

aspire

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RACHEL FERGUSON



spire

*S*pire serves as a beacon of hope by sharing inspirational stories about Acton Institute's supporters, scholars, and events to lift your spirit as together we build a free and virtuous society. To change hearts and minds—and the world—look forward and upward ... to the *Spire*.

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR PRESIDENT

For many years now, a central theme at Acton has been concern for the poor and the excluded. Historic, large-scale efforts to help alleviate poverty both domestically and internationally are perfect examples of how good intentions just aren't enough. Our strategy needs to connect these good intentions with sound economics and an approach based on a theological understanding of the human person in order to make long-lasting changes.

For those of you who have been around Acton for a while, you may remember our work in this space over the years—from the Samaritan Award project, welfare reform analysis, and various conferences to our work on global poverty with the *PovertyCure* Project and DVD series as well as the award-winning documentary *Poverty, Inc.*

As you will read in this issue, Acton is doubling down on our commitment to work in the poverty sphere with the creation of the Center for Social Flourishing. The Center will be a national and international hub to convene scholars, human-service providers, and social entrepreneurs to gather the best ideas, disseminate best practices and lessons learned, and network with other organizations. The Center for Social Flourishing will provide a vision for human flourishing and serve as a place where people interested in both domestic and international poverty can learn from each other.

I am pleased to share with you this issue of Spire, which tells stories of some of the wonderful people who have been impacted by our work over the years, partnership successes, and our vision for the future of the Center for Social Flourishing.

Very Truly Yours,



KRIS ALAN MAUREN
PRESIDENT





"...when people are given the opportunity to **create prosperity, they do.**"



Partnering to Promote Dignity, Community, and Flourishing

Michael Matheson Miller directed an award-winning documentary on poverty in the developing world. Now he's turning his camera lens to the United States.

Poverty, Inc., released in 2014, played in more than sixty film festivals, won a number of awards—including the prestigious Templeton Freedom Award—and has had a successful run on streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. His next film on poverty in the U.S. will come out in 2025.

Problems of international and domestic poverty are generally quite different, explains Miller, who serves as the Acton Institute's Chief of Strategic Initiatives and as director for Acton's new Center for Social Flourishing. He highlights a major similarity, though: good intentions do not always lead to good results.

Meeting material needs can be important in emergency situations, but they often leave unaddressed the underlying, chronic problems that are the source of poverty. Sometimes, giving away material help can even exacerbate those underlying problems.

“In our desire to help, we’ve tended to treat poor people like objects of our charity, objects of our pity, or objects of our compassion,” Miller says.

“We don’t treat them like the subject and protagonist of their own story of development. Too often, we have focused on providing goods. That’s appropriate if there’s an emergency need, but the problem is we’ve treated chronic problems like an emergency situation.”

Poverty, Inc. showed how expansive bureaucracies and labyrinthine regulatory regimes perpetuate poverty in the developing world—a dynamic that holds true in the United States as well. “When an economy gets highly regulated, who do you think writes the regulations? Powerful interest groups, big corporations, and entrenched bureaucracies,” Miller says. “The poorest people—and even lower-middle-class people—don’t have the contacts to navigate this complex system.”

Poverty is a complex issue with many variables and contributing factors. There is no single solution to poverty *anywhere*, much less *everywhere*, Miller says.

This principle is at the core of the Acton Institute’s new Center for Social Flourishing. The Center’s goal is to reframe the discussion from combating poverty to establishing conditions of justice and social flourishing that enable people to create prosperity in their own families and communities.

Besides offering educational programming—such as the biennial PovertyCure Summit that brings together thousands of people internationally to partner on sustainable solutions to poverty—another major project for the Center for Social Flourishing is Miller’s follow-up documentary to *Poverty, Inc.* This film will show how different forms of poverty—material, spiritual, social, and moral—are interrelated, how they are connected to centralization and the breakdown of social connections, and what people in the U.S. are doing to heal their communities.

