

# faithful in small things

HOW TO SERVE THE NEEDY  
WHEN YOU'RE  
ONE OF THEM



## Kevin Wiebe

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

By Russell Doerksen, MDiv

lead pastor at MacGregor Evangelical Mennonite Church



Harrisonburg, Virginia

## Note to Readers

This study guide will help you plumb the depths of *Faithful in Small Things* by Kevin Wiebe. It will be a simple one to follow. There are twenty sections, one for each chapter plus the introduction and conclusion, each with questions intended to help a small group of believers with some attachment to a church body more deeply explore what Wiebe says in his book. There are also questions that will attempt to help readers explore their own preconceptions that may be unhelpful when it comes to trying to put the recommendations of the book into practice. At the end of each section, there is an “action response” in which an assignment, to be completed typically over the course of a week, is presented with the intent of fleshing out the practicality to the book’s approach to tackling poverty reduction.

This study guide is designed for use in weekly meetings over a five-month period, but sections can be combined to fit the number of meetings or amount of time you have. As you progress through the sections of the study guide, you will find common questions keep arising. This is both to make it more conducive for new group members to join mid-study and to act as a refresher as the weeks continue.

My hope with this guide is twofold. First to help you, the reader, put the conclusions of Wiebe’s book into practice in your own life, and second, and more importantly, to help you enjoy *Faithful in Small Things* as much as I did.

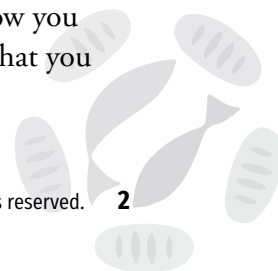
And so, let us begin.

## Introduction

1. The book starts with a deeply personal story from the author’s past explaining why he came to be interested in the topic of poverty reduction. In his story, we find out Wiebe grew up rural, white, and poor. What is your history and perspective of the topic of poverty reduction? How does your outlook compare to that of the author, and how do those differences or similarities shape how you find yourself approaching this book?
2. At the bottom of page 14, the author posits that all people, even those living under the poverty line, have a responsibility to live charitably toward other people, helping those around them. What are your thoughts on this statement? How do you think your own life circumstances and history influence your answer?

### ACTION RESPONSE

If you are a member of a church, spend some time exploring the history of how your congregation has thought of and practiced charity over the past few years. Longtime members of your congregation can be a great help here. If you are not part of a church, spend time thinking about how you have thought of and practiced living charitably in the past. Come prepared to talk about what you found out at the next meeting.



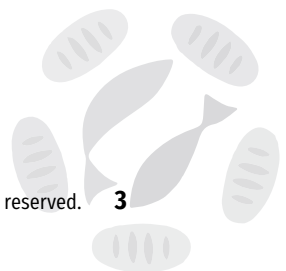
## PART 1: THE BIBLE ON POVERTY

# Chapter 1: The Poverty in Us All

1. On page 20, we find an explanation of what it means to be made in the image of God that focuses on relational terms. To be made in the image of God means that we are in relationship with God, one another, ourselves, and the rest of creation. How were you taught what it means to be made in the image of God? How do you understand the concept? Do you believe that your understanding of being made in the image of God has influenced how you see God, others, yourself, and creation? Why?
2. Throughout the chapter, culminating on page 27, we see a case being made that will form the theological underpinning of this book: Poverty is not simply living under the poverty line, but a series of broken relationships between us and God, us and others, us and ourselves, and us and the world in which we live. How does this differ from your current thoughts as to what it means to care for the poor on a personal level? How does it overlap? How do you think it differs from or is similar to a congregational/charity/governmental view of poverty?

### ACTION RESPONSE

Visit the websites of several poverty relief organizations. Check out the about/mission/description section of their website, and given what they include on this page, jot down how you feel each organization looks at the people it is attempting to serve. Note whether you feel this page was written to talk about the mission of the organization or to be donor-oriented. Why do you think this section was written as it was? Come prepared to discuss your findings at your next meeting.

