

Clarksville Presbyterian Church
MATTHEW 25 – Addressing Systemic Poverty

INTRODUCTION: BLIND SPOTS REPORT

After declaring ourselves as a Matthew 25 Congregation in the spring of 2023, Pastor Annette Goard delivered a sermon which referred to our “Blind Spots”. This began a conversation of what we don’t know about poverty in general and, in particular, about poverty in Mecklenburg County. Several members of the congregation were asked to study certain areas and to report back. Our appreciation to those who have submitted reports which will give us a composite overview. The report is compiled in these sections:

1. **Demographics of Mecklenburg County** – Judi Irvin and Emily Howie: Population, race, educational levels, poverty, schools, literacy, food-insecure, any other relevant data.
2. **Care Portal** – Linda Pulliam, Annette Goard, Cat Graham: A cooperative program between Mecklenburg Social Services and Patrick Henry Services with local churches for on-line referrals of families in need.
3. **Education** – Jessie Ruff (Clarksville Elementary) and Richard Pulliam (Interview with Scott Woerner, Supt. of Schools): What services are available for children of low-income families? What educational programs are aimed at helping children to aspire to escape poverty? Any plans for the future? Suggestions for ways our church might help the schools with this?
4. **Substance Abuse** – Laura Castle: What are relevant statistics about drug use/abuse in Mecklenburg County? What data supports the relationship between poverty and substance abuse? What current programs are showing success? Are there ways that our church might become involved with addressing the problem?
5. **Advocacy** – Frank Ruff and Holly Stadler: What channels are most effective? What areas of poverty should be addressed through advocacy? How should we educate our congregation to be advocates for poverty-related issues?
6. **Red Bird Mission** – Dawn and Jimmy Hartman: Clay County, KY, the location of Red Bird Mission, has a Poverty rate more than twice that of Mecklenburg County. What programs are aimed at helping local residents to rise out of poverty vs. meeting immediate needs? What did we learn from our experience at Workcamp?
7. **ALICE in the Crosscurrents: COVID and Financial Hardship in Virginia** was compiled by United Ways of Virginia in partnership with United For ALICE, a driver of innovative research and action around financial hardship for ALICE. ALICE is the current metric used by the Department of Social Services to measure poverty.
 - **ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed** — households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) but cannot afford the basic cost of living in their

county. Despite struggling to make ends meet, ALICE households often do not qualify for public assistance.

- **ALICE Threshold of Financial Survival:** Derived from the Household Survival Budget, the minimum average income that a household needs to afford housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and a smartphone plan, plus taxes. Calculated for all U.S. states and counties.
- **Below ALICE Threshold:** Includes people in poverty-level and ALICE households combined.

CURRENT MISSION PROGRAMS OF CLARKSVILLE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How are we currently responding to those who are strangers, are hungry, thirsty, in need of clothing, in prison, or sick?

- Hunger Ministries:
 - Food Pantry
 - Backpack Buddies
 - Thanksgiving Baskets
- Literacy
 - Storytime at Clarksville Elementary
 - Support of Imagination Library
- Responding to basic needs of those in Mecklenburg County
 - CarePortal – 67 responders ready to assist local families referred by Social Services
 - School Supplies for Clarksville Elementary School
 - Hygiene Supplies for Mecklenburg High School and Middle School
 - Christmas Families – 30 children who are known by the Food Pantry or school referrals receive two gifts
 - Blessing Bags for the homeless
 - Secret Santa (Donna Lopez) – funding for presents for Middle School Students in need.
 - Clarksville-Boydton Unit of the Salvation Army – new initiative to help with Christmas fund raising and support of children going to summer camp
 - Assistance provided by the Pastor and Administrative Assistant to connect visitors to local resources and by limited financial support from the Pastor's Discretionary Fund.
- Our National and International Missions
 - Yahve Jire Children's Home (Chedlin Justinvil) – annual donation plus funding for the construction of a residence for young men who have graduated from the children's home.
 - Andy and Ellen Collins – hybrid ministry in the US and Asia – annual contributions

- Red Bird Mission, Queendale, Kentucky – thirteen members spent a week doing home repairs, painting, and working at the community store in one of the poorest areas of Appalachia.
- Church World Services – Congregational support of CWS Blankets, Hygiene or other kits, as requested.
- Samaritan's Purse – Congregational collection of Christmas Child boxes.