Other exciting initiatives of the Center for Social Flourishing this year include the launching of a new website, re-energizing Acton’s PovertyCure initiative, and three Free and Virtuous Society conferences on themes related to domestic poverty and social flourishing.

“In many ways, poverty is our normal condition throughout our history and in many places around the world,” Miller explains. “But when people are given the opportunity to create prosperity, they do.”



Finding Sustainable Solutions to Homelessness with Better Way Detroit

It's no secret that Detroit is struggling. Once a thriving metropolis, the Motor City suffered a dramatic fall from grace that began with an overreliance on the domestic automotive manufacturing industry. Detroit was hit incredibly hard by the Great Recession and the bankruptcies of both Chrysler and GM; then, the municipal government itself filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy in 2013. Today, the city is beginning to recover, but it still struggles with comparatively high levels of poverty and homelessness.

At first glance, Better Way Detroit might look like just another nonprofit organization working with the homeless population in the city. However, its methods and mission go well beyond offering a hot meal or a shelter to sleep in.

BETTER WAY DETROIT (CONTINUED)

Rebecca Fifelski began working with Better Way Detroit in the summer of 2022 as a volunteer, but it didn't take her long to become the Board Director. "I just wanted to learn about the organization and see what was going on and . . . help out in any way I could."

And there's plenty to learn. Better Way Detroit doesn't operate quite like other organizations that work with the homeless. Spearheaded by Fr. Marko Djonovic, who has long been passionate about ministering to the homeless population, Better Way Detroit serves as a means for individuals to help themselves escape the trap of homelessness.

Instead of handouts, Better Way Detroit, with the assistance of shelter staff, identifies those who are ready to take on the responsibility of working. One of the biggest struggles of those who are genuinely ready to leave the streets and shelters is gaining the skills and confidence to secure employment and gain the work experience needed to pave the road toward a better life. Through a combination of connections with local businesses, schools, and churches, as well as the mentorship of Better Way's volunteers, qualified candidates are placed in a four-week work program.

"We provide the transportation, and that worksite is usually at another nonprofit that needs help," Rebecca explains. "So, we'll work at Saint Vincent de Paul in their store—they're providing people in the neighborhood access to low-cost household goods—and then we work with Good Fellows, which is an organization that provides Christmas gifts to children in need. We'll work outside for the City of Detroit to clean up blighted houses."

The program participants are grateful for being trained and entrusted with opportunities for honest, paid work. Over and above traditional compensation, Better Way Detroit provides a support system and mentorship long after the completion of the four-week work program. Rebecca adds: "We try to get everybody placed either in a training program or employment with a temporary agency or even permanent employment. We've gotten people positions at warehouses, manufacturing, restaurants."

The simple fact is that the old adage of it being far easier to get a job when you already have a job is even more true for those struggling with homelessness. Numerous organizations generously provide temporary shelter and food to help meet the immediate needs of those facing such obstacles. Better Way Detroit—operating on the principle that when "you teach a man how to fish, he can feed himself for life"—seeks to break the cycle of homelessness itself through the dignity and purpose of work.

