



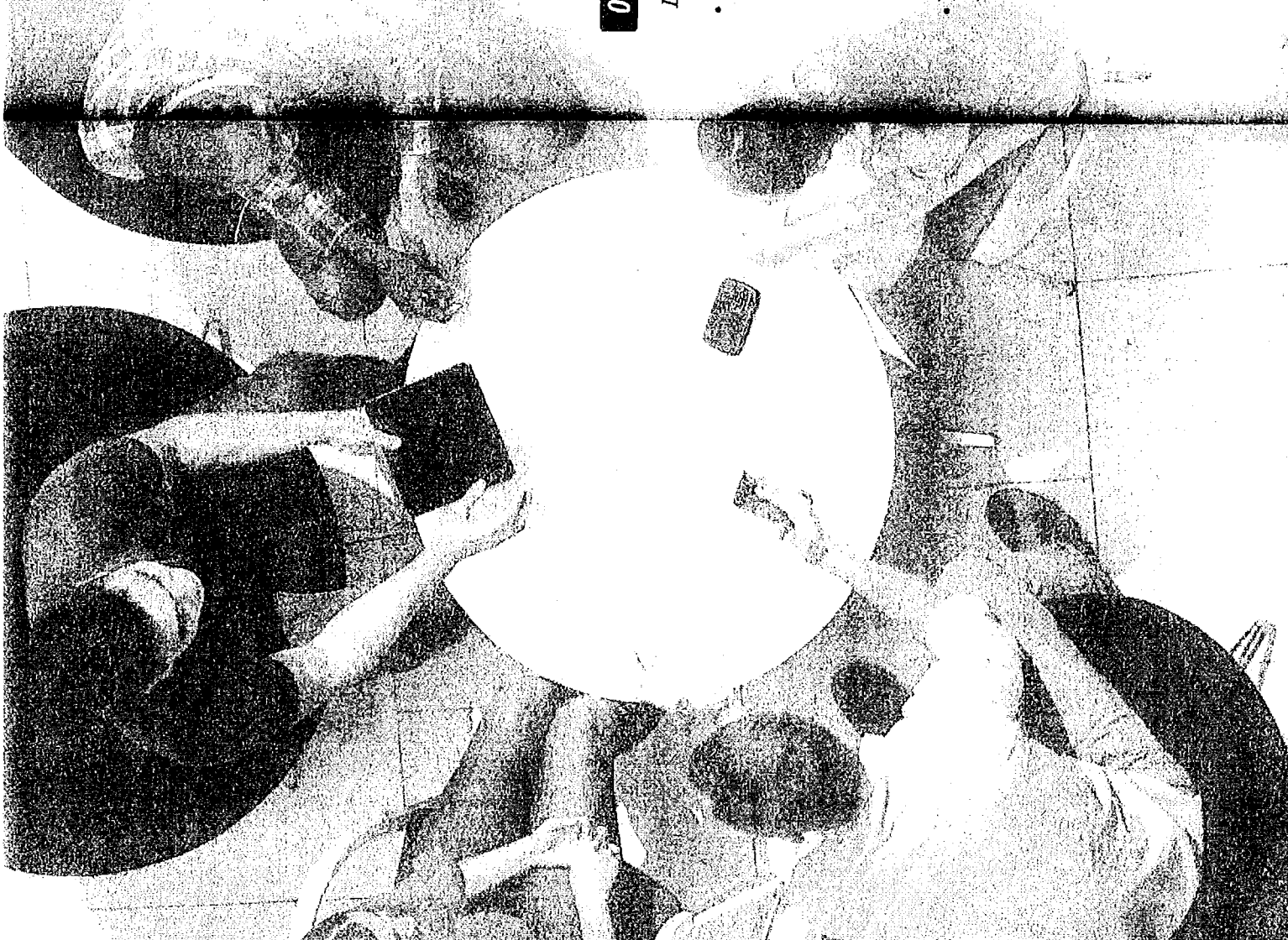
UNIT 2

# SEEING GOD AT WORK

## OPEN

*Discuss these questions as you read this week's introduction.*

- If Alisa showed up at your church door next Sunday asking for help, what would you do?
- How would you define success in your efforts to help Alisa? What would her new "story" look like?



