

God's Kingdom is for Everyone:
Discussing Poverty in a Christian Framework
*A Congregational Guide to **A Statement Concerning Poverty***
(Statement prepared by the Pennsylvania Council of Churches)

Welcome!

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

On behalf of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' Commission on Public Witness, who generated ***A Statement Concerning Poverty*** after a nearly year-long process in 2009, we encourage you to take this opportunity to engage your congregation in this four-week study to read, consider, and, we hope, begin to embody the Statement and its call for Christians to “discern what God wants and to act as God’s agents in the world to overcome poverty.”

The Commission on Public Witness is a diverse group of both clergy and lay persons who represent many of the church bodies that are members of the Council—conferences of the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ, dioceses of the Episcopal Church, synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, districts of the Church of the Brethren, and the statewide bodies of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and the Moravian Church. The Commission members were aware that many, if not most, discussions about poverty end poorly because members of congregations come to the table not viewing poverty through a Christian lens, but instead with misconceptions about poverty, societal biases concerning the poor, and personal feelings of fear or other emotions that make conversation difficult. They developed this statement to enable congregations to begin a dialogue concerning poverty using a common point of reference. Rather than simply accepting “you (will) always have the poor with you”¹ as a reason to do nothing, the Commission saw it as a challenge to act to alleviate suffering.

It is said that there are more than 2,000 references to poverty in the Bible. Jesus said that what we do for the “least of these,” we do for him, and that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus welcomed all people—even, and perhaps especially, those scorned and rejected within his society—and offered healing and hope to them. Aren’t we called to do the same?

Community agencies and congregations work desperately to provide assistance as we deal with an economy that has not only worsened conditions for those already struggling to survive but has created an entire group of newly poor persons through unemployment and loss of homes or health care. Despite their best efforts, these entities can never address the needs of all who are unemployed, hungry, homeless, lacking health care, or dealing with the impacts of poor education or disabilities. Governments are struggling to meet the need in an environment of reduced revenues because of unemployment and corporations that manage to avoid paying taxes at all. Instead of considering the question “What is required to ensure that all are able to live in safety and dignity?”, budgets are slashed to reduce or eliminate some benefits to persons in need of help while creating even greater number of vulnerable persons through cuts to education and policies that support those who have at the expense of those who do not.

In reviewing ***A Statement Concerning Poverty*** and its companion document, members of the Commission expressed their own challenge—how to make the Statement a living document, one that would be read and used by congregations, rather than end up sitting on a shelf gathering dust. They determined that the Statement’s headings easily lend themselves to shaping a study structure for congregations—hence, this guide.

While we are pleased to offer this guide for use by congregations, we are compelled to note the following:

¹ Matthew 26:11

- This is not a study guide which attempts to present all the answers to questions about poverty. In fact, at times, the speakers quoted in this guide may stir up some unsettling feelings within us.
- The search for truth sometimes leads us through questioning the assumptions we make in order to teach us to ask better questions and seek more faithful answers.
- We may not even realize that some of our deepest, most long-held assumptions about poverty have been shaped more by the individualistic, often short-sighted, and consumer-oriented society in which we live, rather than by truly biblical values.
- This guide attempts to reorient us to seeing and analyzing the world, people, and poverty more from God's perspective—from the principles of justice, compassion, and love. Asking better questions will lead us toward more creative solutions and beginning to address some of the root causes of poverty which we may never have otherwise considered.

As with any statement, the message and potential power remains hidden if no one reads it. This study guide is intended to help in fostering important conversations within the study group. Even more important, we pray that it opens doors for respectful discussion within your own congregation, and throughout the wider faith community. We hope that it will:

- Open your community to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, and learn to be led by the Spirit's promptings;
- Create a stronger sense of community that creates a safe space for sharing—more authentically—individual and community joys and concerns;
- Open a greater understanding that we are all persons created in God's image—and as such, deserving of love, respect, and compassion; and
- Engage in action—in community—to bring health and healing to those living in poverty, and to work to change policies that create the conditions that place people there.

Finally, if the Gospel is good news to the poor, what about the rich? Could it be that it is also good news to the rich, because the same things that bind the poor, also bind the rich, though in different ways. Perhaps the way out of bondage for all of us is for the rich and the poor to join hands and work together to break the bonds of injustice. Then we will both be free.

We hope that this resource will help congregations and individuals throughout the Christian and wider faith community. We believe it will help to bring many disparate voices to bear in finding a common voice that can speak truth to power, confronting the misinformation about and discrimination against God's children who are living on the edge, and seeking to make their lives better. In the process, we may find that our world and all of our lives will be better.

Thank you for considering this guide.

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***God's Kingdom is for Everyone:
Discussing Poverty in a Christian Framework***

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How to Use this Guide²

Group Structure and Size

This guide was designed for small, congregational groups. Any existing group—an adult study class, a prayer circle, a social concerns or mission committee, “house groups”—can make use of this guide as is or by adapting it to meet its needs. It may be also be used profitably for other groups and purposes as well, such as a task force to address poverty in the congregation’s community, a congregational retreat, or a Lenten study series. Small groups ranging from five to fifteen are preferable to promote active engagement by all participants. Larger groups can work as well, but you may want to consider having smaller break out groups, especially during group sharing times.

Facilitation

Each session needs at least one (perhaps more, if the group is larger) person who will undertake the necessary preparation (outlined in each Facilitator’s Guide) and then facilitate each session’s flow and discussion times. Facilitators need not be experienced at facilitating, nor must they be experts in the issues.

Because each session has an easy-to-use facilitator overview and facilitation steps, your group may want to consider rotating the role of facilitator to further boost engagement. Having facilitators that volunteer from the group can create a greater sense of group ownership. While the initial facilitator will usually be the person who selected the topic and/or convened the group, time can be set aside during the first session to identify other facilitators for the remaining sessions.

One of the main facilitator responsibilities is to help foster a respectful, safe environment in which participants can express their thoughts, feelings, questions, and creativity. In order to help with this responsibility, we have provided a set of Group-Building Guidelines in the Appendix. We suggest that your group adapt these guidelines to meet their needs and commit to honoring the guidelines during each session.

² Many of the ideas in this section were shaped by the study guide entitled *Opening the Letter: A Congregational Guide to God’s Earth Is Sacred*, published by the National Council of Churches’ Eco-Justice Program and available at http://ncecojustice.org/network/downloads/OpenLetter_final.pdf.

Time and Setting

At least one hour is needed in order to provide sufficient time for meaningful reflection and discussion. The study can be done in weekly sessions (such as Sunday School classes or weekly Bible study groups), or you could do them in series over the course of a retreat, perhaps with expanded discussion times and worship. (For suggestions on using these materials within a retreat setting, please see suggestions in the Appendix.)

Settings for each session vary, from a Sunday school class room to a group member's home. It is probably best to keep the setting informal, which can help to keep the environment more relaxed—especially helpful when disagreements arise during discussion.

Session Format

Each of the four sessions contains the following components in some form:

- Facilitator Overview (to be read by the facilitator before each session)
- Welcome and Overview
- Brief Introductions
- Reflection
- Group Sharing
- Focused Read of God's Kingdom is for Everyone
- Activity and Discussion
- Review and Looking Ahead
- Closing Prayer

In addition to these components—which are meant for facilitators—each session has an accompanying handout for participants.

Overview of Sessions

The general flow of this series is one that starts from a place of learning what Christians are called to believe and how society views poverty. It then moves to defining poverty and discussion about who lives in poverty. Next, it promotes reflection and discussion on how poverty affects us personally and as a society, and how permitting it to exist reflects on us. Finally, the study guides the group into considering what God calls us to do about poverty.

- Session One: “What Christians Believe About Poverty; Poverty and “The Invisible Backpack””—invites participants to reflect on scriptural passages that address poverty, as well as the myth that in our system of free market capitalism, all who work hard will do well when in reality some are born with privileges that others do not have.
- Session Two: “What Is Poverty? Who Lives in Poverty?”— invites participants to explore the concept of poverty—how the Pennsylvania Council of Churches has chosen to define poverty, and how others define it; who is labeled as “poor” or “living in poverty; poverty of spirit; and what we might consider “necessities.”
- Session Three: “How Does Poverty Affect Us? What Does Its Existence Say About Us?”— invites participants to reflect on how poverty affects us personally, in congregations, and in the community, and to consider Biblical admonitions about what we are called to do to help our vulnerable brothers and sisters. Participants are asked to reflect upon what their priorities would be for the expenditure of their tax dollars, noting that war/conflict is significantly more costly than providing adequate supports.
- Session Four: “What Does God Call Us To Do?”—invites participants to consider five kinds of responses to which God calls us concerning poverty. SUSTAINABLE LIVING, SOLIDARITY, SPEAKING UP, SHARING, SYSTEMIC CHANGE.

Session One: What Christians Believe About Poverty Facilitator's Guide

Dear Facilitator,

This first session invites participants to reflect on scriptural passages that address poverty, as well as the myth that in our system of free market capitalism, all who work hard will do well when in reality some are born with privileges that others do not have. This session will attempt to help participants discern their own beliefs and attitudes toward poverty and those who live in poverty, set the stage for further discussion throughout the four weeks of study, and provide an appropriate lead-in for the second session which looks at a definition of poverty and exploration about who lives in poverty.

You should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Make enough photocopies of the Session One Participants Handout for all group participants.
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of ***A Statement Concerning Poverty***.
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
 - For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.
 - Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also

post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What gives me hope?
 - What bothers me?
 - What is most important to me?
 - What is one thing I could change?
 - Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Prayer

Lord of Life, Open our eyes to make us: aware of the poverty suffered by others; aware of the immorality of allowing that suffering to take place; aware of our rights as citizens to be heard; aware of the men, women and children dying as we speak; aware that our solidarity gives us strength; aware that our leaders may turn a deaf ear but God hears our cry; and aware that only together can we make poverty history. Give us the strength and determination to work towards solutions and policy changes that can free our sisters and brothers everywhere from the chains of poverty. Amen.³

Brief Introductions (5 minutes)

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this four session discussion of poverty considered from a Christian perspective, using the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' ***A Statement Concerning Poverty***—what Christians believe about poverty and our responsibility as Christians to “speak truth to power” and act to overcome poverty wherever it exists.*

Discussions about poverty are fraught with all sorts of emotionally-charged beliefs and attitudes and before we can

³ Adapted from prayer by Cardinal O'Brien at <http://www.educationforjustice.org/node/1452>.

begin talking about the issue itself, we need to examine our own beliefs and attitudes and their roots.

In today's discussion, we will address a very basic question for Christians—"Who is my neighbor?"—a question that Jesus addresses in various ways throughout the gospels. From there we will move on to discuss beliefs at a societal level, using the metaphor of an "invisible backpack." The reference is to a 1989 article by Peggy McIntosh, where she presents the concept that some are born with privileges or things they can take for granted that others cannot, and that those who have the privileges are unaware that their experience is very different from those who do not.