Linda Pulliam
Clarksville Presbyterian Elder for Missions
July 2023

REPORT #1: Mecklenburg County, VA

A Very Condensed Historical Perspective of Economic Development

Emily Howie and Judith Irvin

Mecklenburg County has a rich history, not only in terms of its people and environment, but in its economic development. The county has experienced both prosperity and poverty but has always shown a determination to survive and improve the lives of its residents. Mecklenburg is part of the area known as Southside Virginia. During Colonial times, this area was predominately made up of large tobacco and cotton plantations and densely forested land. Other areas of VA developed earlier such as the coastal areas (e.g. Williamsburg), the port areas (e.g. Richmond, Norfolk), and cities associated with government activity (e.g. Alexandria, Williamsburg). As a resident of Richmond wrote after visiting Southside in 1784, “We visited several fine estates upon the Roanoke [river] and were not less surprised than delighted at the beauty and fertility of the country.”

The county of Mecklenburg was organized on March 3, 1765. With the growth in new settlements and population, the Virginia General Assembly passed an act in 1764 dividing Lunenburg County into three counties: Lunenburg, Charlotte, and Mecklenburg. The county was named after Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Streilitz, German wife of King George III of Great Britain. The town of Boydton was founded in 1812 by Alexander Boyd who owned the property. Boydton became the county seat. Clarksville was founded in 1818 and named for Clark Royster. In 1821 it became the first incorporated town in Virginia.

Chase City and South Hill are the two other sizeable communities in Mecklenburg County. Chase City, located in the northwestern part of the county, was incorporated in 1873. South Hill began as a railroad town in 1889 and was incorporated in 1901. South Hill is one of only three towns in the nation to be originally planned and developed in a circular pattern, extending 5/8 of a mile in all directions from a center point.

Tobacco dominated the economic development of Mecklenburg County for many years. The Clarksville Tobacco Market was so large and important that the Roanoke Navigation Company was formed to transport the crop to Petersburg and other areas. By 1848, Clarksville was known as a major market for leaf tobacco and a tobacco-manufacturing center. By 1860, Clarksville was producing more manufactured tobacco than any other establishment in Virginia and the Carolinas. South Hill is now the third largest tobacco market in Virginia.

Another part of Mecklenburg’s early economic history was horse breeding and racing. According to one contemporary source, the county was “celebrated for raising fine horses—yes, the best suited for the turf, the saddle, and for war.” The favored breed of horse was the quarter horse. By 1823, Boydton had a popular oval racetrack located a mile west of the town.

The Civil War resulted in the destruction of many of the horse farms and Mecklenburg's prominence in the equestrian field.

In the 20th century, the textile and furniture businesses expanded into Southside Virginia. In Clarksville, Burlington Industries opened a wool scouring operation in 1957, expanding the operation into a complete worsted combing unit in 1959. In June of 2002, Burlington announced the closure of the Clarksville operation and three other plants in the South – a loss of 2,800 jobs. Other textile, specifically apparel manufacturers, that operated in the county, but have since closed were Hampco Apparel, Inc., in Chase City, which opened in 1935 and employed 320 operators, and LaCrosse Sportswear Corporation. LaCrosse Sportswear Corporation began in 1953 and operated out of a building in downtown LaCrosse employing 280.

The second largest employer in Mecklenburg County from 1968 until 2001 was Russell Stover Candies. The plant produced over 50,000 boxes of candy per day. With the closure of the facility in 2001, 690 jobs were lost.

Two corporations that originated in Mecklenburg County are Estes Trucking and Virginia Homes Manufacturing Company. W.W. Estes from Chase City bought a truck to haul livestock in 1931 to supplement the income from his farm during the Depression. Estes Trucking is now headquartered in Richmond and is still privately owned by the Estes family. It employs 20,000 employees with a network of over 240 terminals around the country.