### Are We There Yet?

During the 1990s, Alisa Collins and her family lived in one of America's most dangerous public housing projects in inner-city Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Alisa got pregnant at the age of sixteen, dropped out of high school, and started collecting welfare checks. She has five children from three different fathers, none of whom help with childrearing. With few skills, no husband, and limited social networks, Alisa struggled to raise her family in an environment characterized by widespread substance abuse, failing schools, high rates of unemployment, rampant violence, teenage pregnancy, and an absence of role models.

From time to time, Alisa tried to get a job, but a number of obstacles prevented her from finding and keeping regular work. First, there were simply not a lot of decent-paying jobs for high school dropouts living in ghettos. Second, the welfare system penalized Alisa for earning money, taking away benefits for every dollar she earned and for every asset she acquired. Third, Alisa had child-care issues that made it difficult to keep a job. Finally, Alisa felt inferior and inadequate. When she tried to get vocational training or a job and faced some obstacle, she quickly lost confidence and rapidly retreated back to where she was comfortable—public housing and welfare checks. Alisa felt trapped, and she and her family often talked about how they couldn't get out of the ghetto.

### WATCH

Close your books and use the accompanying QR code to watch this week's video.

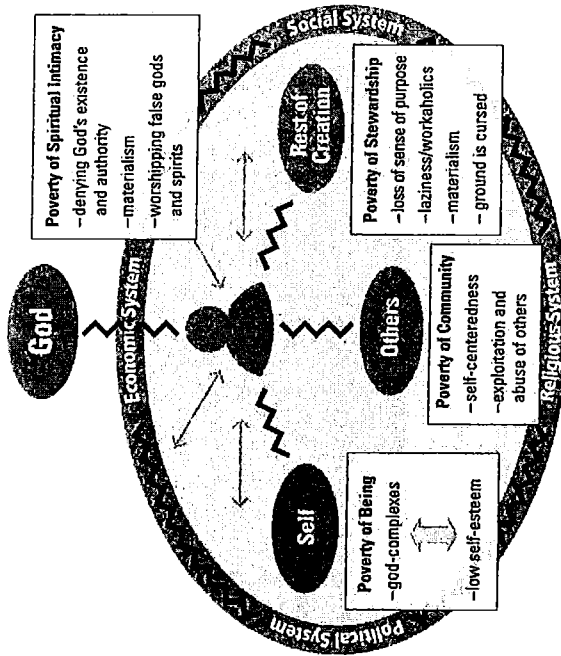


[www.helpingwithouthurting.org/smallgroup-2](http://www.helpingwithouthurting.org/smallgroup-2)

### APPLY

1. You may not be materially poor, but what evidence do you see in your own life of the four broken foundational relationships? In what areas do you need to repent and pray for God's healing?

### THE FOUR BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS



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

- Broken Relationship with God:

- Broken Relationship with Self:

- Broken Relationship with Others:
- Broken Relationship with the Rest of Creation:

2. Read through the definition of poverty alleviation below:

### **POVERTY ALLEVIATION**

A process in which people, both the materially poor and non-poor, move closer to living in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation.

- Think back to a situation in which you tried to minister to people who were materially poor. Did your approach reconcile the four broken relationships in each of you? In what ways?
- Were there any ways that your approach actually contributed to greater “poverty” in the four relationships in each of you? If so, what could you do differently in the future?

3. Look back at Alisa’s story at the beginning of this unit. Given what we have talked about so far, including the quote below, what do you think “success” would look like in her story?

*“If you go back to what is poverty, poverty alleviation isn’t just about fixing their circumstances. It is about helping them discover that they are an image bearer and that they have tremendous value as a human being, that they are called to be a steward of their resources and opportunities.”*

- In what specific ways would her life be different?
- What personal choices would Alisa need to make, with God’s help, to move out of poverty?
- What changes in systemic factors or circumstances—challenges Alisa has no control over—would aid Alisa in the process of moving out of poverty?
- With this new “story” in mind, how could you or your church help people like Alisa when they walk into your church?

