

1                                   **A Digest of *When Helping Hurts* by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert**

2                                   Adam Brice

3  
4           The reality of our society’s vast wealth presents North American Christians with an  
5 enormous responsibility, for throughout the Scriptures God’s people are commanded to show  
6 compassion to the poor. In fact, doing so is simply part of our job description as followers of  
7 Jesus Christ. Nobody can deny the upswing in social concern among North American  
8 evangelicals in the past two decades. But any excitement about this development must be  
9 seriously tempered by two concerns. First, North American Christians are simply not doing  
10 enough. We are the richest people ever to walk the earth, yet most of us live as though there is  
11 nothing terribly wrong in the world. We do not necessarily need to feel guilty about our  
12 wealth, but we should wake up every morning with a deep sense that something is terribly  
13 wrong with the world and yearn and strive to do something about it. Second, when North  
14 American Christians *do* attempt to alleviate poverty, the methods used often do considerable  
15 harm to both the materially poor and the materially non-poor. Not only are our methods  
16 wasting human, spiritual, financial, and organizational resources, they are actually exacerbating  
17 the very problems they are trying to solve. There is hope, however, because God is at work.  
18 This book is designed to help the church increase both the level and effectiveness of our efforts  
19 to minister to a hurting world. [p. 11-28]

20  
21           The mission of Jesus was and is to preach the good news of the kingdom of God—to say to  
22 the world, “I am the King of kings, and Lord of lords, and I am using my power to fix everything  
23 that sin has ruined.” As the King, Jesus is bringing healing to the entire cosmos. Yes, Jesus died  
24 for our sins, but he also died to reconcile—that is, to put into right relationship—all that he  
25 created. The curse is cosmic in scope, bringing decay, brokenness, and death to every speck of  
26 the universe, but as the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus is making all things new! This is  
27 the good news of the gospel. Jesus proved that he was the King both by preaching the good  
28 news of the kingdom in his words, and by showing the good news of the kingdom in his deeds.  
29 The church must do the same—preach the good news of the kingdom in word and deed. When  
30 people look at the church they should see the *embodiment* of Jesus and his kingdom. We are to  
31 embody Jesus Christ by doing what he did and what he continues to do through us: declare—  
32 using both words and deeds—that Jesus is the King who is bringing a kingdom of righteousness,  
33 justice, and peace. And the church needs to do this where Jesus did it, among the blind, the  
34 lame, the sick, the outcast, and the poor, because God has chosen to reveal his kingdom in the  
35 places where the world, in all of its pride, would least expect it. [p. 31-44]

36  
37           Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, evangelical Christians played a large role in ministering to the  
38 physical and spiritual needs of the poor. However, this all changed at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup>  
39 century as evangelicals battled theological liberals over the fundamental tenets of the faith.  
40 Evangelicals interpreted the rising social gospel movement, which seemed to equate all  
41 humanitarian efforts with bringing in the kingdom, as part of the overall theological drift of the  
42 nation. As evangelicals tried to distance themselves from the social gospel movement, they  
43 ended up in a large-scale retreat from the front lines of poverty alleviation. A “great reversal”  
44 occurred in the evangelical church’s approach to social problems. This great reversal came

1 prior to the rise of the welfare state in America, and was fundamentally due to shifts in  
 2 theology and not—as many have asserted—to government programs that drove the church  
 3 away from ministry to the poor. The church has a great deal of freedom in terms of how we  
 4 should best reach out to the poor in any given situation, but we must rediscover the Christ-  
 5 centered, fully orbed perspective of the kingdom of God taught everywhere in the pages of  
 6 Scripture. [p.45-49]

8 Defining poverty is much more than a merely academic exercise, as our definition of  
 9 poverty will play a large role in shaping our thinking about what poverty alleviation should  
 10 involve. Western people, who tend to be materialistic, typically define poverty in exclusively  
 11 materialistic terms—that is, poverty is the lack of material resources. Western approaches to  
 12 poverty alleviation, then, tend to revolve almost exclusively around providing material  
 13 resources. For example, the World Bank has poured enormous amounts of money into  
 14 majority world countries with little noticeable effect in terms of poverty alleviation. People in  
 15 majority world countries, where there is in fact much material poverty, tend to describe their  
 16 poverty more in psychological and social terms—shame, inferiority, powerlessness, humiliation,  
 17 hopelessness, isolation, depression, etc. If our attempts at poverty alleviation are to have any  
 18 hope of success, we need a robust biblical understanding of what poverty actually is, and that  
 19 begins with a robust biblical view of man. [p. 51-55]

