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# Overcoming Poverty in Appalachia



**A**ppalachia has lost the cache that once drew national attention and initiated social ventures to enhance community life. For those left behind economically, the gap between the powerful and the poor continually widens. Perhaps those without means feel even a deeper hurt psychologically when they see themselves as losers, a in a sea of missed opportunity within a wealthy country where fewer people are willing to help.

## APPALACHIAN STEREOTYPES

Last year ABC's *20/20* aired "A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains." That program highlighted the plight of four children in Appalachia who face a steep mountain climb for a dignified life. Drugs and alcohol played a significant role among the parents in three families living a hardscrabble existence, forcing the children seemingly to parent the adults. One fellow became the first high school graduate in his family, but slipped off the ladder leading out of poverty when he withdrew from college after only eight weeks. Another fellow, unintentionally fathering a child, scrapped his dream of a military career for a life underground in the coal mines.

Stacked back to back, these vignettes paint the portrait of Appalachia viewers expect. However, sometimes we use a magnifying glass to examine the poor, when we really need a picture window to view the whole economic system.

## CULTURE OF POVERTY

Critics of Appalachian programs bemoan the persistent poverty after billions of federal dollars were pumped into the region during the War on Poverty and the 45-year history of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). With frustration Bill O'Reilly interviewing Diane Sawyer on his show in 2009 about the *20/20* program encouraged the youth of Appalachia to leave the poverty belt and "move to Miami" while Diane Sawyer with enthusiasm hailed the children's future that computers could bring.

A simple fix will not solve a complex problem. The casual commentator frequently overlooks the huge Hummers impatiently driving behind rusted pickups on a steep mountain grade, or the occasional palatial dwelling a short distance down the road from dilapidated mobile homes. Appalachia epitomizes sharply the wealth/poverty contrast in America.

The “culture of poverty” theory, so convenient and popular in the 1960s, emphasized fatalism as a way of life characterized by little rebellion or questioning. Besides fatalistic, mountain people were easily characterized as person-oriented, present-minded and individualistic when the modern world revolved around reason, accumulation, community organizations and a faith in the future. In reality the theory blamed the victim.

## A MINERAL COLONY

When the War on Poverty sputtered as it attempted to include local participation in programs to overcome this fatalism and alienation, a paradigm shift took place. Academics recognized that local folks were constrained by their political and economic powerlessness. County officials oversaw the federal poverty funds and many officials manipulated the programs to enhance their control. Local power structures in the mountains served the interests of absentee corporations that owned the timber and coal resources and controlled the land like a mineral colony.

In a land ownership study released in 1981, the 80 Appalachian counties sampled showed the top 1 percent of owners owned 44 percent of the land. The 13 million acres of surface land in the study revealed 72 percent was absentee owned as was 80 percent of the mineral rights. Astonishingly, more than 75 percent of the mineral owners paid less than twenty-five cents per acre in annual taxes. This absentee ownership, inequality and inadequate tax base insured fewer community services and opportunities for the ordinary mountain person.

## ECONOMIC POVERTY IN APPALACHIA

According to ARC, Appalachia comprises all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states totaling 420 counties. The area has somewhat more prosperous Northern and Southern Regions, but the stereotypical image of Appalachian poverty is found in the Central Region consisting of southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee and southwest Virginia. Here ARC has designated most of its 82 distressed counties for FY 2011 as among the 10 percent poorest counties in the United States.

A distressed county is one with a poverty rate of 50 percent above the national average, an unemployment



rate averaged over three years of 50 percent above the national average, and per capita market income only two-thirds the national figure. Kentucky has 42 distressed counties, West Virginia 10, Tennessee 9 and Virginia 1. Most of these counties depend on extractive industries—coal, timber, gas and oil—for their major employment.

## THE CHURCH AWAKENS

At the time the government established ARC, 18 Christian church denominations organized themselves into the Commission on Religion in Appalachia (CORA) to address poverty and strengthen the social Gospel in the region. CORA encouraged the pooling of ecumenical resources, both human and financial, to address the problems of unemployment, housing and healthcare. Through its Appalachian Development Projects Committee it funded cooperatives dealing with crafts, groceries and agriculture, and supported non-profits for housing and medical services. Its approach favored self-help efforts and local community control.

Besides economic and service projects, CORA also sponsored a community action arm, the Social, Economic and Political Issues (SEPI) task force. This committee supported the empowerment of people by organizing groups addressing labor issues, black lung, welfare rights and stronger regulations of strip mining. These groups challenged the power elite.