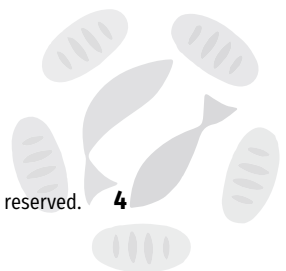


## Chapter 2: **The Murdered Homeless Man**

1. On page 33, the author makes the case that Christians are not to think of the endgame of our faith as that of Christ, but that we should instead think of the Trinity as holding this important position in our lives. What is your take on this statement? How do you understand the Trinity? How would you say that focusing on the Trinity instead of just Jesus changes your understanding of Christianity?
2. On page 37, we are reminded of the importance of the fact that Jesus himself was homeless and impoverished, relying on the charity of others. Throughout Christian history, there have been many groups that take this as a call to live likewise, such as the Catholic Franciscan Order that requires a vow of extreme poverty from its members. How do you understand this aspect of Christ's life in relation to your own life? Do you think Christian groups like the Franciscans are right to take this oath? Why? How do you think Christ's living as one homeless, impoverished, and reliant on charity should relate to your church?
3. On page 38, we read that one of the most subversive things that Jesus did in his ministry was to become friends with the kinds of people whom society thought poorly of. This will be an ongoing thread throughout the rest of the book, but it is also a truth that the church has historically struggled with because of the tension between trying to follow this example of Christ and wanting to be seen as "upright" or "pure." How do you struggle with this tension in your own life? Do you find yourself falling firmly on one side of this tug-of-war, or somewhere in the middle? Why?

### **ACTION RESPONSE**

A central tenant of Christian theology is that if you want to know how to live as a Christ follower, you need to look at Christ's life as your guide. Choose a gospel to read in its entirety before your next meeting. If possible, read it in a single sitting. Make notes of how you understand Jesus to be relating to other people. Compare your notes with one another the next time you gather. What were some things you were surprised by when it comes to how Jesus relates to those around him?

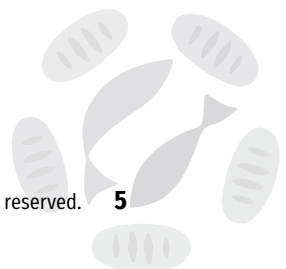


# Chapter 3: **The Revelation of Your Hidden Beliefs**

4. On page 45, we read that one of the problems the church has today when it comes to caring for the poor is not that wealthy people are disinterested, but instead that they don't know poor people to help. Historically, this has been something that church congregations have helped with; in the era before traveling far distances was possible, churchgoers, regardless of financial well-being, would often attend the church of the parish in which they lived. (Of course, racism and legal and de facto segregation played a role in restricting church demographics.) However, with the introduction of automobiles and mass transit, churches in many ways have grown more and more homogenous. Do you think this old function of the church as a cross-boundary social hub is an important part of its mission, or that its focus should be elsewhere? If you believe this function of the church is important, how do you think it should be reclaimed?
5. On page 48, we read about how in the story of Joshua, the Israelites are invited to submit to God and follow God's will, but instead choose to follow their own lead. Over the short term, this ends with both God and the Israelites achieving what they want, but further down the road, this difference in perspective leads to the destruction of the kingdoms of both Judah and Israel. How would you apply this story to how the church deals with outside organizations? Do you think this connection is a fair one to draw? Why or why not?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

This chapter seeks to show us why aligning our actions with our words is important when it comes to addressing the reduction of poverty. Do you claim that caring for the poor is important, yet hold the subject theoretically, at arm's length? Pick a partner to meet with midweek—preferably not a spouse or household member. Spend time alone first, making a list of all the things that you hold to be important. For example, it is important to be charitable, it is important to be kind, it is important to work hard, it is important to have a good job, and so on. Next, make a list of all the things you believe the other person finds important. After you are done, get together and compare your lists. What were the differences between the two lists? Why do you think those differences appeared? Come prepared to talk about this exercise at the next meeting.

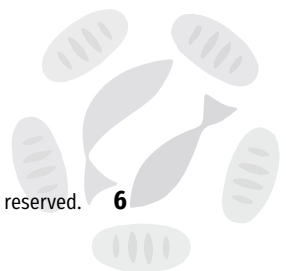


# Chapter 4: **Broken**

1. On pages 51–52, the author shares a personal story of how in response to a deeply held and justified wrong he had suffered, his pastor at the time encouraged him to let his pain go. To explain why he should do this, the pastor invoked the old adage “Hurt people hurt people.” Learning how to deal with our own past trauma is difficult at the best of times. Learning how to interact with, counsel, and comfort those around us who have experienced trauma is often even harder. Do you agree with how Wiebe’s pastor counseled him? What would you have done if you were in the pastor’s shoes? Do you believe there comes a time when it is best to point someone to another person who may be better at helping, such as a counselor? If so, how would you decide if you have reached that place in a conversation with someone? How do you think your answers to these questions affect how you approach building relationships with people living in poverty?
2. On page 57, we read about how God often uses the broken to help the broken. Supporting this point, we read this quote by Henri Nouwen: “It is an illusion to think that a person can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.” How do you understand this quote? How do you understand its implications for the life of a Christian? How about for the life of the church?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

On page 54, it is pointed out that if poverty is at its heart about broken relationships, that means we need to ask, for ourselves, what it would take to heal our own broken relationships in order to build the kind of relationships that can address those living in poverty. To flesh out this idea, the author lays out several questions over the rest of the page that reflect the different kinds of relationships we enter into as human beings made in the image of God. Spend some time reflecting on these questions, attempting to answer them for yourself. At the next meeting, spend some time reflecting with others, as you feel comfortable, on the answers you have found.



