

## Shaking My Head in Tears

by Vivian M. Lucas

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Each year, during this season, I find myself shaking my head in wonderment as holiday advertisements flood the airwaves. Messages about the newest tech gadgets, top-selling toys, smart TVs, fine jewelry, two-for-one holiday meal deals, and countless other alluring tokens, trinkets, and enticements compete for attention and dollars daily. I think, “Am I missing something? Is there a super holiday elf flitting about with a magic wand granting infinite shopping dollars for the pockets, purses, and bank accounts of everyone in the U.S. except me?” Then I think, “What about those who are barely making ends meet already? What about persons living in poverty?”

Poverty is a constant struggle and heart-breaking burden for individuals, families and communities in our country and around the world. In 2014, 14.8 percent of people in the United States lived in poverty — a whopping 46.7 million people! The 2014 poverty rate for children under age 18 was 21.1 percent.

I am blessed to have a job. But in the community where I live and work, the poverty rate is 25 percent, and child poverty is over 45 percent. In this North Carolina county, unemployment still hovers in the double digits. Those who have jobs are grateful, but there are still many who are working for the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. I image these, my sisters and brothers, shaking their heads as they try to stretch their dollars to provide for their families. For no matter where they shop, what businesses they support, or services they patronize, it costs more than they have to pay.

I see the hurt poverty inflicts. Poverty affects where people live, the quality of their education, access to healthy food and medical care, the quality of their environment — even longevity of life. In distressed communities, housing is scarce and substandard; schools have limited basic supplies; fresh foods are unavailable; medical attention is distant; and chronic disease is overwhelming. The whole community hurts because of poverty.

Just recently, I heard about a veteran who took his own life after struggling for years to find a job, care for his needs, provide for his family, and get medical help. He suffered from post-traumatic stress, but his plight was made worse because the poverty-stricken community he returned to could not offer economic opportunities for work, for adequate pay, for a living wage, or for needed services. I am grateful for his service and I thank God for him. But my gratitude will not make a difference.

The problem of poverty is complex. There are no easy solutions. But in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, there is much that can be done to ensure that opportunities are available to those who want to work. There is more that can be done to make sure people have jobs and earn a fair and living wage. This season, I renew my commitment to work with the women, men and children in my community to fight for economic justice, more jobs, fair pay, and a better quality of life.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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