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Helping poor a job for churches, not government

By Leland Conway

CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

All poverty is local. That's why the government does such a poor job fighting a war against it. The government can disburse checks to welfare recipients and build cinderblock projects that temporarily stave off homelessness for some people, but most of the means that government uses to fight poverty are faceless, generic and ineffective.

First we must come to grips with the reality that poverty can never be eradicated. The utopia necessary for such a scenario to exist goes against basic human nature. Unless our humanity and individuality are stripped from the fabric of our being, this will never happen.

But with this realization, we can work toward a set of solutions that could minimize the impact of poverty and turn destitute people facing difficult circumstances into driven, contributing members of society.

Poverty exists in two forms. The first is monetary. Some people don't have enough income to cover their current necessities. The second form is spiritual. Some people face a crisis of hope, and they can show up anywhere -- even next door.

The first of the two most effective ways of dealing with both forms of poverty is the church re-establishing itself as the leader and care-taker of the community.

That is not to say that many churches do not have thriving community ministries. Porter Memorial Baptist, Bethel Harvest, Southland Christian, Church of the Savior and Christ the King, to name just a few, are exemplary examples of the church taking an active roll in the community.

But more must be done. Churches are often the last place of refuge for the destitute when they should almost always be the first. Many churches do good works by sending money to far off missionaries while failing to sow the seeds of prosperity in their own back yards.

Second, and perhaps more important, individuals can be the most effective deterrent to poverty in our communities. No government agency knows your neighbor the way you should. And often the most effective churches find the subjects of their ministries through observant members of their congregations.

It is one thing to drop a dollar or two in the Salvation Army bucket on your way to do some Christmas shopping; it's quite another to actually get involved in someone's life. Because poverty is local and the circumstances always vary, people who are concerned and pro-active can be a quick and powerful force for good.

I've always believed in the cliché that it's better to teach a man to fish than to hand him one on a plate. But the government is really bad at teaching men to fish. I learned from one person -- a kind neighbor who took me to the Kentucky River and taught me the best bait to use for bass.

With all the recent talk about raising cigarette taxes and expanding gambling to help us solve Kentucky's problems, one can easily lose sight of real solutions. The idea of putting slot machines and crap tables around the Bluegrass makes politicians feel as if they are accomplishing something, but it will not fix the health care system or lift our education structure from the bottom to the top. Neither will a higher cigarette tax. These ideas will end up hurting the very people they are intended to help.

We often write checks to big-name charities and exhort the government to send more money because it's the easy thing to do. There are few lasting consequences to simply having a little money deducted from your paycheck by a high-overhead charity or coughing up a few more tax dollars to help the poor.

But there can be long-term effects when you look into someone's eyes and hear his story, then take action to encourage and mentor him as he makes decisions that will change his life.

Expanded gambling and higher cigarette taxes may temporarily fill the state's pork trough, but only long enough to send fattened legislators beaming back to their districts, cash in hand, and to quiet the grumbling of those who feel guilty because of what they see all around them but are too busy to do anything about.

This Christmas season I challenge people to quit whining to the government to fix our problems. Find someone you know who

has a need. Don't just meet the need; also see whether you can inspire the person to change. You'll see the only true eradication of poverty that can ever take place -- one person at a time.

Leland Conway of Nicholasville is executive editor of <http://www.conservativeedge.com/> and a radio talk-show host. E-mail him at Leland@conservativeedge.com.