

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

GENERATIONAL POVERTY AND EDUCATION

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF IGNORANCE

A Dissertation-in-Praxis Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership

by

Leland Elton Jackson

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

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## ABSTRACT

Generational poverty is a problem that is not limited by race, gender, geography, or any other demographic. It is widespread and found in every state and city in the United States. Currently, over 17% of the population of the United States lives in poverty, based on a 2019 study. Of those, the vast majority are at least second-generation poverty dwellers. There seems to be no shortage of opinions on why a person lives below the poverty line, and many are willing to share them with those they know and those living in poverty. It is not unusual for one living in poverty to be looked down upon, treated as “less than,” and given no place at “the table” within their community. But just because a person is currently living in poverty, even generational poverty, does not mean they have to stay there. There are ways to break the cycle and change the trajectory of one’s life and the lives of those who come after them. The most effective method found to date is that of education. This researcher, with the assistance of a team of individuals associated with the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA, worked to provide that education and began the process of breaking a cycle of generational poverty within the local community by taking the time to teach others through a 16-week program the basics of how things like generational wealth, compounding interest, cost of borrowing, and renting versus buying, just to name a few, impact one’s financial position. In so doing, the team began the process of breaking the chains of generational poverty. Additionally, as the participants learned who they are in God’s view and that they have been created uniquely and for a purpose, their self-worth and hope increased.

*Keywords:* poverty, generational poverty, education, YMCA, Image of God, hope

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to those who were my cheerleaders on this journey. To those who encouraged me, listened to me when this was just a crazy idea in an old guy's head, heard my vision, and did not try and dissuade me, but told me I was enough, and if not now, when?

To my children, Haley and Wesley, you will never know how proud I am of you and how much your words meant to me as I not only began but struggled through this journey. As you checked in on your dad, listened to stories regarding my latest research, and heard me grumble about APA, you never wavered and never stopped listening. Thank you!

To my wife, Leigh Ann, you have been my center. You encouraged me not only to begin but to keep going when I was ready to walk away. Your ongoing encouragement and willingness to pick up my slack around the house made this opportunity possible. Your help with keeping me on track and managing our small group, church, and personal schedule is the only reason I am still standing today.

Finally, the LOL Group I lead at church demanded I take some downtime from leading our Bible study so I could focus on wrapping up my classes with no distractions. Your faith in me means more than you will ever know, and there are no words to express my appreciation.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Mr. Mike Roark and his team at the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA. Without his assistance and willingness to champion my cause, this work would not have been an option for me.

I am grateful for the ongoing encouragement and input from Dr. Gary Bredfeldt. His words of encouragement meant more than he will ever know, and I will forever be grateful for his time investment in working with me on my chapter submissions.

My neighbor, Minister Phil Brookman, sat in my living room when this was just a crazy idea in an old guy's head and listened. He offered some suggestions on topics and recommended that some that I was thinking of be scratched. He introduced me to Dr. Josh Kingcade, a member of his staff who had recently finished his dissertation. Between the two, I was able to bounce ideas off them, and they each spoke truth and faith into me. I am thankful.

Amanda Chote was the facilitator of the Getting Ahead program in which I participated. Her willingness to allow me to observe, discuss, share input, and hand out surveys made this research “real” and life-changing.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)

Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

Chief Operating Officer (COO)

Chief Financial Officer (CFO)

Oklahoma City (OKC)

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

## CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM IN PRAXIS

### Introduction

Generational poverty, defined as two generations of a family unit living below the poverty line (NCCAA, 2020), is a term thrown around by the masses, is greatly misunderstood, and is oftentimes blamed for the woes of a culture, society, or a particular demographic. One demographic that is impacted in a large proportion is that of single parents, primarily mothers. Due to the lack of income, the option of providing a quality education for their children is lessened, and therefore, the cycle continues. As Beegle (2003) states in her article, “Although there has been some progress made in diminishing the educational barriers of race, gender, geography, and religion, poverty is the one barrier that has not been even partially overcome” (p.12).

Through the years, both government and non-profit organizations have thrown money at this problem in hopes of rectifying the situation. This has not worked. In her article “Breaking Free of Generational Poverty,” Trenda (2017) states,

Single mothers whose own mothers received assistance from federal safety net programs such as welfare, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), housing vouchers, Medicare and Medicaid are more likely to receive assistance themselves compared with single mothers who did not grow up on federal assistance (*Institute for Research on Poverty*, 2016; Martin, 2003).

There is a solution to this problem, but it will take a concerted effort by those living in generational poverty and those with the resources to provide a way out.

### The Strategic Problem

Generational poverty is a topic that has been studied, debated, ignored, misunderstood, and blamed for the woes of society. The government has thrown money at it, but that did not fix it. Non-profit organizations have thrown time and money at it, but that did not fix it. Everyone

seems to have an opinion of the solution, but as of yet, society still has those living in poverty as part of the population. Through research, this researcher learned that education is one of the primary solutions to this problem. Education for those living in poverty and those wishing to have an impact on their lives. Education for those who need to be “invited to the table” and those with the power to invite them. Through the Getting Ahead In A Just Gettin’ By World program, members of each of the groups listed have an opportunity to be educated and have an impact on their society. This researcher spent sixteen Thursday nights sitting in class at a local YMCA to learn about the lives of those living in poverty and those willing to invest their time, talent, and resources to assist in helping them out. Through this process, a passion was ignited, and a change of lens took place in how this researcher sees the poverty problem and its potential solutions in his community.

### **Problem and Response: Program**

According to a U.S. Census Bureau search of those living in poverty in this researcher’s hometown, Oklahoma City, OK, it was reported that a staggering 14.9% of the population lives below the poverty line. Based on this percentage, that equates to 150,000 residents living in poverty. According to a 2022 article in *SmartAsset*, single mothers make up almost half of those living below the poverty line across the nation. 47.5% of single moms, on average, live in poverty (Solum, 2022). This statistic is more than just that. This statistic points toward lessened opportunities for both the parent and the child. This statistic points toward nourishment issues, housing issues, lack of educational opportunities, self-worth issues, long-term health issues, and the list goes on. It is only by interrupting the ongoing cycle of generational poverty that these issues can be dealt with, and future generations can have the same opportunities as those living above the poverty line.



In speaking with the Chief Operations Officer of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA, this researcher was encouraged to find an educational program to address this issue in the Oklahoma City metro. It was the desire of this researcher to come alongside this organization to review and provide input to the existing program that would expand and enhance it. Though the results of the program have been promising, the informant stated that there is still much room for improvement and growth among the educators and participants involved. This researcher believed that the lens through which one views one's world plays a large role in how one sees that world. By introducing a spiritual aspect to the training and helping the students and educators understand that humanity was created in God's image, the participants' self-worth had the opportunity to be enhanced, and the outcomes improved.

This researcher envisioned a multi-week training program that involved building mentoring relationships with the participants that would allow the instructors to speak about their specific situations. Training in budgeting, job search, interviewing, parenting, entrepreneurship, and more provided the necessary tools for those participating in the class to leave with renewed hope and a sense of self-worth. But more importantly, they left with the knowledge required to break this ongoing cycle of poverty. Additionally, an aspect of this training that this researcher saw as extremely promising would be bringing former graduates from the program back to share their stories. The pastor of North Church OKC, this researcher's home church, is fond of saying, "Your story is someone else's hope."

Though the numbers mentioned above are for Oklahoma City, this researcher's goal was to build a program that could be utilized nationwide. Generational poverty is not just something found "in the South." It ranges from border to border, coast to coast, and exists in the shadows of all cities. Though money is not the entire solution, it will require the most expensive item on the

planet to resolve this issue, which is a person's time. That is why this researcher believed that if a "turnkey" program could be provided, the implementation of that program would be better received by those wishing to make a difference in their world.

### **Defining Reality: The Current Need**

The topic of generational poverty brings about numerous discussions and arguments regarding the cause and solution. On one end of the spectrum is the group that believes anyone can climb out of poverty if they are willing to work, while on the other end are those that will argue that capitalism is the problem and that once one falls into poverty, it is next to impossible to climb out (Brady, 2019). No matter where on this spectrum of thought one might find oneself, the reality is that there is a real issue of generational poverty, and it is imperative that a solution be found if one would like to see a better world.

To begin the discussion regarding this topic, a definition needs to be put in place for what constitutes generational poverty. According to an article in the North Carolina Community Action Association, "Generational poverty only requires that a family lives in poverty for at least two generations" (NCCAA, 2020). To bring this into focus, that equates to you, the reader, living below the poverty line, and then your children, as they become adults, doing the same. By the time your children have children, your grandchildren, the cycle of generational poverty is in place, and the chances of it continuing far outweigh the chances that it will be broken. As the article mentioned above goes on to say, "The people trapped in poverty struggle to think of the future because they are so focused on surviving for the next few days or weeks" (NCCAA, 2020 para. 4). This, in turn, leads to children being raised in homes where the thought of continuing education, proper nourishment, saving for the future, or any other "higher" achievement is not considered (NCCAA, 2020). These families live in an environment of toxic stress as they

continue to worry about their finances. The current annual income in the United States that qualifies a person as being “in poverty” is \$13,590 for a single person and \$27,750 for a family of four (OKPolicy.org, 2022). As a reader of this dissertation, this researcher is sure one can understand the stress this would bring into one’s life if this were where one finds oneself in regard to one’s income and needing to care for one’s family.

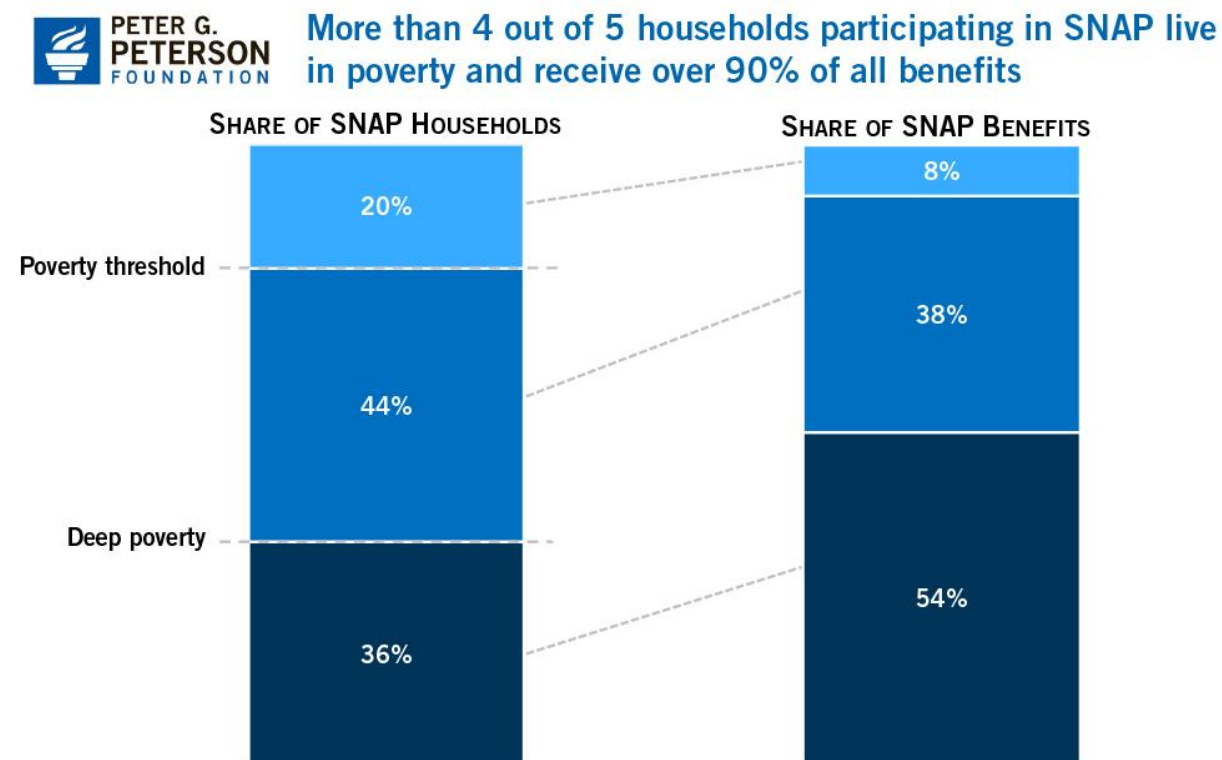
The long-term effects of generational poverty vary, but there seems to be an underlying current of impacts that are consistent across the population of those involved. According to a 30-year study (Najman, J. et al., 2018), there were consistencies found among those who lived in poverty. They were at an increased risk for physical and mental health issues, higher mortality rates for most diseases, developmental delays in their children, higher rates of morbidity and mortality in their children, poor health as both a child and adult no matter the socioeconomic state as an adult, and increased biological consequences of being exposed to long term stress.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, in the fiscal year 2021, \$182.5 billion dollars was spent on food and nutrition assistance programs. Of that amount, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) made up the largest portion at almost \$120 billion. This program, formerly known as “food stamps,” is funded by the United States government and allows those who qualify for this service to purchase food to provide nourishment to the members of the household. The funds provided in 2021 increased by 44% over the prior fiscal year, which was, up until 2021, the highest amount ever paid out for the program (USDA, 2021). These numbers alone should be evidence that throwing money at this problem does not solve it. If it did, the amount being paid out each year would lessen, not increase. Though 100% federally funded, the SNAP program is run through state agencies. The requirements are, for the most part, consistent across all states in regard to income and assets. A

survey conducted by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation concluded that 80% of households receiving SNAP benefits are living below the poverty line.

**Figure 1**

*SNAP BENEFITS DISTRIBUTION*



SOURCE: United States Department of Agriculture, *Characteristics of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Households: Fiscal Year 2019*, March 2021.

NOTES: Numbers may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding. USDA used 2018 poverty income guidelines to determine FY 2019 SNAP eligibility standards. The poverty threshold for 2018 was \$25,100 for a household of 4, though SNAP household statistics include many household types. "Deep poverty" is defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as having income below half the federal poverty threshold.

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The secondary finding of this study, as you can see above, is that 92% of all SNAP benefits go to those who are living below the poverty line. The income limits were given above for what equates to poverty, but as you can see in this chart, there is a section marked as "deep poverty." Deep poverty means a person is making half, or less, than the maximum amount that equals poverty.

Based on the above and the lens through which this researcher views the world, something more must be done to put an end to generational poverty. It is obvious that throwing

money at it, though a definite need at this time, does not fix the problem. As this researcher read through articles and studies, education is the common denominator pointing toward a solution. This education would involve both the children and the adults. The reason is that the children who are living within the environment created by poverty have already learned how to survive, and there must be some retraining if there is an expectation of a long-term change. This is where the relationship with the YMCA came into play, as they have a current initiative regarding this epidemic, and education is at the forefront of the solution. Additionally, based on the worldview lens this researcher mentioned above since the 'C' in YMCA stands for Christian, this researcher had the opportunity to bring a spiritual aspect into the mix during the educational process with those involved in the program.

The range of emotions has been extreme in the short time this researcher has been studying this topic. Everything from anger to guilt had been felt and attempted to be worked through. In the Bible, the followers of Christ are told to love their neighbor as themselves (New American Standard Version Bible, 1960, Matt. 22:35-40). These verses were in response to a lawyer asking Jesus a question to test Him. He quoted the Shema (New American Standard Version Bible, 1960, Deut. 6:4-9) in response. The Shema is taken from the Torah and is recited three times a day by devout Jews as a reminder as to who God is and how they should respond to Him. Additionally, one can read in Luke 10:25-37, the parable Jesus talked about the Good Samaritan. He talked about how the lowest of the low, a Samaritan, chose to serve an enemy, a Jew, out of love. The religious and wealthy person passed by the beaten man, but the one the audience to whom He was speaking hated was the one who showed mercy. He then wrapped up His teaching by telling those who were in attendance to "go and do likewise." From this teaching, this researcher understood that he had a mandate to love those around him who are

different from who he is. He had a mandate to reach out to the “less than” and treat them as equals. He had a mandate to show the world what the love of Christ looks like in the day-to-day world in which he lives.

### **Defining a Preferred Future: The Visionary Focus**

#### ***Vision Statement***

To see an end to generational poverty through education for those who desire a better future for their families.

#### ***Purpose Statement***

To create and/or enhance educational curricula that could be utilized in training those currently in the generational poverty demographic so that they can break the cycle within their family.

