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A step toward diminishing poverty

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Poverty should not be accepted as a necessary evil or an insoluble problem but should be considered a crisis requiring emergency measures." Yet, few of us see poverty in that light.

We have come to accept it as one of life's givens and thereby are able to excuse ourselves from any earnest effort to eradicate it.

In his book, "God's Politics," Jim Wallis, an evangelical who for many years has worked and lived with the poor in Washington, D.C., describes his experience when speaking to audiences around the country.

Whenever he asks the question, "What is the most famous biblical text in America about the poor?" he receives the same answer every time: "The poor you will always have with you!" they shout out.

I have found, in conversations about poverty, it's not unusual for someone to interject, "Oh well, what are you going to do; there always will be poor people."

Even people who accept

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nothing else in the Christian Bible seem to be influenced by that apparent teaching.

The problem is, it's the wrong lesson.

As Jim Wallis points out in his book, if we look at the context in which Jesus made that assertion, it appears that rather than making a universal declaration about the nature of poverty — that it always will be part of life — he was making a more specific point to his disciples in a particular situation. Because their ministry was focused on the poor, then, naturally, the poor always would be with them.

The issue for those of us in society's middle and upper classes isn't whether the poor always will be with us, but whether we will stand with the poor.

We who have benefited from our society's blessings should not seek refuge from the responsibility to share those blessings in the belief that life's natural order requires poverty for some.

If we are able to recognize the extraordinary harm poverty perpetrates upon not just the poor but society as a whole, then we might appreciate our efforts to eradicate poverty will serve all of our interests.

On June 8, we will have the opportunity to help diminish the harm caused by poverty.

On that date, Thurston County is sponsoring a forum called "Dream the Dream," beginning at 8 a.m. at Westwood Baptist Church in Olympia.

Admission to the forum is free, but participants must register by May 31. To register, go to www.co.thurston.wa.us.

The forum comes in response to a bill passed in 2005 by the state Legislature that calls for establishing statewide programs to end homelessness in 10 years.

As I understand the forum's purpose from one of its organizers, the intention is not to dwell on how bad things are, but to imagine how good things could be as we consider ways we might work together to end homelessness in Thurston County.

Perhaps, for example, the religious communities could join their efforts toward fulfillment of one of the proposals.

Because poverty in the United States is such a large and complex problem, I don't believe it will ever adequately be addressed by any single grand solution.

However, we can greatly diminish its hold on our society through our willingness to remedy its ills one step at a time.

Whatever the forum's results, I see it as holding out the possibility for us to take one of those small but significant steps toward diminishing the terrible consequences of poverty.

As the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. told us, "Poverty should not be accepted as a necessary evil or an insoluble problem."

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Perspective is coordinated by Interfaith Works in cooperation with The Olympian. The views expressed are those of the author.