21 A biblical view of man takes into account a person’s relationship to God, to self, to others,  
 22 and to the rest of creation. These four relationships are the building blocks of life. When these  
 23 relationships are functioning properly, humans experience the fullness of life that God intended  
 24 because we are being what God created us to be. We are able to fulfill our calling to glorify  
 25 God and promote human flourishing through our work. But of course the world is not the way  
 26 God intended it to be. Our sinful rebellion against God has not only caused brokenness in our  
 27 relationship with God, it has also had devastating effects on the other three relationships as  
 28 well. Thus there are religious, social, economic, psychological, and political effects to our sin. A  
 29 biblical view of poverty would include the brokenness that we experience in all four of these  
 30 foundational relationships (see diagram).

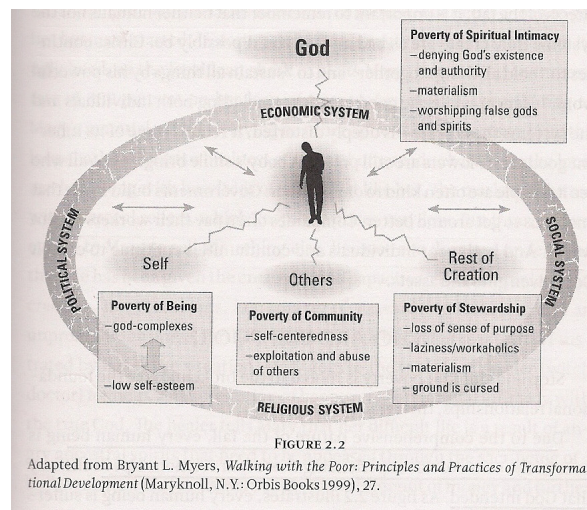


FIGURE 2.2  
 Adapted from Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1999), 27.

1 One important implication of this comprehensive view of sin is the fact that *every* human  
2 being is poor in some way or another—that is, every human being is experiencing brokenness in  
3 terms of their relationship with God, with self, with others or with the rest of creation. How we  
4 experience that poverty varies greatly. Material poverty can be uniquely devastating as it  
5 creates a daily struggle to survive resulting in feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and desperation  
6 that are unparalleled in the lives of those who are not materially poor. Nevertheless, from a  
7 biblical perspective it is crucial for us to realize that we are *all* poor. Unless we grasp this fact,  
8 our attempts to help the materially poor by just giving them some of our resources are likely to  
9 do far more harm than good. Such attempts typically create a situation in which those with  
10 resources feel superior (they develop a god-complex) because they are not poor, and those  
11 without resources feel inferior (their sense of shame and humiliation over their inability to  
12 provide is increased), and no real healing occurs for anyone. In fact, the poverty or brokenness  
13 of both parties is actually increased. [p. 56-73]

14  
15 As we have seen, poverty is rooted in the brokenness we all experience in our relationships  
16 to God, self, others and the rest of creation. Jesus is ushering in a kingdom that will bring  
17 healing and restoration to all of these relationships and indeed to the whole of creation. The  
18 church is to do what Jesus himself did: bear witness to the reality of this coming kingdom using  
19 both words and anticipatory deeds. With this basic biblical perspective in place, we are able to  
20 develop a biblical approach to poverty alleviation. Poverty alleviation is the ministry of  
21 reconciliation: moving people closer to glorifying God by living in right relationship with God,  
22 with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. The goal then is not to turn the materially  
23 poor of the world into middle-to-upper class North Americans, a group characterized by high  
24 rates of divorce, sexual addiction, substance abuse, mental illness, and other forms of poverty.  
25 The goal is to restore people to a full expression of humanness, to being what God created us  
26 all to be, people who glorify him by living in right relationship with God, self, others, and the  
27 rest of creation. [p. 75-78]