## PART 2: UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

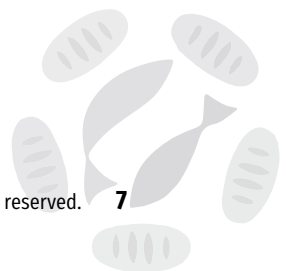
# Chapter 5: They Have Faces and Names

1. On page 62, we are reminded that those living in poverty are human beings the same as all people. Often, the author says, we can forget this when we leave the discussion of poverty at arm's length. When we speak and think of poverty reduction in hypotheticals and purely in terms of issues “with the system,” the humanity of those suffering often fades into the background of the conversation. While this is true, it is also important to understand poverty in these systemic ways in order to be informed citizens. How do you feel it best to balance the personal, microscopic view of individual poverty as compared to the impersonal, zoomed-out view of the issues that cause it? When is it helpful to take the zoomed-in approach? When is it important to think of the issue on a larger scale?
2. Throughout the chapter, we read stories of both positive spirals—systems that influence systems to positively lift people into more comfortable and stable lives—and negative spirals—systems that influence systems to keep people who are living in poverty poor. Have you ever experienced either of these spirals in your own life or in the lives of people you know? Does the church have a role in addressing these negative or positive spirals? How do you feel those of us on the outside of these spirals should address those in them?

### ACTION RESPONSE

While all charity would ideally be practiced on a person-by-person basis, this approach is not scalable to the large number of people who need help at any given time. This is why a large number of procedures, rules, and laws are put into place when it comes to charity—to increase the number of people who can be served. However, as we have seen throughout this chapter, these same procedures, rules, and laws often end up being the cause of persistent poverty for those affected by them.

Spend time with local news sources finding examples of these negative spirals in your area. Note what issues have caused these problems. If relevant, note how the person or persons in the story escaped their predicament. When your group meets again, compare your findings. Are there similarities among the stories you found? Is there a way that you, your group, or your church could build the relationships needed to address these negative spirals going forward?



# Chapter 6: **The Good News**

1. On page 73, we read of the current tug-of-war in Christianity—particularly among evangelicals—between social justice issues like helping those living in poverty, on the one hand, and the need to evangelize as many people as possible, on the other. How were you raised to think of the relationship between these two things? Do you find yourself firmly on either side of this tension, or somewhere in the middle? What do you think are some benefits to each approach when it comes to living out your faith? What are the drawbacks?
2. On page 75, we read this quote from blogger Shannon Doerksen: “We, body and mind, are God’s workmanship, as is the world we live in. Christ embraced creation in his incarnation and redeemed it rather than discarding or ignoring it.” How were you raised to understand your physical body? Was it a positive relationship or a negative one? How do you think your understanding of your relationship with your own body affects how you think of caring for others? How do you think it affects your understanding of the mission of the church reaching out to other people?
3. On page 77, we read that as Christians, even as those interested in the matter, we are called not to make poverty reduction our primary goal but to dedicate ourselves to being disciples of Christ. This does not mean that we should withhold our aid to others until they have been proselytized to and agree to become disciples themselves, but instead that we ourselves cannot separate our faith from our actions. How do you understand the relationship between being a disciple of Christ and offering aid to those in need? In how the church relates to other people? Do you think there is a place to withhold aid until the “gospel message” has been shared, or is that approach always to be considered wrong-headed? Why do you think as you do?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

The central claim of the chapter is that as Christians, we are tasked to spread a gospel message that combines John 3:16 and 17 together: the good news that God loves the world so much that he sent his Son into the world not to condemn it, but to save it in its entirety. Wrapped up in this full gospel message is both a spiritual and a physical component. Simply put, to separate these two elements of the gospel is to render it incomplete.

This gospel message of love and redemption often finds itself battling uphill in communities where the church has a mixed or a negative legacy. Spend some time researching the history of how the church (in a large sense) has reached out to the people of your community. If you live in a diverse area, choose a specific group of people on whom to focus. Elderly people who have lived in the area a long time are often a great source of information for this kind of research. Is the church understood as having helped your community? Has it caused rifts? When your study group next gathers, spend some time discussing what you found. How do you think this history affects how the gospel will be spread going forward? If there are issues, what do you feel is a good first step to try to address the problems ahead? Taking this chapter into consideration, how do you think you could help this end?