Virginia Homes Manufacturing Company, a modular and mobile homes builder began in Boydton in 1969 and now has production operations in both Boydton and South Hill. The company produces over 1,000 living units per year, including multi-family, ranch, cape, and two-story homes, apartments, dormitories, and other light commercial structures.

The building of the John H. Kerr Reservoir and Dam in the 1950s brought another economic opportunity for Mecklenburg County, namely tourism and recreation. The most recent statistics are from 2021 from the Virginia Tourism Corporation. Tourism spending in the county rose 38.6 percent from \$72.6 million to \$100.7 million from 2021 to 2022. Jobs related to tourism in the county jumped from 682 to 746.

Mecklenburg County has also benefited economically from a major investment by Microsoft Corporation to build data storage facilities in the county. First announced in 2010, the Southern Virginia Regional Network Group facility was built near Boydton at a cost of \$500 million and has been expanded five times. Recently Microsoft announced that it plans to build another data center campus in Clarksville.

What are the implications of this economic development for persons living in poverty?

Poverty rates have only been tracked since 1959 resulting from legislation that focused on the *War on Poverty*. One can only assume that before the era of Reconstruction, the black population in VA was enslaved and a significant population of white residents lived in poverty.

Reconstruction was difficult for both black and white populations and a significant number of the general population lived in poverty. Plantations and horse breeding farms during the 1800s benefitted only the wealthy. The rise of the production of tobacco, textiles, and candy provided jobs for workers of all levels. With the demise of these industries, those workers without higher education and especially women were left without a means to make a living wage.

Measuring Poverty

Poverty estimates have been produced by the Census Bureau since the 1960s. Poverty level was defined as “a family and the individuals in the family as being in poverty if their pretax money income is below a threshold adjusted by family composition (US Census Bureau, 2022).” The *Supplemental Poverty Measure* (2009 to present) complements the official poverty measure by expanding resources to include noncash benefits and deducting key expenses, while redefining poverty thresholds to account for a wider set of needs and geographical variation. It also includes unrelated children into the formula. Bottom line is that two formulas are used concurrently: Official Poverty Measure (1959 to present) and the Supplemental Poverty Measure (2009 to present). The SPM indicates a relatively lower level of poverty. By either measure, nationally, Black females with no high school diploma who work less than one week represent the largest characteristic of those in poverty. Interestingly, co-habiting partners indicate a higher poverty rate (almost 30%) than married couples (less than 10%).

In Mecklenburg County (VA)

If one examines the two annual lists of top corporations by total revenue (Fortune 1000) and fastest growing companies (Inc.5000), few companies are located in Southside VA. Mecklenburg County is comprised of white folks and black folks (mostly) with education levels, income, home value, and mobility lower than the State average. Almost 96% speak English at home. The poverty rate is almost twice that of the State of VA and higher than the national average.

Percentage of Poverty of Mecklenburg County, Virginia, and the U.S.

	Mecklenburg County	Virginia	U. S.
Population (2022)	30,508	8,683,619	
Race			
• White	• 62.9%	• 68.8%	
• Black	• 33.8%	• 20.0%	
• Other	• 3.3%	• 29.2%	
Education			
• High School or +	• 86.5%	• 90.8%	• 88.9%
• Bachelor’s degree or +	• 22.3%	• 40.3%	• 33.7%
Mean travel time to work	24.9 minutes	28.2 minutes	26.8 minutes
Persons in poverty	17.9%	9.9%	12.6%
Children Economically Disadvantaged (ED)	50%		
Pass rate of ED on PALS-K	62% (88% for non ED)		
Per capita income	\$28,959	\$43,267	\$37,638
Median household income	\$46,378	\$80,615	\$69,021
Median value of home	\$146,200	\$295,500	\$244,900
Geographic mobility	6.2%	14.4%	13.4%
Language other than English spoken at home	4.1%	16.5%	

A study of social and economic costs of inequality in the state of VA explored the extent of inequality of place across the state, finding significant inequalities between counties on measures such as household income, poverty, college completion, single parenthood, and racial segregation. In short, someone growing up poor in Mecklenburg County is far less likely to move beyond poverty than many other places in the State. For example, Mecklenburg County ranked

- 104 out of 133 counties in rates of upward mobility,
- 58 out of 125 counties for college graduation,
- 106 out of 133 counties for incarceration rates,
- 118 out of 133 counties for household income, and
- 104 out of 133 counties for getting married.

