility to alleviate poverty. ABC News correspondent John Stossel pointed out that the more government adds in dollars to solve the crisis, the more the charitable tax payers withdraw personal funds to support private solutions, to which many in Rescue would say, “Amen.”

Whose job is it to break the cycle of poverty and what would be the result?

Poverty is a generic term which usually means that a person or family has insufficient income and resources to sustain healthy living. Poverty can predictably be identified by factors, such as: low educational level, a significant number of minority/racial groups, lack of job skills, one-parent homes and low income. These factors combine and interact to form an environment often worsened by the involvement of drugs and crime.  

Poverty is generally divided into two types: generational poverty and situational poverty. Generational poverty is when the economic level of a family drops and stays in a low economic state for more than two generations. Many researchers and public health and social service providers think that generational poverty creates a belief in children that they can not change their circumstances. Moreover, they become comfortable in their culture and do not want to change.

Situational poverty is the decline in resources because of the loss of a job, a death, a divorce or other catastrophic event that forces a family to change their style of living temporarily – one to five years.

Generational poverty breeds generational poverty. The focus is on survival with skewed methods for achieving it. Limited resources may be unwisely spent on ways to relieve momentary pain.

A recent study found that non-monetary factors play a bigger role than previously thought in determining how children are able to overcome disadvantage. The extensive research suggested that higher income alone did not affect the non-monetary problems known to encourage poverty, such as: low educational achievement, young motherhood, single parenting and racism.
What is the true story about poverty in the U.S.? Is it growing or shrinking? Statistics can be made to support about any position you want to take on about any topic. So it is with poverty. However, most experts agree that about 12% of the population is currently living in poverty.

An attempt to break the cycle begins with discovering the causes of the cycle and addressing the underlying issues.

The cycle is broken one family at a time by changing a destructive and limiting mindset that has been passed down generation to generation. Truth has to replace misconceptions and faulty beliefs. Rescue Missions are in a wonderful position to be able to facilitate such change, family by family.

Three factors affect whether a family will break out of generational poverty: Education, Morality, and Hope. Lack of education, single parent homes, and victim thinking are all listed as statistics of poverty. For the Christian ministry that relies on the truth of Scripture, we know both that truth sets people free and that we are called to share Truth.

The blight of poverty runs much deeper than a classification of being in the lowest income bracket in the United States. The cycle of poverty that must be broken is the mindset that keeps generation after generation from a hope and confidence that Scripture refers to as the abundant life.

Many researchers acknowledge the importance of believing in divine purpose and guidance in establishing the hope necessary to move out of the helpless/hopeless destructive mindset. We know that Jesus came to set people free.

We, in Rescue, offer clients opportunities to break out of the cycle of poverty by learning to maximize resources through life-skill classes in financial management, household management, and decision-making. We teach them to increase family income through getting a GED, certificate programs, career development, and job readiness training to maintain employment. They can learn through spiritual training and discipleship to respond to negative life situations without engaging in self-destructive behavior. Education is paramount. Without a suitable reading level, an impoverished person does not benefit from reading scripture or making progress on any level. Without learning new life-skills and problem solving methods, a person is relegated to the limited rut of the past.

Jesus predicted that the poor we will always have with us, but the damaging life styles perpetuated in the cycle of poverty can be broken – one family at a time. Rescue Missions bring together the educational and spiritual resources to accomplish the task.
“The Value of Private Charity” Townhall, August 24, 2005

1Issue Brief, Professional Association of Georgia Educators, May 2005, “Breaking the Cycle of Poverty”

2Victims of Generational Poverty May Use Hidden Rules of Conduct, California Educator May 8, 2004

3Univ. of Chicago Chronicle, April 1997, William Harms, “Breaking the Cycle of Poverty”