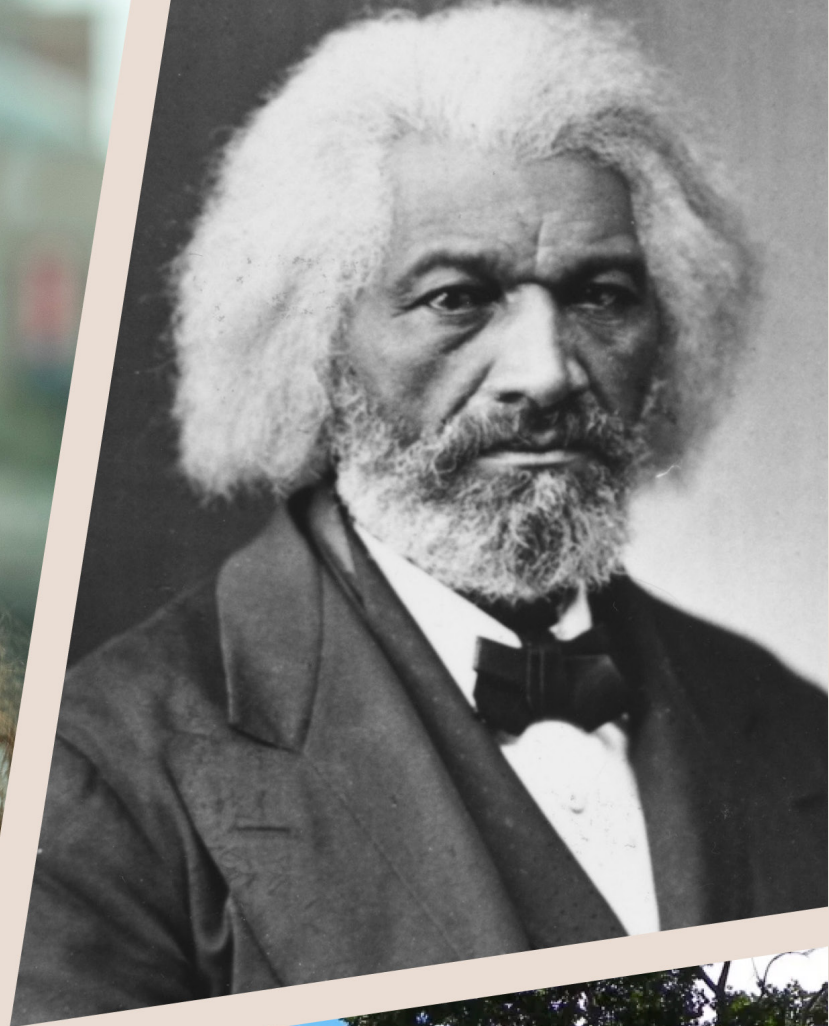
The Acton Institute has, since 2020, been instrumental in providing guidance and mentorship to the staff at Better Way Detroit.

Long-time Acton supporter Rosemary Kirt brought the organization to the attention of Acton leadership, after realizing how aligned the approaches and values of the two organizations are.

The Acton Institute is honored to draw attention to this fine organization as an example of how building relationships, focusing on the dignity of the individual, and finding a noble purpose can help support a freer and more virtuous society. Through the ministry of caring individuals working with clear purpose, we are capable of solving even the most difficult problems our world faces.

Learn more about
Better Way Detroit





A Professor Brings Others to Acton

There is a passage in Frederick Douglass's autobiography that business professor Rachel Ferguson never forgets. Douglass describes how, when he was a slave, his owner's wife started teaching him to read. When Douglass's owner found out, he was furious and "proceeded to unfold to his wife the true philosophy of the slave system," Douglass writes. The owner told his wife that teaching Douglass to read the Bible would make him "unfit for slavery forever."

"It was in that moment that Douglass determined to learn to read, and ultimately to free himself from bondage entirely," Ferguson says. "Education is necessary for a free citizen who will run his or her own life and who will help create the life of the community."

Douglass's message that education liberates one from ignorance and poverty continues to inspire Ferguson's work. She is the Director of the Center for Free Enterprise at Concordia University in Chicago, where she teaches business ethics. She is also an affiliate scholar at the Acton Institute, which has been hosting Concordia faculty and students at Acton University, as well as a Fellow at the Center for Social Flourishing. "There's no better way for me to introduce my colleagues and students to this world of Christian classical liberalism than at Acton University," Ferguson says. "And they have been really impressed, educated, and energized by the experience!"

RACHEL FERGUSON (CONTINUED)

Most students at Concordia come from minority communities and most are first-generation college students. What they're learning at Concordia and through Acton University is liberating in a profound way.