Of the almost 18% of Mecklenburg’s population who live in poverty, few are likely to move out of poverty as measured by the metrics just mentioned if they live in Mecklenburg County (rather than a county such as Fairfax). This comparison begs two questions:

- What does Fairfax County have that Mecklenburg does not?

- Excellent school system
- Common services (such as dry cleaning) available for the public (jobs)
- Social services for low income families
- Higher level of pay
- Transportation services
- Medical services
- Federal government and military jobs
- Lack of affordable housing in the County
- What are the mediating factors of poverty?
 - One program that has been successful across the nation is the Jeremiah Program. Their five core pillars are:
 - Safe and affordable housing
 - Career-track education
 - Quality early children education
 - Supportive community
 - Empowerment and life skills training

Conclusion

A major report discussed “narratives” about poverty – some helpful and some not so much. For example, a narrative that includes that “poverty is a natural part of society” implies that nothing can be done to improve the situation. Three helpful narratives are:

- The Systems Narrative: Poverty is a product of our choices as a society implies that we can re-design policies and institutions to solve poverty.
- The Humanity Narrative: People experiencing poverty are real people who confront enormous challenges and do remarkable, inspiring things.
- The Solidarity Narrative: We need to join together across racial differences and stand up against systemic injustices.

Any action, no matter how small, can lead to positive results for our community and people living with poverty. One positive step can build and support another. Eventually, we can make a positive difference in the lives of others.

Documents that Informed this Paper

Bracey, S. (1977). *Life by the Roaring Roanoke: A History of Mecklenburg County, VA*. Richmond, Mecklenburg County Bi-Centennial Commission.

Census Reporter: Mecklenburg County, VA

Emanuel, K. & Feldmann, D. (2022). *Language Matters: Words to Avoid When Talking about Poverty in America*. Ad Council

Eppard, L. M, et. Al. (2021). Social and economic costs of inequality in the State of VA. *Journal of Working Class Studies*, Vol 6 (2), December 2021.

The Jeremiah Program. Jeremiahprogram.org

United States Census Bureau. *Poverty in the United States: 2021*.

Yancey, D. (2022). The economic geography of VA often leaves out Southwest and Southside. *Cardinal News*.

REPORT #2: CAREPORTAL

A Partnership with Patrick Henry Family Services and Mecklenburg DSS

Linda Pulliam, Annette Goard, Cat Graham

Shortly after the Session approved our application to PC(USA) as a Matthew 25 Congregation with the focus of “Eradicating Systemic Poverty, Clarksville Presbyterian was invited by the Mecklenburg County Dept. of Social Services and Patrick Henry Family Services to partner with other local churches to provide specific assistance to foster children and families. **CarePortal** is a web-based program which allows staff of Social Services to alert church representatives of local families in crisis. Churches may then respond if they have the resources to assist or want to partner with other churches to address the need. Although CarePortal can be used for tangible needs such as beds or clothing, it can also provide services to families including transportation, tutoring, or car repair. One of the goals of the program is to strengthen our church’s discipleship impact by developing relationships with these families.

A Response Team was organized to receive notifications by email when a request is received, and members will then have the option to participate. Full information is available at: <https://www.careportal.org/>

Since the launch of the CarePortal in Mecklenburg County on May 19, Clarksville Presbyterian has accepted these cases:

1. Food Insecurity: In cooperation with South Hill Presbyterian and Home Depot, a contribution of \$60 was made towards the purchase of a refrigerator/freezer for a family whose refrigerator had broken, losing all of their refrigerated and frozen food.
2. Strengthening a Biological Family: A single mother with three children in her home ages 2, 10, and 11 recently moved to South Hill and were in need of a twin bed, box spring, and sheets/comforter for the bedroom of the 10 and 11 years olds and a toddler bed, mattress, and sheets/blanket for the two year old. These items were provided by members of the congregation and delivered to the family.
3. Help Make a Foster Care Placement: A sibling group (girl 13 years old, boy 9 years old) were removed from their home and placed in treatment foster care. They had a long history of abuse and neglect and lived in severe poverty. The children had few items to take with them to their new placement. They were in need of clothing and shoes. They would also like some toys and/or other items to entertain them. The congregation responded with great generosity and six large gift bags of supplies were delivered to the caseworker at DSS.

4. Domestic Abuse: A single mother with two children, ages 6 years and 5 months, was recently involved in a domestic incident that has caused her to relocate with her children for their safety to a motel room with one bed. She was in need of a Pack-n- to accommodate the infant who had started to roll over on her own. A Pac-N-Play and was donated by member of the congregation and was delivered to her at a motel in South Hill along with a box of diapers. (An additional Pack-N-Play and diapers were donated to a mother of six who lives at Newton's Trailer Park.)

In two months, the CarePortal has provided us with links to families most in need in our community. Our relationship with DSS has given us a foundation for our Matthew 25 program of "Addressing Systemic Poverty".

REPORT #3: MECKLENBURG COUNTY SCHOOLS

Jessie Ruff (discussion with staff at Clarksville Elementary)

Richard Pulliam (with Scott Woerner, Supt. of Schools)

1. What services are currently available through the schools for children of low-income families?
 - **Free lunch program** is available to every child in school because of the poverty level in the county. Having it free for all avoids the stigma attached to free lunch.
 - **The Summer Feeding Program** is available for any child in the school system any time a program is going on in the school and the cafeteria is available.
 - **FeedMore** uses the schools as a distribution center at Chase City and LaCrosse.
 - **Dental screening** is offered as well as free **health screening** by VDH.
 - **Special Needs:** There is a volunteer at each school who organizes support for special needs in the school (like Kelly Colgate does with the Middle School).
 - **Buffalo Soldiers:** They work to help meet special needs for low income.
 - **Mecklenburg 4-H** partners with Mecklenburg Public Schools to offer economic education programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. These programs give students the opportunity to “fast forward” into the future with a career, a paycheck, and a month’s worth of financial decisions. Volunteers from the community work with Virginia Cooperative Extension and MCPS staff to man stations and help students through the decision-making process.
 - “Kids’ Marketplace” - all 5th graders participate in this financial literacy program which is a “real world” simulation that teaches basic personal financial skills.
 - “Real Money, Real World” – Middle School
 - “Reality Store” – High School
 - **Backpack Buddy** program and **Clarksville Food Pantry**
 - **Other charitable organizations and churches** -- Jamieson’s monthly dinner, referrals from guidance counselor, Christmas presents
2. What programs are aimed at helping children to aspire to escape poverty?
 - **Career and Technical Education Classes** (“vocational” is an unacceptable term these days. The school system uses CTE.) are offered at the High and Middle school in trades such as welding. The concept is “Finding a pathway for a trade.”
3. Any plans for expanding these services in the future?
 - **Legislation** is moving forward that would expand the CTE program and provide more funding.

- The school system has removed book fees and fees for programs such as field trips and senior trip so that all can participate.

4. Suggestions for ways our church might help the schools with this?

- Scott was very positive about the **reading program** we are currently doing and indicated that this is helping the children.
- Suggested maybe there were other ways we could incorporate mentorship at the schools for kids who needed it. He likes the **Big Brother concept**, and we discussed how risky it would be these days for one on one activities like Big Brother.
- He then suggested maybe **helping with after school activities** for kids or setting up after school clubs such as 4-H. He likes the 4-H financial literacy program.

REPORT #4: SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND RELATIONSHIP TO POVERTY

Laura Castle

Substance Abuse – What are relevant statistics about drug use/abuse in Mecklenburg County? What data supports the relationship between poverty and substance abuse? What current programs are showing success? Are there ways that our church might become involved with addressing the problem?