Before we get started, let's please take a few moments to read the handout on Group-Building Guidelines. We'll be using these guidelines throughout this four week series, especially during our discussion times.

Refer participants to the "Group-Building Guidelines" handout and give them a few minutes to read the guidelines. After they have done so, ask if there are any questions, additions, etc. then guide people into the Reflection.

After doing so, please move people into the time of Reflection & Group Sharing.

Reflection & Group Sharing (25 minutes)

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the Holy Spirit into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read the following prayer or offer one of your own:

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit; help us as we seek your wisdom and guidance that we may recognize you in the faces of our neighbors—whatever their color, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. In Jesus' name. Amen.

After the prayer, invite one participant to read Deuteronomy 5:12-15 from the Participant Handout—and then invite the group to reflect silently for a minute or two.

After this time of silent reflection, begin to guide them through a discussion of this passage. **Note:** It is not necessary to "go around the circle"—participants should speak if and when they feel led to do so. As facilitator, you may want to start the sharing by offering a brief insight of your own. If your group is large (more than 10 people), you may want to have people break into smaller groups or "pair up" to share

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their insights—this will save time and allow for greater depth of sharing.

Unlike the Exodus version of the command to keep the Sabbath, which is rooted in the Creation narrative of God resting on the seventh day, this version is rooted in the Exodus narrative of liberation.

"Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt!" Deut. 5:15a

Slaves are supervised by cruel taskmasters, who unceasingly push them to work without rest. What, for you, are some modern-day taskmasters, which would deny you rest from your labors?

Pause to allow for participants to respond as you move through each of the questions. If necessary to get the discussion started, you might want to offer the following suggestions:

Do you feel bound by your cell phones? Email? Your job? Striving to be a success? The demand to keep a positive attitude? Body image? The call to have it all? Perfect parent syndrome? Teachers? Bosses? Spouses?

Is one of the taskmasters you have named harsher than the others? If so, why is that so?

[PAUSE for responses]

"Six days you shall labor and do your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God, you shall not do any work..." Deut. 5:13-14a

The People of Israel are no longer slaves. The message here is rest, because now you can. Slaves, after all, aren't allowed to rest. Any rest they catch will have to be on the sly. Therefore, their rest will always be shadowed by fear (of getting caught) and guilt (their shirking will mean a heavier load for their fellow slaves).

Do you ever feel guilty about putting off some task? What tasks do you most want to put off doing? Something job related? An exercise program? Housework?

Whom do you most fear for not doing that task? Boss? Spouse? Yourself? God?

[PAUSE...]

"the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." Deut. 5:15b

God freed the People of Israel. They could see their freedom in the corpses of their taskmasters and enforcers bobbing in the Red Sea. But...as one observer notes, our problem is we fish

their bodies out of the water, resuscitate them and allow them to take up residence in our heads!

Name some things you berate yourself for failing to do. Name some things you are apt to berate others for failing to do. What similarities and differences do you note in your lists?

[PAUSE...]

When you think about people living in poverty, do you believe they enjoy a rest you cannot enjoy, or are they more like the slaves in Egypt, or some mix of those two ways of living? Let's take a couple of minutes to discuss the many ways we might think about people living in poverty, and whether it strikes us more as rest or as slavery.

[PAUSE...]

*In **Nickel and Dimed**, author Barbara Ehrenreich asserted that there is a whole socio-economic category (the working class in low-wage service industries) who must deal with a wide variety of taskmasters (including us). What do you imagine may be some of those taskmasters?*

[PAUSE...]

In what aspects of your life do you need more rest? How might you find more rest for yourself? What might the church do to facilitate sabbath rest?

"you shall not do any work, you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave...or the resident alien in your town, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you."

Deut. 5:14b

Do you believe the church has a role to play in seeing that those living in poverty or on low incomes have access/opportunities for freedom and sabbath rest?

[PAUSE...]

Now, let's turn to the passage from Mark on the feeding of the 5,000. Take note of the verbs in verse 41—Take, Blessed, Broke, Gave. These are the identical verbs describing the actions of the Last Supper/Holy Communion.

Imagine you were in that crowd that day. What might you be feeling as you watched Jesus? Would it be different if you had nothing? If you had a lot?

[PAUSE...]

The Early Church linked the sacrament of Communion with the radical sharing evident in the miraculous feeding stories. How does that effect how you see Communion? Do you see how Communion might not be an activity of the church set apart

from the world, but rather as a call to serve in the world -- doing as Christ did, participating in his work of the Kingdom?

Focused Read of "What We Believe" from A Statement Concerning Poverty (10 minutes)

Please read or summarize the following:

*We're now going to transition into a time of looking closely at the section of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' **A Statement Concerning Poverty** that we are considering today. First we'll read the section out loud—"What We Believe." The "invisible backpack" is a concept introduced by Peggy McIntosh, Senior Research Scientist at the Wellesley Centers for Women, in a paper she wrote in 1989.*

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud the "What We Believe" section of the Statement, and Matthew 25:40. Ask for a second volunteer to read the excerpt from "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack" from p. 1 of the Participants Guide. After the reading, proceed to ask the following questions and record responses on a sheet of flip chart paper or note board.

Now that you know what we mean by the "invisible backpack," what are some of the privileges you have in your backpack—things in your circumstance that you take for granted and which make your life easier?

How might these things hinder your seeing the conditions of the poor and working class?

Imagine that tomorrow you awoke and lost so many assets and income that you fell into poverty. What might you feel? Fear? Shame? Anger? Regret? Despair?

Activity (10 minutes)

Read or summarize the following:

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Who would you say is your neighbor?

Allow a brief time for participants to reflect on this question. Then move on to the following.

Let's take a few minutes to reflect on all that we have discussed today. Are there new insights that you have gained from our discussion? Has the discussion raised questions that have not been answered, and that you might want to keep in mind as we engage in further discussions over the next three sessions?

On two pieces of flip chart paper or note board take notes (or ask a volunteer to do so) of initial responses and questions. Briefly summarize responses on the “Emerging Insights” sheet and any questions on the “Emerging Questions” sheet.

Review and Looking Ahead (5 minutes)

With participants, help to wrap up the session:

- Refer to the Emerging Questions page. Ask for volunteers who may have an interest in/be willing to explore one of these questions, with the intent of sharing with the group at the next session. Volunteers may want to refer to the “To Learn More ...” list on their handouts.
- Point out the “Preparing for Session Two” items listed on their handouts and encourage them to engage in them before the next session.
- Pay particular attention to the item involving participants bringing snacks, since this is part of the activity for Session Two.

Closing Prayer

Read or summarize the following:

Consider all the people who crossed your path over the past week. Were there any encounters that stood out for you? Are there neighbors with whom God is calling you or your congregation to build relationships? Please take a moment of silence to ponder these questions.

Invite the group to join you in this closing prayer, one of your own, or one from another participant.

Lord, your Son commanded that we love you with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our strength and with all our minds, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us to remember that our neighbors are as numerous as the population of the earth. Guide us to see Jesus' face in the face of everyone we encounter, no matter how different, and help us to share your love with all we meet. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Session One: What Christians Believe About Poverty Participants Handout

Reflection⁴

Deuteronomy 5:12-15: Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Mark 6:30-44: The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to

his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

From **"Privilege and Unpacking the 'Invisible Backpack'"** (referenced in *A Statement Concerning Poverty*): Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an *invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless backpack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.*⁵

Affirmations

From Deuteronomy reading: **Sabbath rest is a good thing; it is a command from God. God released the captive Israelites from Egypt that they would no longer be slaves and would have time for rest, and God frees us to do the same.**

From Mark reading: **This message of Communion is a message of radical sharing, and abundance—there is plenty for all if we trust God and don't hoard more than our fair share.**

⁵ McIntosh, Peggy, White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack (<http://www.uakron.edu/centers/conflict/docs/whitepriv.pdf>)
1.

⁴ All Biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Luke 10:25-28: Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "**You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.**"

Preparing for Session Two

Read "What is Poverty? and "Who are the Poor? Who Lives in Poverty?" in *A Statement Concerning Poverty* from your Session One handout. If possible, read the additional footnoted information in *A Companion to a Statement Concerning Poverty* at http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/index_files/web_attachments/A_Companion_to_Statement_on_Poverty.pdf.

Read reflections on "poverty of spirit" at <http://reverendmommy.blogspot.com/2009/05/poverty-of-spirit.html> and <http://creativegrace.net/poverty-of-spirit-or-poor-in-spirit/>.

To Learn More ...

... about what others have to say about poverty, please visit the following sites:

What Does the Bible Say About Poverty? NOTE: verses and reflections will be posted on the advocacy website.

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack:

http://www.uakron.edu/centers/conflict/docs/white_priv.pdf—This paper was written in 1989 by Peggy McIntosh, currently Associate Director of the Wellesley Centers for Women (bio at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peggy_McIntosh). It takes into consideration the role of privilege with regard to gender, race, etc.

Exploiting Poverty Caused The Financial Crisis:

An interesting piece of food for thought at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sally-kohn/exploiting-poverty-caused_b_127401.html.

Check your denomination's website to find statements, resources, and actions concerning poverty.

Christian Churches Together:

<http://www.christianchurchestogether.org>—particularly the Statement on Poverty and the Domestic Policy Initiative.

Session Two: What Is Poverty? Who Lives in Poverty? Facilitator's Guide

Dear Facilitator,

This second session invites participants to explore the concept of poverty—how the Pennsylvania Council of Churches has chosen to define poverty, and how others define it; who is labeled as “poor” or “living in poverty; poverty of spirit; and what we might consider “necessities.” Please feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Make enough photocopies of the Session Two Participants Handout for all group participants.
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of ***A Statement Concerning Poverty***.
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
 - For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.
 - Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What gives me hope?
- What bothers me?
- What is most important to me?
- What is one thing I could change?

- Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Prayer

Dear God, help us to keep our minds and hearts open so that we may see the needs of our neighbors and ourselves as we look for answers to and understanding of the church's place in dealing with the issue of poverty.

Brief Introductions (5 minutes)

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this continuing discussion of poverty considered from a Christian perspective, using the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' ***A Statement Concerning Poverty***—what Christians believe about poverty and our responsibility as Christians to “speak truth to power” and act to overcome poverty wherever it exists. Last session we began the “why” of this study; the basis of beginning this study on poverty and just whom we are talking about. Today we will discuss the basics of poverty: what it is. This is not always the easiest thing to understand nor to agree upon. Our understanding of poverty includes spiritual poverty, from which many suffer who may have “substantial” income. This does affect our society and church and must be included in the church's look at poverty.*

If there are new people joining the group this session, continue with:

Before we get started, let's take a moment to glance over the Group-Building Guidelines that we received in the first session. Does anyone need a copy? (Allow a minute or so for review.) Does anyone have any questions before we proceed? (Respond to any questions.)