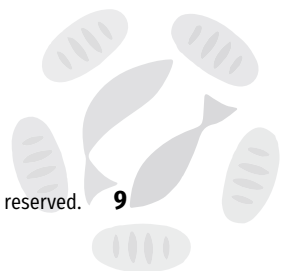


# Chapter 7: **Get Off Your High Horse**

1. The first few pages of this chapter highlight the problem of Westerners going into poor regions convinced they have the solutions to complex problems, often leaving destruction and broken relationships in their wake. This problem is so prevalent that there is a name for it: “white savior complex.” While the people with this mindset are often tolerated for the sake of receiving their aid, this way of thinking almost always ends up doing far more harm than good. Have you ever encountered people with this mindset, either coming into or going out of your community? What about the Western Christian approach to missions might encourage this issue?
2. On page 87, we are again reminded that the rich and the poor alike are made in the image of God—equal. This means that when we lord ourselves over others, we are dehumanizing not only others by failing to see them as our equals but also ourselves, as we are claiming to be something we are not: above others and closer to God than they are. Our society in many ways depends on relationships where people are placed in positions of power and elevated status over others. Think for example of mentors and mentees, or employers and employees, or celebrities and “regular” people. What do you think marks a healthy relationship of this kind as compared to a dehumanizing one? How would you teach someone to identify a healthy relationship of this kind as compared to a dehumanizing one?
3. One of the terrible effects of dehumanizing relationships is that they cause those being dehumanized to believe they have nothing to contribute nor value to give. This mindset is likely to keep those living in poverty poor; rarely can anyone speak to our needs more directly than we can ourselves. In what ways do you think this truth affects our society as it relates to elements like employment or representation? In what ways do you think it should influence the mission of the church? In what ways do you think it should influence your own Christian living?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

The history of the church is in many ways a history of elevating the status of those in power while belittling those without it. This is unfortunate, because as the word *dehumanize* implies, this action runs right in the face of how we Christians believe human beings were created. Choose a mission or outreach program near and dear to your heart. Examine how it holds up when it comes to averting the “white savior complex.” In what ways does it do well? In what ways does it come up short? How could it do better? Come prepared to discuss your findings at the next group meeting.



# Chapter 8: Learning to Receive

1. On pages 93–95, the author talks about the trouble he had accepting a gift from a generous but financially strapped congregant named Shelley. This is not an uncommon feeling when it comes to receiving the charity of others, especially when you feel that the person giving is less financially secure than you are. How would you feel about receiving a gift in a similar situation? What do you think might be the cause of these feelings? Do you think that pride or feelings of dignity come into play? Why or why not?
2. On page 97, Wiebe highlights a difference between long-term development and emergency aid. When it comes to emergency aid, there is an immediate need for resources—medical attention, basic necessities, shelter or clothing—and the goal is to fulfill those needs as soon as possible. But for long-term development, the golden rule is to not do things for people that they can do for themselves. How would you determine when a person has transitioned from one kind of care to the other? Why do you think it is important to make that transition?
3. Starting on page 98, the author emphasizes that the issue with not knowing how to receive from others is that it leaves our relationships unbalanced, without mutuality. In time, this lack of balance leads to relational breakdowns and possibly spiritual hardship. How do you think this dynamic should play out in relationships that are (often necessarily) defined by one-sided giving, such as that of a parent to a child? Do you think this advice applies to these relationships over their lifetime, or does a point of transition to balance things out always need to occur if the relationship is to thrive?

## ACTION RESPONSE

Spend some time reflecting on whether any relationships in your life feel particularly one-sided. Why do you think this is? How do you feel this one-sidedness has influenced how the relationship has formed so far? The next opportunity you have, try to reverse the situation; for example, give a gift to a person who always sends gifts to you. Note how this reversal went. How do these results change your feelings about the relationship? Come prepared to discuss this at your next meeting.



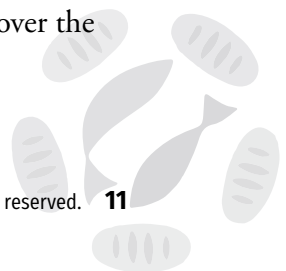
# Chapter 9: **Mental Illness, Addictions, and Self-Care**

1. On page 109, we read about how mental illness often causes poverty, and that there is no way around this hard truth. Is there someone in your life who has been affected financially by mental illness? How has the person been supported or not been supported? How do you think you can determine if you have responsibility to this person? Why?
2. On page 110, we are met with some excellent advice: Do not try to be someone's therapist (or doctor) unless that is what you are trained to be (and, as appropriate, hired to do). It is always far better, unless you are a trained professional, to simply choose to be someone's friend. What do you think is the difference between these two types of people, a professional and a friend, when it comes to dealing with someone with mental health issues? How do you recognize when you are crossing the line from one to the other? What would you do if you found you had crossed the line and now needed to step back?
3. On page 112, the author shares a personal story highlighting how all too often, Christians judge people dealing with addiction in ways that cause those relationships to break. Far from inspiring any positive change in people suffering with addiction issues, this kind of action is often likely to further isolate those affected. If you are going to push someone to try to break harmful habits, you *have* to be willing to first establish a relationship with the person in which it is not out of place to call out the person's actions or behavior. In light of the earlier chapters' discussion on the importance of reciprocity and balance in relationships, what are the characteristics of a relationship where you can call people out on their destructive behaviors? For those suffering from addiction, how might it feel to have another person call them on their negative actions? If that were you, how would your relationship with the person calling you out need to look so that you would feel comfortable with this happening?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

This chapter ends with a discussion of the need for self-care when it comes to maintaining relationships with others. On page 116 we see highlighted the need for boundaries when it comes to caring for those with high needs, because while God's strength is limitless, ours is not. Such boundaries are important to maintaining good relationships; without them, those same relationships are likely to erode and then implode.