What are relevant statistics about drug use/abuse in Mecklenburg County?

It is difficult to get specifics as to how many people in Mecklenburg County may meet the criteria for a Substance Abuse diagnosis at any one time. The Virginia Social Indicator Dashboard and the Southside Wellness Coalition both offer

<https://vasisdashboard.omni.org/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=CommunityLevelReport&iptCSB=&iptLocality=&iptMapType=Locality%20Level&iptTableRows=9999&LinkHref=True>

(<https://bewellsouthside.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/swc-wenzel-presentation.pdf>)

some data, however only certain very specific pieces of data can be measured. For example, we can measure fatalities via overdose from specific drugs, hospitalizations from mental health or substance abuse issues and pertinent legal/arrest statistics but again this does not provide data on people using drugs or alcohol who have not come into medical care or the legal system yet. According to this website Mecklenburg County has a population of 30,679 with 17.54% of the population meeting the criteria for living in poverty. Generally accepted and often quoted statistics indicate that 1 out of 5 people will meet criteria for a mental health diagnosis in their lifetime and 50-75% of those have a co-occurring substance abuse diagnosis.

What data supports the relationship between poverty and substance abuse?

When discussing the relationship between poverty and substance abuse it is more of a correlation rather than a causation. Because those who live in poverty experience mental and physical issues at a higher rate than those living above the poverty line, it is reasonable to extrapolate that the range of problems that occur for those in this population (substandard housing, hunger, homelessness, inadequate childcare, unsafe neighborhoods, under-resourced schools) also puts them at a higher risk for substance abuse disorders as well as increased barriers to receiving treatment when needed. We also know that children who grow up in poverty have a much higher rate of experiencing trauma which can lead to increased substance abuse and numerous studies support the relationship between ACE's (adverse childhood

experiences) and an increased risk of substance use. Researchers have linked chronic stress to a host of cognitive effects, including trouble with attention, concentration, which frequently co-occur with substance abuse and addiction.

Cliffside Malibu a treatment center in CA has an extensive blog that addresses these issues (<https://www.cliffsidemalibu.com/blog/how-does-trauma-relate-to-substance-abuse>)

The APA's article "Exploring the mental health effects of poverty, hunger and homelessness on children and teens" outlines a number of studies which describe these various factors and how they are interrelated.

What current programs are showing success?

When discussing "success" relative to substance abuse programs success has to be defined. Generally, substance abuse professionals define success as some measure of long term sobriety (6 mths to a year). That being said the average person can be involved in 5-7 treatment stints before they achieve some long term sobriety. The accepted wisdom in the field is that relapse is a condition of the disease rather than a failing of treatment. Group therapies are generally considered to be more effective versus individual therapies.

Are there ways that our church might become involved with addressing the problem?

As there are many interrelated factors that increase someone's risk of substance abuse it would be necessary to address these other factors in order to have an impact on the substance abuse problem. Factors such as homelessness and insecure housing, food insecurity, inadequate childcare, and lack of reliable transportation create barriers to receiving treatment when a substance abuse problem is identified and treatment is warranted.

REPORT #5: ADVOCACY

Frank Ruff and Holly Stadtler

Senator Frank Ruff

Mecklenburg's poverty rate is about 17% for 2020. Seven years before it was 19.6% in 2013.

Causes and possible solutions are as follows:

One parent household

Re-enforce those values taught in most churches

Educate young people about family planning

Limited education

- Our school system structure has focused for too long on those planning to go to college. Often encouraging marginal students to do so. Treating other students as failures, leaving them to drop out of school or simply to flounder around in high school. This is what I have focused.
- Policy makers are starting understand. I have driven our community colleges to offer short-term skills training rather than two years to accomplish the same.
- Through a program aimed at middle school through high school, that has been named GO TEC, we have started a move in this part of Virginia that exposes young people in which they can get certification by the time they graduate from high school.
- Those older workers that might not be willing to return to get skills training is a problem that could and should be focused.