#### ***Objectives***

**To develop and/or enhance an educational curriculum that provides the necessary tools for an individual to end the legacy of generational poverty.**

In a *Newswire* article (2020), Jeff Mount discusses the need for financial education as a key requirement to end generational poverty. He also discusses the negative impact on those with little to no financial education and how they are often taken advantage of. This involves things like higher interest rates on loans, higher interest rates on credit cards, and the inability to receive credit.

**To educate the educator on the obstacles created for those who live in generational poverty that those not living in poverty do not have to navigate.**

There are many myths regarding generational poverty, and if educators are going to be able to reach those in the room, they must have a better understanding of the

reality they are living. Alice Armstrong, in her article for *The Education Digest* (2010), states, “A full stomach and clear mind are prerequisites for learning. Many children who live in poverty have neither. And the number of children who might be considered "food challenged" is growing at an alarming rate.” She goes on to discuss that many who live below the poverty line do so with undiagnosed ailments brought on by living a lifestyle of simply surviving from day to day. The impact of malnutrition, living in a constant state of stress created by the survival mode mentality in which this demographic lives, and the lack of self-worth found in not only the parents but also the children all create an environment where learning is extremely difficult.

**To educate parents so that the opportunities of the children of those living in generational poverty are increased.**

According to an article in *The Portland Press Herald* (2018), the education of the parent plays a vital role in the stability and well-being of the family. One of the items the author points out is the impact on children as young as four when their parents seek education to benefit the family. The article goes on to state that when the person pursuing the education is the mother, the benefits are even greater. This hurdle is huge. When one lives in a daily fight for survival, adding anything to the routine that does not provide an immediate return on the time investment takes an extra effort.

**To graduate people who are willing to take the time to educate others.**

Removing the excuse of “but you don’t understand my situation” from the vocabulary of those involved in taking the classes would greatly benefit the program's overall success. This particular group of individuals would not necessarily need the

additional training of having to be educated to understand the obstacles that must be overcome by educators of those who live in generational poverty.

### ***Outputs***

Upon completing this program, this researcher would have liked to see a training curriculum for the educator and student.

1. The training for the educator would involve training regarding the lifestyle of those who live in generational poverty, the myths swirling around the concept of generational poverty, and the opportunity being provided to them to assist a family in breaking the chain of generational poverty.
2. The training for the student would have involved training on how to create a budget, how to look for a job, how to invest in one's own education through reading, how to utilize public services while seeking assistance, how to better parent, and how to educate one's children to ensure the cycle ends.
3. Additionally, both parties would have been trained to understand their uniqueness as individuals and that they were created in the Image of God and have a purpose for being alive.

### ***Outcomes***

As the training stated above took place, this researcher saw a variety of outcomes that benefited not just the individuals involved but society as a whole. The three primary outcomes this researcher was striving for were:

**Families currently living in the cycle of generational poverty to break the cycle.**



That is, those currently surviving in a day-to-day existence learned to provide for themselves and their families so that they could live life with joy and pass on to their children the fundamentals of how to live a life of more than sheer existence.

**To build a team of educators who are willing to invest their time in “the least of these.”**

As this program continued to evolve, this researcher desired to see others who are capable of facilitating groups within their communities do so with excellence.

**Those involved in the program come to understand their uniqueness and that they are created in the Image of God.**

Through this understanding, those who are currently living below the poverty line and struggling with their self-worth have grown to believe they have intrinsic value and a specific calling in their lives.

These three outcomes were achieved with the efforts of this researcher and those he worked with at the YMCA of Greater Oklahoma City.

### **The Collaborating Organization, Team, and Coach**

As this researcher began his search for a team of individuals to work with as he developed his Dissertation-in-Praxis plan, he was fortunate to have existing relationships with members of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA. This organization has played a significant role in the Oklahoma City metropolitan community for decades, and its leadership is highly respected among non-profit organizations. The willingness of the leadership team, primarily this researcher’s coach, the COO, to open their program to an outside audit was further evidence of its desire to grow further as a community partner.

The team this researcher had the opportunity to work alongside involved members of the YMCA organization at varying levels. From the CEO down to the childcare workers, each member had their role and carried it out throughout the process. Though the interaction between this researcher and each person on the team varied, there was never a doubt as to the availability of any member should they be needed. The primary interaction was between this researcher and the COO of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA. His willingness to allow this research to take place was evident from the beginning, and his support and dedication never wavered.

### **Organizational Description, Mission, Vision**

The Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA was founded in 1889 and got off to a rough start. After two initial failures to remain open, the organization received funding to purchase a building in 1904. It has been a part of the Oklahoma landscape since then. The driving force behind the need for the YMCA in Oklahoma was The Great Land Run of 1889, when a three-week-old small tent city of a few hundred grew to over 10,000.

The mission and vision of the YMCA have remained constant since its founding. The goal was to provide for the “whole” person by understanding their uniqueness based on being made in God's image. Though the delivery of the message has changed over the years, the basic concept has not.

### ***Organizational Description***

The Young Men’s Christian Association, better known as the YMCA, was founded in 1844 in London, England (YMCA.Org). Seven years later, the organization's first branch was opened at The Old South Church in Boston, Massachusetts. Founded by George Williams, the purpose of the YMCA was to provide young men with a safe haven from the streets and the pressing cultural changes around them. Since then, the YMCA has spread across the United

States and has over 10,000 communities in rural and suburban settings. It is the largest non-profit organization in the nation.

Today, the YMCA is based out of Geneva, Switzerland. The organization serves over 64 million individuals in 120+ countries. In spite of the growth, the basic vision of the organization has not changed (YMCA, 2023). The goals of the organization are to provide a safe place for individuals to grow to their full potential in mind, body, and spirit, as well as expand the understanding of the impact Christian values can have in one's life and the lives of those they, in turn, touch.

Through the years, the YMCA has offered support to military troops in every war since the Civil War. During the wars, the YMCA raised money and built "huts" at military installations so that the men could have a release through exercise. As wars continued in this nation, the YMCA was one of the founding organizations behind the United Service Organizations, better known as the USO. In the hometown of this researcher, the USO, located at Will Rogers International Airport in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is run and supported by the local YMCA.

In 2010, the YMCA went through a major rebranding that created a large amount of controversy within the organization and among its donors. In an attempt to stay current and remain relevant, the organization hired a marketing company to change the logo, and in turn, the name was impacted as well. The primary response was, "Using the best in the field of brand identification research, the national YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) determined that it would shorten its name to just the "Y." This prompted a good number of members to think and to ask the Y if they were removing the "C" from their mission (YMCA, 2022). As the

organization assured its members that the “C” was still as relevant today as it ever had been, it was still impacted negatively in fundraising for a period of time.

The YMCA that this researcher worked with is the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA. This organization encompasses several Y’s across the metropolitan area that makes up the Oklahoma City metro and some branches that are a distance away and found in the suburbs. The first YMCA in Oklahoma was founded in 1889 (Money & Lackmeyer, 2014). The date was May 14th. The event that led to this had taken a small tent town that was three weeks old to a city of over 10,000 people. That event is known as the Great Land Run and is still celebrated and reenacted in elementary schools across the state every year. Creating a YMCA in such a tumultuous time in Oklahoma City was to provide those who wished to have a Christian base in their daily lives with a place of refuge. The organization ceased to exist by 1901 in Oklahoma. After three attempts to revive the organization, it was in 1904 that funding was provided, and a building purchased so that the YMCA could be re-established and have a major impact on the lives of those who came through its doors.

A major point of impact for the YMCA of Oklahoma City took place on April 19, 1995. Timothy McVeigh chose to perform a terrorist attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, a building located just a few blocks away from the YMCA of Oklahoma City headquarters. The YMCA daycare and headquarters were destroyed, never to be opened again after the bombing. The building was condemned and eventually torn down (Money & Lackmeyer, 2014). It was from this tragedy that the YMCA headquarters was able to move to a larger building where services that had not been offered to the community prior were now able to be provided due to additional space. Much of the decision to donate the building to the YMCA was based on the response provided to the community during this tragedy.

### ***Organizational Mission Statement***

To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all.

### ***Organizational Vision Statement***

“We build strong kids, strong families, strong communities.”

### **Organizational Setting and Demographics**

Since one of the primary drivers for learning is the setting, it was imperative that the environment in which these classes took place was conducive to the learning process. That is, there was no excessive noise, the participants were comfortable with the temperature in the room, and there was enough room to allow for private conversations when needed. Additionally, since this program was designed to address poverty issues, it was important that the people in the room could relate to the topic from first-hand experience.

If these two goals were achieved, the participants were set up with a greater opportunity to see the results they were looking for. If any of the pieces were missing the chances of success were diminished and each participant impacted in a negative way.

### ***Organizational Setting***

The training that was implemented for those selected to be a part of the course took place within a training center at the YMCA across several of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA facilities. This training took place once a week over a period of sixteen weeks. It was staffed by those who have been trained to facilitate conversation and teaching. Attendance was mandatory, and no more than two absences were permitted prior to being dropped from the program. Dinner was provided each evening with classes for all family members. Childcare was made available

for those with young children. This researcher's goal was to eventually expand the classes to include training for adolescent children in the home.

The training utilized a combination of group lectures, cohort conversations, and one-on-one counseling. This section aimed to create a support system for those attempting to break the cycle of generational poverty. In addition, portions of the training focused on the spiritual aspect of life for those who chose to become involved. This portion was not mandatory to be a part of the overall program.

It was the intent of this researcher to create an environment conducive to interaction, relationship building, trust, and growth. It was only by providing an environment that allowed for these things that those struggling to live a fulfilled life while living on an income that placed them below the poverty line could happen. Following the training, each participant who graduated from the program was provided with a one-year membership to the YMCA at no charge.

### ***Organizational Demographics***

This program was open to any and all participants who chose to take advantage of it regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, or other outlying factors. The only requirement was that those who chose to participate must be living near or below the poverty line. As mentioned above, those numbers are different for a single person than for a family with children, but if one qualified based on those criteria, they were welcome to be a part of the program.

It was the intent of this researcher to ensure that a focus was maintained on single-parent households, but that, too, was not a requirement. The purpose of this focus was the long-term impact on children raised below the poverty line by only one parent. According to OkPolicy.Org, 1 in 3 Oklahomans living in poverty live in single-mother households (OkPolicy.Org, 2017).

This is in comparison to 1 in 4 when the child is living with a married couple. This same study found that there is a correlation between the level of education and the chances of finding oneself below the poverty line. This is why providing education for the parents and the children is so important.

The current program is made up primarily of Caucasian and Hispanic adults. These two demographics comprise the two highest ethnicities regarding poverty in Oklahoma. It was the hope of this researcher that by providing additional ongoing education regarding this topic, additional ethnicities would be willing to attend the classes.

### **Organizational Leadership and Collaborative Team**

The YMCA's leadership is consistent throughout its organization. Led by a Board of Directors responsible for hiring a CEO, each YMCA branch is made up of a team of individuals tasked with accomplishing the YMCA's mission.

By working with the leadership of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA, this researcher was able to create a collaborating team to assist him in accomplishing his goal of reviewing the YMCA's Getting Ahead program. The collaborating team comprised individuals from the leadership team and those in the local branch where the program occurred. Without this team and the leadership team's support, this Dissertation-in-Praxis program would not have been doable.

### ***Organizational Leadership***

The YMCA's leadership structure is consistent across the nation. A Board of Directors is responsible for hiring a Chief Executive Officer, who is then responsible for hiring staff to run the local branch or branches. Some of the YMCA facilities are considered independent, and though they have the structure mentioned above, they report to the National office. Others, such

as the one this researcher worked with, have several branches that fall under a central leadership structure and allow for a central form of management.

Within the organization of the YMCA of Greater Oklahoma City, a Board of Directors exists. This Board is made up of volunteers who are invited to be a part of the leadership team. One of the goals of this Board is to maintain diversity on the Board, so the Board of Directors of the YMCA of Greater Oklahoma City is made up of males and females as well as a diversity of ethnicities.

This organization's leadership team comprises a Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Vice President of Human Resources, Vice President of Communications, Vice President of Strategic Development, and Vice President of Property Management. The Chief Executive Officer reports directly to the Board of Directors, while the other positions mentioned above report to the Chief Executive Officer. Each of these positions has reports under their authority that are required to accomplish the mission of the Y. Within this structure, the key positions that this researcher worked with are the Chief Operating Officer, Chief Financial Officer, and Chief Executive Officer. Each of these individuals agreed to provide both personal and professional support to ensure the completion of this Dissertation-in-Praxis program.

### ***Collaborating Team***

As this researcher looked at assembling a team within the staff of the YMCA to work with, he immediately determined he needed people with a similar passion for the problem of generational poverty, or at least those who have a biblical worldview and view people as God's unique creation and each one has value.



In speaking with the Chief Operating Officer, it was determined that a team of people within the organization fit the criteria mentioned above. He provided introductions to these people and allowed this researcher to discuss his plans and goals for this project. Each individual bought in, and the collaborating team was created.

The primary position that this researcher worked with was the Executive Director of Social Responsibility. This position reports to the Chief Executive Officer. The following two positions both report to the Executive Director of Social Responsibility, and they are Associate Executive Director of Social Responsibility and Social Responsibility Coordinator. The day-to-day interactions were with the Social Responsibility Coordinator with weekly and/or bi-weekly meetings with her superiors.

This researcher selected these individuals to be a part of his collaborating team because they were already in the trenches of this program and leading it as they continued to learn new ways to educate those living in poverty. Their passion for this program was unsurpassed, and they were very willing to bring in a “new set of eyes” to determine how they could better the program that is currently in place. Each member was open to the spiritual aspect that was needed in the existing program and was interested in how to incorporate that while remaining sensitive to the beliefs and values of those in the room.

Another team member was the Chief Financial Officer, who reports to the Chief Executive Officer. This researcher invited the Chief Financial Officer to join the team because of his ability to move requests through the system quickly. This researcher believed there would be a need for additional space and financial resources as this program grows. Based on that, the Chief Financial Officer would be a key component in getting things done quickly and with minimal pushback from others.

The final two members of the team were the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Operating Officer. Both of these members were in more of a passive role. However, based on their role within the organization, it would have been a poor decision on the part of this researcher not to include them. Each of these members was kept in the loop regarding all meetings and discussions with their subordinates and was invited to attend meetings as their schedules allowed.

### ***Collaborating Coach***

This researcher reached out to an individual within the YMCA organization and shared several of his visions for his Dissertation-in-Praxis program. Only by talking through these ideas with this individual was this researcher able to determine a direction that he could be passionate about and feel that an impact could be made for the better once the program was implemented.

The individual this researcher selected to be his collaborating coach was the Chief Operating Officer of the YMCA of Greater Oklahoma City. He is a Godly man who leads as a servant leader and has a Biblical worldview. He has been employed with the YMCA since his graduation from college and reports directly to the Chief Executive Officer. Having him as the collaborating coach definitely opened some doors that may have been difficult to get through, and his openness to a “free” consultant was very exciting for this researcher to experience.

In full transparency, the COO had been a customer of the company this researcher works for over the past ten years and had been a personal friend for the past seven. That friendship had created a vested interest in him wanting to see this researcher succeed in the current pursuit of his doctorate, as well as his trust that the product his organization received was of high quality based on past experience.

## Chapter Summary

This researcher, in conjunction with the leadership team of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA, intended to work with a staff of volunteer facilitators to educate those who find themselves in the cycle of generational poverty. The current program, *Getting Ahead in A Just Gettin' By World*, has been in place for a year and has seen some positive results, but the leadership of the YMCA would like to see the participants get more out of the program. With the agreement of the YMCA leadership, it was the intent of this researcher to review the curriculum and determine what changes could be made to reach their goal of providing additional spiritual influence and lasting change for all participants.

Reaching “the least of these” was the calling of the current YMCA leadership, according to their COO. By providing education, food, facilities, and a one-year family membership to the YMCA upon completion of the program, the leadership team was putting their money where their mouth was and working to provide a way out of this vicious cycle.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE FRAMEWORK**

### **Introduction**

Generational poverty, defined as two generations of a family unit living below the poverty line (NCAA 2020), is an ongoing issue in the United States, and the number of those who fall into this category appears to continue rising. This researcher intended to assist in further developing an educational program administered by the Greater Oklahoma City Metro Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) to assist families and individuals in breaking the cycle of poverty.

Through a sixteen-week program, individuals were provided with the tools to assist them in learning how to overcome the barriers of poverty and overcome the numerous obstacles they encountered. The foundation on which this researcher built his project is found in the gospel of Matthew. At the final judgment, Jesus lists things a specific group of people has done. When they ask when they did these things, He states, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (New American Standard Bible, 1960, Matt. 25:40). This researcher's Dissertation-in-Praxis was designed to reach out and help "the least of these."