During this time, anyone who has volunteered to follow up on an item listed on the last session's Emerging Questions sheet can briefly report his/her insights and findings.

After doing so, please move people into the time of Reflection.

Reflection (25 minutes)

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the Holy Spirit into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read or summarize the following:

Last week, prayerfully reflected on what we, as Christians, believe about poverty, recalling the stories of the Exodus and the feeding of the 5000 to guide our discussion. I invite you to consider those stories and some of our observations and insights as we enter our time of reflection today.

Ask for two volunteers to read aloud each section of the Statement—"What is Poverty?" and "Who Are the Poor? Who Lives in Poverty?"

Pause for several moments then read or summarize the following:

Very often in speaking about "the poor" the Gospel of John 12:8 is used as a reference. That verse speaks about "we will always have the poor with us." However, the main focus of that verse is not the poor or poverty but how we should treat and respect worship.

*From **A Statement Concerning Poverty**, we define poverty as "a continual, chronic condition of want for 1) basic necessities, resources and opportunities, 2) connection to the larger society and 3) power to affect positive change, which is often exacerbated by social stigmas, isolation, and caste status." This definition also fits with the concept of "spiritual poverty," where those who focusing on the all-too-human concepts of value or wealth may experience the same sense of want, even when what they have is adequate to meet their needs.*

Yes, this is a mouthful and not always so easy to fit into our neat ideas about poverty. A description such as this puts many in poverty outside our third world image of the starving, unclothed and uneducated.

Considering this definition, what are some examples of "poverty" that you can think of, including in your own neighborhood, place of employment or church community?

Ask each participant to begin thinking about this different perspective of poverty. Think about whether or not each person also feels that he/she may suffer in some way from a situation that could be considered to be "in poverty."

Ask for a participant to read the following:

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Deuteronomy 15:11

Luke 6:20-26

Ask the group how they feel these two passages relate to poverty as defined in **A Statement Concerning Poverty**.

After some time for discussion, read or summarize the following:

Consider this reflection:

Some time ago National Public Radio did a series on poverty. They interviewed individuals, asking how they managed and their definitions of poor. There were people who made \$70,000 per year who felt and stated that they were "poor." There were people who made \$20,000 who felt and stated they were fine. They could afford what they needed and several worried about those who had less. It is obvious that we do not all agree on the terms "poor" and "poverty." The current (until March 2010) federal guidelines place persons in the "living in poverty" category if their income is below \$10,830 for one person; \$14,570 for a two person household; \$18,310 for three persons; and \$22,050 for four persons.

We know that poverty in today's society is often tied to income levels, mostly relating to what the government sets as "poverty guidelines." A family of four that earns more than \$22,050, for example, would be considered to be living above the poverty line. If we use this as the standard, there are many families that live above the federal poverty level but are still unable to afford decent housing, healthy food every day and other "basic necessities."

Give the participants time to reflect upon your words and respond before moving on to the Group Sharing.

Group Sharing (10 minutes)

Invite participants to share their thoughts concerning the following questions:

- In light of the differing views of who is poor, how do you respond as a Christian to someone who appears to have substantial income?
- What do you consider to be the "basic necessities?"

For this time of sharing, it is not necessary to "go around the circle"—participants should speak if and when they feel led to do so. As facilitator, you may want to start the sharing by offering your own story. If your group is large (more than 10 people), you may

want to have people break into small groups or “pair up” to share their insights—this will save time and allow for greater depth of sharing.

Activity (10 minutes)

The purpose of the following activity is to demonstrate how one may feel if subjected to having less than another.

1. Snacks are brought for the group (group members should have been asked to bring snacks during Session One, though this is something you may wish to arrange yourself depending on your situation).
2. Group members are divided into three groups (counting off is fine!).
3. Snacks are distributed according to the group. For example, Group 1 would receive everything: cookies, fruit, drinks, plates, napkins, etc. Group 2 might receive cookies and napkins, and drinks with no cups. Group 3 would get drinks only.

After the snacks have been distributed, the group is asked to honestly express the feelings about having more than others or less than others. Do they feel “poor?” Do they feel mistreated? This emphasizes that “poverty is not a life-style choice.”

Discussion should follow about how the distribution could have been done to make each group feel better/more comfortable.

Review and Looking Ahead (5 minutes)

With participants, help to wrap up the session:

- Refer to the Emerging Questions page. Ask for volunteers who may have an interest in/be willing to explore one of these questions, with the intent of sharing with the group at the next session. Volunteers may want to refer to the “To Learn More ...” list on their handouts.
- Point out the “Preparing for Session Three” items listed on their handouts and encourage them to engage in them before the next session.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for the opportunity to look at another perspective. Help us to make decisions about those who have less and those who can help to make changes in our society. Keep our minds and hearts open that we may see what you would have us see, that there is goodness in all people, no matter how they live their lives. Amen.

Session Two: What Is Poverty? Who Lives in Poverty? Participants Handout

Reflection

John 12:8: You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Deuteronomy 15:11: Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

Luke 6:20-26: Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

“What is Poverty” and “Who Are the Poor? Who Lives in Poverty?” from *A Statement Concerning Poverty* (see *Statement* in the Appendix)

Affirmations

From Deuteronomy reading: God does not look to us to solve the problem of poverty in the world, but we are admonished to share what we have with others, particularly those who have less.

From Luke reading: One's financial status is not God's basis for reward. No matter how those who are hungry, homeless, and without financial resources are treated in this world, God will bless them and welcome them into the kingdom of God.

Preparing for Session Three

Read “How Does Poverty Affect Us? and “What Does Permitting Preventable Poverty to Exist Say About Us?” in *A Statement Concerning Poverty* from your Session One handout. If possible, read the additional footnoted information in *A Companion to a Statement Concerning Poverty* at http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/index_files/web_attachments/A_Companion_to_Statement_on_Poverty.pdf.

Read “Framing Poverty as a Social Problem” at <http://www.spssi.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=1010>. This is a brief piece that notes that psychological research indicates that as with race and gender, people have prejudice based upon class, and notes that these biases affect the treatment of people living in poverty, the desires others have to help, and policy efforts aimed at reducing poverty.

Read one of the following (though reading both would be better!): (1) “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity” by Walter Brueggemann at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>; (2) “The Great Wealth Transfer” by Paul Krugman at http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/12699486/paul_krugman_on_the_great_wealth_transfer/print.

Conduct a web search using terms like “poverty impacts,” “how poverty affects society,” and “how does poverty affect us?” Note the differences in what turns up from this search. Look into a specific area of interest—affects on education, children, crime, the economy, the environment, etc. and be prepared to share what you learn.

Find a current news item that addresses poverty in your community. Bring the item to class and be prepared to share your impression of how it affects you, your congregation, and your community, and think about what permitting it to exist says about you, your congregation, and your community.

To Learn More ...

... about what others have to say about poverty, please visit the following sites:

Read the various definitions of poverty from the website “A Dollar a Day: Finding Solutions to Poverty” at

http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/00282/over_whatis.htm. It describes a variety of ways that various constituencies define poverty.

Framing Poverty as a Social Problem:

<http://www.spssi.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=1010>— Psychological research indicates that as with race and gender, people have prejudice based upon class. These biases affect the treatment of people living in poverty, the desires others have to help, and policy efforts aimed at reducing poverty.

About the Progressive Religious Tradition (Bill Moyers on the Social Gospel):

<http://www.pbs.org/now/society/socialgospel.html>.

Check your denomination's website to find statements, resources, and actions concerning poverty.

Christian Churches Together:

<http://www.christianchurchestogether.org>— particularly the Statement on Poverty and the Domestic Policy Initiative.

Session Three: How Does Poverty Affect Us? What Does Its Existence Say About Us? Facilitator's Guide

Dear Facilitator,

This third session invites participants to reflect on how poverty affects us personally, in congregations, and in the community, and to consider from our Christian perspective what permitting preventable poverty to exist says about us. Exploring these themes is expected to provide much “food for thought” for the fourth and final session, “What Does God Call Us to Do?” As before, you should feel free to adapt this session as necessary to your circumstances.

- In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:
 - Make enough photocopies of the Session Three Participants Handout for all group participants.
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of ***A Statement Concerning Poverty***.
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
 - For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.
 - Set up two pieces of flip chart or other blank paper—one labeled “Emerging Questions” and the other “Emerging Insights from Group Activity”—or print these two headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What gives me hope?
 - What bothers me?
 - What is most important to me?
 - What is one thing I could change?
 - Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Prayer

May God richly bless our time together with deep reflection about how the existence of poverty impoverishes everyone, and thoughtful discussion of a Christian view on what permitting poverty to exist means for the church.

Brief Introductions (5 minutes)

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this continuing discussion of poverty considered from a Christian perspective, using the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' **A Statement Concerning Poverty**—what Christians believe about poverty and our responsibility as Christians to “speak truth to power” and act to overcome poverty wherever it exists. In the last session we considered what poverty is using the definition contained in the Statement and who lives in poverty. This included those we traditionally think of as living in poverty—the poor—but also those who live in a state of spiritual poverty and how this state may contribute to causing people to live in physical poverty. Today we will be discussing how poverty affects us—individually and in families, in the church, in the community, and as a society—and what permitting preventable poverty to exist says about us, the church, and society.*

If there are new people joining the group this session, continue with:

Before we get started, let's take a moment to glance over the Group-Building Guidelines that we received in the first session.

Does anyone need a copy? (Allow a minute or so for review.) Does anyone have any questions before we proceed? (Respond to any questions.)

During this time, anyone who has volunteered to follow up on an item listed on the last session's Emerging Questions sheet can briefly report his/her insights and findings.

After doing so, please move people into the time of Reflection.

Reflection (15 minutes)

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the Holy Spirit into this prayerful time. After a moment of silence, slowly read or summarize the following reflection:

Last week we prayerfully reflected upon the words from Deuteronomy and Luke and discussed these texts in the context of considering how we define poverty. I invite you to remember those words and some of our observations and insights.

Pause for several moments then read or summarize the following:

*Now, as you remember these insights, please listen to these words from **Romans 15**: We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.*

It is almost certain that Paul intended these words in his letter to the Romans as a guiding statement for living in community—communities are strengthened by treating our neighbors well, building them up so that we can all live to our God-given potential as members of a community. However, it would be quite easy to interpret these words in a very different light. We may indeed see persons who are “weak,” and have many failings, but we live in a society where many persons find themselves in situations beyond their control. (NOTE: Many traditions would say we are all sinners and we all have some failings.) Indeed, millions (and growing) live without or with insufficient health care coverage, and suffer economic disaster in the event of a major illness or injury. Risky activities by banking and investment communities have placed many more at risk for bankruptcy or foreclosure. Deceivingly irresistible opportunities have led many to overextend themselves financially, not anticipating the necessity of having savings to protect them in hard economic times.