Health issues

- Some fall into poverty because health issues, educating to better eating and better life styles can prevent or delay some problems.
- Others are covered by Medicare, Medicaid or a combination.
- Some do not qualify for these programs because of assets. These are the ones that need outside help.

There is a group that understands that there are many sources of support if one claims need.

- These people have learned how to beat the system by not working or working for cash. They then qualify for anything the government or non-profits will provide.

Direction for assistance

- There is no single solution.
- The reading program, assisting after school, re-establishing the robotics program are all good education and not letting anyone fall through the cracks.

- The food pantry and backpack programs are positive. However, another step we could work on for next year might be to agree to build a few small risen gardens for a few elderly folks.
- Providing medical transportation like we do for those in our church to the unchurched might be something to consider.

Advocacy

- There are different groups that focus on advocating for different issues.
- The Methodists have a 'Day at the Capitol' in which they come to talk about issues. Other denominations do so on a less organized basis. I'm not sure it is an effective use of time and resources. Sometimes they don't fully understand the ramifications of what they are supporting. (This can have a very negative effect.)
- Letter writing to policy makers is probably more effective. Single issue letters to those at every level of government are best. They must be accurate and concise.

I hope this gives you some guidance as you work through what your goals should be and how best to tackle them.

Frank

Frank M. Ruff
District 15
Senate of Virginia

ADVOCACY: Ending Poverty by Starting Locally

Holly Stadtler

"If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime."

We can feed them, clothe them, buy gifts for their kids at Christmas, but how can we help them become self-sustaining?

We could focus efforts in so many directions: job training, skills for growing food, securing transportation so one can reliably get to their job & keep it, taking care of their health, fighting addiction, overcoming educational barriers, getting themselves hired after jail/prison time, feeding a family with limited resources, are all challenges folks in poverty face. Which are we best suited to tackle?

We need to know who are the poor in our area poor & why are they living in poverty? Is it due to:

- Lack of education
- Lack of motivation
- Family circumstance – parent been incarcerated or parent died, living with extended family member as a result (i.e. grandparent)

How can we advocate for them? First we need to have some demographic information – to know who/why they fall into this group. Then we might need to choose one focus towards ending poverty of a local group. So are we able to focus on:

- Grandparents thrust into the role of caregiver for multiple youngsters
- Single parents with multiple children
- Elderly folks
- Children

Are we focusing on job training, or job procurement or supplemental education?

Are we focusing on hunger?

Once we decide on a focus & are armed with demographic information, we need to have a core group of enthusiastic church members to lead and organize efforts and then use several methods to advocate for change:

1. One-on-one communication to have our members bring neighbors, family or friends on board with our initiative
2. Hold a public event (open house/roundtable or dinner) to share info about the initiative and bring members of the town/county to join in the effort
3. Create media to promote the cause using photos/videos/audio elements in posters, logo, letter writing across multiple platforms: printed publications, digital publications, social media outlets, radio/tv
4. Approach local officials or organizations with small group of 2-3 folks taking a meeting (school board, town administration, state house legislators, etc) and ask for support – BE SPECIFIC in your request - \$ amts, letters of support, dissemination of materials, use of their logo, etc.

Without knowing how enthusiastic members of congregation are about supporting an initiative with their time, list of friends/contacts, financial support it's hard to say how many initiatives you can move forward at one time. BUT it seems obvious that we'll need to take the long view & make sure volunteers and supporters don't burn out by taking on much more than can be achieved.

REPORT #6: Red Bird Mission Trip and Relevance to Matthew 25 Initiative

Dawn and Jimmy Hartman

What did we learn from our experience at the Red Bird Mission Work Camp, May 7-12, 2023, that would apply to Matthew 25 Initiative in Mecklenburg County?

- We learned that, with a good team and leadership, we can accomplish a lot.
- Don't judge people because you cannot change deeply entrenched habits.

What programs at Red Bird Mission were aimed meeting immediate needs?

- Home repairs by Work Camp participants.
- Mother and Infant Support through the Outreach Department
- Community Store offered access to very low cost clothing and home supplies.

What programs were aimed at helping local residents to rise out of poverty?