Spend some time thinking about what relationships in your life might fit the description the author gives of a relationship that requires boundaries to survive. Is there someone you love to care for, but who takes a lot out of you whenever you do? In light of what is said in this chapter, what boundaries do you think you should look to enact to preserve your relationship with this person? What is one first step that you could take to do this? Discuss this at your next gathering, and then, over the remaining weeks, act as a support group to help ensure that these steps are taken.



## PART 3: FIGHTING POVERTY

# Chapter 10: The Value of Relationships

1. On page 123, the author states that he and his family have almost always lived below the poverty line in Canada, the country where he lives. Canada's poverty line, however, is relatively comfortable when compared to the world average, where being under the poverty line often means the security of food and shelter are called into question. While this comparison can be eye-opening to the scale of the wealth disparity in the world, it can also be used as a way of dismissing the needs of those in poverty in wealthier countries: after all, what do they have to complain about when others have it so much worse? What do you think is an example of how such a comparison can be made in a useful way? How about in a non-useful way?
2. On page 124, we read that when it comes to poverty reduction, time spent in meaningful relationships is far more important than money given. In North America, this distinction often plays out through the promotion of volunteering with a charity instead of simply donating to it. How do you think that volunteerism fits the call to live in relationships with those living in poverty? How do you think it comes up short?
3. Throughout the chapter, the case is made that relationships are a major contributor to a person's life and well-being. It is because of this truth that negative relationships are more likely than most other factors to cause future issues for individuals. In the church as well as in wider society, we often emphasize the importance of being friends with the "right sort of people," as well as talk of the importance of cutting "toxic people" out of our lives. How would you reconcile this popular teaching with the role that positive relationships have in lifting people out of a life lived in poverty?

## ACTION RESPONSE

On page 129, we read about how the United Kingdom recently (in 2019) diagnosed loneliness as a terrible enough epidemic as to warrant the appointment of a minister to address the issue. Spend some time thinking about your own life. How often do you feel lonely? After this, think about the church. What role do you believe the church has to play in addressing this issue? Finally, think about how the church has addressed this issue as compared to how it could in light of the insights gained from this chapter. How do you think the church could better address this issue in your community? What steps do you think you could take to help your church to this end? Come prepared to discuss your thoughts at the next meeting.



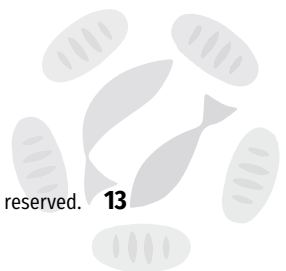
# Chapter 11: Holistic and Sacrificial Giving

1. On page 134, we read a quote from Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* that discusses how if Western Christians were more comfortable living even a slightly more modest life, there would be far more resources available to address the issues of local and global poverty. While for millions this is undoubtedly true, it does run headlong into the Western concept of success: that to accumulate more is the key to happiness. While the way forward through this tension may on the surface seem simple—to ignore societal norms for the sake of helping others—this solution sets up those who choose to sacrifice from their own well-being for the sake of others to appear as failures in the eyes of the society in which they live. This noble action comes with very real social ramifications, often including worsening relationships with neighbors, friends, and coworkers. How do you think this tension should be navigated?
2. Starting at the bottom of page 139, the author recounts a recent story highlighting the irony that many attempts to address poverty today are done purposely in the absence of faith or religion, even though many of the problems that need to be tackled to address poverty—such as building good relationships, addressing the lack of capital, finding people to provide services in times of need—are things that the church has been doing since its inception. While the separation between church and state emerged for a litany of historical reasons, both valid and reactionary, society is nevertheless and in many ways suffering from a church-shaped hole in its attempts to address poverty. As such, it is looking to reinvent the wheel to address these shortcomings in its approach. While the church may not necessarily be allowed to participate in these new solutions, the church nevertheless still has a scriptural mandate to address poverty. How do you think this relationship should play out in your community? How about in your province, state, or country? Should the church seek to collaborate to the best of its ability, or do its own thing? What do you feel are the strengths of both approaches?