### **Biblical and Theological Framework**

The topic of poverty has been bantered around within the church world for a long time. There are those on both sides of the argument regarding the amount of help, if any, that should be provided to those who live below the poverty line. Both sides utilize scripture to defend their arguments and are well-meaning. The problem is that when one uses scripture out of context, it can have a negative impact on those in question.

As an example, in this case, Paul stated in his letter to the church in Thessalonica that if one will not work, they should not eat (New American Standard Bible, 1960, 2 Thes 3:10), and it

is not a very long reach to realize if a person does not work they will end up in poverty.

However, what if the person living in poverty is working multiple jobs and attempting to provide for their family? Does this verse then apply to them? Yes, they are in poverty, but not due to a lack of willingness to work but due to a variety of other issues. This is the type of situation where one must be extremely cautious to apply scripture properly. Paul did not say that if one is poor, one should not eat, but that if one is not willing to work. Each situation that finds a person in poverty must be evaluated on its own merits and not viewed through a lens that assumes if one is poor, it is because they are lazy.

As this researcher built his biblical and theological framework, it was imperative that he build his project on biblical truth. Within the scriptures are biblical imperatives regarding this topic of poverty and what the church should do in response. Additionally, there are biblical imperatives directed toward the individual and their response to impoverished individuals.

### **Biblical Imperatives and Principles**

In Leviticus 19, God instructed His people not to harvest all of their crops but to leave something for the poor. In Deuteronomy 15, He goes on to say that one should not harden one's heart or shut one's hand against a poor brother. In other words, God has a place in His heart for the poor of this land and has instructed those who are capable of assisting them to do so. And not just to assist but to do it with a proper heart motive. Finally, in Proverbs 31, God stated that His people are to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves and defend the rights of the poor and needy. As one reviews these three passages, it becomes very apparent very quickly that God has commanded His people to care for the “less than” and do things within their power to lighten their load.

Through the program that this student was working on with the YMCA, he was able to fulfill the callings placed on him in the above biblical references. As discussed in the book *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World*, one of the largest obstacles to breaking the cycle of generational poverty is a lack of education (DeVol, 2020). Not just “school” education but an education in how the economy works for those who fall below the poverty line. A better understanding of why reducing and eliminating debt is more difficult if you find yourself impoverished. An education on how to put a resume together that will receive a response from the recipient. An education on how to parent better so that the children living in poverty understand their value and worth in a world that looks down on them (Haider, 2021). These, and many more, are ways that, as a child of God, this student can fulfill the command to protect and care for the poor in the land.

### ***The Orphan and the Widow***

In the book of James, there is a definition that states what “pure and undefiled” religion looks like (New American Standard Bible, 1960, James 1:27). The passage states that one is to visit the orphan and widow in their affliction. Based on current statistics, the overriding population that falls below the poverty line is single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau). Over 47.5% of all families living below the poverty line are single-mother-led households. These women may not fall into the traditional category of “widows”; however, the husband/father has departed the home for many of them, leaving them on their own to fend for the family. And it is these fatherless homes, homes of “orphans,” that are found to create the culture of generational poverty.

As one who is a child of God and has been called to follow His commands, this researcher firmly believed that the above biblical directive should guide his steps. Through the

Dissertation-in-Praxis program that this researcher worked to develop, he intended to fulfill the mandate found in the book of James. Treating those in the program, both the teachers and students, with value, respect, and love was an example of who Jesus is. It was the desire of this researcher to show up for the classes being offered with a pure motive and to remain undefiled by a culture that chooses to treat the poor with disdain.

### ***The Elderly***

In her article, *What Challenges Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Face*, Harleena Singh notes that the first challenge to be dealt with is that of a financial basis (Singh, 2012). As grandparents are primarily on a fixed income and the costs of healthcare, food, clothing, and utilities continue to increase, the addition of dependents into the home only increases the opportunity for the family to fall toward the poverty line.

In Deuteronomy 11, God commands His people to open wide their hands to the poor. This did not, nor does it, mean just those who fit the “role” of being without. This could also be understood to mean those who have taken on the burden of rearing children that are not theirs, and so they are now poor in resources, time, mental contentment, and rest. Through the education offered in the program, this researcher invested in, the elderly and grandparents raising grandchildren are included and are supported not only in the educational process of dealing with poverty but also in dealing with young children in the home again. Times have changed, and it is important that those providing the care become educated on new technologies that their grandchildren either know or should know to remain competitive in school.

### **Biblical and Theological Themes**

As this researcher moves on to discussing the biblical and theological themes that moved him forward in his Dissertation-in-Praxis program, the reader will find that there are two primary

concepts that will be shared that were building blocks for the implementation of the program the researcher had in mind.

### ***The Image of God***

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His own image; in the image of God, he created him; male and female, he created them. (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Gen. 1: 26-27).

What does the image of God look like? Over the years, this term has been abused and misused to allow “leaders” to treat those they held prejudice toward as less than others. It has been used to oppress those with a different skin color, a different gender, a handicap, a different ethnicity, and a variety of other differences that the oppressor can point out so that they can remain in control (Horowitz, 1979). But is the image of God visible through the naked eye? Is it actually a physical trait? Can it be found in everyone? In his book *Dignity and Destiny*, Kilner discussed what this term truly meant and what impact that may have on humanity as a whole (Kilner, 2016).

When this conversation quoted above was taking place in the heavenly, one must ask themselves which of the three parts of the Godhead were flesh and blood. By that, this researcher is referring to the question, who decided what God looked like? Ware, in his article “*In the Image and Likeness*”: *The Uniqueness of the Human Person*, warns:

We Orthodox, then, must guard against the tendency to enlarge the scope of dogma beyond its proper limits, and must reject the temptation to make tradition more clear-cut and monolithic than is in fact the case. That we are in God’s image is undisputed; but how we are in God’s image, and in what that image consists, is far from immediately clear (Ware, 2021, p. 50).

Since Jesus had not taken on the form of man yet, perhaps one must ask themselves if the “Image of God” does not refer to any physical features whatsoever.



Perhaps the Image of God goes so much deeper than a physical attribute. And since God said, “Let us make man in Our image,” then that would lead the reader to understand that all of mankind is created in the image of God. And if all of mankind is created in the image of God, then does not all of mankind warrant being treated as such? “By the concept of the image of God, Genesis affirms the dignity and worth of humanity and elevates all humans—not just kings or nobles—to the highest status conceivable, short of complete divinization” (Clines, 1967). This truth was one of the primary driving forces behind this researcher’s Dissertation-in-Praxis program. All too often, those living below the poverty line or those in an impoverished state are not only viewed but treated as “less than.” In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is asked what the greatest commandment is. As a rabbi and student of Jewish Law, He immediately replied with what is today known as the Shema. This Jewish prayer is recited three times a day in worship and reverence to Yahweh. It can be found in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (New American Standard Bible, 1960, Deut. 6:4-5). However, Jesus did not stop there. He added another phrase that would have caught the religious people of His day off guard. He followed up His quote from Deuteronomy with a statement, “The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (New American Standard Version Bible, 1960, Mark 12:31). In a separate parable, Jesus defines that our neighbor is anyone that a person comes in contact with (New American Standard Version Bible, 1960, Lk. 10:25-37) as He shares the story of the Good Samaritan. That includes those whom one would not normally engage with or have any reason to care for. That would include the poor person whose child attends the same school as the child of a wealthy person.

So, if all humanity is created in the Image of God and this writer is to love his neighbor as himself, then how does he not view the “less than,” the impoverished, and the underprivileged as being equal with himself? How would he dare not use the opportunity provided by God to love, educate, and equip those whom God places in his life with the tools required to improve not only their lives but the lives of their children and those around them? Would he not be compelled to provide a renewed hope that would then catapult a person to new heights? In their book *Hope Rising*, Gwinn and Hellman share the impact that something as simple as hope can have on the lives of those who find it (Gwinn & Hellman, 2019). Through this program, this researcher's goal was to provide renewed hope to a group of participants who have none.

The question that often comes up in this type of discussion is, what about the person who made bad choices along the way and is in poverty because of that? The response of this researcher goes back to the question, what is the Image of God? Can that image be marred by sin, bad financial decisions, choosing to follow after other gods, or anything else? In other words, is there ever a time when a person is no longer created in the Image of God? According to Kilner, that time never occurs (Kilner, 2016).

### ***Leading as a Shepherd***

In reading scripture, there are passages where the phrasing is to be taken literally and those that are used metaphorically. For example, in Psalm 91:4, the writer David refers to God as taking those whom He loves under His wings. This does not make God a bird but is simply a metaphor for His willingness to protect those who trust in Him. The metaphor of the sheep and shepherd is very similar and is found in both the Old and New Testaments. Though some of those written about in the Bible were actual shepherds, the metaphor of leaders being the

shepherd and the followers being the sheep is more in line with the scriptures found regarding this idea.

Throughout scripture, there are examples of shepherds and how they lead their sheep. As one reads, they will find both good and bad shepherds. There are those who were in shepherding roles for personal gain and those who were willing to die for their flocks. God has something to say about both types of shepherds and is very clear regarding the reward or lack thereof that they can look forward to receiving.

According to the authors of *Bridges Out of Poverty*, one of the solutions to generational poverty is for leaders to lead. For men and women to be willing to take a look in the mirror and come to terms with the true cause of poverty in this nation (Payne, et al., 2022). In their writings, they argue that until leaders are prepared to sit at the table with those from all classes across the spectrum and value all members of society as having value and as equals, then the chasm that is generational poverty will not be resolved. They continue to argue that there are those in the community “serving” the impoverished who are actually taking advantage of their circumstances and making their living on the backs of those who cannot even afford to care for their own families.

In the book of Ezekiel, the reader will find God calling out the shepherds who were abusing the flock, the nation of Israel in this case, and receiving unjust gain while doing so (New American Standard Bible, 1960, Ezek. 34). Although the people that this researcher worked with in his program were not necessarily from the nation of Israel, they are created in the image of God and are therefore loved by Him. And since God has placed those in leadership there for His purposes (New American Standard Bible, 1960, Dan. 2:21, Rom. 13:1), He expects that they will care for the sheep He has placed in their care.

Not all leaders are created equal. Some must work hard and slowly advance up the chain of command to reach a position of leadership. Some have leadership thrust upon them due to circumstances outside of anyone's control. Still, others inherit the leadership role based on their last name. But no matter how one gets there, the role of leadership requires something more of a person. The question is, what is that something? How does one determine a good leader from a bad one? Smith (2009) discusses the concept that a person is not made up of simply their intellectual thoughts, but at the core of a person is their heart and what it desires. A good leader has a shepherd's heart.

Jesus describes Himself as the Good Shepherd. As followers of Christ, leaders are compelled to follow His example. In John 10, Jesus tells the audience that He is the Good Shepherd and willingly lays His life down for His sheep. His audience would have understood the life of a shepherd in His day. They understood that shepherds would often have to deal with wild animals attacking the flock. Shepherds who were willing to defend the flock by putting their lives in danger were held in high regard. The greatest difference in this scripture is that Jesus states, "...I lay it down of my own accord" (New American Standard Bible, 1960, Jn. 10:18), meaning that He planned to die for His sheep. If leaders are to be like the Good Shepherd, then how could this writer do anything but choose to shepherd those placed in his care by God and do so with the love that Jesus showed him by dying for him? As Laniak (2006) discusses in his book *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, the primary purpose of the shepherd is to tend the sheep (Laniak, 2006, p. 53-57). When done in line with biblical teaching, that tending leads to positive results. It leads to healthy sheep. It leads to an increased flock size. This leads to the need for additional shepherds. And on and on the growth goes (Laniak, 2006). As this researcher viewed

the flock placed before him as an opportunity to show the love of Jesus and shepherd the flock to keep it safe and healthy, he accomplished the calling to which he had been called.

Finally, as leaders of God's people, one must consider the slave and master motif in scripture. Harris (1999) compares and contrasts leaders based on how they view themselves. He argues that he can look at himself as a "Slave of Christ," or he can view himself as the "Master of the Slaves" (Harris, 1999, p. 107-125). One leads to being a restorative leader, while the other leads to being abusive. This researcher was looking to help those who are viewed as less than by others to be restored not only in their financial position but also in their self-worth and to gain an understanding of Christ's love for them.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As one attempts to determine how best to combat generational poverty, the approach question has to be considered. Each individual is going to have their own views on what that approach should be, and those views are going to be based on the lens through which they view humanity. Some believe poverty is about laziness, while others view it as a lack of opportunity, and of course, there are those somewhere in between. But, no matter which camp one falls into, there is a theory that one can argue to support their belief system.

Having spent decades in management and leadership roles, this writer argued that no single theory can be utilized to address this issue of generational poverty. He was of the belief that it is a combination of theories, each of which will be presented in this writing, that, when put together, can have a positive impact on this problem and, therefore, create a positive outcome. It is similar to finding some great recipes for a particular food, combining some of the ingredients, removing some, and tweaking some until one creates the "perfect" dish.

This researcher found the theories of Robert Greenleaf, James Burns, and Mason &

Roberson to be his driving force when it came to his leadership model. Each of these theorists' foundations is based on a biblical view of people and the world in which they live. Though they do not directly mention the biblical aspect of their theories, the reader can easily see it if they choose to look.

### **Leadership and Organizational Theory**

In most organizations, the lens through which the leadership team views the world will determine their leadership style. For example, leaders who view the staff as inherently lazy will lean toward McGregor's Theory X. In contrast, if they view them as self-motivated, they will lean more toward his Theory Y ideas (McGregor, 2006). The impact across the organization becomes apparent once the leadership style, determined by their theory, becomes known. The two items go hand in hand and cannot be separated from each other, no matter how hard a single individual may try.

As a variety of theories are discussed below, the impact they have on the leadership of the YMCA and this researcher will be made apparent in relation to the impact they have on the program being discussed to assist those in generational poverty to create better opportunities for themselves and their families.

### ***Servant Leadership***

Servant Leadership, a term coined by Robert Greenleaf in 1970 (Frick, 2021) and introduced in his first published book, is a theory that he shared with the Western world based on his concern for a lack of leadership that he was seeing in the government at the time. According to research performed by the program director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, there are five primary characteristics of a Servant Leader identified and defined (Witt, 2018). The five characteristics are Valuing People, Humility, Listening, Trust, and Caring.

As one views and defines these characteristics and how they would best be implemented into a program working with those viewed as “less than,” it is apparent that this concept is counter-cultural to the current view of the Western world that tells people to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” (Lingenfelter, 2008).

In Greenleaf’s own words, he wraps up this theory of servant leadership with the following statement:

The servant-leader is servant first... Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? (Greenleaf.org, 2021, p. 1)

The questions posed at the end of Greenleaf’s definition of servant leadership serve as a framework for this program designed to assist those living in generational poverty to move beyond their current standard of living and then, in turn, assist those who are still there.

This researcher does realize that the idea of giving up power to serve others through influence is not well received in the Western world. However, based on Greenleaf’s ability to consult with some of the largest companies of his time (Frick, 2021), he was able to begin the process of having this theory begin to be implemented. Prior to his death, he made the following statement regarding this implementation process:

A fresh critical look is being taken at the issues of power and authority, and people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways. A new moral principle is emerging, which holds that the only authority deserving of one’s allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. To the extent that this principle prevails in the

future, the only truly viable institutions will be those that are predominantly servant led. (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 24)

In a world of poverty, power and authority are two primary issues that must be dealt with on a daily basis. Those who are asking for assistance find themselves dealing with “predators” as they attempt to care for their families (Payne, et. al., 2022), and it is these predators who must be replaced with those who have both a servant leadership mindset and the power and authority to change things for those attempting to create a better world for themselves and their families.

### ***Transformational Leadership***

A second theory that aligns with the theory of servant leadership is transformational leadership. Burns (1978) introduced this theory, which taps into the concept of the individual being the primary focus of the leadership model and not the organization. According to Burns, “Leadership is quite different from power because it is inseparable from followers’ needs” (Burns, 1978, p. 18).

A contemporary of Burns, Bernard Bass, says there is a significant difference between transformational leadership and transactional leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transactional leadership is more of a quid quo pro mentality that says, “I will do this for you if you will do that for me.” This is important in the context of this writing because those experiencing generational poverty are well acquainted with transactional leadership. They experience it primarily as they work with government agencies in an effort to gain resources to better provide for their families (DeVol, 2020). Additionally, Bass discusses the downside of transformational leadership when he writes about those who attempt to change someone but not in a positive way (Bass, 1985). In 1998, he coined the term pseudo-transformational leadership to describe such leaders.