In the same way that you reflected upon the words and issues we considered in our previous session, I now invite you to reflect

silently upon the poverty you may have seen in our community or in the world, where you have heard cries for God's help and healing. This may be through your own personal witness—your own life or in your neighborhood or community—in media accounts, or in the reading and reflection you have done in preparation for today's session. It can take into account last session's discussions about who lives in poverty—both the poor and those living in a spiritual state of poverty. As you reflect, try to think in as much detail as possible about the person, family, organization, or other entity involved, and how this made you feel.

After a few minutes of silence, invite participants to pick up their handout. Read or summarize the following:

Let us now share in the litany found on your handout. This litany is provided as a faith resource on poverty by Bread for the World, and it provides a good foundation for today's group sharing and discussion. Going around the circle, we'll take turns reading each of the petitions and we'll all join in reading the responses in bold.

Go around the circle and have participants take turns reading one of the petitions, with the entire group reading the bolded responses. (NOTE: As facilitator, you may want to read the opening statement to start the litany.)

Group Sharing (10 minutes)

Invite participants to share:

- their stories and insights from the previous Reflection; and/or
- a description of the news item that they brought to this session, and what struck them about it.

For this time of sharing, it is not necessary to “go around the circle”—participants should speak if and when they feel led to do so. As facilitator, you may want to start the sharing by offering your own story. If your group is large (more than 10 people), you may want to have people break into small groups or “pair up” to share their insights—this will save time and allow for greater depth of sharing.

Focused Read of “How Does Poverty Affect Us?” and “What Does Permitting Preventable Poverty to Exist Say About Us?” from *A Statement Concerning Poverty* (10 minutes)

Please read or summarize the following:

*We're now going to transition into a time of looking closely at the portions of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' **A Statement Concerning Poverty** that we are considering today. First we'll read the two sections out loud—“How Does Poverty Affect Us?” and “What Does Permitting Preventable Poverty to Exist Say About Us?” Then we'll read Bible passages and quotes that relate to these sections. The Bible readings, in particular, contain mostly admonitions about what God prods us to do for our brothers and sisters who are among the “least of these,” but also affirmations indicating that we will be blessed for our good actions. Most of the quotes speak to the consequences of permitting widespread poverty to exist in our nation and world.*

Ask for four volunteers to read aloud each section of the Statement, the scripture references, and the quotes, then ask the group to briefly discuss the questions below. On the two pieces of flip chart paper or note board take note (or ask a volunteer to do so) of responses and questions. Briefly summarize responses on the “Emerging Insights” sheet and any questions on the “Emerging Questions” sheet.

- *A few minutes ago, you spent some time reflecting on a specific instance of poverty that you have witnessed. In light of what we have just read, how would you say this has affected you personally? What are the ways that it might affect your community, the country, or the world?*
- *Dorothy Day speaks of needing to get beyond our fears in order to be able to love and address the needs of those who are poor, homeless, hungry, and without necessary resources. St. Francis of Assisi says that taking action removes fear, greed, anxiety, and other paralyzing emotions. What is the fear about? Is it related to a sense of physical danger? Is it a fear of how it may affect us (i.e., reduction in property values when housing stock declines)? Is it the fear of the potential that you could be that person, and ignoring it causes the fear to subside?*
- *Does the failure to acknowledge or address poverty create greater problems/ effects for us and society?*
- *The Christian view reflected in **A Statement Concerning Poverty** and other faith statements is that allowing poverty to exist is morally wrong—and this does*

not seem to present the most convincing case for policy and decision makers who say that we can't afford a burgeoning public welfare system when health care, prisons, and other program costs are rising dramatically. It's also been said that budgets are moral documents that reflect the priorities of governments. What do you think about these questions? Can how we spend federal, state and local tax dollars impact poverty and welfare expenditures?

- *What do you think about the notion of economy as idol?*

Activity (10 minutes)

Read or summarize the following:

A number of years ago someone said that if all the money that is spent to wage war around the world were to be rechanneled appropriately, we would have more than sufficient funds to address all the problems of infrastructure, hunger, education, and so on, with the result that we could end poverty everywhere. This may or may not be true, but it is certainly an interesting thought. Obviously we are not privy to the kind of information available to those who prepare government budgets, and we aren't subject to political pressures from every direction, so thinking about the task from our perspective is much simpler. However, really thinking about our own priorities for how our tax dollars are to be spent can be a powerful motivator to move us to action, and can make our actions more powerful. If you had the opportunity to present your own budget, how would you set priorities and allocate funding?

Distribute blank paper and pencils or pens—one of each for each person. Ask that participants take a few minutes to jot down their priorities, how they might distribute funds to each, and why they made the choices they did.

After the chosen “end time,” ask participants to share their top priorities with the group, jotting them on a flip chart sheet or board. Is there a pattern—i.e. a sharing of priorities within the group? After you've compiled the list, read or summarize the following and allow participants several minutes to write a response:

Now that you've considered your priorities and finished your “budget,” I ask you to reflect on this question: “What one thing can I do this week to make my priorities known, and who or what should be the target of my effort?” Please take a moment to write your response on your budget, and be prepared to share briefly at our next session what you have done.

Review and Looking Ahead (5 minutes)

With participants, help to wrap up the session:

- Refer to the Emerging Questions page. Ask for volunteers who may have an interest in/be willing to explore one of these questions, with the intent of sharing with the group at the next session. Volunteers may want to refer to the “To Learn More ...” list on their handouts.
- Point out the “Preparing for Session Four” items listed on their handouts and encourage them to engage in them before the next session.

Closing Prayer

Invite participants to take a few moments to silently read over the items on the Emerging Insights page—let them know that this page reflects the fruits of the session's discussions. Offer the following prayer, one of your own, or one from another participant.

Loving and compassionate God, we thank you for the presence of your Spirit to guide and give insights to flavor our discussion today. We know that you created each and every person in your image, and you ask us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us to reflect on what this means as we continue our studies and discussions about poverty. Bless our time this coming week—help us to continue to grow, and guide our efforts that they may be fruitful and provide comfort and hope for those who are struggling. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

Session Three: How Does Poverty Affect Us? What Does Its Existence Say About Us? Participants Handout

A Litany for Uncertain Economic Times⁶

When God brought the Israelites out from Egypt into the wilderness, they complained that they had nothing to eat. But God gave them manna. Let us bring our prayers before God, knowing that they will be heard by the One who provides.

We thank you, gracious God, for all that you provide. In this time of economic uncertainty, give us gratitude for all that we have and freedom from worry about the things we lack. Lord, your faithfulness is beyond all measure.

Help us trust in you.

We pray for all people who have lost jobs and for those whose livelihoods are threatened, especially those supporting families through their labor. Lord, your faithfulness is beyond all measure.

Help us trust in you.

We pray for all people now facing futures dramatically different from the ones they planned. Help us meet what is yet to come with flexibility, grace, and a certainty that our future is in your hands. Lord, your faithfulness is beyond all measure.

Help us trust in you.

We pray for all people who hunger and especially for those around the world whose lives are at risk this day because of insufficient food. Lord, your faithfulness is beyond all measure.

Help us trust in you.

We pray for all people struggling to stay in their homes and for those who have been uprooted. Help us to remember that we are truly at home in you. Lord, your faithfulness is beyond all measure.

Help us trust in you.

In this time of challenge, deliver us from the temptation to see blaming others as a solution. Give us a spirit of generosity, understanding and love. Lord, your faithfulness is beyond all measure.

Help us trust in you.

We pray for the leaders of all nations, and especially for our president and congress, as they make decisions that affect many lives. Guide them and help them remember hungry and poor people as they consider the path ahead. Lord, your faithfulness is beyond all measure.

Help us trust in you.

Loving God, provider of manna, loaves and fish, and bread and wine.

Help us trust in you.

Open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts this day as we reflect on all who suffer physically and emotionally in a difficult economic environment. Send your Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and create a safe space to discuss how this uncertain time affects all of us and our desire and ability to respond. We pray this in the name of the Christ who arrived among us in the humblest of circumstances.

Reflection⁷

Biblical Passages

Proverbs 22:16: Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss.

Isaiah 10:1-3: Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth...

Romans 12:13: Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans 15:1-2: We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.

James 2:15-17: If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do

⁶ From Bread for the World, <http://www.bread.org/get-involved/at-church/litany2009.html>

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⁷ All Biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Other Quotes

Attributed to Dorothy Day, who lived from 1897 to 1980: “Love casts out fear, but we have to get over the fear in order to get close enough to love them.” (Dorothy Day was an American journalist, social activist, and devout Catholic convert. In the 1930s, Day worked closely with fellow activist Peter Maurin to establish the Catholic Worker movement, a nonviolent, pacifist movement that continues to combine direct aid for the poor and homeless with nonviolent direct action on their behalf.

From a UN News Service Report, March 3, 2009: “Reduced growth in 2009 will cost the 390 million people in sub-Saharan Africa living in extreme poverty around \$18 billion, or \$46 per person, warned the report by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)...The report highlighted the prospect of an increase of between 200,000 and 400,000 in infant mortality and that child malnutrition, already rising, will be one of the main drivers of higher child death rates.”⁸

The words of Paul Krugman, Economist and Nobel Laureate: “...the statistical evidence shows, unequal societies tend to be corrupt societies. When there are huge disparities in wealth, the rich have both the motive and the means to corrupt the system on their behalf...As the past six years demonstrate, such political corruption only worsens as economic inequality rises. Indeed, the gap between rich and poor doesn't just mean that few Americans share in the benefits of economic growth — it also undermines the sense of shared experience that binds us together as a nation.”⁹

From “Framing Poverty as a Social Problem”: “Economic inequality is problematic for everyone. The greater the income gap between the poorest and the wealthiest in a society, the poorer the health of

the members of that society (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006)... The impact of poverty on children has lifelong effects. Children who experience poverty have limited chances of moving out of poverty (McLoyd, 1998), and poor children are at risk of poor nutrition, homelessness, and underfunded schools (Fairchild, 1984; Gletman et al, 1996; McLoyd, 1998; Parker et al, 1988).”¹⁰

From Christian Churches Together's Statement on Poverty: “Our faith in Christ who is the truth compels us to confront the ignorance of and indifference to the scandal of widespread, persistent poverty in this rich nation. We must call this situation by its real names: moral failure, unacceptable injustice. Our faith in Christ drives us to call our churches and our society to a more urgent, united response.”¹¹

The words of Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA: When people forget that Jesus is the bread of the world, they start eating junk food—the food of the Pharisees and of Herod, the bread of moralism and of power. Too often the church forgets the true bread and is tempted by junk food. Our faith is not just about spiritual matters; it is about the transformation of the world.¹²

Affirmations

Biblical Passages

Numbers 11:9: When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

Acts 20:35: "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

2 Corinthians 9:6-13: Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man

¹⁰ Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, <http://www.spspi.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewpage&pageid=1010>.