**CLOSE** (or proceed to Go Deeper if time permits)

After decades of living on welfare checks, Alisa Collins started finishing her high school degree, working full-time as a kindergarten teacher, and getting up at 4:00 a.m. to wash her family's clothes before she was due at work. What happened?

It all began when Miss Miller, the principal of the local school, hired Alisa to work part-time as a teacher's aide. Miss Miller soon observed that Alisa had natural teaching gifts and took the time to encourage Alisa to pursue a teaching career, guiding her to the education and certification she would need. With Miss Miller's relational and nurturing approach, Alisa began to gain confidence. And while her view of herself was changing, two important changes also occurred in Alisa's economic environment. First, Congress passed welfare-reform legislation, making welfare more "pro-work" and placing limits on the length of time people could stay on it. Alisa knew her days on welfare were coming to an end and that she simply had to find a full-time job. Second, Miss Miller offered Alisa a job as a full-time teacher.

Churches are uniquely positioned to provide the relational ministry on an individual level that people like Alisa need. Of course, churches can also offer Alisa something that Miss Miller could not: a clear articulation of the gospel so that Alisa can experience the profound and lasting change of material poverty alleviation—the ability to fulfill her calling of glorifying God through her work and life.

**PRAY**

"Jesus Christ transforms both of us . . . Poverty alleviation is about walking side by side, hand in hand, and saying 'I'm broken, you're broken' but Jesus Christ can show up and bring healing to both of us."

Spend time this week praying that God would reveal your need for His miraculous reconciling work in your own heart, and that He would show you ways you can be a channel of that work to others in your community.

**GO DEEPER**

Use one or more of the following modules to further explore principles of poverty alleviation.

**WORK, WORSHIP, AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION**

(Reference *When Helping Hurts*, 73–75.)

*"It is very hard to beg. You know, if I come to you to ask for things, I've got to come down."* —Sarah Kasulic

While we are all poor in the sense that we are all experiencing less than the fullness that God intended for us at creation, the materially poor face a daily struggle to survive that creates feelings of helplessness, anxiety, suffocation, shame, and desperation that are simply unparalleled in most of our lives. Thus, the definition of material poverty alleviation has its own unique dynamics:

**MATERIAL POVERTY ALLEVIATION**

Working to reconcile the four foundational relationships so that people can fulfill their callings of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruit of that work.

Note these two things about the definition of material poverty alleviation:

- Material poverty alleviation involves more than ensuring that people have sufficient material things. Rather, it involves the much harder task of empowering people to *earn* sufficient material things through their own labor, for in doing so people are moved closer to being what God created them to be.
- Work is an act of worship. When people fulfill their callings by glorifying God in their work, praise Him for their gifts and abilities, and see both their effort and its products as an offering to Him, then work is an act of worship to God.

1. Think about your past and present work: Do you *believe* and *act* like the purpose of work is to glorify God?
2. What gifts has God given you? List gifts that are both specific (skills and talents) and more general (personality strengths, things you have learned from past experience, etc.).
3. In what ways has your work, present or past, utilized these gifts?
4. Think about your materially poor friends or family members. What gifts do you see in them that they could use to God's glory and to support themselves through work?

**CHRIST IS MAKING ALL THINGS NEW**  
(Reference *When Helping Hurts*, 76-79.)

*"The church is Grand Central Station for the Kingdom of God. The church is the primary manifestation of the Kingdom of God, and Christ is the one who alleviates poverty."*

As the local church, we are to display God's reconciling work to the materially poor. Jesus is not just "beaming up" our souls out of planet Earth in Star Trek fashion because things are broken and messy; rather, Jesus is bringing reconciliation to every last speck of the universe,

including both our foundational relationships and the systems that emanate from them. *Poverty is rooted in broken relationships, so the solution to poverty is rooted in the power of Jesus' death and resurrection to put all things into right relationship again.*

1. Read the following passages of Scripture. What do these passages say (explicitly or implicitly) about what God is doing and will ultimately accomplish in this world? How are you and your church demonstrating this work to the materially poor?
  - Colossians 1:15-20:
  - 2 Corinthians 5:17-20:
  - Revelation 21:1-4:
2. Can materially poor people participate fully in your church's corporate worship and fellowship? What obstacles might they encounter to being full participants? What might you do to address these obstacles?