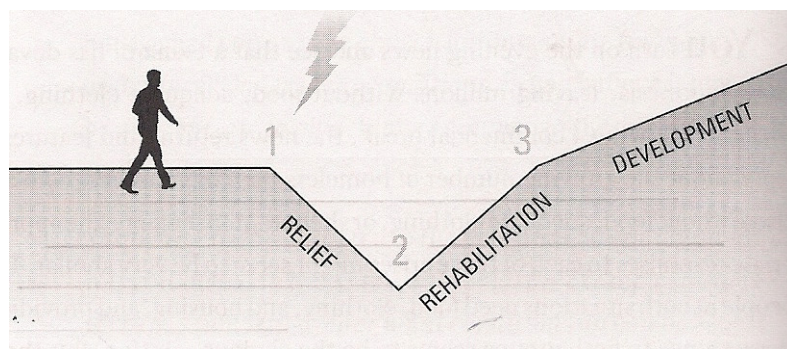
28  
29 On this view, the alleviation of material poverty in particular will be seen as working to bring  
30 reconciliation in these four foundational relationships, so that people can fulfill their calling to  
31 glorify God and bless others by working and supporting themselves and their families.  
32 Alleviating material poverty is more than just ensuring that people have material things. It  
33 involves the much harder task of empowering people to earn sufficient material things through  
34 their own labor, for in so doing we move people closer to being what God created them to be.  
35 Our relationship to the materially poor should be one in which we recognize that both of us are  
36 broken and that both of us need the blessing of reconciliation. We should say to them, “We are  
37 here to walk with you and to help you use your gifts and abilities to avoid being in this situation  
38 in the future. Let us into your life and let us work with you to determine the reason you are in  
39 this predicament” (p. 55). Our perspective should be less about how we are going to fix the  
40 materially poor, and more about how we can walk together in the midst of our poverty, asking  
41 God to fix both of us. [p. 78-80]

42  
43 It should be evident from this perspective that true poverty alleviation cannot occur apart  
44 from people accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord. Yes, people can experience some degree of

1 healing in their lives, but a person cannot experience foundational and lasting change in any of  
2 the four foundational relationships without becoming a new creature in Christ. This fact implies  
3 that we cannot hope for lasting transformation in terms of poverty alleviation without the  
4 involvement of the local church and the verbal proclamation of the gospel that has been  
5 entrusted to it. The goal is to see people restored to being what God created them to be:  
6 people made in the image of God with the gifts and abilities to make decisions and to effect  
7 change in the world around them; and people who steward their lives, communities, resources,  
8 and relationships in order to bring glory to God. This kind of development and transformation  
9 tends to happen in highly relational, process-focused ministries more than in impersonal,  
10 product-focused ministries. [p. 80-99].

11  
12 In order to “help without hurting,” it is crucial to determine whether the situation calls for  
13 *relief, rehabilitation, or development*. The failure to distinguish among these situations is one  
14 of the most common reasons that poverty alleviation efforts often do harm. *Relief* is the urgent  
15 and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or  
16 man-made crisis. The key feature of relief is a provider-receiver dynamic in which the provider  
17 gives assistance—often material—to the receiver, who is largely incapable of helping himself at  
18 that time. *Rehabilitation* begins where relief stops, and seeks to restore people and their  
19 communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. The key feature of  
20 rehabilitation is working *with* people as they participate in their own recovery. *Development* is  
21 not done *to* people or *for* people but *with* people. The key dynamic in development is  
22 promoting a process by which all the people involved—both the “helpers” and the “helped”—  
23 become more of what God created them to be, experiencing reconciliation with God, self,  
24 others, and the rest of creation in a way that moves them *beyond* their pre-crisis situation (see  
25 diagram). With these distinctions in mind we can see that one of the biggest mistakes North  
26 Americans make in poverty alleviation is applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or  
27 development is the appropriate intervention. [p. 103-105].

28



29  
30

31 In order to determine whether or not relief is the proper response in a given situation, we  
32 should at least ask the following questions: 1.> Is there really a serious crisis at hand, such that  
33 if you fail to provide immediate help, there will really be serious, negative consequences? If  
34 not, then relief is not the appropriate intervention, for there is time for the person to take  
35 actions on his own behalf. 2.> To what degree was the individual personally responsible for the  
36 crisis? The point is not to punish the person for any mistakes or sins committed, but to ensure

1 that appropriate lessons are being learned in the situation? 3.> Can the person help himself? If  
2 so, then a handout is almost *never* appropriate, as it undermines the person's capacity to be a  
3 steward of his own resources and abilities. 4.> To what extent has this person already received  
4 help from you or others in the past, and how likely is he to be receiving such help in the future?  
5 It is unlikely that we know many people who are actually in need of relief as it is defined here.  
6 These few would include the severely disabled, some of the very elderly, orphans, the mentally  
7 ill homeless population, and victims of natural disasters. Most of the poor in our communities  
8 and around the world are in need of rehabilitation and development. This could involve  
9 providing financial assistance, but such assistance would be conditional upon and supportive of  
10 their being productive. In most cases we should be seeking interventions that complement  
11 people's own work and thrift with additional resources. [p. 106-109]  
12