Transformational leadership is about the development of the individual. It is a philosophy that promotes the importance of the individual over the company or even the team. In



their book *How People Grow*, Cloud and Townsend discuss what it takes for a person to mature and continue to grow along the spiritual spectrum that God has planned for them (Cloud & Townsend, 2001). The findings shared in their book are not only for those who refer to themselves as Christian but can also be applied in a secular setting. One of the findings that this researcher found to be quite beneficial is, “As is often the case with leaders, talent and abilities can be confused with maturity” (Cloud & Townsend, 2001, p. 48). This misconstruing of talent and abilities for maturity is why it is imperative that there be a deeper relationship with both the leader and student so that it can be determined where both parties really are in their growth continuum. In the program that this researcher will be involved in, it could be easy for a participant to hide behind the veil of busyness and completing their workbook assignments but never take on the hard work of making the changes required to change their situation. For these reasons, this researcher is of the opinion that transformational leadership is not simply a nicety but a necessity within this program.

### ***Inclusive Leadership***

The third and final leadership theory that this researcher believes will impact the leadership style required for the proposed program to succeed is that of inclusive leadership. In their book *Bridges Out of Poverty*, the writers discuss the importance of all members impacted by the decisions made need to have a place at the table (Payne et al., 2022). This theory is significantly younger than the ones mentioned above, but that does not make it any less important or impactful. In their writings, Donna Chrobot-Mason and Quinetta Roberson contend that it has not been until recently that there has been an allowance of diversity at the table within organizations (Northouse, 2022). To the detriment of many organizations, there was no room for non-white males, and no females were even considered for a position of leadership. According to

Payne et al. (2022), though decisions are being made that impact those living in poverty, there is no representation of that demographic at the table based on a mindset that says, we know best what you need. Until those impacted by the decisions of those in authority have a seat at the table, there will be less success than there could be for a positive outcome (p. 204).

The challenge with this leadership style is that with diversity comes diverse thought, behavior, upbringing, culture, and a variety of other lenses through which people view the world. To fully embrace this theory of leadership, one must get in the trenches with those who see things differently and shovel along with them. Since this researcher intended to add a larger spiritual aspect to the current training program, he had to be willing to pick up a shovel. As Howell (2003) states, “Leaders bring God’s people in line with God’s mission” (p. 3), and since all people are created in the Image of God (Kilner, 2016), then diversity is a creation of God and must be considered when one is leading. This concept is extremely necessary for the program considered by this researcher based on the diversity of not only those being educated but also those doing the educating.

### ***The Four Lenses***

As an organization determines its leadership style, it is then able to move into the realm of determining how it is going to view the individuals involved in and impacted by its organization. At this point, the writings of Shapiro and Stefkovich (2012) come into play. In their book *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education*, the authors discuss the four lenses through which an event is viewed. Those lenses are Justice, Care, Critique, and Profession (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The researcher intended to use these educational lenses as a framework for this project. He saw the benefit of educating those in leadership roles within the program using this model to

avoid a myopic vision of those living in a poverty situation. Instead, it enables learners to learn how to change lenses based on the unique individuals involved. Through the utilization of these lenses, leaders can combine the three theories mentioned above in their leadership style and philosophy within the program being designed to serve those struggling with generational poverty.

The key to this program's success resides in the ability of those involved, both the educators and the students, to know when to utilize which lens and how to change it when necessary. For example, if one views everything through the lens of Care, one cannot critique a person's actions and/or motives. They will spend their resources enabling the person they care for without realizing the damage they are doing in the long run. Since each situation is unique, the situation must mandate the lens or lenses being utilized.

### **Teaching, Learning, and Group Theory**

The word *team* is thrown around a lot these days. Go to any major organization and ask about their team philosophy, and they will respond with a variety of ideas, including team building, team dynamics, teamwork, team mindset, and so on. Then, ask them to define what a team is and be prepared for that deer-in-the-headlights moment. Sadly, too many individuals and organizations view a team as a group of people who have been thrown together and are expected to perform at a high level of excellence. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As Krispen (2017) shares in his article *Strengthening Ministry Teams: Facilitating Unity and Cohesiveness*, a group of people thrown together does not make up a team. It makes up a group of people thrown together (Krispen, 2017). Not until there is an understanding of what makes up a highly effective and performing team will there be the ability to create one.

### ***Individualism Within the Team***

“There is no I in team” is a saying that goes a long way back and is heard and spouted by coaches all the time. It is their way of attempting to get their “players” to submit to the overall good by sacrificing their individual rights. And that sounded really good until one of the “team” members responded with, “You’re right, coach, but there is definitely an *I* in win.” And though onlookers laugh at the comment, it is where many teams find themselves when they are honest enough to perform a self-evaluation.

Lencioni (2002), in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, spells out what it takes for a team to be effective and, therefore, successful. The five main points he brings to light are trust, conflict, commitment, accountability, and results. He points out that each of these is a building block for the prior one. If your team does not trust you, for example, they are not going to be willing to enter into constructive conflict with you, and without the conflict, the commitment to the team is missing. This process continues until the team reaches the point where they hold each other accountable to perform their duties excellently and see the desired results. These steps were paramount to its success in the program this researcher planned to work with. Each person in the various cohorts must have the trust of others within that cohort so that a level of accountability can be assumed and maintained, and as time passes, the ultimate results of a better life for all involved will be a possibility.

This leads to the overriding question of how this level of trust within a cohort of individuals who do not know each other is accomplished in sixteen short weeks. What must take place to move people from an individualistic mindset to that of a team? And perhaps the greater question may be, how did the current culture get here? In the 1980s, there was a very popular saying, “If it is to be, it’s up to Me,” that could be found on coffee cups, posters, desk plaques, and sadly, even in churches. Schaeffer (2005) discussed how the Western world reached this

point in his book *How Should We Then Live?* The author argued that individualism is at the core of a lack of spiritual and personal growth within those who embrace it (p. 205-208). If one is not maturing, one is incapable of being a trusted team member if the definition of Lencioni (2002) of what makes a good team member is accepted. It was the plan of this researcher to convey these concepts to those involved in the program he intended to be working in so that as the weeks passed, there would be a higher level of teamwork and trust within each cohort.

Another issue that has impacted this concept of individualism has to do with how technology is utilized within education. When members of a team never have to be in the same room physically, it makes it easier to disengage from being an effective team player. In their book *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age*, Lowe and Lowe (2018) discuss how technology has allowed teams to be made up of not just individuals within the same organization but a team can be made up of members who are scattered across the globe and from a variety of cultures (p. 120-134). Further, in his book *Leading Cross-Culturally*, Lingenfelter (2008) contends that if members of the team are not willing to set their prejudices and pride aside, they will continue to work and act within a realm of individualism, and the team as a whole will not benefit from the variety of thought and culture that comes to the table (p. 157-158).

### ***Creating the Curriculum***

Covey (2004), in his bestseller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, states that an effective program/individual must begin with the end in mind (p. 109). As this researcher began working on a program to impact generational poverty, he was fortunate to find a program already in place but could benefit from additional input. As he spoke with the current facilitator, he found that this curriculum was built “backward” and was based on a book that was written to educate the upper-middle-class and wealthy on the plight of those living in poverty. In reviewing

this curriculum, this researcher found that there is a foundation laid at the outset of the program on which those enrolled have the opportunity to build a better future for themselves and their families. The sixteen-week program definitely begins with the end in mind.

In his review of the curriculum, this researcher found it to be weak in its content regarding the uniqueness and spiritual component of the individual. He intended to add this spiritual aspect to the curriculum so that those enrolled would understand that they were created in the image of God (Kilner, 2016) and are valued by God not for what they do but for who they are.

The Executive Pastor at the church this researcher attends is very fond of saying, “We are spiritual beings, not spiritual doings.” As the curriculum in this area was added, this researcher began with the end in mind and worked backward. He was mindful of any government and/or organizational requirements that might prohibit spiritual teachings in a funded program and did not allow his teaching to appear to be proselytizing toward any specific denomination.

The final aspect of creating a successful curriculum came from the understanding that not all people learn the same. Some are readers, some are observers, and yet others are doers. Oftentimes, people combine each of these in a way that they learn best. It was important that as this program advanced, there was an understanding by the educator and the learner that there is no “right way” to learn. The “right way” for each individual is how they are best served and learn and retain the information.

### **Thematic Framework**

Generational poverty is a topic that is receiving a lot of press these days. A Google Scholar search on the topic of generational poverty research returned 326,000 items. And that was with a delimiter of nothing earlier than 2019. Though the issue has been around for decades,

the interest in generational poverty and how best to battle it seems to be finding its way into the spotlight. Though this researcher could not determine the exact reason for this, it was his belief that it was based on the advancement of technology that allowed a more widespread education of those who were living in the dark regarding this topic.

As this researcher had found in his research, there is no one particular reason that one finds themselves living a life of generational poverty, but there do seem to be a few consistent paths on how to get out of it and change one's life's trajectory (Payne et al., 2022). It is through the education of both the one living in poverty and the one who is capable of offering assistance that this problem can be dealt with. Additionally, there must be a willingness to look in the mirror and come to terms with any prejudices one might have in regard to *the poor*. In their article *Poverty, Racism, and the Public Health Crisis in America* (Bruce et al., 2021), the authors share that the vast majority of those living in poverty in the United States are minorities (para. 1). One must ask, "Why is this the case in a first world country where resources abound?" Finally, there needs to be those in leadership positions who are willing to make a difference. This requires that they choose to be counter-cultural in many ways and reach across the chasm of cultural and societal differences.

### **Current Literature Themes**

This researcher was fortunate enough to be working with a program that had remained relevant through its growth. Though the initial release of one of the primary books this researcher utilized, *Bridges Out of Poverty*, was in 2006, the authors have continued to revise the content as time has passed. The current publication is the fifth edition and was published in 2022. The primary theme of this book is how professionals and communities can and should strategize to assist those within their communities to build a life that raises them out of poverty.

From this book, the workbook was created and utilized within the program where this researcher performed his Dissertation-in-Praxis. *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* is in its fourth publication and was developed by Philip DeVol. This book, too, has remained current and relevant over time.

### ***The Impact of Race***

Though generational poverty is not discriminatory in whom it impacts, the statistics show that there is definitely a large disparity when it comes to the races that are living below the poverty line. According to a study performed by the Kaiser Family Foundation, “The prevalence of communities being below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) varies by race and ethnicity with 24.2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 21.2% of Black, 17.2% of Hispanic, 9.7% of Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, and 9% of White American families falling below 100% of the FPL” (Kaiser, 2021). As one can see by these statistics, American Indians, Black, and Hispanic races are at least two times as likely to be living in poverty in the United States. One must ask themselves why this is the case.

The findings of Beech and his peers point to public policy as a primary reason that the discriminatory practices that cause poverty are continuing (Bailey et al., 2020). This topic is also discussed in *Bridges Out of Poverty* as well as in numerous articles this researcher found during his research. As Payne (Payne et al., 2022) and her associate authors point out, one of the largest issues faced by minorities is that they do not have a place at the table to impact policy, and policy change is one of the basic requirements for people to get out of generational poverty (p. 235).

### ***The Role of Education***



If a person does not know how to resolve a problem they are facing, they are doomed to live with it. This is the world in which those living in poverty face daily. Many of them do not know how to change their trajectory because they do not know how to change their circumstances. Though every child in America is to receive a baseline education, not all children have the opportunity to learn.

Based on how schools are funded in the United States, it is imperative that students attend their classes and, in some states, that they perform well on state-mandated tests. This is a twofold problem for those living in poverty. According to an article published in the eLearning Industry journal, students living in poverty are more likely to attend underfunded schools with fewer resources (Ayers, 2022). The author goes on to argue that these students may also struggle to complete homework due to their home environment not being conducive to studying. In turn, this lack of education impacts an individual's earning power as they grow into adulthood, which in turn equates to the ongoing cycle of generational poverty.

The education process is not simply that of going to school and learning the basics. According to Payne and her associate writers, there is also an aspect of education that involves learning the basics of society and what makes the difference between being in poverty and living a middle-class lifestyle. One must also be educated to look for predators, users, and those seeking to take advantage of those living in poverty. In the Getting Ahead curriculum, this is one of the modules in place to assist those who are currently impoverished to better their lives.

In Ayer's journal article, he is quick to point out that the education crisis for those living in poverty cannot be blamed on the teachers. Many of the teachers in these schools are doing all they can to provide the "extras" for their students, but due to a lack of funding, there is simply not enough money available to meet all of the needs. This lack of funding is based on taxes

collected from property taxes, and since those in poverty live in neighborhoods that have lower property values, the tax base is significantly less than in areas where wealth is the norm (Ayers, 2020).

### ***The Leadership Need***

To address the dilemma of generational poverty, there is a need for leadership that is willing to step up and step out. Leadership that is willing to lead cross-culturally and to treat those whom the culture views as “less than” as equals. A leader who views all humanity as created in the image of God (Kilner, 2016). Leaders who call others to follow them and then empower them to become all they are capable of becoming and then send them out to replicate themselves (Lingenfelter, 2008).

In their book *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools*, Parrett and Budge share a quote from a former school superintendent that lines out the leadership view that must be in place for educational success in these underperforming schools. The superintendent states, “We could not continue to do what we knew would, at best, minimally raise student achievement...and for only some of the kids. We had to fundamentally change the way we did business” (Parrett & Budge, 2020, p. 2). This is the leadership mentality that must be in place for both the student and the teacher to achieve success in an underfunded school. This is leadership that is willing to fight the fight when the conflict begins.

Fighting this battle will take a leader willing to view the world through various lenses. They must be willing to look through the Individual lens and accept that each person is an individual who deserves a better life. They deserve an opportunity to be more than they are today and begin a legacy of hope for their family. They must then look through the Institutional lens and be willing to work with organizations within the community to assist them in the changes

required to be better community partners for all individuals in the community, not just those with money. It is through the view of this lens that one finds a need for all members of their community. The third lens is that of the Community lens. This lens views all individuals as equal and invites all parties to the table for discussion and collaboration. This is, in the view of this researcher, the most important lens, as it is a community that will hold people together. This lens, when viewed through, is what assists those who have, sharing with those who do not. This lens allows community members to volunteer in underfunded schools and provide those items that are much needed. The fourth and final lens is the Policy lens. It will take a leader willing to battle for a policy that may not benefit them but will benefit those who cannot speak for themselves based on their socio-economic state (Payne, et al., 2022). This is a leader who is a reflection of the leadership style of Jesus.

### **Relevant Models**

The good news is that there are several churches and organizations assisting those living in poverty with food, childcare, medical care, and the basic needs of life. This researcher's home state has more non-profit organizations than one can count or keep track of. Some of these are national organizations such as Goodwill, The Salvation Army, The United Way, and the YMCA. Others are local organizations and have a passion for those in need in Oklahoma. The desire to provide assistance seems to be real, and at some level, these organizations are doing a good job. The bad news is that very few of these churches or organizations are providing a way out of the current existence for those who rely on them. This researcher attended a fundraiser this year and heard stories of those who have relied on the non-profit for over eight years to assist in meeting their needs. The stated purpose of this non-profit is to assist people in getting out of poverty. Something is wrong!