## THE FIRST APPALACHIAN PASTORAL LETTER

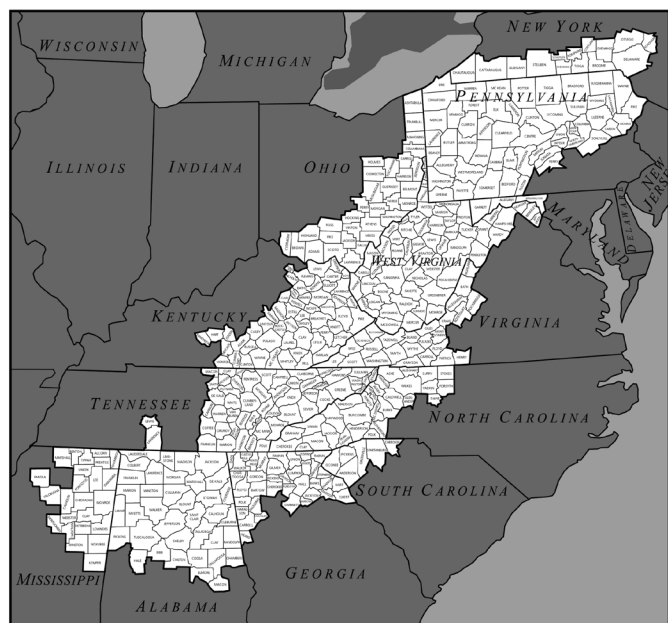
Out of the CORA mix, the Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA) was born in 1970. Through diocesan offices of Catholic Charities and offices for Appalachia, priests, religious and lay people formed a network of folks who listened to stories of local people that registered a pattern about the power of the corporations and the powerlessness of the people. This initiated a two-year process that culminated after over a hundred small feedback meetings with the first Appalachian bishops' letter, *This Land Is Home To Me*.

The letter brought about two outcomes. First, it analyzed the absentee ownership of corporations and the powerlessness of the people in light of Catholic social teachings. This analysis legitimized looking at the political and economic structures in light of the authentic development taught by John Paul II: "True development cannot consist in the simple accumulation of wealth and in the greater availability of goods and services if this is gained at the expense of the development of the masses and without due consideration for the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the human being" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 9.8).

Second, the pastoral letter motivated scores of religious women to serve in the mountains in creative ways. Many professional women leaving teaching positions wondered how to minister in a poverty area. The pastoral taught them: closeness to the people, research of the social sciences and dependence on the Holy Spirit. Throughout the mountains, community centers founded by Sisters sprung up teaching GED, community development skills and craft marketing. While parishes frequently had used clothing stores and offered direct services to families that were hungry or short on their light bill, the creative responses of women religious, many times living up the hollows and in small communities, enabled many to build a healthy self-image while deepening their relationship with God.

## OVERCOMING POVERTY IN APPALACHIA

The United Nations defines poverty as a denial of a life in dignity, and lists three dimensions: "income poverty" (inability to buy the essentials of life: food, clothing, shelter); "human development poverty" (denied access to education, healthcare and other basic services); and "social exclusion" (racism, sexism and other prejudices



Source: [http://www.arc.gov/appalachia\\_region/MapofAppalachia.asp](http://www.arc.gov/appalachia_region/MapofAppalachia.asp)

that prevent people from participating fully in society). Americans define poverty so exclusively in economic terms that we miss the liberating aspect of the UN definitions and the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of "true development" from Pope John Paul II.

Overcoming poverty begs a holistic approach. Passage of the Black Lung Benefits Act of 1972, for example (promoted by the SEPI task force), continues offering greater dignity and economic security to thousands of retired miners who between 1999 and 2004 were still dying from pneumoconiosis at the rate of 600 former miners per year. The child care offered at Sarah's Place in Sandy Hook, Ky., still provides a safe environment while parents can pursue gainful employment. The addiction counseling at New Beginnings in Dryden, Va., gives hope to clients when thousands of their neighbors have overdosed on illegal or pharmaceutical drugs.

Overcoming poverty means putting in place structures that concretely demonstrate the church's social teachings that affirm human dignity, the rights of workers and the care of creation. These structures must temper the rugged individualism of free market economics with concepts like the common good, solidarity and the call to community.

## TO THE FULLEST POTENTIAL

Ministry remains a two-way street. When ministry is seen not as "doing for" but "doing with", people of limited

means will help those in the dominate culture better understand simplicity, appreciation of creation and the richness of being neighbor. People of the church by standing with the materially poor and politically powerless will begin to realize the spiritual poverty of affluence and examine the entire fairness of the economic system. From our faith stance, overcoming poverty means encouraging

everyone to work together changing the structures of society so all can live to their fullest potential. ■



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