## ACTION RESPONSE

In this chapter we learn that sacrificial giving does not need to be thought of primarily in terms of money. It should instead be thought of holistically, in terms of our time, skills, power, relationships, and so on. While the giving of our finances is a great thing, generosity should not be thought of as an either/or.

Spend some time thinking about the things you are good at. Next, spend some time asking yourself how you can give of those skills to others. This does not necessarily mean that you need to donate your professional skills free of charge, but instead think of what you have to offer, and think of how you can give that for the benefit of others. Next, spend some time thinking of things you think your community needs. How do your skills fit into those needs? When you gather again, compare your lists to see if there are overlaps among those present, as well as in the community, that can be addressed by the skills present in the people there.



# Chapter 12: Turn Off the Tap

1. At the beginning of the chapter, we read a horrific (and darkly humorous) anecdote in which babies are falling from a skyscraper. This allegory seeks to highlight that while it is good to catch those that fall, it is equally important to address the root cause to prevent the tragedy from continuing. While the story offers a good bit of wisdom, the author remains convinced that this is not a way of thinking that our society is particularly good at; we often refuse to treat the root of a problem because treating the symptoms is more politically/financially/temporally/emotionally expedient. Can you think of any examples in your community or in your own personal relationships that fit into this pattern of addressing symptoms while ignoring the root problem? Was the root problem ever addressed? If so, how? Do you think there are times when it is legitimately the better option to treat only the symptom and not the cause? Why or why not?
2. In several of the examples throughout this chapter, the solution to the root problems at play was political in nature; the solution required dealing with the government. When it comes to dealing with governmental bodies, be they local, provincial, or federal, do you think there is ever a place for a church to get involved? As we learned a few chapters ago, when a governmental body is at fault in a situation, it is often tempting to use the problem as an excuse to take focus off the individuals affected—to focus on the machine more than the person. How do you think it is best to address governmental issues while also keeping the focus where it is needed?
3. On pages 153–154, we are cautioned to be slow in prescribing the term “lazy” to those living in poverty. While laziness is a real thing, to get to the point where real poverty is on display, other forces are usually at work. Do you agree with the author’s assessment? How, in your own words, would you explain laziness? How would you identify it in yourself? Does this definition differ from how you would define laziness in someone else? Why or why not?

## ACTION RESPONSE

This chapter focuses on identifying the root causes that perpetuate poverty. Addressing these issues, though often daunting, is key to reducing poverty in a way that lasts.

Spend some time looking locally for root issues that may be causing people to live in poverty in your area. For example, whom does the municipal tax code in your community benefit the most? How far do low-income individuals have to travel in your area to get to work? What form does the low-income housing in your area take? Is it government-owned? Is it a trailer park? Rentals? How do local schools stack up against the national average? Once you have made even a brief list, ask yourself, *What is one simple way to address one single issue I have identified?* The more focused and smaller the action, the better. Then discuss your findings when your group gathers again. Are there any items you have come up with in your group that you can put into action?

Does it seem daunting to compile such a list? One suggestion to make it easier is to talk to someone who is living in poverty in your area about the things that influence that person’s life the most. Doing this will often quickly point you to a number of these issues.



# Chapter 13: Choice and Consequence

1. On page 159, we read about how the idea of free will is often lampooned by those in places of power and privilege. This leads to the dismissing or excusing of terrible actions, making it seem that those in power are there because they deserve to be and that those who are in poverty are there because they could never be anywhere else. This, to put it mildly, runs completely counter to the biblical witness. How has the idea of free will been taught in your life? Have you ever seen it used as a weapon against others? Or yourself? How would you talk about free will when it comes to others who are doing things you either agree or disagree with?
2. On pages 160–61, we read a story in which brothers struggle with addiction. After much hardship, one brother manages to achieve sobriety, which causes the second brother to sever ties with him because he feels confident that he is being judged for not doing the same, even though we are not told this is the case. This reaction is common for those who are either tackling addiction or beginning to be lifted out of poverty. This fear of losing important relationships can often pull people back down. How would you counsel the brothers if you were in their story? How would you support the brother rising out of his addiction in light of the severing of ties? Why do you think that an accurate view of the importance of free will may be important in this situation?
3. On page 163, the author talks about “Maimonides’s ladder of tzedakah,” a proverbial ladder on which each rung up is a better form of charity. At the top of the ladder is business partnerships with those living in poverty. For understandable reasons, this is not a rung many people reach. Can you think of any examples? Why do you think this is at the top of the ladder? Can you think of any ways in which you can promote this idea yourself?

## ACTION RESPONSE

When we think of poverty reduction, free will is not something that often comes to mind. As this chapter shows, it is actually quite an important element of the discussion—without a good understanding of our own free will, we are just as likely to hold ourselves back and away from the relationships that will help raise us up as we are to hurt those we are trying to help.