Ferguson became a classical liberal by reading books like *The Gulag Archipelago* by Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and *Democide: Nazi Genocide and Mass Murder* by political scientist R.J. Rummel. "Understanding the horrors of the totalitarian state sends one scrambling to understand how free societies can really work well," Ferguson says. "And of course, my faith helped me see clearly one of the major elements of a free society: thick civil society institutions like the church." For Ferguson, classical liberalism is the natural outgrowth of her faith: "Although we have separate nations, we do see every person as operating under the same moral law."

Ferguson is devoted to popularizing classical liberal ideas for the public. "I started out studying property rights," she says, "and have naturally moved into how the failure to protect such rights affects groups that the state excludes. But I'm also interested in the ways that we all—and perhaps the marginalized among us most of all—have leveraged our civil society institutions to make life worth living, even in the face of terrible circumstances."

As a faculty member, Ferguson is now part of a growing network of liberty-oriented faculty across the nation. "For years, Acton provided spaces for new faculty that I would fill with my new contacts," she says. "It is such a powerful way to get ideological fellow travelers plugged into all of the wonderful opportunities that Acton provides for on-campus content, engagement with church leaders, and student internship opportunities."



Many of Ferguson's Concordia students are grateful for her introducing them to Acton where they have the opportunity to immerse themselves in the ideas of a free and virtuous society. They're also being connected to a diverse and thriving community that spans the world. Ferguson has met friends at Acton who she brings to her campus, including a Chinese dissident who was jailed for his involvement in Tiananmen Square and Magatte Wade, an entrepreneur from Senegal featured in *Poverty, Inc.*, whom she calls "a life-changing speaker for the nonprofit administration students."

Meeting people—and bringing them together through Acton—especially energizes Ferguson. It's not just about the ideas of freedom in theory, but about how human beings live out those ideas in reality. From her perspective, the most powerful thing about Acton University probably isn't any one lecture or moment; rather, it's "this sense of connection with those striving to be free all over the world."



Keeping the American Dream Alive

As supporters of the Acton Institute for the past thirty years, Charles (Chuck) and Jan Stoddard are living the American Dream. Their fifty-six years of marriage have led to four children, eight grandchildren, one great-grandchild, and a cozy home by a lake in Michigan. Don't let their modesty keep you from seeing how their extraordinary drive fuels their commitment to doing their part to keep the American Dream alive for others to achieve. There's more to the Stoddards than meets the eye.

Chuck is something of a serial entrepreneur. He believes strongly in doing good by doing good business. Over the course of his career, he founded Grand Bank in Grand Rapids, cofounded a private K-12 school for children with learning differences called Lake Michigan Academy, and an angel investment firm called Grand Angels. Through both his bank and his investment firm, he has helped countless small business owners get the resources they needed to start and grow their businesses, creating untold jobs and value for their communities.



