

BOOK REVIEWS

LIVING FAITH: EVERYDAY RELIGION AND MOTHERS IN POVERTY By Susan Crawford Sullivan, Chicago, Ill: University Of Chicago Press, 2011, 288 pp. \$26.00.

The gap in church attendance between the middle class and the poor, especially the urban poor, is fairly well documented in the literature. What are less well studied is why this gap exists and what role faith plays in the lives of the poor? Susan Crawford Sullivan in *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty* provides important insight into these questions through in-depth interviews with forty-five mothers living in urban poverty and fifteen pastors who minister in low income areas.

Sullivan's study contributes to a growing body of research on what is called "lived religion," which focuses on how people practice religion in their everyday lives. Her book lets the women speak and we have the opportunity to listen to voices about religion and faith not often heard in the literature. Although most of these women do not attend church regularly, they have not lost their faith, and practice it in ways that may surprise many readers. It will also give the reader much food for thought on contemporary discussions of the decline of religion and growth of spirituality in America.

Poor women, she points out, do not attend church for many reasons, including many obstacles that are overwhelming to families with few resources (transportation, work schedules, etc.) but also because they feel stigmatized and unwelcome in church. They are often single unwed welfare mothers who may be cohabitating, or they perceive their own culture at odds with that of the middle class culture of the church. Most of the pastors she interviewed acknowledged this problem but often felt powerless in the face of their congregations' attitudes and actions.

Consequently, poor urban mothers live their faith outside the boundaries of the church, often isolated from the support systems (religious and otherwise) that the church might provide. But this faith plays a key role in their lives, both motivating and restricting their actions. Prayer is their primary religious practice, often for material assistance for their desperate situations or for help with emotional or mental health problems. But they also express gratitude in their prayers for what little they do have, affirming that their "lives have value despite what society at large believes about poor single mothers on welfare (p. 37)." And, contrary to critics who may argue that faith creates passive acceptance of their situation, Sullivan provides substantial evidence that it often gives women the confidence to tackle their daily challenges and improve their lives.

Faith, prayer and hope fill the language of their discourse, and for some it leads to a critique of their social situation, but it is mostly aimed at churches and pastors (and their failure to meet what are perceived standards of Christian love and justice) rather than at an economic system that might provide better jobs or working conditions. Consistent with much other sociological research, Sullivan finds that the poor mothers in her study embrace the meritocratic ideal in American culture that hard work and self-reliance will yield economic success, and many of her mothers actually supported welfare reform. In addition, the women interpret their suffering in highly individualistic ways, often believing that they became homeless, for example, because God allowed or willed it.

Living Faith is a book that will be of value to many constituencies. For sociologists and other social scientists, Sullivan's analysis provides considerable support for religion as a critical factor to consider in our understanding of the poor and their response to poverty. Although their faith provided meaning and

empowerment, it did not "provide a framework from which to draw a larger social critique or engage in social action (p. 206)." Sullivan points out efforts to bring about social change begin in relationships, but most of the women she interviewed lacked such connections.

Here the role of churches and pastors is critical, and why this book is a must read for them. Sullivan argues that churches have much to offer these women in terms of social capital (both bonding and bridging). Not only would participation in a supportive religious community diminish their sense of isolation and shame, but it could also help them to "navigate the competing ideological and practical demands of commitment to both parenting and providing (p. 219)," that is, to their roles as both mothers and workers. However, this may require a shift in how churches think about the poor and how they engage (or do not engage) the poor. Many congregations today hold a strong ethos of individualism that blames the situation for mothers in poverty on personal behavior rather than more structural issues. Sullivan references Putnam and Campbell's (2010) recent research which shows that the dominant religious response to poverty today is not one of advocating greater structural social justice. Equally important, Sullivan points out, most churches do not seem to be reaching out to the poor, who often make up the major population in their neighborhoods. If they make contact at all, the disenfranchised poor are seen as charity recipients, not as potential fellow congregants. The challenge is to develop a theology of doing with the poor, not just for the poor, what some today call relational justice.

This isolation and separation from the poor is not just restricted to churches, however, but to all of us. Sullivan points out those recent trends in American society have exacerbated both economic and residential segregation of the poor from other social classes, thus limiting our interaction with and understanding of the poor. Consequently, this is a book that anyone with an interest in social justice should read. Besides, as Sullivan correctly argues, churches are not a panacea for the problems that poor mothers face. Over ninety percent of women she interviewed believed that the government, not churches, should have the primary responsibility for helping the poor. And the majority viewed with suspicion faith-based programs that were funded by the government, a finding that should catch the attention of researchers in this area.

Living Faith is an excellent piece of qualitative research and a well written book that makes extensive use and integration of the existing research and literature. Sullivan is comfortable with the sociological and broader social science literature as well as the Bible and theology, a rare combination. Like many good books, it raises as many questions as it answers. And it establishes an important foundation for future research and reflection. Hopefully, those who read it will see it as a beginning point for their own work.

Works Cited

Putnam, R. and Campbell, D. (2010). *American grace: How religion is reshaping our civic and political lives*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

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