¹¹ Statement at <http://www.christianchurchestogether.org/poverty/poverty.pdf>.

¹² From “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity,” *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999. Copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission. This text was prepared for Religion Online by John C. Purdy at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>.

⁸ Financial crisis to deepen extreme poverty, increase child mortality rates – UN report at

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30070&Cr=Financial+crisis&Cr1>.

⁹ Excerpt from “The Great Wealth Transfer,” posted November 30, 2006 in Rolling Stone at

http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/12699486/paul_krugman_on_the_great_wealth_transfer/print.

should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Other Quotes

Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, who lived circa 1181/82-1226: “Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor vexation. Where there is poverty and joy, there is neither greed nor avarice. Where there is peace and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor doubt.”

The words of Walter Brueggemann (see reference above): The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis I is a song of praise for God's generosity...The feeding of the multitudes, recorded in Mark's Gospel, is an example of the new world coming into being through God...Jesus conducted a Eucharist, a gratitude. He demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all...Jesus presents an entirely different kind of economy, one infused with the mystery of abundance and a cruciform kind of generosity...In this and in the following account of a miraculous feeding in Mark, people do not grasp, hoard, resent, or act selfishly; they watch as the juices of heaven multiply the bread of earth. Jesus reaffirms Genesis 1.

Preparing for Session Four

In *A Companion to a Statement Concerning Poverty* at http://www.pachurchesadvocacy.org/index_file/s/web_attachments/A_Companion_to_Statement_on_Poverty.pdf, read the two-page section under “What Does God Call Us to Do?”

Read the following scripture passages:

- Genesis 47:1-26
- Exodus 16:1-26
- Leviticus 25:1-42
- Deuteronomy 15:1-15
- Acts 6:1-7
- Nehemiah 5:1-13

NOTE: The exclusivity of the Hebrew people which feels strange to read about in Leviticus and Deuteronomy was eventually superseded in the prophets, and in Jesus' and Paul's teachings with universal love.

To Learn More ...

... about what other Christians have to say about poverty, please visit the following sites:

National Council of Churches:

<http://www.nccusa.org>—scroll down the home page to the lower left to the heading “Reducing Poverty” to look at resources. Also consider checking into resources under “NCC Policies,” also at the left (but higher up) for policy statements and public statements by the General Secretary.

Bread for the World: The “Get Involved at Church” page (<http://www.bread.org/get-involved/at-church/>) has many resources for study, prayer, worship, and action.

Check your denomination's website to find statements, resources, and actions concerning poverty.

Christian Churches Together:

<http://www.christianchurchestogether.org>—particularly the Statement on Poverty and the Domestic Policy Initiative.

ONE: <http://www.one.org/us>—go to the “Issues” page to look at the issues that affect global poverty.

Poverty Initiative (Union Theological Seminary): <http://www.povertyinitiative.org/>.

Session Four: What Does God Call Us To Do? Facilitator's Guide

Dear Facilitator,

This final session in the study guide invites participants to consider five kinds of responses to which God calls us concerning poverty. SUSTAINABLE LIVING, SOLIDARITY, SPEAKING UP, SHARING, SYSTEMIC CHANGE. As with each of the other sections, you should feel free to adapt as necessary to your circumstances.

In preparing for or assisting with this session, please:

- Read over the readings in the **Reflection** section aloud several times before class, so that you are very familiar with them, and can read them with clarifying voice tone and pauses.
- Read the selections listed in the “Preparing for Session Four” section at the end of the “Session Three Participant’s Handout.”
 - Make enough photocopies of the Session Four Participants Handout for all group participants.
 - Have additional copies of the Group-Building Guidelines for anyone who needs them, and post any additional guidelines set by the group.
 - Have additional copies of ***A Statement Concerning Poverty***.
- Have the following aids available at the session:
 - For discussion times: a flip chart with easel, or other blank paper with masking tape (for hanging paper), and markers, or a chalk board or white board (if used, be prepared to copy down notes at end of session).
 - For the activity: blank paper and pencils or pens for all participants.
- Just prior to the session:
 - Arrange the group seating into a circle, if possible, to enhance group participation.
 - Place one set of handouts at each seat.
 - Set up five pieces of flip chart or other blank paper— labeling them with one each of the “5 S’s” above—or print these five headings on the chalk or white board. It may be helpful to also

post the following questions as a starting point for participants when you get to this process.

In what we have read and discussed today:

- What gives me hope?
 - What bothers me?
 - What is most important to me?
 - What is one thing I could change?
 - Why does it matter to me?
- Keep track of time and help to keep group discussions consistent with the Group-Building Guidelines. You may need to adjust the time for each component in advance to fit the time available to you.

Prayer

Dear God, we approach you this day in gratitude for the abundance with which you have provided for our world. Teach us to gather according to our limited needs, and to reshape our society so that all people are enabled to do the same. Amen.

Brief Introductions (5 minutes)

Each participant briefly introduces her/himself.

Welcome and Overview (5 minutes)

Please read or summarize:

*Welcome to this continuing discussion of poverty considered from a Christian perspective, using the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' ***A Statement Concerning Poverty***.*

Last session we considered how poverty affects us.

Today we will be discussing what God calls us to do about poverty.

If there are new people joining the group this session, continue with:

Before we get started, let's take a moment to glance over the Group-Building Guidelines that we received in the first session. Does anyone need a copy? (Allow a minute or so for review.) Does anyone have any questions before we proceed? (Respond to any questions.)

During this time, anyone who has volunteered to follow up on an item listed on the last session's Emerging Questions sheet can briefly report his/her insights and findings.

After doing so, please move people into the time of Reflection.

Reflection and Discussion (20 minutes)

Encourage participants to let their minds and bodies relax and to invite the Holy Spirit to help them to gain new insight into a familiar passage of scripture. After a moment of silence, slowly read or summarize the following reflection:

There are many important Biblical themes which call God's people to respond to the needs of the poor. Many of them were mentioned in the beginning of the "Companion..." piece that you were asked to read in preparation for this session. You may refer back to them there if you wish.

However, a closer look at a familiar story in the early life of the Hebrew people will illustrate for us a few basic economic principles underlying many of these Biblical themes, but which are often overlooked.

The familiar story is the manna story. But first, we will take a close look at the context of the story. Many of us are familiar with the long saga of Joseph, filling chapters 37-47 of Genesis. We may remember that Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob. We have heard since our earliest Sunday School lessons about how God worked through a long series of events in and around the life of Joseph, including some hateful actions of his brothers, to eventually rescue the Hebrew people from a famine in Canaan. Most of us are, however, not familiar with the continuation of that saga (47:13-26), which involved Joseph systematically taking advantage of the vulnerability of the Egyptian and Canaanite people during the famine to consolidate nearly all the wealth (money, herds, lands, and people) under Pharaoh's control.

It's difficult to understand what to do with this passage, which is probably why few of us have ever heard it in Sunday School, but it is there to read for ourselves as clear as day. We may remember that God had given Joseph the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, which involved a warning that after seven years of plenty, there would follow seven years of famine. So, Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of preparing for the famine. The food gathered under direction of Joseph had been produced by the Egyptian farmers over the period of seven years of abundant harvest, with the purpose of making it available to feed the

people during the seven years of famine. Pharaoh, in appreciation to Joseph, invited his father, Jacob, and the rest of Joseph's extended family, to come settle on the best land of Egypt. They would be given food, and even jobs, caring for Pharaoh's herds.

However, in the second half of Genesis 47, we read the part of the story usually left out of the telling. Joseph orchestrated things so that the common Egyptian and Canaanite people coming to him for stored food had to first give up all their silver to get any of it. When that first supply of food was gone, they had to give up all their herds in order to receive the next supply. Finally, they had to turn over all their lands and themselves as slaves – in order to continue receiving food.

Joseph used piled up food to both save people and to enslave people. The Hebrew people, who were at first saved from famine by Joseph, were enslaved themselves by this same Egyptian empire years later when another Pharaoh took control.

QUESTION—Would Egypt have had the means to enslave such a large and flourishing population like the Hebrew people if Joseph hadn't so efficiently consolidated the wealth of the land under Pharaoh? What do you think?

[PAUSE for responses]

QUESTION—Is there something about piling up wealth which then becomes a temptation to control others?

[PAUSE for responses]

At any rate, after many years of slavery to Pharaoh's Egypt, God sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to deliver the Hebrew people. The "exodus," the story of God delivering them from slavery in Egypt, is a central event in the Hebrew people's history, identity, and faith.

Just six verses separate the Exodus story from the manna story. Those verses are simply about God providing water for the people in the wilderness.

Now, the manna story was the very first teaching in the "rule of life" (Exodus 15:25b, NEB) which Yahweh gave the Hebrew people after delivering them from slavery.

Traveling in the wilderness, the Hebrew people had no source of food. So God sent manna, a bread-like substance which fell from the sky in the night, and was available for the people to gather in the morning. There was plenty to go around, as long as the people followed God's instructions. Each household was to gather what they needed for one day, but no more. (If they gathered too much, it would get maggots and stink.) The one exception was the day before the Sabbath, in which they were to

gather a two-day supply, which would stay fresh for consumption on the Sabbath.

QUESTION—Do you think this was a simple test of obedience, or was there a reason God wanted the people to practice these particular actions?

[PAUSE...]

Daniel Erlander, in his inspiring book, **Manna & Mercy**, does a wonderful job of explaining that the manna story was one of the first lessons in God's plan for "mending the universe."¹³ Through simple words and dozens of helpful drawings, Erlander traces this theme throughout the both testaments.

Erlander refers to this period of Hebrew history as "the wilderness school,"¹⁴ in which Yahweh taught the Hebrew people a set of fundamental economic principles about how to live as free people – free from being oppressed, and free from evolving into a Pharaoh's-Egypt-kind-of-society themselves.

There were three lessons in this first chapter of the wilderness school:

"LESSON ONE: GOD GIVES MANNA FOR ALL... All food is God's. In fact, everything is God's...we can trust God for daily bread... God gives enough...

"LESSON TWO: HOARDING STINKS... Hoarding is unnecessary... The Pharaoh's-Egypt way [accumulating, piling up] brings rot, decay, and death...¹⁵

"LESSON THREE: THE GIFT OF SABBATH ...Humans do not have to work every day to receive and distribute God's manna. The extra time is a beautiful gift of God which makes it possible for humans and animals and earth to rest....God gives rest so humans can practice full time what life is all about ...

"FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD.