13 When relief *is* the appropriate response there are several things to keep in mind in order to  
14 provide it effectively. First, since relief is by definition an intervention that is appropriate only  
15 in time of crisis, it's important to try to be prepared ahead of time by asking what types of relief  
16 situations the church is likely to encounter. Second, it is important to remember that relief is to  
17 be given seldom, immediately, and only temporarily during that time when people are unable  
18 to help themselves. When that time has passed, relief should stop and the work of  
19 rehabilitation should begin. Finally, if local people and organizations are able and willing to  
20 help those in crisis, we should let them do so. Local people tend to have a much better  
21 understanding of the people, the situation, and the best way to provide help. [p. 109-112]  
22

23 *We should never do for people what they should do for themselves. The poison of*  
24 *paternalism is most often seen in giving people material resources when the real need is for*  
25 *people to steward their own resources.* But paternalism can come in many forms including  
26 spiritual, knowledge, labor, and managerial paternalism. Knowledge paternalism is a particular  
27 problem in cross-cultural contexts, where North Americans have a tendency to assume that  
28 their ministry styles are normative for all cultures. [p.115-119]  
29

30 It is difficult for one individual or organization to provide relief, rehabilitation, and  
31 development as the relational dynamics in each situation are very different. Therefore we all  
32 need to find our niche of service within God's kingdom. Unfortunately, most existing  
33 organizations are focused on providing relief, even though most of the materially poor are not  
34 in need of relief. This situation develops because: 1.> most organizations have a material  
35 definition of poverty, 2.> relief is easier to do than rehabilitation and development, and 3.> it is  
36 easier to raise funds and volunteers for relief efforts, which do not require long-lasting, time-  
37 consuming relationships. Churches committed to providing appropriate interventions for  
38 people in need should keep a list of other organizations in the community that are providing  
39 relief and rehabilitation. [p. 119-121]  
40

41 Once you have determined whether relief, rehabilitation, or development is the correct  
42 intervention in a given situation, what do you do next? Many feel the obvious thing to do is to  
43 take a "needs-based" approach to the situation, in which you determine what the needs of the  
44 individual or community are, and then what the best way to help would be. The merit of this

1 approach is that it attempts to diagnose the underlying problem in a situation, which is  
2 essential to formulating proper solutions. The problem with this approach is that it focuses on  
3 what is lacking in the life of a person or individual. It begins the relationship with low-income  
4 people by asking them essentially, “What’s wrong with you? How can I fix you?” The  
5 assumption in such approaches tends to be that solutions to poverty are dependent upon  
6 outside human and financial resources. But pouring in outside resources is not sustainable and  
7 only exacerbates the feelings of helplessness and inferiority that limits low-income people from  
8 being better stewards of their God-given talents and resources. Much better is an “asset-  
9 based” approach to community development. This approach puts the emphasis on what the  
10 materially poor already have and asks them to consider “What is right with you? What gifts and  
11 abilities has God given you that you can use to improve your life and that of your neighbors?”  
12 *The relationship begins by asking the materially poor how they can be stewards of their own*  
13 *gifts and resources, seeking to restore individuals and communities to being what God has*  
14 *created them to be. [p. 125-126]*  
15

16 Once assets have been identified, it is then appropriate to ask the materially poor individual  
17 or community the question, “What needs can you identify that must be addressed?” As the  
18 relationship progresses, it may become apparent that the individual or community does not  
19 have sufficient assets to address all of their needs. *In that case it may become necessary to*  
20 *bring in outside resources, but it is crucial that such resources do not undermine the willingness*  
21 *or ability of the materially poor individual or community to be stewards of their own gifts and*  
22 *resources.* There are different specific strategies that can be used in an “asset-based” approach  
23 to community development. “Asset mapping” uses individual or group interviews to catalogue  
24 the assets in a particular community. “Participatory learning in action” uses a variety of group-  
25 based exercises to engage and energize community members in thinking about their  
26 community’s history, assets, survival strategies, and goals. “Appreciative inquiry” facilitates a  
27 process in which low-income communities narrate what has worked well for them in the past,  
28 so that they can begin to imagine how life can be better in the future. These are merely some  
29 of the ways in which one can approach an individual or community from an “asset-based”  
30 rather than “needs-based” perspective. [p. 127-139]  
31

