

Clothed with compassion: Sunday, May 6 (Acts 9:36-43)

by [Heidi A. Peterson](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

Around 1967, a visitor came to worship at the church that my family attended. He was a minister on leave from his parish while he worked for Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty. I remember watching him in the narthex. He would lean his whole body into his conversation partner's space, and in a raised, urgent tone he would voice the same refrain to everyone, "We could do more."

There *is* more we could do. We address the emergency needs of persons living in poverty, but we do far less to understand and undertake long-term measures that might break cycles of poverty over generations. Jesus told us the poor will always be with us, but neglected to explain why two out of three of those poor persons would be women, or why, even in 2001, a woman over the age of 60 is twice as likely to be impoverished as a man.

Sociologist Dianna Pearce coined the phrase "the feminization of poverty" in 1978, but it is not a modern phenomenon. In the Middle Ages, merchant and trade guilds determined who could practice a particular profession. Women were generally "out." To achieve economic security, some women of poorer classes pooled their resources, living together and sharing their goods, their property and their religious convictions. Beguines, as these communities were called, not only secured the lives of members but contributed to society by running hospitals and schools, by spinning and sewing. Without patronage, Beguines thrived as self-sustaining communities with a social purpose. They provided a way for single women to live lives of worth and service. Yet in 1311, the church's Council of Vienne condemned their lifestyle and returned them to their place as objects rather than agents of ministry.

In first-century Rome, women without men topped the list of vulnerable populations. A widow had little access to economic structures. The recurring biblical theme of charitable concern for widows reveals their inferior status and poor treatment in the community.

An argument in the faith community over the care of widows raised such concern that the office of deacon was created to resolve it (Acts 6). Yet despite the

churchmen's concern, they stopped short of imagining the widows free from dependence and powerlessness.

The widows of Joppa had only Tabitha and her faith-based initiative. The only woman in all of scripture to be called a disciple, Tabitha cared for the widows, apparently out of her own resources and in the most practical of ways—she sewed their clothing. Her death was such a crisis that they sent for Peter.

Alone with the body, Peter prayed and then commanded Tabitha to get up. She opened her eyes and, with help, got up. Peter had been on the move, teaching and healing by the power of the Holy Spirit. By that same Spirit he was able to show Tabitha to be alive and well, restored body and soul to the widows who depended on her acts of charity for their survival.

Many who heard about Tabitha's venture to and return from the other side believed, perhaps because it was a miraculous event. Or perhaps because of what the event revealed about God. The widows would not be abandoned. God would not allow it.

Southwest of Guatemala City, a road leads to the barrio of La Esperanza. The poorly graded dirt road challenges even four-wheel-drive vehicles. At the edges, the street just falls off—eroded away in gullies cut by rain and sewage. Tiny houses built wall-to-wall are made of scrap lumber, sheet metal, cardboard, cinderblocks. Women, children and an occasional man linger in doorways to catch the elusive breeze. Bone-thin dogs roam, sometimes dragging emaciated puppies clamped onto their withered nipples.

When the Guatemalan government unleashed its wave of terror against the indigenous, largely illiterate farm worker population, 25,000 men, women and children were killed in five years' time. Thousands of men were abducted from their homes and disappeared. In the early 1980s, the widows of the "disappeared" left the farms and went to the city for refuge and work. Some formed the community of La Esperanza, which means "hope."

The widows came together in their desire to survive and to see their children grow up. They worshiped and worked together. They refused charity, but accepted funds from a Presbyterian program that helped them construct one durable building in the center of the community. The building houses a day-care center, a preschool, a health clinic and a weaving cooperative. The women care for each other's children. Some have been trained as dental hygienists and nurse practitioners. Some sew

clothing for others or sell weaving in the market. Compared to begging and gleaning, it is a dignified life.

Because Tabitha lived, the widows were not left alone. But there is another truth to which her rebirth bears witness. If death is not the final word, then reality is not bound to what has been. Reality is bound to God's promise that all things are made new. In God's new world order, it is possible to be a widow and prosperous rather than poor. It is possible to be self-possessed rather than powerless. It is possible to be an agent of ministry instead of an object of ministry.