FRIENDSHIP WITH OTHERS

FRIENDSHIP WITH NATURE"¹⁶

(Note that the lessons came even BEFORE the gift of the law and the ten commandments.)

Note also the profound contrast between these fundamental Biblical teachings and the fundamental principles of classical economic theory—the theory currently dominating our society and most global economic interactions today. Classical economics says that there is a scarcity of resources, and that people have unlimited needs. Biblical teachings say that there is an abundance of resources, IF we are to limit our "gathering", according to our limited needs.

Erlander explains that God used the instructions about daily manna gathering to form the Hebrew people into a "Contrast Society" [13].

QUESTION—God shaped the Hebrew society to be a "Contrast Society" to what?

[PAUSE...]

In Erlander's book, "... MANNA is a word/symbol for God's way of 'justice' or 'righteousness'. A MANNA SOCIETY is a society of justice which thanks God and shares God's blessings so all have enough. Please note this Biblical meaning of 'justice' since the popular definition equates justice with 'bringing criminals to the punishment they deserve.'" [80]

After a few minutes of silence, invite participants to reflect on and respond to the following questions:

- 1) Does the manna story remind you of any other Biblical stories or passages? Which ones?
["Give us this day, our daily bread..."; feeding the 5,000; the last supper; ...]
- 2) "Can you think of any way our economic system encourages us to think about and adhere to any kind of definition of a level of personal consumption that would represent enough"?
[Actually, our economic system seems to completely ignore the concept of "enough."]
- 3) Do you recall whether Israel ever acted like a Pharaoh's-Egypt kind of society?
- 4) Do you see any similarities between our own nation or any other nation and Pharaoh's Egypt?

Small Group Discussion (30 minutes)

Have the group divide into five groups. Each group will choose or be assigned one of the sections on the "5 S's" on the Participants Handout to read and discuss. Have each group list on one of the flip chart pages some specific things that could be done under their theme.

¹³ Erlander, Daniel, Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Universe (Mercer Island, WA: The Order of Saints Martin and Teresa, 1992) 3.

¹⁴ Ibid. 6.

¹⁵ However, it may be useful to discuss the difference between hoarding and responsible saving.

¹⁶ Ibid. 7-9.

After about 10 minutes, bring the groups back to report on their discussion, and to add additional ideas from the larger group to their flip chart page. Each group will have up to 5 minutes for their sharing.

- 1) Explain what you see happening in the cartoon in the SUSTAINABLE LIVING section of the Participant's Handout, relating it to our current world.
- 2) What organizations that educate and organize people for action on behalf of poor people near or far have been especially meaningful for you, and how so?

Have four people read the four readings in the **Affirmations** section.

Ask which of the action ideas seemed like something they would like to begin taking action on.

Closing Prayer

Read "A Franciscan Benediction" below.

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done.

From Tearfund
www.tearfund.org

Additional questions to choose from for discussion, if there is time:

- 3) There are a number of "pitfalls" mentioned in the section of the "Companion..." piece. Read one of the pitfalls, and tell how you would respond to someone getting stuck there.
- 4) At the end of the "Systemic Change" section of the Participant's Handout, Thomas Thangaraj speaks about needing dialogue among the world's peoples before systemic change is initiated. How and where could or does such dialog happen?
- 5) Professor Thangaraj talks about helping people sense an assurance of forgiveness. What does he say forgiveness has to do with systemic change? Do you agree with him about this? Why or why not?
- 6) Can you think of some ways in which the healing of the poor and the healing of the rich are bound up together?
- 7) Can you describe any international trade policies or practices which people of nations in the global South feel are doing them more harm than good?

Session Four: What Does God Call Us To Do? Participants Handout

Five Responses to Poverty (The “5 S’s”)

Sustainable living
Solidarity
Speaking up
Sharing
Systemic change

Sustainable Living

Sustainable living, or “voluntary simplicity,” as it is often referred to today, is not about legalism. It’s not about romanticizing poverty, nor about buying the cheapest brands. It is about learning to live the manna way – thankfully gathering what we need, and leaving the rest for others.

Doris Janzen Longacre, in her book, *Living More with Less*, describes simple living as a “pilgrimage,” a “treasure hunt”.¹⁷ It’s about “rediscovering what is good and true...” It’s about “beauty, healing, hope...about getting more, not less.”¹⁸ It’s not simple, but “it can be joyful, rich, and creative.”¹⁹ *It’s about a journey of learning how to be conscientious consumers, shaping our consumption habits and lives according to five “life standards.” These are: “Do Justice. Learn from the World Community. Nurture People. Cherish the Natural Order. Nonconform Freely”*²⁰ (emphasis added).

Some would argue that, for various reasons, the journey toward living simply is best embarked upon together with some kind of support group. A “simple living circle”, or “sustainability circle”, would meet periodically (weekly, monthly, bimonthly, for example), to share joys and challenges. Each participant or household would start where they are, and move at their own speed, toward stabilizing their level of consumption around some understanding of “enough.” The idea would be to be part of a group of pilgrims on the journey toward more sustainable living; to have people with whom to share simple

living joys, challenges, ideas, contacts, experiments, work projects, celebrations, family recreation time, meals, etc. (It’s much easier to teach these values to children if there are other families working together on the same things. Doing any of these in community makes most goals more achievable, and more joyful than attempting any of them as individuals or even as households.)

At times, the group may want to focus on a book or series of some kind. Longacre’s book would be an excellent focus of study (there is a separate study guide available)²¹, as would many resources from Alternatives for Simple Living, an organization whose mission is “equipping the people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly and create meaningful celebrations.”

As the group gets to know each other better, they could choose ways of becoming involved in at least one or two of the other “5 S’s” below.

Solidarity²²

While the term, “solidarity” may not be so familiar with some folks, we are referring here to some very familiar concepts.

In Romans 12, the Apostle Paul writes about how Christians, though different from each other, need one another in the same way as do the various parts of the human body. Each is important.

Menno Simons said, “It is not customary that an intelligent person clothes and cares for one part of his body and leaves the rest naked. The intelligent person is solicitous for all his members. Thus it should be with those who are the Lord’s church and body. All those born of God are called into one body and are prepared by love to serve their neighbors.”²³

¹⁷ Longacre, Doris Janzen, *Living More with Less* (Scottsdale, PA, Herald Press, 1980) 6.

¹⁸ Ibid. 15.

¹⁹ Ibid. 17.

²⁰ Ibid. 21.

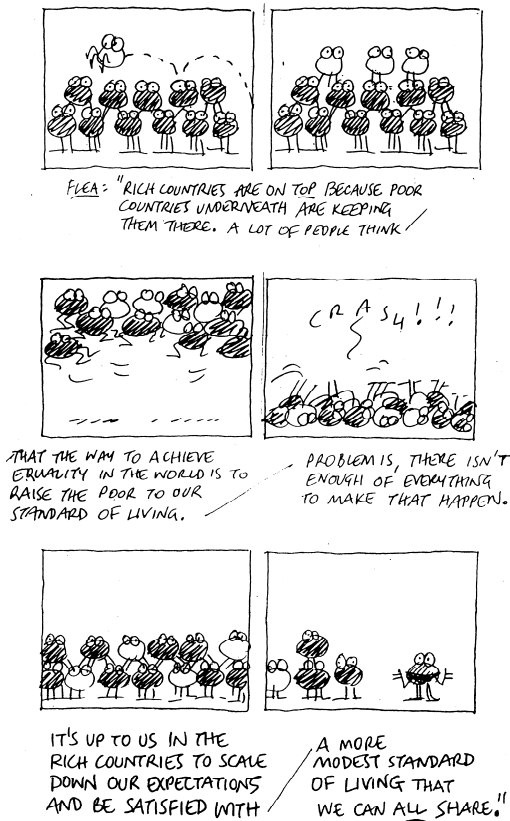
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²¹ Friesen, Delores Histan, *Living More with Less Study/Action Guide* (Sioux City, IA: Alternatives for Simple Living, 1999)

²² Unless otherwise noted, words in italics are reprinted from *A Companion to “A Statement Concerning Poverty.”*

²³ Longacre 14.

**LIMITS TO GROWTH . . .
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**



"Reprinted with permission from *A Discussion and Study Guide*, for *The Mouse's Tale* and *The Richest Dog in the World* video set, produced in 1990 by Australian Catholic Relief (Caritas Australia), p.40. www.caritas.org"

We must challenge individualism and speak to the concept of community as embodied in the early church, where "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45).

Responding to poverty near and far involves our seeing ourselves as being part of a larger group, whether it be the Body of Christ in the world, a local congregation, a neighborhood, a nation, or the whole human family. Though we have our differences, at some level, we are all in this together, and therefore should support one another.

Without our realizing it, some common choices in our daily lives can be compared to that of a person paddling a rowboat around a lake with her enemy. She is seen drilling a hole in the floor of the back end of the boat behind her enemy's seat. When

questioned about this risky action, she says, "Oh, don't worry about me. My seat is the front seat!"

We must build connections in our congregations and communities that lead to better understanding for everyone—providing a safe space for people who are struggling to tell their stories is one way of doing this.

Looking for ways to listen to one another—really listen—and to build relationships across economic lines can go a long way toward seeing the world through their eyes. Congregations could seek ways to develop "sister congregation" relationships with one another across economic lines. Joint work projects can also break barriers and build friendships in marvelous ways.

Individuals or families may even choose to forego a more typical vacation, and instead participate in a work camp or similar experience, in which they would live with or at least interact significantly with common folks in impoverished areas. Such experiences, if done with appropriate leadership and open spirits, can plant seeds within us for life-changing choices back home.

An excellent way of continuing to grow in understanding and connection with people struggling with poverty is to join an organization. There are hundreds to choose from whose mission it is to educate and organize people to stand with the poor, as well as with people actively working for justice on their behalf. Sojourners, Jubilee USA Network, and Witness for Peace, are several which come to mind immediately.

Speaking Up

On a personal level, we can communicate gently but directly with our family, friends, and co-workers when they express positions that we believe run counter to God's call to do justice and love our neighbors. We can remind them of Jesus' healing acts, very often directed at those who were most vulnerable, and note that his actions empowered them. We can remind them of God's call to love our neighbors—all neighbors—by suggesting that "it's not loving" to speak or act in ways that are harmful to our neighbors.

Writing letters to corporate or government officials, letters to the editor of local newspapers, or articles in congregational or denominational publications can help raise awareness with others when they see that

we are willing to stand up and be counted on issues that affect the poor among us.

And we must speak truth to power. We must reframe the discussion concerning why people are poor, because it is often government and other institutions that have taken actions and implemented policies that have placed many of our brothers and sisters into vulnerable positions.