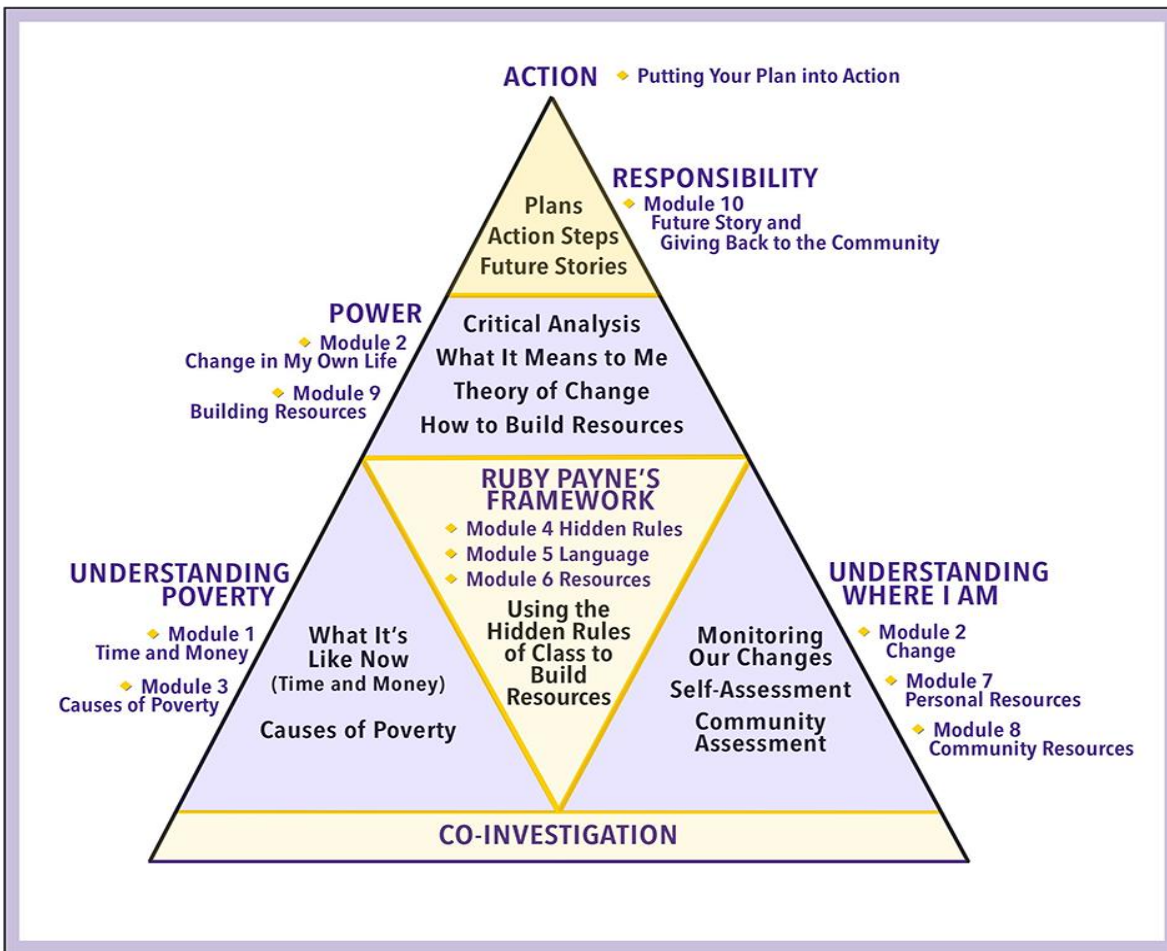
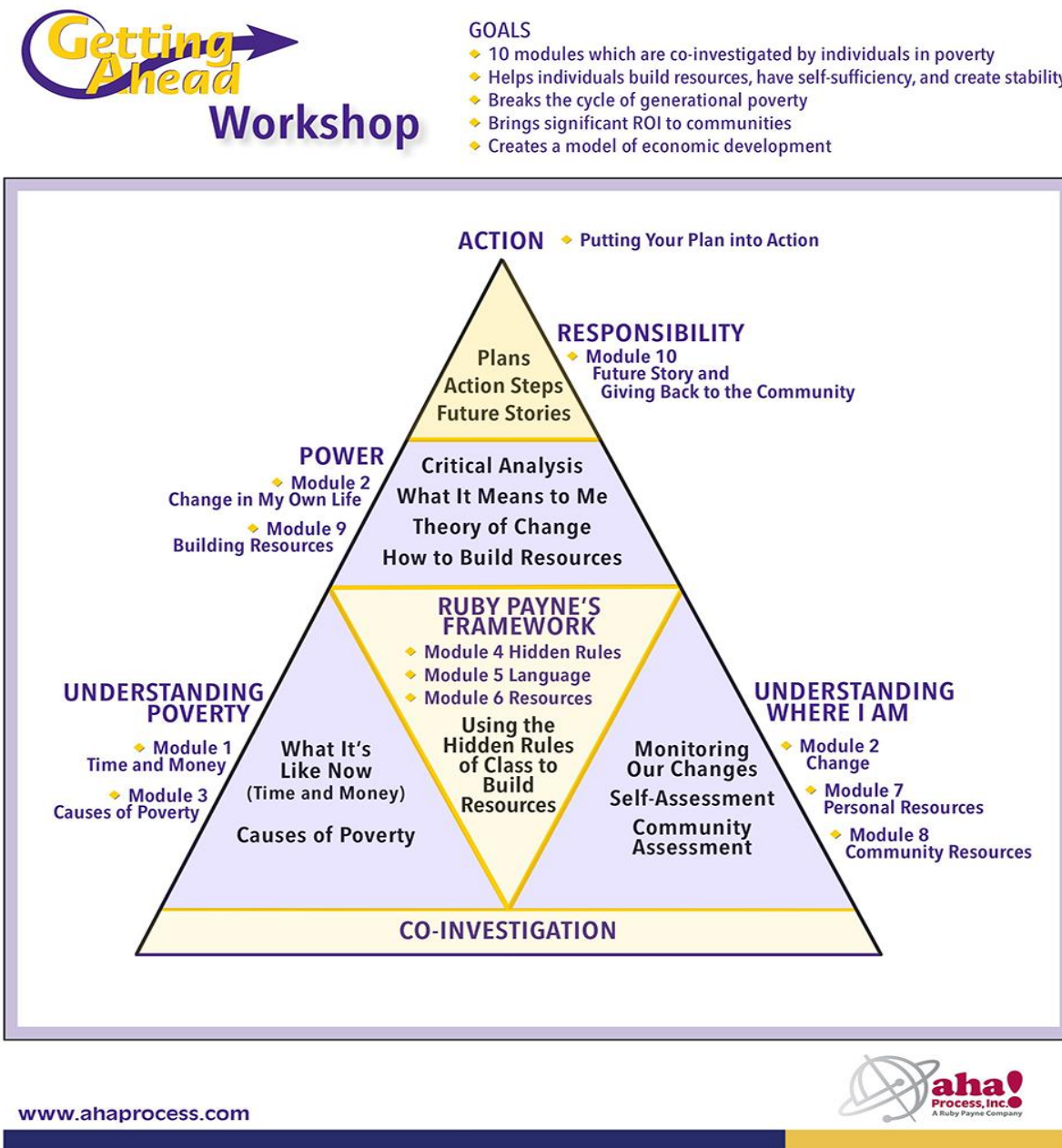
### ***Educate Both Parents and Children***

The first model this researcher shared that is working to break the cycle of generational poverty is the one he worked with during his Dissertation-in-Praxis implementation. The program was offered by the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA. The program was not exclusive to them, but they have chosen to apply resources toward a problem in their communities that they have a passion for.

Getting Ahead is the name of the program, and it was created by Philip DeVol (DeVol, 2020), a co-author of *Bridges Out of Poverty*. This program was made up of ten modules that are taught over a sixteen-week timeframe at a local facility within the community. In some cases, it is at the YMCA, but more often than not, it is at a local community center, school, or church. The groups are made up of a facilitator and those enrolled in the class. The YMCA has set a standard that there will be a maximum of twelve individuals per facilitator to ensure the greatest opportunity for success for those enrolled. Besides the teaching, each evening, there was a meal provided and free childcare to eliminate an additional possible barrier to entry. Once the students graduated, they were gifted a one-year membership to the YMCA to allow the family to continue achieving one of the YMCA founding platforms: ministering to the Mind, Body, and Spirit. Not all YMCA branches offer this program. It was only through the leadership of the Oklahoma City organization that this was made available to the participants at no cost.

**Figure 2**

*Getting Ahead Triangle*



[www.ahaprocess.com](http://www.ahaprocess.com)



As the students worked through each of the modules with their cohort and the facilitator, they moved from describing their life as it is today to ending it with their personal and community plans (DeVol, 2020). Each module involved homework, and it was expected to be

completed before coming to the next class. During the time that the adults were in their classes, the children were in classes where they, too, were taught some of the basics of the Getting Ahead curriculum. This allowed their buy-in when things that they had become accustomed to in the home began to change.

Though there are no modules specifically developed from a spiritual standpoint, this researcher's goal was to inject a spiritual aspect into places where the spiritual and the secular can coincide. A couple of examples were in Module 2, Theory of Change, the concept of God making all things new (New American Standard Bible, 1960, Rev. 21:5) would be a good fit and was able to be handled in a way so as not to offend the participants. In Module 5, The Importance of Language, there would be a lesson on the importance of words and self-talk in addition to the language skills that this module was originally intended for. And lastly, in Module 9, Building Resources, the law of reaping and sowing could fit perfectly.

### ***Career Training and Head Start***

A second program that is more widely spread across the nation is that of Head Start. Head Start is a pre-K program that is state and federally funded for families that meet the qualifications. The program is primarily focused on children in the 3-5 age range but will accept children from birth to five if the situation calls for it (U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services, 2022). “Head Start staff actively engage parents, recognizing family participation throughout the program as key to strong child outcomes” is a primary belief of those in control of the program.

In addition to the Head Start program, there is a program entitled Career Advance. It is offered in Tulsa, OK, by the Community Action Project of Tulsa County (Westervelt, 2017). This program offers, at no cost, job training in high-demand fields such as nursing and other

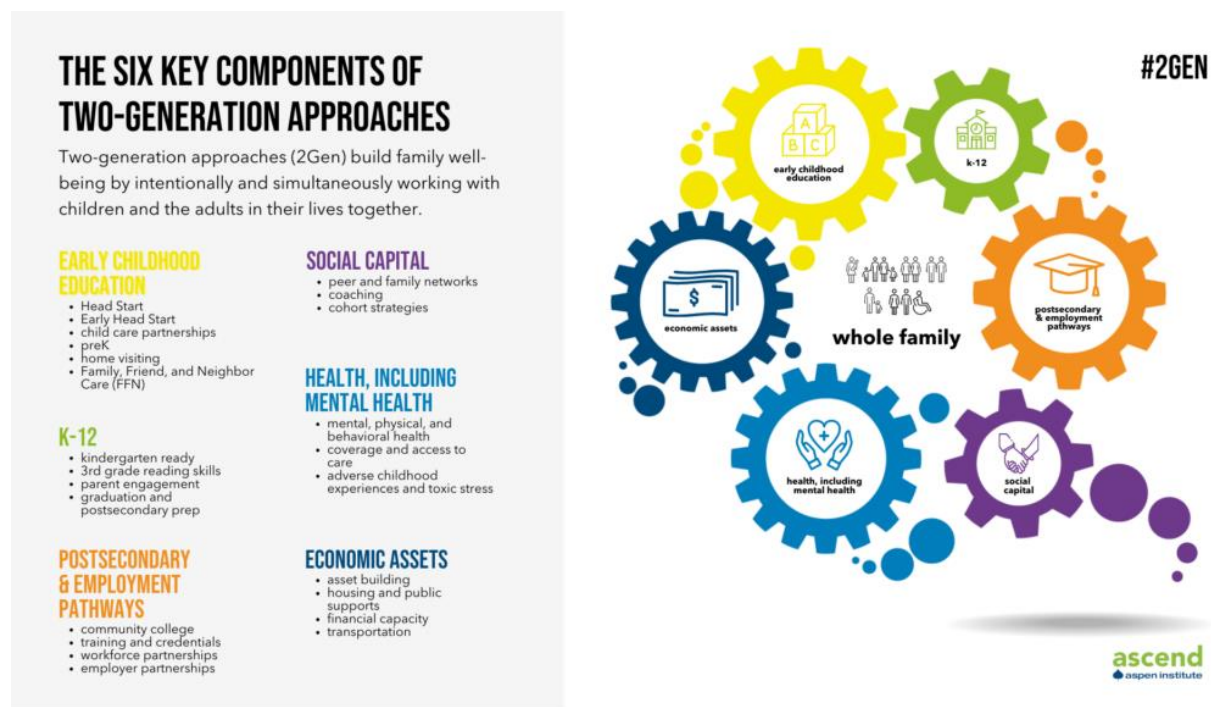
related healthcare jobs. While in the training program, the participants are also provided with a life coach and ongoing support.

The program's goal is to have both the children and the parents as participants. This program does offer financial incentives if specific goals are met along the way and have found that to be a positive motivator for those enrolled (Westervelt, 2017). Absenteeism has declined among both the children and the parents who are enrolled in the program. The life coach that is provided works more on an individual basis and assists in things like budgeting, time management, and handling the basic pressures of life.

Unlike Getting Ahead, this program is much more reliant on the business community to be willing to hire those who need training. This is where educating the community on the benefits of helping people out of poverty comes into play. The local leadership takes that responsibility and has been very pleased with the results.

Both of these programs can be referred to as “two-generation” programs. The idea of educating the children while educating the parents has proven to be widely successful when compared to educating one over the other (Aspen Institute). In the 2Gen approach, families are viewed as fundamental to human development.

The greatest difference between these two programs is how funding is obtained. In Getting Ahead, all funding is obtained through donations made to the YMCA, which are then earmarked for that program. In Head Start, the funding comes from the federal government and is forwarded to the states to be used in their local programs. The career training aspect is funded by the city and county.

**Figure 3***The Six Key Components of Two-Generation Approaches***Chapter Summary**

Generational poverty is still alive and well in America today, even though money has been thrown at it for decades. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson presented legislation that was dubbed The War on Poverty (Bailey & Duquette, 2014). This legislation was the beginning of many of the government-provided services that are still here today. Services like Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, and welfare, to name a few. And yet, more than 15% of those living in America today are living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau). It is apparent that throwing more money at this problem is not going to rectify it.

Based on this researcher's literature review, it will take men and women willing to be leaders, put their prejudices aside, and invest their time and talents in programs serving those the



culture views as “less than.” It will take men and women willing to be servant leaders, transformational leaders, and inclusive leaders. Those who are willing to get their hands dirty and become shepherds of sheep who do not know how to care for themselves. It is going to take spiritual leaders who view those in need as having been created in the Image of God and view them as equals. It is a problem that can be defeated, but only when those who have been willing to reach out a hand to those who have not.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE STRATEGIC PLAN

### Introduction

In the development of the strategic plan for the Dissertation-in-Praxis program that this researcher implemented, careful consideration was given to which model, as defined by Chen, should be utilized (Chen, 2015). After reviewing both the logic and action models, it was determined that the most appropriate model for the program in which this Dissertation-in-Praxis took place was that of *The Action Model/Change Model Schema*. This choice was based on Chen's explanation of descriptive and prescriptive assumptions and their role in implementing a strategic plan and achieving desirable outcomes.

As this plan was implemented, with the assistance of the leadership of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA, the focus on outcomes was driven throughout the 16-week program between this researcher and the program's leadership group. Only through all parties focusing on an end goal could the results set forth as equating to a successful outcome be achieved. Additionally, it was the job of this researcher to ensure that outputs were not misconstrued for outcomes and, therefore, a false sense of success was permitted to enter into the picture.

### Praxis Problem Summary

Generational poverty, defined as two generations of a family unit living below the poverty line (NCCAA, 2020), is a real problem in the United States and is greatly misunderstood. As this study defines poverty, it is more than just a lack of financial means. This level of poverty that is being discussed overlaps with education, health, healthcare options, neighborhood choice, and financial education, to name a few.

The program that this researcher worked with had an end goal of educating those living in poverty in not only how to create a budget but also how to set themselves up for a better life for themselves and their families by changing the way they think and make choices. This 16-week program began with defining the existing reality of the participants and then helping them create not only a vision of but an actual preferred future for themselves, their family, and their future generations. By implementing this program, hope was extended to those who currently had very little or none. When implemented properly, the program allowed those involved to see a future that does not have to be lived in a mode of survival but one that they and their future generations can experience the opportunity to thrive.

### **Vision Statement**

To see an end to generational poverty through education for those who desire a better future for their families.

### **Purpose Statement**

To create and/or enhance educational curricula that could be utilized in training those currently in the generational poverty demographic so that they can break the cycle within their family.

### **Objectives**

1. **To develop and/or enhance an educational curriculum that provides the necessary tools for an individual to end the legacy of generational poverty.**

In a *Newswire* article (2020), Jeff Mount discusses the need for financial education as a key requirement to end generational poverty. He also discusses the negative impact on those with little to no financial education and how they are often taken advantage

of. This involves things like higher interest rates on loans, higher interest rates on credit cards, and the inability to receive credit.