32 One of the main reasons for slow progress in poverty-alleviation efforts around the world is  
33 *inadequate participation of the materially poor themselves in the process.* Meaningful  
34 participation of the materially poor themselves in the selection, design, implementation, and  
35 evaluation of an intervention greatly increases the likelihood of success. But most poverty-  
36 alleviation attempts in recent history have been highly non-participatory, involving a blueprint  
37 approach in which the materially *non-poor* make all the decisions about the project, and then  
38 *do* the project to the materially poor. The blueprint approach appears to be very efficient, but  
39 it often fails because it imposes solutions on poor communities that are inconsistent with local  
40 culture, that are not embraced and “owned” by the community members, or that cannot work  
41 in that particular setting. Because of these pitfalls, many experts in community development  
42 have turned to a “learning process” approach to development. This approach seeks to facilitate  
43 an action-reflection cycle in which the materially poor themselves participate in all aspects of  
44 the project. The role of the outsider is not to do something *to* or *for* the materially poor person

1 or community, but to seek solutions together *with* them. A learning process approach to  
2 problems increases the likelihood of success because, like all human beings, poor people are  
3 more likely to have a sense of enthusiasm for and ownership of a project if they have been full  
4 participants in it from the very beginning. Moreover, poor individuals and communities are  
5 highly complex and not well understood by the materially non-poor. Hence solutions that do  
6 not involve the materially non-poor in the process often completely fail to understand the  
7 situation. While a learning process approach typically takes more time to produce tangible  
8 results, it is more efficient in the long run because it is more likely to result in workable and  
9 sustainable solutions. *The key point to remember in this discussion is that participation is not*  
10 *just a means to an end but rather a legitimate end in its own right.* Helping the materially poor  
11 to get involved in the process of solving their own problems is as important as the problem  
12 itself, since the ultimate goal from a biblical perspective is to restore people to experiencing  
13 humanness in the way God intended. Part of what it means to be created in God's image is to  
14 exercise dominion over our individual lives and communities, constantly seeking better ways to  
15 use our gifts and resources to solve problems we face, help others to flourish, and bring glory to  
16 God. [p. 141-158]

17  
18 The potential for harming the materially poor while trying to help them is particularly high  
19 with cross-cultural short-term missions trips (STMs). Most STM teams are unaware of what  
20 happens when two different cultures collide. In particular the United States and Majority  
21 World cultures have very different conceptions about how time operates and the role of  
22 individuals and groups in shaping life. People from the United States tend to be extremely  
23 monochronic. They view time as a limited and valuable resource which can be lost or saved.  
24 Good stewardship means getting the most out of every minute, and completing clearly defined  
25 to-do lists. Majority World cultures tend to be much more polychronic. On this view time is a  
26 somewhat unlimited resource. Schedules and plans are mere guidelines that have little  
27 authority over how one spends one's day. Tasks typically take a backseat to forming and  
28 deepening relationships. People from such cultures tend to be less productive in terms of  
29 goods and services, but they typically have a much deeper sense of community and belonging.  
30 Americans are also extremely individualistic, emphasizing the value and uniqueness of each  
31 human being, whereas Majority World cultures are much more collectivist, emphasizing loyalty  
32 and self-sacrifice for the sake of the group. The importance of the local church is felt much  
33 more keenly in collectivist societies. As most STMs involve people going from the United States  
34 to Majority World cultures, it is not difficult to see that the potential for cultural conflict and  
35 misunderstanding is high. STM participants view the trip as an opportunity to "do missions."  
36 They want to use their time "wisely," and get as much done as possible in two weeks. They  
37 expect many activities to occur and projects to be completed. But getting things done quickly is  
38 simply not what development is all about. Development is a lifelong process not a two week  
39 product. For this reason, most STMs end up engaging in relief efforts when development is  
40 really the intervention that is called for. [p. 161-169]

41  
42 The potential for paternalism is particularly high with STMs. Local organizations and  
43 ministries are in a much better position to actually help the materially poor in their area, but all  
44 too often STM teams ignore local people in favor of "getting things done more efficiently."