Spend some time thinking about how you understand free will. Think about your thoughts on the subject in general, philosophically, and theologically. Then spend some time thinking about how those understandings affect your world outlook. Finally, spend some time thinking about how those understandings influence your relationships with other people. Come prepared to spend time discussing your findings at your next group meeting.



## PART 4: RISKS AND POSSIBILITIES

### Chapter 14: **When We Harm**

1. On page 170, we read what will be this chapter's common theme: when it comes to trying to reduce poverty, it is not a matter of if you will accidentally hurt the people you are trying to help, but a question of when it will happen. This is true of most any relationship, such as a marriage. What are your thoughts on this point? How do you approach forgiveness when it comes to accidentally hurting someone? How do you think it is best to make things right in such circumstances?
2. On pages 171–72, the author highlights a common hindrance to building relationships with those in need: the accidental violation of cultural taboos. While rarely does anyone mean to offend or to hurt someone on purpose because of doing something culturally insensitive, the impact can be painful all the same. What's more, unless the underlying problem is explained, the offender can often be left a bit baffled, making the work of addressing the issue difficult. What do you think is the best way to address these kinds of issues as they arise? Do you have any examples yourself? Do you think it is on you to fix the issue if it was the result of an unexpected accident in the first place? How do you think your understanding of this issue affects the way you approach others who are culturally different?
3. On page 176, the author encourages us by saying, “When we fail, as we inevitably will, then we must dust off the good old Christian teachings about confession, repentance, and perseverance.” Essentially, confess when you do wrong, repent for that wrong and make the necessary changes to address it, and then pick yourself up and keep trying instead of calling it quits. What are your feelings on this advice for when you make mistakes helping others? Do you have examples of relationships in your life where you have tried this approach? What were the results?

### **ACTION RESPONSE**

On page 173, we read a quote from Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert that says, “A helpful first step in thinking about working with the poor in any context is to discern whether the situation calls for relief, rehabilitation, or development. In fact, the failure to distinguish among these situations is one of the most common reasons that poverty-alleviation efforts often do harm.” This quote is then followed by a description of how to identify each reason that is well worth rereading.

Spend some time thinking about some of your favorite charities that deal with poverty reduction. Using the descriptions from Corbett and Fikkert, which approach to poverty reduction does that charity primarily take? How would you rate, by your understanding, the job this charity does at achieving that end? Next, spend some time thinking about your own efforts to address poverty reduction in your community. Which of these headings do you think those efforts would fall under? Next, think of the efforts your church takes to address poverty in your community. Which heading do you think it would fall under? Come prepared to discuss with your group next time you meet. Are there any disagreements among your answers?



# Chapter 15: **Falling Forward**

1. On page 178, the story of the apprenticeship by the author's father illustrates the meaning of "falling forward." How would you summarize this concept? How do you think this approach could be incorporated into the life of the church? Do you have examples of this kind of dynamic in your own life?
2. On pages 181–82, the author tells a story from his childhood in which he learned firsthand about dignity and pride by watching his mother's hesitancy to purchase items from the "free store," even though they were at the time exactly whom such a store was set up to serve. Why do you think those in need might be hesitant to accept charity? Why do you think you feel this way? How do you think this influences your understanding of working to reduce poverty? Do you think your thoughts on this matter influence your understanding of the central premise of the book that the primary way to reduce poverty is to build healthy relationships?
3. On pages 182–83, the author writes, "We shouldn't assume that poverty is a default position or something that we desire to be normal in anyone's life. We should always embrace a vision for the future that is hopeful for something better." What are your thoughts on this statement? The idea that there is something better to work toward is common in much of North America, especially among white evangelicals. It would not, however, be as common a belief in much of the rest of the world, where it is to some extent taken for granted that you should not expect to rise above "your station." Do you think the author's stance is an obvious one to take, or not? How do you think your response to this statement changes how you approach poverty reduction?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

On page 184, we are met with a list from the book *Toxic Charity* that gives a short way of evaluating and reevaluating poverty reduction approaches to help ensure they are not hurting those we mean to help. Looking at the items on this list, it is easy to see how each seeks to build a relationship with the person being reached out to on as equal a footing as possible.

Spend time thinking of how you help those in need in your life. How does your approach stack up against this list? How about your church's approach? What do you feel you have done well? Where do you feel you have fallen short? If so, why? Come prepared to discuss your findings at the next meeting, paying special attention to any disagreements that may arise.