**2. To educate the educator on the obstacles created for those who live in generational poverty that the average person does not have to navigate.**

There are many myths regarding generational poverty, and if educators are going to be able to reach those in the room, they must have a better understanding of the reality they are living. Alice Armstrong, in her article for *The Education Digest* (2010), states, “A full stomach and clear mind are prerequisites for learning. Many children who live in poverty have neither. And the number of children who might be considered "food challenged" is growing at an alarming rate” (p. 49). She goes on to discuss that many who live below the poverty line do so with undiagnosed ailments brought on by living a lifestyle of simply surviving from day to day. The impact of malnutrition, living in a constant state of stress created by the survival mode mentality in which this demographic lives, and the lack of self-worth found in not only the parents but also the children all create an environment where learning is extremely difficult.

**3. To educate parents so that the opportunities of the children of those living in generational poverty are increased.**

According to an article in *The Portland Press Herald* (2018), the education of the parent plays a vital role in the stability and well-being of the family. One of the items the author points out is the impact on children as young as four when their parents seek education to benefit the family. The article goes on to state that when the person pursuing the education is the mother, the benefits are even greater. This hurdle is

huge. When one lives in a daily fight for survival, adding anything to the routine that does not provide an immediate return on the time investment takes an extra effort.

**4. To graduate people who are willing to take the time to educate others.**

To be able to remove the excuse of “but you don’t understand my situation” from the vocabulary of those involved in taking the classes would be a large benefit to the overall success of the program. This particular group of individuals would not necessarily need the additional training of having to be educated to understand the obstacles that must be overcome by educators of those who live in generational poverty.

**Outputs**

Upon completing this program, this researcher would have liked to have seen a training curriculum for the educator and student.

1. The training for the educator would involve training regarding the lifestyle of those who live in generational poverty, the myths swirling around the concept of generational poverty, and the opportunity being provided to them to assist a family in breaking the chain of generational poverty.
2. The training for the student would involve training on how to create a budget, how to look for a job, how to invest in one’s own education through reading, how to utilize public services while seeking assistance, how to better parent, and how to educate one’s children to ensure the cycle ends.
3. Additionally, both parties would be trained to understand their uniqueness as individuals and that they were created in the Image of God and have a purpose for being alive.

## Outcomes

As the training stated above took place, this researcher saw a variety of outcomes that would benefit not just the individuals involved but society as a whole. The three primary outcomes this researcher was striving for were:

1. **Families currently living in the cycle of generational poverty to break the cycle.**

That is, those currently surviving in a day-to-day existence learn to provide for themselves and their families in such a way that they are able to live life with joy and pass on to their children the fundamentals of how to live a life of more than sheer existence.

2. **To build a team of educators who are willing to invest their time in “the least of these.”**

As this program continues to evolve, it was the researcher's desire to see others capable of facilitating groups within their communities do so and do it with excellence.

Those involved in the program understand their uniqueness and that they are created in the Image of God. It is through this understanding that those who are currently living below the poverty line and struggling with their self-worth will grow to believe they carry an intrinsic value and have a specific calling in their lives.

## Essential Terms

1. *Abject poverty*: The lowest, most hopeless form of poverty that exists. It equates to living on an income that is half or less than the government-determined poverty line (Whiting, 2021).
2. *Food desert*: Areas that lack access to affordable fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, and other foods that make up the full range of a healthy diet (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

3. *Generational poverty*: Two generations of a family unit living below the poverty line (NCCAA, 2020).
4. *Poverty*: The state of being extremely poor (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).
5. *Poverty line*: Determined by family size. Single - \$14,580/year Family of 4 - \$30,000/year (OKPolicy.org, 2022).
6. *Single-Parent Families*: Single-parent families are comprised of a parent/caregiver and one or more dependent children without the presence and support of a spouse or adult partner who is sharing the responsibility of parenting (Lindwall, et al., 2011).

### **Operational Plan**

Implementation of this Dissertation-in-Praxis plan required several steps to move from the participants' current reality to their preferred future. As it was being implemented, this plan required people, finances, time, a curriculum, a study guide, educators, and a facility for the students and their families to meet. Additionally, it required an attitude of willingness to change and grow.

### **Participants**

There were two different sets of participants involved in this study. The first were those who found themselves working to break the cycle of generational poverty. The individuals in this group currently live at or below the poverty line and are seeking to make a change for themselves and their families. This demographic made up the majority of the participants. This group was a combination of singles and married people. There were those with children or grandchildren and those without. Some were employed, while others were seeking employment. For each of the training groups, there will be 9 – 12 who fall within this demographic. The second group of individuals involved were facilitating the training group. This was a group of individuals volunteering their time and talent to assist those willing to work to reach their preferred future. These individuals had been through a training program provided by the Bridges

Out of Poverty organization in conjunction with the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA. The training program covered the topics discussed in the curriculum as well as an understanding of the daily difficulties a family living in poverty has to live with. Additionally, the volunteers were trained in terminology, acceptance of those in the program, goals, and proper interactions with the participants.

### **Facilities**

For each group of participants and trainers, there were a variety of needs within a facility. There needed to be a room large enough to hold three or four round tables large enough to allow a group of four to six to draw, take notes, eat, and converse. This room needed to allow for plenty of separation between the tables so that conversations were kept private within the realm of each group and their facilitator. It also allowed the various conversations to take place at a normal decibel without the room becoming too loud.

Secondly, there needed to be a room so that the children of the participants had a place to play and be children for a span of two hours a week. This room, too, needed to have room for tables so that the children had a place to eat, color, and converse. It also needed to have areas where the children can play without too much risk of damaging the facility.

One of the primary concerns with facility selection is the primary use of the facility selected. In speaking with the program's leadership, the concern regarding utilizing local churches, for example, is that those participating assume they will have to believe a specific set of doctrines that are consistent with that church. Though this was never espoused during the training, the leadership remained diligent in ensuring a separation of a building, a belief system, and any expectations on the part of those making the facilities available.



**Process**

*Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World* is a twelve to sixteen-week program made up of an orientation session and ten modules. The additional weeks allowed for scheduling flexibility by both students and instructors based on holidays, school schedules, facility availability, modules that require more than one week to complete, and other potential hurdles that would need to be planned around.

Each week, there was homework required to be completed by each participant so that they could be a part of the conversation regarding that week's topic. Each group member is held accountable by the other members of the group so that the facilitator can facilitate and not police.

The time together began with dinner for all participants and their children. Then, members were separated into their assigned groups, and the children went into their rooms to play and spend time with the other children.

***Orientation***

The purpose of the orientation session was to inform those considering participation about what the program is and is not and set the proper expectations. After this session, participants make a final decision on whether or not to participate.

***Module 1***

The title of the first module was *My Life Now*. During this module, the participants mapped out their current reality with assistance from the facilitator. Since poverty is different for each community, it was important that each participant be given the opportunity to share what they are currently experiencing.

***Module 2***

*Theory of Change* was the title of this module and was focused on how people make changes in their lives and the ramifications of those changes. Each participant filled out a Stability Scale to assist with their determination of how much change they are actually dealing with on a daily basis that they may not even be aware of. Lastly, the participants were introduced to the Stages of Change.

### ***Module 3***

As module three began, the participants learned about the *Rich/Poor Gap* and various research on the causes of poverty. Those living in poverty may not realize all of the causes of their current situation. They may assume it is about getting a better job when, in reality, it could also be an issue of people preying on them because they are poor. Once the participants better understand the things they have the power to control in their lives, they better the opportunity to move forward toward their preferred future.

### ***Module 4***

In this module, the teaching was to focus on the hidden rules of each economic class. The middle class and wealthy do not live by the same set of *rules* that those in poverty do. Teaching those in poverty what some of those rules are puts them in a position to understand better how to move from poverty to the middle class.

### ***Module 5***

Communication can be improved as language skills are improved. This module focused on how important language is in one's life and how to improve the skills, or lack thereof, one might have. It also discussed the importance of body language, community language, and understanding the various "voices" one has access to, as well as helping the participants learn how to use their language skills to resolve conflicts.

***Module 6***

Those living in poverty may have a mindset that they are lacking in resources. In this module, they were exposed to eleven resources that would assist them in moving from where they are to where they would like to be. It was in this module that the importance of a spiritual aspect of life was introduced. By understanding that each individual is made in the Image of God and has a divine purpose for being on earth, a person's self-esteem and self-worth can be influenced in a positive way.

***Module 7***

Following the lessons learned in Module 6, each participant performed a self-assessment of the resources that they currently have available. This was a self-assessment instead of someone in an agency performing the assessment based on ownership by the individual performing the assessment. By this point in the program, the members of the group should have become comfortable with each other and built a level of trust that allowed them to hold each other accountable for these types of exercises.

***Module 8***

Following the self-assessment in the previous module, each individual performed a community assessment in the area in which they live. In this assessment, they determined at what level their community is set up to be inclusive of all residents. This assessment is broken down into nine conditions within the community, and each participant ranked their community as to whether they do or do not provide specific items that add up to the condition being assessed. Once they performed the assessment, an overall score was determined for each condition within the community.

***Module 9***

As discussed in the study guide utilized for the *Getting Ahead* program, one of the greatest differences between Getting-By and Getting Ahead is that one is “needs-based” while the other is “power-based” (DeVol, 2020). In this module, each individual learned how to build resources that will give them the power needed to advance.

### ***Module 10***

The final module in this plan looked to the preferred future that the involved individuals had designed in the first few modules. This module was focused on personal and community plans that invite all members of the community to the table and give each of them a voice that is heard. This was performed by an individual taking responsibility for their lives and those who have been entrusted to them and working within the community to build all members up.

### **Budget**

The Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA sets aside funds earmarked for this program each year. These funds come from donors who either give to the general fund or specify the *Getting Ahead* program when they give.

The money is spent on a variety of items. A study guide was provided to each individual participant. In the case of a married couple, each of them received a book so that they could share their unique perspectives. Dinner was provided each week for all those who attended. This included the children in the case of a family group attending. The purpose of this was twofold: it allowed the participants to arrive on time and not worry about fixing a meal prior to attending, and it allowed the participants to get to know each other better. Thirdly, though many of the facilities are donated, there are times when the rental of a facility in a specific part of the community is required. The facilitators are volunteers, so that does not require budgetary consideration.

## **Message**

Participants in this program were not recruited. The availability of the program was made known in a variety of ways. Those attending schools in high-poverty communities are made aware of the opportunity through notification sent home from the school itself. This was usually accomplished by a flyer or newsletter being sent home with the student. Secondly, in the minority communities that have high poverty levels, the city itself may take responsibility for getting the word out. Lastly, since the YMCA has numerous programs for those struggling with poverty, they post information regarding upcoming classes in their local branches. In turn, they provide classes in those branches to make it easier for the potential participants to participate.

## **Assessment Plan**

Prior to the program beginning, it was the intention of this researcher to begin his assessment. This assessment plan was made up of both quantitative and qualitative measurements of those involved in the program. Within this plan, there were benchmarks to assist in the determination of the success, or lack thereof, along the way so that should adjustments to the program be needed, they could be implemented prior to getting to the end of the program and determining the outcomes desired had not been achieved.

## **Outcomes**

1. It was the intention of this researcher to begin the assessment of this program with a survey to be completed by all participants regarding their current view of hope in their lives. The reason for this starting point is that it was the opinion of this researcher that one of the greatest outcomes of this program is a renewed/increased hope for those involved.

2. The second outcome that was sought was how each participant viewed themselves regarding their uniqueness/self-worth. Since this researcher's goal was to instill an understanding of each person's value based on having been created in the Image of God, any change in this area must be assessed. This outcome was based on both a questionnaire and an interview format.
3. A third outcome sought was that those involved in the program begin breaking the cycle of generational poverty. This was to be determined by interviews and observation of homework being completed and positive steps forward based on what is learned throughout the program.

### **Indicators of Success**

Based on the above-listed outcomes, the indicators of success were not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Each participant entered the program in a different “place” on their journey and cannot be compared to the other participants to determine whether the program is successful. They were compared to themselves as the program progressed and ultimately drew to completion. This program's primary indicators of success were increased hope, an understanding of one's value as a creation of God, and positive steps toward breaking the cycle of generational poverty.

1. There were those who entered the program with a higher level of hope than someone else, so success for that individual looked significantly different than for the one who arrived in a hopeless condition. The percentage of increase on the hope scale may be less for the one who arrives having hope, but that does not mean that success did not take place.

2. Regarding the spiritual aspect of the program, some entered having a background of being raised in the church and hearing that Jesus loves them. Others had no exposure to a spiritual aspect of life, and the idea that they were created in the Image of God was quite foreign. Success within this outcome goal was that each participant came to the knowledge that God made them and made them to be unique beings with a unique calling in their lives. As the end-of-course assessment took place in this area, success was a better understanding of their uniqueness and higher self-worth.

Indicators of success within the realm of breaking generational poverty were when the students implemented the truths they were learning in the program. For example, when there was an understanding of the benefits of a budget, one was put together. When one came to accept that there were things that they could do now to begin the process of breaking the cycle even though they were not making any additional money to support their family. These indicators were evident each week during the meetings.

### **Benchmarks**

Based on this being a sixteen-week program, it was the intention of this researcher to survey/interview each of the participants every quarter. The surveys utilized prior to the beginning of the program implementation were the same ones utilized at each of the benchmark dates. Also, the interview questions utilized at the beginning of the program were the same questions used during the process. Additionally, observations were made every week that were documented by this researcher and made part of the final interviews with each participant. A copy of the survey is available in Appendix A. A copy of the interview protocol and questions can be found in Appendix B. The observational summary sheet is found in Appendix C.

## **Assessment of Results**

This was a mixed-methods research model, so the assessment was quantitative and qualitative. This required a level of statistical analysis in the area of hope increasing in one's life. The breaking of generational poverty through specific actions taught in the class was assessed through observation and interview processes, which led to the success or failure of this specific outcome being determined qualitatively. This was also true of how one views themselves and their self-worth. The determination of success or failure in one understanding that they are created in the Image of God and, therefore, have inherent worth was accomplished through an interview process.

## **Summary and Significance**

The program that this researcher worked with was not something new that had been created strictly for this Dissertation-in-Praxis or as a brainchild of this researcher. This program came from many years of research by those working to make communities better for all residents regardless of their socio-economic status. The primary change this researcher was planning to bring to the table was the injection of an understanding of who God is and how He fits into the life of every individual created. Additionally, he was planning to work with the leadership at the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA to add the concept of hope into the program, as it seemed to be missing this integral piece of the puzzle.

This program, when implemented, had the potential to change the lives of those involved. Not just the lives of the students but the lives of the educators, the facilitators, and the extended family who interact with the participants. It brought about a greater understanding of poverty and its many causes and ramifications. It not only breaks the cycle of generational poverty, but it breaks the cycle of a community that judges those living in poverty as "less than." Jesus tells us



in the scriptures that the poor will always be a part of the population, but He did not leave it there. He, in turn, told us that they are to be served and ministered to as a shepherd ministers to and serves their flock.

Generational poverty is a problem that is not going to be “fixed” with a silver bullet. This is a problem that has been here for decades and will continue into the future. The government has tried to eliminate it by throwing money, legislation, job creation, and many other things at it, yet it is still here. The primary reason is that they have failed to educate those who live in this socio-economic class every day and those who live in the communities that need to support them. Though money, legislation, job creation, and numerous other things are not bad at face value, they do not get to the root of the issue. It will be through *Getting Ahead* and programs like it that address the education of the individual and the family that this growing epidemic will be reduced and eventually eliminated by the grace of God.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT

### Introduction

As this researcher began the implementation process of his program, he was able to navigate the hurdles presented. Through communication with his collaborating coach, a night of the week that fit his schedule was determined, and dates were set. On the first meeting of the group involved in the Getting Ahead program that this researcher would be observing, introductions were made, and the purpose of this researcher's presence was made clear. The group was very welcoming, and no concerns were voiced.

During the program's duration of sixteen weeks, this researcher began compiling his data by analyzing the surveys taken by each member of the group and reviewing his observation notes. The following are the results of those two pieces of information obtained during the program.

### Praxis Project Plan

The program this researcher chose to participate in for his Dissertation-in-Praxis project was Getting Ahead. This program, created from the book, *Bridges Out of Poverty* (Payne, et al., 2022), looks at both the causes and solutions to poverty within a community. Over a period of sixteen weeks, the participants study and discuss ten modules regarding poverty and what resources each individual has available to combat it both personally and in a community. The groups are made up of eight to twelve participants, and the process is administered by two facilitators. Each module is made up of in-class exercises, discussions, and homework that each participant is expected to complete.