1 Often local people who have given their lives to serving the needs of those in their area are  
2 humiliated by STM participants who seem to think they can fix everything in a few weeks.  
3 Another significant concern is the wise use of financial resources. STM trips are simply not a  
4 very good investment from a financial perspective. The money typically spent on one STM  
5 team for a two week experience is often adequate to support more than a dozen far more  
6 effective indigenous workers for a year. Moreover, studies have shown that STM trips do not  
7 significantly increase long-term giving for to missions by participants or their sending churches.  
8 Nor has there been any significant increase in those serving as long-term missionaries despite  
9 the explosion of STMs. [p. 169-174]

10  
11 Some suggestions for improving the impact of STMs would include: 1.> Make sure the host  
12 organization understands and practices biblical principles of poverty alleviation. 2.> Make sure  
13 the host organization and community members have requested a STM team as part of their  
14 overall ministry plan. 3.> Design the trip to be about “being” rather than “doing,” increasing  
15 the potential of encouraging local people, sharing ministry, and developing relationships. 4.>  
16 Require all STM participants to pay for a portion of their expenses out of their own pocket.  
17 Learners are more likely to value their training if they pay for a portion of it. [p. 174-180 ]

18  
19 For the first time in US history, more poor people live in suburbs than in cities. Regardless  
20 of where a church is located or where a person lives, it is very likely that one does not have to  
21 travel far to find materially poor people. Poor people are often at the mercy of systems created  
22 by the powerful. Many poor people also have certain behavioral problems that make them less  
23 than ideal workers. Often these behavioral problems are actually encouraged by the systems  
24 the non-poor have designed to help alleviate poverty. Thus poverty alleviation efforts will need  
25 to focus on development not relief, as has been argued already. Specifically, they will need to  
26 address both broken systems and broken individuals using highly relational approaches  
27 wherever possible. In terms of getting out of poverty, the most basic needs poor people have  
28 would include the following: 1.> the ability to work at jobs with living wages, 2.> the capacity  
29 to manage their money, 3.> the opportunity to accumulate wealth, 4.> a greater supply of  
30 quality education, housing, and health care at affordable rates, and 5.> like all people, the poor  
31 need discipleship ministries that help them to grow to maturity in Christ. Examples of  
32 development based approaches to meeting these needs would include jobs preparedness  
33 ministries (e.g. *Jobs for Life*), financial education ministries, and wealth accumulation ministries.  
34 [p. 183-199]. See also [www.chalmers.org](http://www.chalmers.org) for more examples and training programs.

35  
36 Because 2.6 billion people in the Majority World live on less than 2 dollars per day they  
37 usually do not have access to typical savings and loan services that the rest of us take for  
38 granted. Added to this problem are the practices of corrupt lenders who often charge the poor  
39 anywhere from 520% to 3,650% interest on small loans, making it impossible to every  
40 accumulate wealth and escape the vicious cycle of poverty. The micro-financing movement  
41 attempts to address this problem by providing small loans to poor people in order to enable  
42 them to acquire capital for their farms and microenterprises. In order to be successful,  
43 however, the lending agency has to have a large amount of money to ensure that it will be  
44 there tomorrow. If borrowers know the lender is likely to be gone in the near future, they will

1 not repay their loans, causing the lender not to be there in the future. The borrowers must  
2 know there will be penalties for a failure to repay or the whole system collapses upon itself.  
3 Another approach to providing financing for the poor is a Savings and Credit Association  
4 (SCA). An SCA is a very simple credit union in which poor people save and lend their own  
5 money to one another. Each group member contributes a small amount to the fund at a  
6 weekly meeting, and the SCA determines how much of the group fund to lend, to whom, and  
7 what the terms of the loan will be. At the end of a predetermined time (usually six months to a  
8 year) each member's savings are returned along with dividends they have earned from the  
9 interest charged on loans. It is basically micro-financing without outside managers of money.  
10 In this approach the church can be more actively involved in hosting the meetings, providing  
11 training in how the SCA works, and helping the poor to develop systems for saving and  
12 borrowing money. These meetings also provide an excellent and natural context for a holistic  
13 approach to evangelism and discipleship. Other approaches to poverty alleviation in the  
14 Majority World would include small-business training to poor entrepreneurs, and "business as  
15 missions" ministries where missionaries establish businesses in order to support themselves  
16 financially and provide employment for the poor. [p. 201-219]