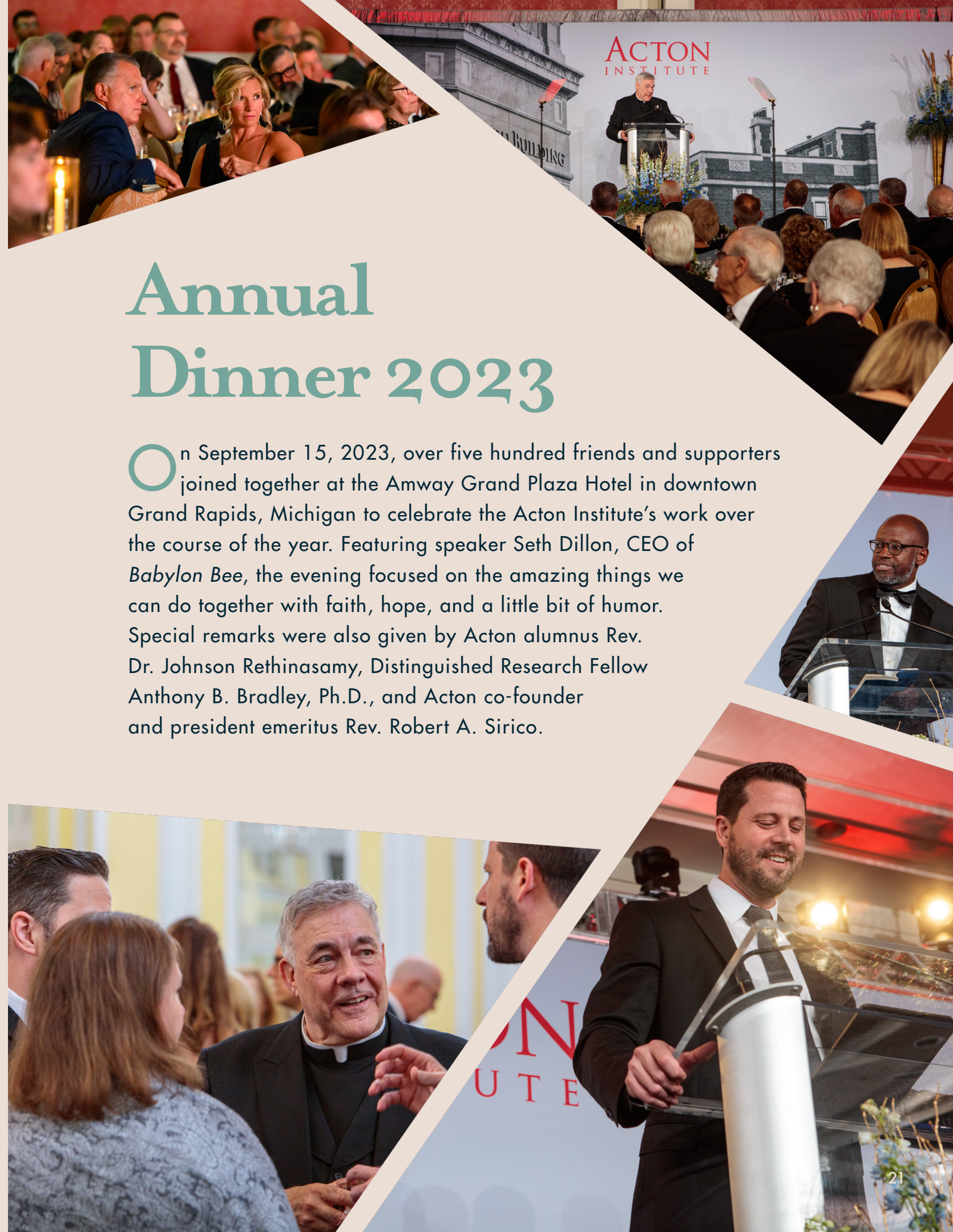
**CHARLES AND JAN STODDARD
(CONTINUED)**

Chuck has also extensively lent his time and expertise to many volunteer endeavors. He has served as president of his local Rotary Club chapter; is a founding member of the Economic Club of Grand Rapids; and has served as a board member for Blodgett Hospital, Butterworth Hospital, Grand Rapids Community Foundation, Michigan State University Development Fund, and the Gerald R. Ford Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

Given his spirit of innovation and generosity, combined with his lifelong commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, it should surprise no one that Chuck and Jan have supported the Institute since 1994. Their dedication to doing the right thing *because* it is the right thing shines through in their work and in the causes they support. Chuck and Jan care deeply about their legacy and the world they will leave for future generations. The two of them recently attended the Annual Dinner—one of their favorite events of the year—and remain passionate about the mission and direction of the Institute.

Chuck is also well known for telling bad jokes called “groaners.” For example, they live in a town called Hickory Corners, Michigan. He says it’s so small that their Dairy Queen has only one flavor.

The Acton Institute is incredibly thankful for three decades of support from Chuck and Jan Stoddard. Their generosity and service to their community serve as a shining example of commitment to useful works the Institute seeks to share.



