

What is your family inheritance?



Maybe it's an heirloom. I recently spoke with someone who owned a family cannon—a Civil War memento procured in his ancestral line. Maybe you've inherited traditions or stories that shape your fundamental understanding of who you are and how you fit in this world. Often our family name carries traditions, the memories of courageous or interesting ancestors that situate us into a story. Maybe you've inherited a particular passion or a skill that your family helped hone within you. If you are lucky, they provided knowledge and love to nourish that passion in you.

Of course, we don't choose our families, nor do we always control what they hand down to us. Admittedly, we can spend our whole lives wrestling a blessing from them, separating the grain from the chaff, and coming to terms with our inheritance's blessings and complexes. It seems we all have an inheritance in some shape or fashion.

We know the importance of these birthrights. They give us resources, a sense of belonging, and our life's meaning.

But what if poverty was your heritage?

What if hopelessness set the tone of your family story? If your heirloom was chronic health ailments perpetuated by insecure healthcare? What if you inherited a scarcity mindset because you have no living relative who has experienced anything but death-dealing death? Your kid can't prep for college when their stomach is rumbling. And you can't plan for a future because it scarcely exists when days are squeezed between deciding to eat or pay rent.

This is what we mean by "generational poverty." It is a pernicious cycle whereby a family lives in poverty for at least two generations. It's not just a bad year or two financially—it becomes the family's inheritance. It means generations of people who will be born, live, and die within the confines of disparity. The external conditions of scarcity are internalized into flesh and blood, and seeped into the soul and psyche.

How poverty affects the spirit of a family

[The Census Bureau](#) provides a threshold for poverty measurements—for a family of four it means annual incomes that fall below \$27,479. But, as we can see, the impact goes well beyond finances. Even a steady job cannot fully resolve this type of poverty because it is systemic, complex, and soul-deforming. It touches the whole person: their ability to parent, make decisions, prioritize values, and even their sense of the divine.^[1] It's not just turned-out pockets—it's a poverty of being.

Indifference to people with low-income, Harold Lewis reminds us, is not an option for the Christian.^[2] That's why generational poverty remains [one of our impact areas at ECF](#). This complex, soul-touching issue requires holistic responses from our community. It involves education, economics, healthcare, spirituality, and community building. It's why we support organizations like the [Agape Youth and Family Center](#) and the [Community Helping Place](#). We partner

with them and others who share the good work of breaking the vicious cycles of poverty that attempt to break us.

[1] Helminiak, Daniel A. 2020. "Material and Spiritual Poverty: A Postmodern Psychological Perspective on a Perennial Problem." *Journal of Religion and Health* 59 (3): 1458-80.

[2] Lewis, Harold T. *Christian Social Witness*. Cowley Publications, 2001.



The Rev. Trey B. Phillips (he/him) is a past member of the ECF Board of Directors and is the curate and Director of Youth Ministries at St. Catherine's Episcopal Church (Marietta). There his work focuses upon the Christian formation of the youth and wider parish. Trey's passion is to reinvigorate the local parish as a center for deep theological learning by employing the rich intersection of human learning sciences and religious education.

SUPPORT ECF

Your one-time or monthly donation allows us to serve people experiencing poverty and oppression throughout our Diocese. [Make a donation at https://episcopalcommunityfoundation.org/donate/](https://episcopalcommunityfoundation.org/donate/)