- Instruction in gardening, assistance with preparation of the soil, and seeds.
- Red Bird School particularly the Entrepreneurship classes.

Comparison of Mecklenburg, VA, and Clay County KY

	<i>Mecklenburg County, VA</i>	<i>Virginia</i>	<i>Clay County, KY</i>	<i>Kentucky</i>
Poverty level	17.9%	12.6%	33.6%	16.3%
Median household income	\$46,378	\$80,615	\$33,399	\$55,454
Unemployment	3.5%	3.2%	6%	3.7%
Median home value (owner occupied)	\$146,200	\$295,500	\$67,500	\$155,100

DEBRIEF OF THE MISSION TRIP

1. General reactions and observations
 - RB Mission is a phenomenal, well-organized operation. The staff were wonderful.
 - Everyone felt that they had a positive experience.
 - The bonding of our group was a special part of the experience.
 - The interaction with the NCSU group was an unexpected treasure.
 - The evening activities contributed to our understanding of the Mission as well as group bonding. (Loved the Bluegrass group!)
 - The lodge rooms and meal service made us comfortable, particularly having a gathering area. The three couples in their campers enjoyed having that option.
 - The Work Supervisor, Tim, knew the homeowner, the area, and the job to be done.
 - The baby supply operation of the Mission inspired Robert to try to replicate something similar in Mecklenburg County.
 - We can't really change poverty in Appalachia, but we did make a difference.
 - The people are happy, not ignorant, but have different goals than we do.
 - We can't change their habits such as smoking and keeping their homes and yards clean.
 - We learned not to judge, but to try to see things through their eyes.
 - Our relationships with the people, both homeowners and Red Bird workers, were important, and we want to try to do the same with CarePortal referrals.
 - Those choosing the on-campus option would like to try to work in Outreach, maybe preparing Christmas supplies.
 - We appreciated the support of our Pastor and the congregation.
2. What do you wish that you had known before the trip?
 - That we would be painting and cleaning so we could bring clothes/shoes.
 - Just how badly in need of repairs the house was.
3. What would you have wanted to change?
 - Wish the homeowners had some sweat equity in the repairs.
4. What are your feelings about doing another Mission Trip next year?
 - Everyone agreed that we should try to do one domestic trip each year.
 - We will meet again in the fall to discuss possible plans.
5. If so, do you have suggestions of where we might go?
 - Everyone was tasked with looking at other options such as the Henderson Settlement and Appalachian Service Project.

- Majority seemed to favor going back to Red Bird if none of the other options can provide the same type of infrastructure.
 - CarePortal will supply some of the same types of repairs and interactions which might make it possible for some people who don't want to travel.
6. Knowing that the experience would likely not be the same (housing, group composition, weather, staff), would you want to return to Red Bird?
- Yes. (One couple would only return if the lodge was available.)
 - From Annette – “Stay attuned to where we are called. The Holy Spirit will lead.”
7. What dates would you prefer? (Mar. 31 is Easter; Thaxtons & Pulliams gone Apr. 5-9; Hat Creek – Apr. 24-26); May – many of this group will be away)
- Suggest week of March 3, 10, or 17, 2024 (before Easter)
 - September or October, 2024
8. Was the cost prohibitive? Possibly include \$100 in church budget?
- Group agreed that, if church finances allow, \$1500-\$2000 be added to the Mission budget to allow a subsidy of \$100 per person or that the Hooker Fund might be requested to provide some funding.
9. Any additional insights that you want to share?
- Tim, the Work Supervisor, has some profound needs. Jim asked the group if they might consider. Individuals will give Jim cash, and he will send a money order to Tim at RB.
 - We want to encourage other people to join the next trip, and this may include some from other churches.
 - The interaction with the NCSU students added greatly to our experience. Spin-off ideas:
 - Take a Wed. night meal to the Wesley Foundation in the fall.
 - Possibly adopt a college student who might not have the type of support needed. Dottie will take to Care Committee to determine the best way we could do this.
 - Dawn has knitted a beautiful throw for Carol Nelson's daughter as a graduation gift. Chicks with Sticks might consider this as a project for graduates.