This researcher attended each class for sixteen weeks and interacted with each participant through surveys, group discussions, and personal one-on-one interaction. The classes were held

weekly at a local YMCA that was central to the participants involved in the program. There were nine participants for this class, most of whom had dependents. There were two couples, both of whom were living together but not married, and five single moms in the group. Three of the participants are Caucasian, and the remaining six are African American.

### **Vision Statement**

To see an end to generational poverty through education for those with a desire for a better future for their family.

### **Purpose Statement**

To create and/or enhance educational curricula that could be utilized in training those who are currently in the demographic of generational poverty so that they can break the cycle within their family.

### **Objectives**

1. **To develop and/or enhance an educational curriculum that provides the necessary tools for an individual to end the legacy of generational poverty.**

In a *Newswire* article (2020), Jeff Mount discusses the need for financial education as a key requirement to end generational poverty. He also discusses the negative impact on those with little to no financial education and how they are often taken advantage of. This involves things like higher interest rates on loans, higher interest rates on credit cards, and the inability to receive credit.

2. **To educate the educator on the obstacles created for those who live in generational poverty that the average person does not have to navigate.**

There are many myths regarding generational poverty, and if the educator is going to be able to reach those in the room, they must have a better understanding of the

reality being lived by them. Alice Armstrong, in her article for *The Education Digest* (2010), states, “A full stomach and clear mind are prerequisites for learning. Many children who live in poverty have neither. And the number of children who might be considered "food challenged" is growing at an alarming rate.” She goes on to discuss that many who live below the poverty line do so with undiagnosed ailments brought on by living a lifestyle of simply surviving from day to day. The impact of malnutrition, living in a constant state of stress created by the survival mode mentality in which this demographic lives, and the lack of self-worth found in not only the parents but also the children all create an environment where learning is extremely difficult.

3. **To educate parents so that the opportunities for the children of those living in generational poverty are increased.**

According to an article in *The Portland Press Herald* (2018), the education of the parent plays a vital role in the stability and well-being of the family. One of the items the author points out is the impact on children as young as four when their parents seek education to benefit the family. The article goes on to state that when the person pursuing the education is the mother, the benefits are even greater. This hurdle is huge. When one lives in a daily fight for survival, adding anything to the routine that does not provide an immediate return on the time investment takes an extra effort.

4. **To graduate people who are willing to take the time to educate others.**

Removing the excuse of “but you don’t understand my situation” from the vocabulary of those involved in taking the classes would greatly benefit the program's overall success. This particular group of individuals would not necessarily need the

additional training of having to be educated to understand the obstacles that must be overcome by educators of those who live in generational poverty.

### **Outputs**

Upon completing this program, this researcher would have liked to have seen a training curriculum for the educator and student.

1. The training for the educator would involve training regarding the lifestyle of those who live in generational poverty, the myths swirling around the concept of generational poverty, and the opportunity being provided to them to assist a family in breaking the chain of generational poverty.
2. The training for the student would involve training on how to create a budget, how to look for a job, how to invest in one's own education through reading, how to utilize public services while seeking assistance, how to better parent, and how to educate one's children to ensure the cycle ends.
3. Additionally, both parties would be trained to understand their uniqueness as individuals, that they were created in God's image, and that they have a purpose for being alive.

### **Outcomes**

As the training stated above took place, this researcher saw a variety of outcomes that would benefit not just the individuals involved but society as a whole. The three primary outcomes this researcher was striving for were:

1. Families currently living in the cycle of generational poverty to break the cycle. That is, those currently surviving in a day-to-day existence learn to provide for themselves

- and their families in such a way that they are able to live life with joy and pass on to their children the fundamentals of how to live a life of more than sheer existence.
2. To build a team of educators who are willing to invest their time in “the least of these.” As this program continues to evolve, it is the desire of this researcher to see others who are capable of facilitating groups within their communities do so and do it with excellence.
  3. Those involved in the program come to understand their uniqueness and that they are created in the Image of God. Through this understanding, those currently living below the poverty line and struggling with their self-worth will grow to believe they carry an intrinsic value and have a specific calling in their lives.

## **Praxis Project Assessment**

### **Assessment of Project Antecedents**

#### ***The Need***

Poverty is alive and well in the United States and even more so in Oklahoma. The current poverty rate in Oklahoma is 15.8%, compared to a national average of 11.5%. This makes Oklahoma the 8<sup>th</sup> highest poverty rate in the country (KOSU.ORG, 2023). Additionally, 1 in 5 children live below the poverty line in the state.

According to the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Extension, “Oklahoma is one of the hungriest states in the nation. One in six (17%) Oklahoman adults and seniors are food insecure, and 1 in 4 (25%) Oklahoma children are food insecure” (OSU Extension). This statistic aligns with the one mentioned above as it relates to the poverty level within the state.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, poverty can negatively impact families in various

ways. Higher mortality rates, slower development in school, and mental health issues, just to name a few. In the Getting Ahead program that this researcher was a part of, there were mental health issues to be dealt with, chronic health issues in young people, and a family facing a situation that involved juvenile incarceration.

The need for this study was definitely justified, and the role that education can play in the assistance in impacting this national crisis became apparent.

### ***The Participants***

The number of participants for the Getting Ahead program was less than this researcher had initially thought. However, after having gone through the program, the concept of holding a group to no more than twelve makes total sense. In the case of this program, there were nine participants, two facilitators, and an observer.

The participants were two couples and five singles. Neither of the couples was married, but they did have lengthy relationships. The five singles in the room were all female and moms. The ages of the children varied significantly from two to eighteen years of age. One of the couples had adult children who did not live with them. Three of the participants were Caucasian, and the remaining six were African American. Of the two couples, one fell in each of the ethnic categories.

This researcher had anticipated more couples than singles for the program and was caught off guard that the participation dynamic was precisely the opposite. This changed the way this researcher interacted with the participants in light of the determination not to have one-on-one conversations with females alone. The participants seemed to be comfortable sharing in a group environment, so there was no major setback to the research being performed.

The participants were very open regarding their lives and struggles. Some had been incarcerated and discussed the actions that caused that. Others knew the humiliation of “couch surfing” for survival and included their children in that process. None of this was an expectation of this researcher. He expected the participants to be somewhat guarded based on someone in the room who did not live their life. This researcher became known as “the gray-haired, old, white guy” as time passed, allowing for more open conversations.

There was no judgment seen or felt among the participants toward each other. Though some were professing Christians and others claimed to be atheists, there was no conversation regarding “right” and “wrong.” There were plenty of conversations amongst the participants regarding faith and what that faith was placed in, but the couples living together were accepted along with everyone else.

In spite of the life that each of these individuals is living, there was also a lot of laughter in the room. There was an overriding attitude of appreciation for the program and for each other. Though a member of the Department of Corrections for the State of Oklahoma, the facilitator was highly accepted and respected. One of the funniest moments was when one of the participants realized the facilitator looked so familiar because she had met her during one of her incarcerations.

### ***The Context***

The context in which this program took place was extremely disappointing to this researcher. The room where the participants met was not air conditioned on several evenings, and the noise level from children playing in the next room became excessive at times. Though fans were brought in to assist with the situation, the noise of the fans running also created issues with participants being able to hear each other during the conversations. Additionally, the room



was not always available at the start time due to others using it for various programs offered by the YMCA facility where the program took place.

The participants took everything in stride, but when the food was delivered late for dinner, it seemed to create an underlying current for the evening. Since the participants and their children ate together, the program could not kick off on time when the dinner was late due to the children being in the room. Since there was an expectation that dinner would be served at 5:30 each evening, the participants arrived early to allow time for them to enjoy dinner with their children. Though the number of evenings the dinner was served late was minimal, those modules suffered based on a lack of time available to cover them.

Childcare was very well done during the program, as each child went to their age-appropriate room. The on-site director of the program arrived early every week to ensure there was enough staff and rooms to eliminate concerns for the parents. Even though the person in the director role changed halfway through the program, the commitment and dedication to the children did not change. The children were segregated by age, allowing them to participate in activities that would be beneficial to them.

### ***The Resources***

Before the Getting Ahead program began, this researcher connected with the Director of Community Involvement at the Greater Oklahoma City YMCA to determine the budgetary numbers for each individual involved in the program.

The budgetary number provided was \$1,000 per participant. This number is based on past experience with this program at the YMCA. The determination of this number is based on the cost to pay the facilitators, purchase food for each week, pay each participant household \$25 per week as a travel stipend, pay the childcare workers at the YMCA, provide a one-year

membership to the YMCA to each graduate free of charge, and provide the Getting Ahead book to each participant.

For this project, the organization worked within its budget and provided each participant with everything committed to them. Additionally, there was a graduation ceremony and party to celebrate each participant. This, too, was done within the expected budgetary numbers.

### **Assessment of Project Processes**

The layout for the Getting Ahead program is straightforward when one reads the text. It is a three-hour timeframe that begins with dinner and then moves into programming. Dinner is to last thirty minutes, and the teaching/discussion portion is two and a half hours. Additionally, there are weeks when participants are to do homework outside the classroom setting and return the following week with the results. Lastly, the discussions are to include all of the participants, and side-bar conversations are to be kept to a minimum.

### ***Timeframe Usage***

There were no evenings that dinner was completed within the thirty-minute timeframe allotted, and discussion began. As mentioned earlier, on a few occasions, it was due to dinner arriving late, but for the most part, it was a matter of the facilitators not driving that particular requirement. Many front-end conversations were taking place that were permitted to continue well into the teaching and discussion time. Though it did build community in some instances, it was apparent to this researcher that those who were ready to begin became quite bored and annoyed with the process. Due to this, those who were not as interactive began to arrive later than the start time to eat and not have to participate in the idle chatter. This behavior served only to delay the beginning of the program each week further since there were children still in the room eating when the facilitators were ready to begin.

### ***Teaching and Discussion***

The facilitators covered all of the modules in the text over the sixteen-week period. Some areas were skimmed over, while others were met with a “deep dive” into the information. Out of each module, specific ideas and recommendations were discussed amongst the participants, with the facilitators providing guidance where applicable.

Based on a survey taken by this researcher, all of the participants, with one exception, believe their time was well spent and that they learned something that will benefit them and their children in the future. Interestingly, the one who did not feel the investment of time was well spent was one who would create idle chatter in the middle of teaching and keep it going as long as the facilitators would tolerate it.

Brainstorming is a very important portion of Getting Ahead and was performed multiple times throughout the program. The facilitators did an excellent job in this arena as pictures, graphs, and diagrams were created on a whiteboard with the input of all participants in the room. These ranged from the Mental Picture of Poverty to the Mental Picture of a Healthy Community. With the input of all nine participants, the group was able to determine where they “are” and where they would like to “be” as the program wrapped up. In the conversations this researcher had with the participants after these sessions, they found these exercises to be extremely beneficial. Many in the room stated they now understand why some of their day-to-day activities were what they were and how to break the cycle they are currently living in.

### ***Homework***

The homework was not completed by all participants in the given timeframe. This led to frustration amongst those who did complete their homework timely as those who did not were given classroom time to get it completed. This led to the obvious outcome of no one doing their

homework outside of the classroom since time was going to be given in class the following week to complete it. This led to less teaching and discussion time for the overall program as a whole. As this researcher observed this behavior week after week, he was expecting the facilitators to comment on it and find a way to reward those who did their homework. This did not take place. Since one of the basic tenets of Getting Ahead is that you have to take responsibility for your actions, the facilitators went totally against that by their willingness to not hold anyone accountable in the classroom.

This researcher found two ends of the spectrum on the homework issue in conversations with the participants. Some were fine with the concept of homework and willingly did it as part of their week. Others were upset that there was homework since it was not mentioned when they signed up for the class, and had they known there was going to be an out-of-class time commitment, they would not have taken the class. Interestingly, some of those who would not have taken the class had they known there was homework involved are the ones who completed their out-of-class assignments timely.

### **Assessment of Project Outputs and Outcomes**

The outputs from the Getting Ahead program are determinable based on the survey this researcher utilized throughout the program. Once every four weeks, the “Hope” survey was administered, and the results were obtained. These results were recorded to be utilized to compare to prior and future weeks.

The outcomes from the Getting Ahead program will not be known in their entirety for some time. Poverty does not end overnight based on one going through a program. It is small changes over a period of time that will determine the outcomes for the participants in this program.

### ***Actual Outputs***

The outputs this researcher listed in his program plan were not all obtained. The following are the actual outputs from the program's implementation.

1. **There was an increase in various aspects of Hope for each participant.**

Three of the eight statements on the survey point to Hope for the future. With no exceptions, all three of these statements saw an increase on the scale as the program progressed.

The first statement was:

*My life circumstances can get better* – the largest swing in response to that statement was from a 6 to a 10 on a 1 to 10 scale. The average swing was two points, with the least being a one-point swing.

The second statement was:

*I am capable of making changes in my life* – the largest swing in response to that statement was from a 5 to a 10 on a 1 to 10 scale. The average swing was 3.5 points, with the least being a two-point swing. The two-point swing was from a 4 to a 6.

The third statement was:

*My past does not have to define my future* – the largest swing in response to that statement was from a 4 to a 10 on a 1 to 10 scale. The average swing was 3 points, with the least being zero with one of the participants.

**Figure 4***Hope Survey – Question 3*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	6	7	9	8	9	3
Participant 2	7	8	9	10	10	3
Participant 3	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	6	10	10	9	10	4
Participant 6	10	8	10	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	5	7	7	7	7	2
Participant 8	N/A	6	10	10	10	4
Participant 9	10	10	10	10	10	0

*Hope Survey – Question 4*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	8	6	8	6	8	0
Participant 2	5	6	8	10	10	5
Participant 3	10	10	9	8	9	-1
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	5	5	10	10	9	4
Participant 6	10	8	10	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	4	5	6	7	7	3
Participant 8	N/A	5	9	10	10	5
Participant 9	10	10	10	10	10	0

*Hope Survey – Question 7*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	6	7	8	8	8	2
Participant 2	6	10	7	10	10	4
Participant 3	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	4	10	3	8	8	4
Participant 6	10	8	10	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	7	7	7	7	7	0
Participant 8	N/A	4	4	10	10	6
Participant 9	10	10	10	10	10	0

- 2. Some of the participants were involved in the program because they received a meal for their family and a \$25 stipend weekly for transportation.**

During conversations with the participants, there were those who stated that they did not know why they were attending the program, but when they heard there was a free meal, a transportation voucher, and a one-year free membership to the YMCA, they decided to enroll in the program. These are the same individuals who did not complete projects outside of classroom time and were reluctant to interact with others during brainstorming sessions.

- 3. There was little to no training or discussion regarding the importance of budgets or how to create one.**

Several of the participants anticipated training on how to create a budget and live within one. They were informed that there is a follow-on class entitled *Staying Ahead*, where this information will be shared.

- 4. Participants were informed of the public assistance programs in the Oklahoma City metro and how to obtain assistance from each program best.**

25% of the modules involved conversations regarding public assistance. Each participant was involved in those discussions and shared with each other the programs available and how best to access them. This was a high point within the program as the participants learned that they did not have to navigate a support system alone. Since poverty is a lack of resources, it was through these conversations that the participants learned they were not as impoverished as they had once thought.

- 5. The internal connections between the participants, facilitators, and program directors will live on past this program.**

80% of the participants have shown interest in moving into the next program in this series, Staying Ahead. Through this program, conversations regarding budgeting, job searching, self-improvement, and giving back to the community take place. One of the facilitators in this program is a graduate of the program and chose to give back by becoming a facilitator.

### *Actual Outcomes*

- 1. The lens through which this researcher sees poverty and generational poverty in the community has definitely changed.**

As this researcher sat with a group of nine participants living at, or below, the poverty level, his view of how society treats and supports those in poverty changed. The amount of support is lacking, the programs are so duplicated that money is being wasted, and the participants are not looking for a “free lunch” as much as they are looking for a way out. Additionally, he had to come to terms with his purpose and drive for participating in the program.

- 2. From this group of participants, there are those who are interested in becoming facilitators.**

This was one of the outcomes this researcher was looking for when he entered this program. One of the facilitators for this group is a Getting Ahead graduate, and she supplied hope to those in the program who would like to do the same thing for others in their community.

- 3. In filling out an end-of-program questionnaire, each participant stated they learned something during the program that will benefit them and their children in the future.**



These responses show that the Getting Ahead program needs to continue. The takeaway mentioned more than any other was that individuals have the ability to change and impact their family and community.