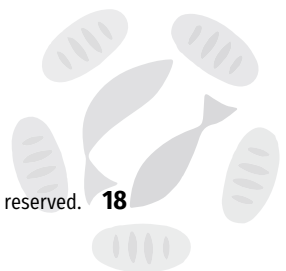
# Chapter 16: **When Small Acts Grow Big**

1. On page 188, it is pointed out that people experiencing homelessness are often dehumanized by being ignored and treated as invisible by people going about their day. Do you have a story of encountering people who were homeless? How would it stack up against this assessment? Do you think there is an ideal way to interact with those clearly living in the depths of poverty as you encounter them? Does that way change if they are asking you for money? Why?
2. “Don’t worry so much about trying to change the world; instead, focus on the small acts” is the author’s main charge in this chapter. More often than not, the big things grow out of these small actions. Do you have any stories where something large came out of something small? If so, was how you act affected after that day? How?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

All too often when we think of how we can help others, our mind stays in the clouds—in the realm of the unattainable. However, this chapter shows us that this is not the best way to help others. It is in the small things that—with Jesus’ help—we can move mountains.

Spend some time thinking about ways you are trying to help others that fit into that “too big to happen” camp. What is a small thing you can do to move toward that goal? Can you take a person out for coffee? Can you have a conversation that you have been putting off? Do one of these small things and come prepared to discuss it at the next group meeting.



# Chapter 17: **When Small Acts Stay Small**

1. On page 194, we are warned against doing small things only in hopes that they will grow into something more. Though this undoubtedly happens, doing things for this purpose alone puts us in the wrong mindset. When it comes to helping others, it is the small things, such as building relationships, that truly matter for their own sake. But this thinking—that it is okay for the small to remain small—often runs afoul of our typical markers of ministry success. What are your thoughts on this tension? Should ministries that are looking to gauge their own success focus on the small or on the big? Why?
2. On page 198, the author calls us to reclaim a view of greatness that is more in line with Jesus' teaching. A view that sees faithfulness as the important thing. A view that sees people doing big things for the kingdom and people doing small things for the kingdom as equally great in the light of Christ's life. While this understanding is readily apparent in the teachings of Paul and of Jesus, it is something the church has nonetheless struggled with from the beginning; for example, one of the prerequisites for sainthood is to have demonstrated miracles. How do you think the church could do a better job at remembering those who were faithful but not necessarily "big" in a better way, both during their lives and after? Do you think they need to be? Why? How do you think this historical emphasis on the "big" heroes of the faith influences how we think of poverty reduction ministries today?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

All throughout this book, Wiebe has put forth that the key to addressing poverty is to build relationships with those in need. This, he insists, is because poverty properly defined is the rupturing of relationships, be they with ourselves, others, God, or the rest of creation. This idea as expressed in this final chapter seems to lead to a simple conclusion: if you are addressing poverty reduction well, you will build relationships with those living below the poverty line, and in time those relationships will become friendships like any other.

Spend some time thinking about the relationships you are in where you feel you are the benefactor, or where you feel that someone is acting as a benefactor to you. What would need to change for the relationship to become an actual, well-rounded friendship? Then spend some time looking to accomplish just that.



# Conclusion: **Faithful in Small Things**

1. On pages 200–201, Wiebe points out that a great first step is to form relationships with people who are living in poverty; not a one-sided relationship, but one where you are willing to be vulnerable as well. He goes on to say that if you don't know anyone living in poverty right now, a great place to start is by looking around to see where such people exist and then making changes in your lifestyle in order to encounter them. While this may sound like being sneaky, it is actually healthy—the more diverse the life experiences of the people around you, the better off you will become as a result. Looking around your life now, do the people you come into contact with seem rather homogenous, or diverse? If homogenous, what are some things you can do to expand your circle to include those living in poverty?

## **ACTION RESPONSE**

One of the final bits of advice the author leaves us with is that a great way to get started down the road of addressing poverty reduction and building the kinds of relationships the book has spent a lot of time discussing is to get involved with a charity with a proven track record when it comes to helping those in need. Over the past eighteen action responses, we have spent a fair amount of time assessing and dissecting the ministries of various charities. At this point you likely have a decent understanding of which ministries in your area would qualify as having a solid history of addressing poverty, and which do not. And from the time spent assessing your own thoughts and motives when it comes to poverty reduction, you likely have a good idea of which charities would be a good fit for you and which would not as well.

For this final assignment, decide on a charity that meets the criteria for being helpful, reach out to the group or organization, and find out more about how you can help. If you do not have time to volunteer regularly, see if it would be possible to spend just a few days here and there learning from them. This experience, and the relationships you will build through it, will undoubtedly be valuable going forward into the rest of your life.

## **A Note to Rural Readers**

If you are from a rural area, how do you think Wiebe's assessment in this note stacks up against your own experience? Are there items you can take and implement in this list? Is his understanding of the rural church and its speed to function accurate in your experience?

While Wiebe is quite likely right that poverty tends not to be as on display in rural communities as elsewhere, it is nevertheless present. Government surveys will often show to what extent poverty is an issue in any given community. Are there people you know who seem to “know everyone in town”? If you are looking to expand your circle of friends to include those living in poverty, these are often the people who can point you exactly where you need to go.