Annual Dinner 2023

On September 15, 2023, over five hundred friends and supporters joined together at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan to celebrate the Acton Institute’s work over the course of the year. Featuring speaker Seth Dillon, CEO of *Babylon Bee*, the evening focused on the amazing things we can do together with faith, hope, and a little bit of humor. Special remarks were also given by Acton alumnus Rev. Dr. Johnson Rethinasamy, Distinguished Research Fellow Anthony B. Bradley, Ph.D., and Acton co-founder and president emeritus Rev. Robert A. Sirico.



ACTON *Legacy*

After providing for loved ones, please consider adding Acton Institute to your estate planning, helping to ensure the long-term success of the work you already support. We appreciate your support and want to make the gift as effective & beneficial for you as it is for us.

In addition to supporting our shared mission of defending a free and virtuous society, gifts may provide additional income for you and your loved ones, and potentially reduce income or estate taxes. You can make a planned gift with cash, appreciated assets (stocks, bonds, and real estate), personal property, and life insurance.

For more details and contact information, please visit acton.org/legacy or scan the QR code.



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“This was one of the **best summits I have ever joined.** Thanks to everyone who made it possible.”

“The PovertyCure Summit 2022 has really **changed my mindset about poverty,** and at the same time, has equipped me to see opportunities to turn around the narrative even in dire situations of poverty and need for action in my community.”

“Wow, this summit **gave me hope!**”

COMING THIS FALL...

poverty cure
SUMMIT 2024

TO LEARN MORE, VISIT POVERTYCURESUMMIT.COM

Acton Institute Giving Circles and Societies

The Acton Institute is continually grateful for our supporters who believe in our mission. By joining our Giving Circle, your gift supports recruiting, training, and equipping leaders from around the world to help promote a free and virtuous society.

FOUNDERS' CIRCLE

(\$10,000+ ANNUALLY, OR \$750/MONTH RECURRING GIFT)

- ✓ Personal call from Acton Leadership
- ✓ Opportunity to name Acton University Fellowship
- ✓ Invitation to quarterly "townhall" calls with Acton Leadership
- ✓ Complimentary subscriptions to all Acton publications for one year
- ✓ Invitations to private receptions at Acton events around the country, including the Annual Dinner and Acton University

LORD ACTON SOCIETY

(\$5,000+ ANNUALLY, OR \$350/MONTH RECURRING GIFT)

- ✓ Invitation to quarterly "townhall" calls with Acton Leadership
- ✓ Complimentary subscription to all Acton publications for one year
- ✓ Invitations to private receptions at Acton events around the country, including the Annual Dinner and Acton University

PRESIDENT'S CIRCLE

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- ✓ Complimentary subscription to all Acton publications for one year
- ✓ Invitations to private receptions at Acton events around the country, including the Annual Dinner and Acton University

LEGACY SOCIETY

- ✓ Complimentary subscription to all Acton publications for life
- ✓ Invitations to private receptions at Acton events around the country, including the Annual Dinner and Acton University

To learn more about Acton's Giving Circles and Societies, please visit acton.org/giving or reach out to Kayla Kaseska, Donor Relations and Stewardship Officer, at kkaseska@acton.org.

2024 EVENTS

MARCH

26

DALLAS LUNCHEON

📍 DALLAS COUNTRY CLUB

MARCH

27

HOUSTON LUNCHEON

📍 WESTIN GALLERIA HOUSTON

MAY

17

CHICAGO LUNCHEON

📍 UNIVERSITY CLUB OF CHICAGO

JUNE

24-27

ACTON UNIVERSITY**

📍 DEVOS PLACE IN GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

** KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR OUR 2ND ANNUAL DONOR DAY AT ACTON UNIVERSITY

OCTOBER

30

34TH ANNUAL DINNER

FEAT. WILLIAM INBODEN

📍 AMWAY GRAND PLAZA, GRAND RAPIDS

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