Sharing

We must engage in acts of charity that congregations do so well. Sharing our time in service projects, and our money, especially through agencies working closely and respectfully alongside the poor, are good ways to share. It is important to remember that "money can be a two edged sword. Some aid can actually be harmful to the recipients. Quite a lot of it does more good to the donors than to those who receive it. All the same, well-spent money is indispensable in helping the poor to overcome poverty.... A rule of thumb is: will the money be used in helping the poor to change the things that are making them poor?.... Other questions you could ask about aid programs... [include]: Whose project is it? Is it the donor agency's, or does it originate with the people involved?.... Does the project reinforce dependence on outside sources of material and skills, or does it use local ingenuity, local labour and local material, and can it be maintained with local skills?"²⁴

Systemic Change

There is some confusion in the faith community about how we can best help our most vulnerable neighbors. While congregations often seem more comfortable with acts of charity, in this complex age, one way we love our neighbors is to help shape the laws and policies that define how we live together in God's world.²⁵

We must work to remove roadblocks that prevent our neighbors from reaching their God-given potential. We must provide constant reminders about the "invisible backpack" of hidden privileges (see Session One) that perpetuates a caste system in our society. We must call for policies and actions that put an end to discriminatory practices or that punish vulnerable persons who are affected by circumstances that are beyond their control.

In addition, we all have a responsibility to work for the redesign of community systems when they aren't working. Two scriptural passages provide examples that we might bear in mind. Acts 6 contains a description of a community meeting to address the neglect of Hellenist widows in distribution of food. In Nehemiah 5, we read about the formation of an assembly to challenge the nobles and officials who were demanding too much in taxes from the people, causing them to lose their land and become slaves in order to get grain during a famine.

When considering redesigning systems, there are some key things to keep in mind. Isaiah 58:6 says, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke." But it is often difficult for people who are not poor to truly understand, or to even begin to comprehend what are the "bonds of injustice", or the "yokes" that are binding the poor. Sometimes, when people who are not poor try to improve the situation of the poor on their own, they may miss the mark, or possibly even make things worse. The best way to overcome this obstacle is to begin by sitting down with people who are poor, and learn to listen carefully to their experience with the "yokes" that are binding them. Here following are some related reflections from people of the Global South.

In God's Politics, Jim Wallis quotes representatives from "The Micah Network," several hundred Christian relief and development organizational leaders, meeting in the fall of 2003, after failed World Trade Organization talks in Cancun, Mexico. "No longer willing to just 'pull the bodies out of the river,' these evangelical Christians, mostly from the southern hemisphere, were ready to 'go upstream and find out what or who was throwing them in!'"²⁶

Thomas Thangaraj, Professor of World Christianity, Emory University, says, "I teach a course on the images of Christ around the world. So we were discussing the image of Christ as Liberator—Liberator from oppression, from want, from poverty. Immediately the question came, 'What shall we do?' All the students felt that they were rich.... So what shall the rich do?.... With regard to systemic change, it is very difficult to give answers right away because it

²⁴ [A Discussion and Study Guide](#) for "The Mouse's Tale" and "The Richest Dog in the World" video set, produced in 1990 by Australian Catholic Relief (Caritas Australia) 44-45.

²⁵ www.pcusa.org/washington

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²⁶ Wallis, Jim, [God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It](#) (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005) 433.

requires a lot more conversation and cooperation between peoples.

Professor Thangaraj continues, “What I have been doing...is to help people move from the paralysis of guilt...the kind of problem we are talking about is not an individual problem. It is a problem which is linked to the whole community and the way we are organized in the world...socially, politically, economically—that’s what determines unfair sharing of resources. So that means we cannot be simply changing individuals. We need to work together so that we can change the way we are organized in the world. But for that kind of activity we need individuals who feel forgiven of their participation. So in that sense I am really offering as a person from outside the US a certain assurance of forgiveness to people. So that will remove them from the guilt, but move them towards a structural organizational change... so to act they need forgiveness.”²⁷

If the Gospel is good news to the poor, what about the rich? Could it be that the Gospel is also good news to the rich, because the same things that bind the poor, also bind the rich, though in different ways?

For example, Raj Patel, in his latest book, *Stuffed and Starved*, discusses the paradox of our global food system, in which one billion people are sick because they are overweight, while 850 million others are starving.

Charles Bowden, author of *Murder City*, discusses how Juarez, Mexico, had been the “poster child for free trade for decades,” but has since become one of the most violent cities in the world. He explains that this has happened because of the rapid changes brought on by globalization. Bowden continues, “The United States is never going to be secure by living next to a country that’s starving to death. Do you think you can maintain your house in your neighborhood, and have people starving to death next door? Well, you can’t.”²⁸

²⁷ “Break Forth Into Joy,” video produced by Alternatives for Simple Living, www.simpleliving.org.

²⁸

<http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/03/22/pm-murder-city-q/#http://www.yahoo.com/>

Leviticus 25, which is a chapter describing the Sabbath and Jubilee principles of periodically redistributing wealth, explains that one of the reasons for following this way of living is “that you may live on the land securely” (verse 18). Much of society today is characterized more by fear than security.

Perhaps the way out of bondage for all of us is for the rich and the poor to join hands and work together to break the bonds of injustice. Then we will both be free – free of fear, free of excess, and free of want. We’ve seen glimpses of joining hands for change in the recently passed health care reform legislation.

Lilla Watson, an Australian Aboriginal woman, has said, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Affirmations

- 1) “There is a groundswell of alternative consciousness around economics that one can see in the many small-scale experiments here and around the world with more just and environmentally sustainable business practices, technologies, land uses, financial systems, trade patterns, consumption habits, and income distribution schemes. ...this is a *good* time for the church to rediscover the radically different vision of economic and social practice that lies right at the heart of her scriptures.”²⁹
- 2) “You won’t overcome world poverty single handed. Whatever you do, get together with some friends to do it. It will work better that way. World poverty is a deadly serious problem. But if you go around with a long face and take yourself too seriously, you may end up being part of the problem instead of part of the solution.”³⁰
- 3) The primary question may not be whether choosing **SUSTAINABLE LIVING, SOLIDARITY, SPEAKING UP, SHARING, OR SYSTEMIC CHANGE** will bring about the end of poverty in our lifetime (although what the Spirit of God can and has done through a few committed people far outreaches our expectations and often even

²⁹ Myers, Ched, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington: The Church of the Savior, 2001) 8.

³⁰ “The Mouse’s Tale” 45.

our imaginations). The primary question is, “On which side do I want my life to count?” Where do I want to invest the time, resources, skills, and abilities which God has entrusted to me? Jesus asks us to choose whom we will serve, God or mammon. The Deuteronomist also asks us for a choice, “I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life....” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

To Learn More....

...about responding to poverty, please visit the following sites:

Sojourners: <http://www.sojo.net/>—Sojourners’ mission is to articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world.

Alternatives for Simple Living: (800) 821-6153; <http://www.simpleliving.org>—Equipping people of faith to challenge consumerism, live justly, and create meaningful celebrations. Excellent (downloadable) resource guide.

Jubilee USA Network: <http://www.jubileeusa.org/>—Joining hands to break the chains of debt.

Witness for Peace: <http://www.witnessforpeace.org/>—Transforming People. Transforming Policy. Supporting Peace, Justice, and Sustainable Economies in the Americas.

God's Kingdom is for Everyone: Discussing Poverty in a Christian Framework Appendix

Group-Building Guidelines³¹

For creating an open, community-enhancing group during the series, we suggest the following guidelines:

- View everyone as a participant (there are no leaders). While one person will help to facilitate each session's flow, neither this person nor anyone else should view him/herself as the session's "leader." Each of us has a unique voice that can help to reveal unforeseen wisdom. We can create an environment of respect and mindfulness in which every person's voice can shine forth.
- Respond as equals. As we all bear the image of our God who loves us equally, we can commit to valuing each other as equals and we can ensure that our responses to one another reflect this commitment.
- Be authentic. In our day-to-day lives, we often wear many masks. This group time is a blessed opportunity, in the company of our Christian sisters and brothers, to be more fully the people God is creating us to be.
- Bring our whole selves to the conversation. While our intellectual gifts are very valuable, we can use this opportunity to bring our emotions, spiritual and experiential insights, and imaginations to the conversation as well.
- View conversations as barn-raising instead of battle-making. Consider the following as we strive to create a collaborative environment:
 - Really listen to others—avoid becoming distracted and the temptation to formulate a response as someone is speaking.
 - Respond with support—avoid the highly destructive temptation to attack, dismiss, or denigrate others.
 - State what you mean without persuasion—enjoy the freedom that comes from not having to prove that you're right.
 - Remember to use your own voice, don't play devil's advocate—the latter erodes authenticity and trust.
- Question conventional ideas and seek alternative explanations and views. Because human communities and all of God's creation groan under the weighty implications of traditional worldviews, this is a time to bring critical, biblical thought to these views.
- Discover wisdom through stories. Jesus' parables offer some of the greatest kernels of wisdom in our faith. What are your life parables and what may God be trying to say through them? When we share our life stories, we open ourselves to one another as holy, living texts.

³¹ These guidelines, printed in "Opening the Letter: *A Congregational Guide to God's Earth Is Sacred?*" (http://ncccojustice.org/network/downloads/OpenLetter_final.pdf), are inspired by *The Simplicity Circle* by Cecile Andrews (published by HarperCollins, 1994) and *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, edited by Michael Schut (published by Earth Ministry and Living the Good News Press, 1999) p. 229.

Suggestions for Retreats

Using these materials in a retreat setting can be very meaningful. Here are some suggestions for making simple modifications to these materials for retreats:

- Allow for significant breaks of time between sessions—including ones that would allow participants time to be outside. For example, your group may want to engage in Session One in the morning, take a hike in early afternoon, then engage in Session Two in the later afternoon.
- Make sure that your group has all of the materials (e.g., photocopied handouts) needed for every session, prior to Session One.
- Because participants will be asked to read materials from the web, please consider:
 - making arrangements with your retreat location (if it has Internet access) for participants to explore materials on the web; and/or
 - download copies of the materials and make hard copies available or arrange to project the materials on a screen.
- Please bring a variety of current magazines and newspapers from which participants can clip items related to discussions.
- During Session Three, participants will be asked to make a list of their priorities and how they would distribute funding to them using our tax dollars through the federal budget. They are then to ask themselves the question: “What one thing can I do this week to make my priorities known, and who or what should be the target of my effort?” Modify the question (e.g., “What one thing can I do after this retreat...”).
- At the end of Session Four, participants will be asked to consider action ideas and name actions they might take on as their own. They should be asked to pull out what they wrote in Section Three to consider how their named priorities fit with the actions they named, and consider again—for both questions—what they will do after the retreat.

Evaluating “God’s Kingdom is for Everyone”

After you have completed sharing “God’s Kingdom is for Everyone” with your group, we invite you to help us to improve this study tool by answering a few questions.