As we walk with the materially poor over time in relationships, we also have to remember that Christ has been active in these communities since the creation of the world. This should give us a sense of humility and awe as we enter poor communities, for part of what we see there reflects the very hand of God. Of course, the residents of these communities may not recognize that God has been at work. In fact, they might not even know who God is. So part of our task may include introducing the community to who God is, proclaiming the good news of Christ's reconciling work through the cross and the empty tomb.

3. Think about a time in the past when you or your church ministered to the materially poor. Did your efforts include both a clear, verbal articulation of the gospel *and* a concrete demonstration of Christ's concern for restoring their four relationships—and thus His concern for healing their material poverty?

### HELPING OR HURTING?

(Reference *When Helping Hurts*, 61–64.)

*“We’ve just been steeped in this society that values and judges people based on what they have and what they have accomplished, so we are always going to be fighting falling back into this default mode of ‘They need me, they need what I know, they need what I have.’” —Jeriyn Sanders*

One of the biggest problems in many poverty-alleviation efforts is that they exacerbate the poverty of being of the economically rich—their god-complexes—and the poverty of being of the economically poor—their feelings of inferiority and shame.

When combined with our material understanding of poverty, the results can be devastating. We may help improve people's physical conditions—they may have clean water, repaired houses, or new classrooms—but the other, intangible aspects of their poverty are

deepened. The equation below summarizes this dynamic:

Material Definition of Poverty	+	God-complexes of Materially Non-Poor	+	Feelings of Inferiority of Materially Poor	=	Harm to Both Materially Poor and Non-Poor
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• Does this equation describe the work of you, your church, or other ministries in your community? If so, what steps can you take to move toward a healthier ministry dynamic?

### ESCAPING THE POVERTY TRAP

(Reference *When Helping Hurts*, 84–87.)

*“When you have a poverty of spirit, your hope diminishes, your sense of confidence erodes, and you begin to believe that for you there is no way out. It is what I would call conditioned hopelessness.” —Robert Lupton*

Whether we realize it or not, the fall had an impact on everything in our lives and the lives of the materially poor in deeply debilitating ways.

1. Have you ever felt trapped by life's circumstances to the point where you believed that you could not do anything to change the situation? If so, describe the emotions and behaviors that this produced in you. Did you ever feel like just giving up?

2. Do you see this sense of entrapment at work in the lives of the materially poor around you? If so, in what ways might you practically model and encourage them with the hope of Christ's reconciliation and restoration?

Consider Alisa's story. While Alisa's worldview, values, and behaviors clearly contributed to her material poverty, as an African-American woman growing up in a ghetto, she is also a victim of powerful systemic forces that have dealt her a different set of cards than those most North Americans received. The ghetto into which Alisa was born, through no choice of her own, was shaped by centuries of racial discrimination and damaging economic, social, and political factors. What happens when society crams historically oppressed, uneducated, unemployed, and relatively young human beings into high-rise buildings, provides them with inferior education, healthcare, and employment systems, and then establishes financial disincentives for work? Is it really that surprising that we see out-of-wedlock pregnancies, broken families, violent crimes, and drug trafficking?

Being aware of this background makes all the difference when Alisa walks into our church asking for assistance. Does Alisa have personal sins and behaviors that are contributing to her material poverty? Yes. But to reduce her problem to this ignores the comprehensive impact of the fall on both individuals and systems, blinding us to our need to bring the reality of Christ's redemption to bear on both.

3. When you interact with the materially poor, do you tend to see their poverty more as a result of their individual choices or their circumstances?

4. If you emphasize one more than the other, how would the way you interact with the materially poor change if you truly believed that the fall impacts both individual hearts and social systems?