### Figure 5

*Response to “What Have You Learned That You Will Make Sure Your Children Know?”*

Participants	Comment
Participant 1	How to use resources to their advantage.
Participant 2	There are long-term consequences to everything.
Participant 3	How important self-discipline is when it comes to making right decisions.
Participant 4	It’s not about how much money you have but what you do with your money.
Participant 5	Some things are better taught sooner rather than later.
Participant 6	Build your own team.
Participant 7	How to break down goals so they are achievable..
Participant 8	Hidden rules.
Participant 9	N/A

#### **4. By becoming facilitators, 80% of the participants can make an impact on others living in poverty.**

As this researcher communicated with the participants, he found that each of them desired to support others living like them. They are willing to take the time to become trained to facilitate future Getting Ahead classes. With the exception of two individuals, both struggling with mental health issues, each participant is capable of performing the duties.

### **Summary of Results**

As the Getting Ahead program wrapped up, this researcher found that he and each participant were impacted in ways not anticipated. Seeing each of these participants once a week for sixteen weeks and getting to interact with them and their children was quite a reminder of why programs like this need to be in place. The participants each grew in their knowledge and understanding of the causes of poverty and were able to remove much of the guilt and shame of

their current life situation. They learned that there is a future for them and their children and that much of that change begins with a paradigm shift. Conversations led to accountability and confrontation as to who is responsible for where one is and that no matter where one is today, they do not have to stay there.

*Getting Ahead in A Just Gettin' By World* is both a text and a program that can have a major impact on both those in poverty and those who live in the community with them. It is a program that can take one from where they are to where they want to go. As those who graduate from the program choose to give back by facilitating others through the program, the impact of the program will be felt across the nation.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, APPLICATIONS**

### **Findings, Impact, and Conclusions**

#### **Introduction**

As this researcher concluded his Dissertation-in-Praxis program, he found that though he could audit the Getting Ahead program offered by the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA, he could not provide an exhaustive study of his topic, generational poverty, and how to overcome it. It was a grueling sixteen-week program that this researcher found himself immersed in, and yet he realized that he had simply touched on the tip of the iceberg. He hopes those who come behind him select a specific topic within the various modules of the Getting Ahead program and focus there.

It is hard to explain the life that those living in poverty have to work through daily. It is even harder to wrap one's mind around this concept if one has never experienced it. The daily fight for survival is an ongoing battle for those living in poverty. Yet, through this program, this researcher was able to experience the initial footsteps of those working to make their lives better and those who rely on them. The "baby steps" of the Getting Ahead program have proven to be a start for those seeking a better life.

**Figure 6***Hope Survey – Question 5*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	10	9	10	10	10	0
Participant 2	5	9	9	10	10	5
Participant 3	8	8	10	3	9	1
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	10	9	10	9	10	0
Participant 6	10	8	10	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	5	10	10	10	8	3
Participant 8	N/A	6	10	10	10	4
Participant 9	10	10	9	10	10	0

*Hope Survey – Question 6*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 2	4	9	10	10	10	6
Participant 3	10	3	3	7	8	-2
Participant 4	10	3	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	5	7	5	10	9	4
Participant 6	10	2	8	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	5	6	7	7	7	2
Participant 8	N/A	1	4	5	6	5
Participant 9	8	9	9	10	10	2

*Hope Survey – Question 8*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	7	6	6	5	6	-1
Participant 2	7	6	7	8	8	1
Participant 3	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	7	7	9	9	9	2
Participant 6	10	9	9	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	8	6	6	7	8	0
Participant 8	N/A	2	8	10	10	8
Participant 9	10	10	10	10	10	0

There are additional studies this researcher would like to see initiated, and he is hopeful that his research may be the jumping-off point for some of those studies. One of those would be

to move forward with the Getting Ahead program participants as they move into the Staying Ahead program. Upon completion of that program, the statistical data would be able to show whether or not there is staying power to the two programs combined. There is also a place for research to determine how one finds oneself impoverished and the events that took place for one to get there. Both of these studies would allow those living in poverty to find a way out through education.

Jesus told His followers in Matthew 26:11 that they would always have the poor among them. The question that must be asked based on that statement is if it is acceptable for those who are followers of Christ to then turn their backs on those living in poverty. This researcher does not believe that to be the case, and though his research is not exhaustive, he believes that Christ has called His followers to reach out and assist “the least of these.”

### **Findings**

As this researcher began the process of developing his Dissertation-in-Praxis, he thought he understood what poverty in America was all about and what the solution was. As he spent time researching the topic and then spent sixteen weeks observing a class of participants trying to become educated so that they could change the trajectory of their lives, he realized he had no idea the impact that poverty has on the individual and the family both today and into the future. Though the impact is seen in the current living conditions and lifestyles created by poverty, the actual ramifications may take years to present. Additionally, the statistics show that once a family finds themselves in poverty, they have minimal odds of coming out of it (Brady, 2019).

While listening to the participants in the group that this researcher observed, it became apparent very quickly that those in poverty want what everyone else wants: a roof over their heads, food on the table, and a better life for their children. They just do not have the same

opportunities that those who do not live in poverty have to provide these basic necessities for their families. As the participants shared their stories of day-to-day survival, this researcher realized that it is not for a lack of trying that they are where they are, but more a lack of resources in all areas of their lives.

Lastly, this researcher learned that the lens through which one views the world makes all the difference when it comes to having a future hope. Having been raised in a middle-class Christian home, this researcher was taught from a young age that God loved him and that there is hope for the future as long as one is breathing. This is not what this researcher found during his observations and interactions with the participants. Though some of the participants are active in their churches and speak of their faith, living in survival mode every day has blurred the lens through which they see the world. Though changing the glasses one is wearing sounds like a simple task, it is extremely difficult to do and takes time. This is why one of the highlights of the research this researcher performed was to see an increase in hope among the participants as the class went on. It is possible to see hope renewed, restored, and, in some cases, introduced into the lives of those who participate in programs like Getting Ahead.

### **Impact**

Nine participants, two facilitators, and one observer sat in a room one night a week, three hours a night, for sixteen weeks. At the end of the program, not one person walked out the doors on that last night the way they walked in on the first. This program had an impact on each person involved. Though the impact was different based on the role, each person this researcher spoke with on the last night shared that they were changed for the better.

**Figure 7***Hope Survey – Question 3*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	6	7	9	8	9	3
Participant 2	7	8	9	10	10	3
Participant 3	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	6	10	10	9	10	4
Participant 6	10	8	10	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	5	7	7	7	7	2
Participant 8	N/A	6	10	10	10	4
Participant 9	10	10	10	10	10	0

*Hope Survey – Question 4*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	8	6	8	6	8	0
Participant 2	5	6	8	10	10	5
Participant 3	10	10	9	8	9	-1
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	5	5	10	10	9	4
Participant 6	10	8	10	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	4	5	6	7	7	3
Participant 8	N/A	5	9	10	10	5
Participant 9	10	10	10	10	10	0

*Hope Survey – Question 7*

Participants	Pre-Survey	Week 4	Week 8	Week 12	Week 16	Increase
Participant 1	6	7	8	8	8	2
Participant 2	6	10	7	10	10	4
Participant 3	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 4	10	10	10	10	10	0
Participant 5	4	10	3	8	8	4
Participant 6	10	8	10	N/A	10	0
Participant 7	7	7	7	7	7	0
Participant 8	N/A	4	4	10	10	6
Participant 9	10	10	10	10	10	0

In the final survey, several participants shared that they had already begun implementing the things they had learned in the Getting Ahead program. Some wanted to be facilitators of

future classes as a way to give back. Others had begun having conversations with their children and sharing what they were learning so that their children did not have to walk the same road they had. Seeing these changes beginning so soon was very impactful to the facilitators and inspired them to continue in their roles. One of the two facilitators, a graduate of the Getting Ahead program, was extremely excited to see those who were inspired by her story.

The largest impact seemed to take place in the concept of hope in the lives of those involved. Most participants scored extremely low in their initial survey regarding their hopes for today and the future. They had minimal hope that their children would have a better life than they did. As the class progressed and the survey was taken again, this researcher was pleasantly surprised to see an increase in hope every four weeks. The increase was very slight with some individuals, while it was large with others. Interestingly, there was no specific quarter when all participants had the same level of increase. The impact this had on this researcher is hard to put into words. To be a part of a program that brings hope into a hopeless life is truly a gift from God.

## **Conclusions**

Poverty is not going away any time soon. This epidemic goes all the way back to the time of Christ and prior (New American Standard Bible, 1960, Matt. 26:11). That does not mean that there is not work that can be done today to lessen the impact of poverty on individuals and families and that organizations should stop attempting to be of service to those who need it. Programs like Getting Ahead are the way out for many, yet these programs are underfunded and overlooked.

Both federal and state governments continue to attempt to solve this problem with money and handouts. They continue to make decisions for those living in poverty without discussing



those decisions with the ones who will be impacted. Men and women who have never experienced poverty are placed in positions to determine what poverty is and how to solve it. This is done with no thought of bringing someone who lives in poverty to the table as part of the solutions team. It is the belief of this researcher that until the model found in *Bridges Out of Poverty* is followed, until those living in poverty are included in the conversation and invited to the table, and until individuals living in poverty are viewed as equals, this epidemic will continue to get worse, and communities will suffer.

### **Implications for Organizations and Leaders**

In working with the leadership team of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA to complete this researcher's Dissertation-in-Praxis, it became apparent quickly that they had the heart to serve their community. As the Getting Ahead program was discussed, they were pleased with the former results but knew there was more that could be accomplished with some additional work and another set of eyes on the project. Their willingness to invite this researcher to audit the current program showed their desire to improve the communities they serve. Additionally, their willingness to allow a spiritual aspect to be introduced into the program, though subtly, was a reminder of the meaning of the 'C' in the YMCA.

The YMCA, the largest non-profit organization in the United States, does not discriminate based on income level and does not refuse membership to individuals based on their inability to pay a monthly membership fee. This is one of the reasons that the Getting Ahead program is beneficial to this organization. If those currently utilizing the YMCA facilities at no cost can rise above the poverty line, they could become contributors instead of merely consumers. When this occurs, the YMCA and those individuals they invested in are impacted by offering the Getting Ahead program at no cost.

Up to this point, the YMCA's leadership has chosen to fund the Getting Ahead program as an investment in their local communities. They utilize a portion of their annual budget to cover the cost for each individual involved. As mentioned earlier, the average cost is \$1,000 per person. As donations diminish, costs increase, and new buildings need to be built, the leadership of the YMCA must find additional ways to fund the program. In conversations with the on-site director during the observation period this researcher performed, he was informed that grants are being applied for to continue the funding of the program. This needs to be a priority within the organization so that this program does not have to go by the wayside. An additional option would be to partner with other organizations in the community to share the cost.

One of the advantages of providing the Getting Ahead program within their local community is that it shows the YMCA to be a contributing member of the community. In a day and age when the big box gyms are moving into cities and charging in excess of \$100 per person per month to be a member, the YMCA continues its mission of providing for each individual's body, mind, and spirit at an affordable cost. Community goodwill only goes so far, however. The leadership of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA will need to educate their workforce regarding this program and its availability so that they can then educate their members who are in a position to donate. As this researcher visited with those using the YMCA facilities across the metro whom he knows on a personal basis, he was surprised to find that none of them were aware of the Getting Ahead program and that it was being offered free of charge to those who signed up. This is a discrepancy that the YCMA leadership needs to address and rectify.

### **Applications for Organizations and Leaders**

The research performed by this researcher at the YMCA and the things learned would definitely carry over to other organizations looking to support those in the community who need

it. The class format and structure, the use of those who have already been down the path in the area where the help is being offered, providing meals and childcare, the utilization of trained facilitators, and a travel stipend have all proven to incent those in need of support to come forward and get it. The program can be fine-tuned and tweaked for whatever topic an organization is looking to work with.

Funding is also an area that other organizations will have to consider and, like the YMCA, can have the results of an outside observation written up in detail and provided back to them. They can then utilize this information as they seek grants. Additionally, should they be an organization that utilizes galas as fundraisers, they could have program graduates speak and share their life change prior to “the ask.”

Since there are numerous non-profit organizations that are working toward furnishing services to those in poverty, the lessons learned from this research could become part of a larger vision and training as these organizations combine forces to deliver even more services to their communities. When who gets the credit is no longer a driving factor in serving the community, and the various organizations sit down and learn from each other, the YMCA could play a pivotal role based on how they have structured the Getting Ahead program.

Lastly, this researcher would say to other organizations that when someone in the C-Suite is the Champion of the cause, the odds of success and livelihood are greatly increased. If the COO of the Greater Oklahoma City Metro YMCA had not had a place in his heart for those living in poverty, this program would have been eliminated long ago. This, too, carries over to other organizations looking to make a difference in their communities. Buy-in from the top is mandatory if they wish to see the program succeed.

### **Advice to Future Research-Practitioners**

In looking back over the past few months, this researcher asked himself what he wished someone would have said to him prior to his beginning this journey. The following are some of the questions he wishes would have been asked and some of the things he wished to have been told.

When one chooses to work with people on a research project, one must be prepared to feel emotions they may not have felt prior. This is especially the case when the people one is working with have experienced negative things that the researcher has only read about. A man who had just finished his Ph.D. work said to this researcher during their first meeting when this researcher was bouncing dissertation ideas off of him, “Lee, are you sure you want to live in that dark hole for two years?” This researcher would advise those who come behind him, especially in researching poverty, that you will go to dark holes, and they will impact you. Move forward and tackle the job; just ensure you have a support system in place.

Go into your research with an open mind. You must check your preconceived notions at the door. You are in for a rude awakening if you believe you have the answers. You must allow the research to stand on its own and not try to make it say what you already believe. This is a difficult task, as humans dislike being wrong. Should you choose to come behind this researcher and deepen the research on breaking the cycle of generational poverty, you will find plenty of fresh data that can be utilized in your study. Statistics are updated daily. The advice this researcher would give in this area is that you do not become so wrapped up in the statistics that you forget that there is a person associated with every one of those numbers. If you do not see poverty as a blight on a sector of humanity, you have missed the impact of poverty on humanity as a whole.

There are additional studies this researcher would like to see carried out by those who come behind him. Following the Getting Ahead program, there is the Staying Ahead program. It would be interesting to see how the graduates of this program do over an extended period of time. Do they continue to grow in their hope for the future? Do they actually make the leap from living in poverty to the middle class? Do their children end up living in poverty as they become adults? All of these questions are worthy of research, and this researcher would offer future researchers the challenge not to go back and re-state the results of the Getting Ahead program but to move forward and determine its long-term outcomes.

In closing, the final piece of advice this researcher would offer to a researcher performing a Dissertation-in-Praxis project is to count the cost. You are in for some long hours, sleepless nights, missed events, and ongoing arguments with yourself. Know that the cost is worth it in the end, but it may not feel like it in the midst of the battle. Those people you are interacting with as part of the project matter, and you may be the only person who has told them that. As you spend time with them and treat them as equals, they will come to appreciate you, respect you, and share the information you need to complete your dissertation with valid data.

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**APPENDICES****Appendix A****Hope Survey of Program Participants**

On a scale of 1 – 10 (**1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest**) please rate your current amount of **Hope** in the following categories:

1. My children will have a better life than me \_\_\_\_\_
2. My grandchildren will have a better life than me \_\_\_\_\_
3. My life circumstances can get better \_\_\_\_\_
4. I am capable of making changes in my life \_\_\_\_\_
5. There are people who care about me \_\_\_\_\_
6. There are people willing to help me \_\_\_\_\_
7. My past does not have to define my future \_\_\_\_\_
8. I have dreams and goals for myself \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Participant Self-Worth Questionnaire**

1. Are you loved?
  - a. Explain your answer
2. Do you matter?
  - a. Explain your answer
3. Are you unique?
  - a. Explain your answer
4. Is your world a better place because you are here?
  - a. Explain your answer
5. Do you believe in a Supreme Being?
  - a. If so, does that Supreme Being care about you?
6. Are you a creationist or evolutionist?
7. Did you attend church as a child?
  - a. Explain your answer

## **Appendix C**

### **Participant Observation Points**

1. Did the participant attend every week?
2. Did the participant interact with their cohort during the discussion of the reading assignments?
3. Did the participant to their homework?
4. Did the participant arrive early and/or stay late to discuss questions regarding the reading and/or homework assignment with the facilitator?

**Appendix D**  
**IRB Approval Letter**

IRB #: IRB-FY23-24-24

Title: Generational Poverty and Education: Breaking the Cycle of Ignorance

Creation Date: 7-7-2023

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Leland Jackson

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial Review Type Limited Decision Exempt - Limited IRB

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