1. Resource materials were provided both for facilitators and for participants. Were these materials understandable for the users? Did they seem appropriate for reflection and discussion purposes?
2. How was participation for your group? Do you believe this was more a factor of the group itself or do you believe the materials encouraged lively participation?
3. Were there specific sections, resources, or questions that elicited better response than others? Were there some specific sections, resources, or questions that did not work for your group?
4. This is obviously subjective, but—Do you believe that participation in this study experience changed attitudes of any of the participants, and if so, how do you believe it affected them?
5. Are there additional resources or information that would have been helpful as you participated in this study?
6. Are there additional resources or information that you would recommend for the study guide?
7. Would you be willing to share the “Emerging Questions” and “Emerging Insights” that came out of your discussions? This would be helpful information for future users in their preparations to facilitate sessions.
8. Are there worship materials that you are aware of or that you or your congregation have used related to poverty that you would be willing to share? The purpose is to develop a worship resource to aid congregations that wish to focus on poverty in worship as well as study. Here are some of the types of worship materials we are seeking:
 - Call to Worship
 - Opening Prayer
 - Laments/Confessions
 - Affirmations
 - Miscellaneous Prayers (including prayers of commitment)
 - Litanies/Responsive Prayers (including prayers of commitment)
 - Sermon Resources/Full Sermons
 - Possible Hymns

The preferred method for sharing worship materials is to send them in an attachment to an e-mail message, or to incorporate them into a message. Please provide appropriate attribution if desired—who prepared it, when it was used, any other information that you feel is appropriate, and how a user might provide recognition when they use the resource.

9. Have you adapted this guide for use with children/youth? If so, would you be willing to share changes, resources, anything that might be helpful for others who might want to use it in this way?



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

A Statement Concerning Poverty

Christian Churches Together's "Statement on Poverty" begins with the following words:

As Christian leaders in the wealthiest society on earth, we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The Gospel and our ethical principles place our service to the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.

This is a fitting statement that speaks to the Pennsylvania Council of Churches' position—that we, as a community of faith, have a unique responsibility to bear witness to the Gospel, seeking to discern what God wants and to act as God's agents in the world to overcome poverty in God's world.

What We Believe

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches believes that we are called by God to urge our churches and nation to strengthen and expand efforts to address the scandal of widespread poverty in the United States and around the world. The Gospel and our ethical principles place our service to the poor and vulnerable and our work for justice at the center of Christian life and witness.³²

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

Matthew 25:40

We believe the fundamental question for Christians is, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus addresses this question in Matthew 25, when he says, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me." Jesus' words strike at the very core of God's call to us as Christians—to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Presumably, loving our neighbors as ourselves means treating them as we would like to be treated—with dignity and respect. This simple "Golden Rule" guides us to work to ensure that all persons have what they need to live lives of dignity, safely and with access to adequate food, shelter, health care, education, and living wage employment.

Treating others with dignity and respect includes having an acute awareness that all members of society do not have the same privileges or opportunities due to circumstances beyond their control, including, but not limited to, race and position. Once we understand that all do not have the same privileges, we have a responsibility to lessen or end the consolidation of power in the hands of those with privilege. See "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack"³³ by Peggy McIntosh.

What is Poverty?

We define poverty as a continual, chronic condition of want for (1) basic necessities, resources, and opportunities, (2) connection to the larger society, and (3) power to affect positive change, which is often exacerbated by social stigmas, isolation, and caste status.

We witness a reluctance to accept individual or societal responsibility for any part of this problem. We also understand that greed leads us to hoard more than our "share" of resources, driven by the fear that there isn't enough to go around.³⁴ Often we even place blame on persons living in poverty in the belief that our capitalist system will always work to lift persons out of poverty if they work hard enough. We acknowledge that this system can and does lift some out of poverty, but we also stress that this isn't always the case. A free market system does, in fact, require rules to avoid producing extreme winners and losers.

Poverty is not a life-style choice. We believe that most people, given favorable circumstances and the right resources, would choose the path that leads to a comfortable existence and respect within our society.

³² Wording borrowed from Christian Churches Together's Statement on Poverty at <http://www.christianchurchestogether.org/poverty/poverty.pdf>.

³³ <http://www.uakron.edu/centers/conflict/docs/whitepriv.pdf>

³⁴ This speaks to the notion of "poverty of spirit," and it is this type of poverty that we believe contributes to poverty as defined above.

Who Are the Poor? Who Lives in Poverty?

We all live in poverty, to some degree. Even if we are not poor, many of us live in a state of spiritual poverty. We impoverish ourselves by focusing on the all-too-human concepts of value or wealth.³⁵

That being said, there are poor among us, often invisible. They include inner city dwellers (predominantly minorities), persons in rural areas, those with addictions/mental illness, the elderly, women (primarily single parents) and children, and those who were previously middle class who were overcome by health care expenses, a poor economy, or some other combination of factors.

How Does Poverty Affect Us?

Many in our society tend to view poverty as a problem only for those who are poor, but we believe that poverty is EVERYONE's problem—as inequity increases, the impacts affect all of us.³⁶

Poverty is EVERYONE's problem—as inequity increases, the impacts affect all of us.

Sometimes we avoid or deny the existence of poverty altogether by simply claiming that “we don't have poor people,” or that it is only a problem for less developed countries around the world. Many view the ups and downs of the economy and think poverty is only temporary. For those who live it, however, poverty/living without resources is very real, and our denial exacerbates the isolation that they experience.³⁷

What Does Permitting Preventable Poverty to Exist Say About Us?

Failure to address poverty in our country and around the world suggests that our priorities are not God's priorities, but those driven by human greed. We have been willing to spend billions of dollars bailing out businesses that have engaged in risky practices and providing welfare to businesses that don't need it. On the other hand, we have been unwilling to spend, by comparison, very modest amounts for activities and assistance that help those who are poor. For example, for many years we have failed to provide adequate funding for education that would contribute to lifting people out of poverty. We hesitate to provide for adequate nutrition that would help children to stay well and to be better students, able to stay focused because they aren't hungry.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:8

We pay almost any cost to maintain the vision that the economy works and to keep it going, and as a result we claim we can't afford to help others. This viewing of the economy as a god is a form of idolatry, and failure to address the needs of the most vulnerable among us is morally bankrupt.

What Does God Call Us to Do?

We believe that widespread and persistent poverty challenges us to action. The painful truth is that about thirty-seven million people in our country live below the poverty line. Tragically, 18 percent of all our children struggle in poverty. The sad reality is that millions in our nation work hard and still cannot escape poverty. We lament this ongoing poverty.³⁸

We believe that what Jesus called the two greatest commandments—love God and love neighbor—require us to take action to ensure respect for the dignity of every person, and to promote the common good of society.³⁹

³⁵ For further discussion, see “A Theological Discussion Concerning Economics” in “A Companion to ‘A Statement Concerning Poverty.’”

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ For further discussion, see “How Does Poverty Affect Us” in “A Companion to ‘A Statement Concerning Poverty.’”

³⁸ Borrowed from Christian Churches United's Statement on Poverty.

³⁹ For further discussion on scriptural themes, as well as more specific ways of taking action and our responsibility for doing so, see “What Does God Call Us to Do?” in “A Companion to ‘A Statement Concerning Poverty.’”

Conclusion

As Christians, we acknowledge the scourge of poverty that damages our society and that is counter to what we believe about responsibility for our neighbors. We believe that it is our duty to speak truth to power and to act to overcome poverty wherever it exists. It is our intention to do so at every opportunity, and we will seek to work with all who desire to do the same. We understand that overcoming poverty will require greater commitment by individuals and institutions at every level, along with better choices by individuals and better policies within our society.

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches and the broader faith community do not do this work for personal gain. We have no partisan political agenda. Our members cover the political spectrum, but together we believe that our faith demands that we act, and that we seek solutions that transcend political divisions.

For all the reasons embodied in this statement, we pledge to strengthen our efforts to educate and improve understanding, foster better communications, and work to end the scandal of widespread poverty in the richest nation on earth.

Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power, and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack"



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

A Companion to A Statement Concerning Poverty

In “A Statement Concerning Poverty,” we provided a broad statement describing what the Pennsylvania Council of Churches understands and believes about poverty and that we have a responsibility as Christians to speak truth to power and to act to overcome poverty wherever it exists.

We believe that further discussion is warranted concerning some of the issues presented in that statement, thus, this companion document.

A Theological Discussion Concerning Economies

In the Statement, we suggested that many of us live in a state of spiritual poverty, and that we impoverish ourselves by focusing on the all-too-human concepts of value or wealth.

We impoverish ourselves by focusing on the all-too-human concepts of value or wealth.

We typically think of value or wealth in monetary terms, so when we calculate wealth, there are many intangible factors we don't address. It may help, instead, to consider that there are really three economies that might be described as follows:

- God's economy—the natural world
- The industrial/service economy (that which produces goods and services)
- The financial economy (that which focuses on investments that do not produce goods and services)

We believe that God's vision of the world focuses on creation, the natural world—people, the environment, the earth, the universe, and we are called in Genesis 2 to be stewards, to “till and keep” the garden. We also acknowledge the need for the industrial/service economy to provide what we need for living in our modern society, with some reasonable expectation of profits for those who produce goods and services.

It is the financial economy that has permitted the dramatic expansion of wealth for some, and created the conditions that have reduced others to abject poverty, widening the gap between haves and have-nots. There are biblical admonitions against profiting from this kind of activity:

Lev. 25:37: You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance...

Lev. 25:10-18: **10** And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and **you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.** It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. **11** That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. **12** For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. **13** In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. **14** When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, **you shall not cheat one another.** **15** When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. **16** If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. **17** **You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.** **18** **You shall observe my statutes and faithfully keep my ordinances, so that you may live on the land securely.**

God's economy and the industrial/service economy are each tangible, and when we focus on the fair and orderly conduct of these two economies, people and creation are able to thrive. When we focus on the financial economy, whose sole purpose is the creation of financial wealth, as evidenced by the proliferation of abusive mortgage practices, derivatives, credit default swaps, and the like, we find that the result is big winners and big losers. In reality, we all lose when some of our brothers and sisters are left to suffer in abject poverty.

How Does Poverty Affect Us?

Sometimes we avoid or deny the existence of poverty altogether by simply claiming that “we don’t have poor people,” or that it is only a problem for less developed countries around the world. Many view the ups and downs of the economy and think poverty is only temporary. For those who live it, however, poverty/living without resources is very real, and our denial exacerbates the isolation that they experience.

Even if we do not live in poverty, our lives are touched by the fact that poverty exists. What are some of the ways that we are affected?

- Communities as a whole are affected, though some more so than others. It impacts the quality of life for all. Incidences of violence and crime are often greater, and poverty threatens the health and safety of those who live in substandard housing, without utilities, and without adequate nutrition.
- Congregations are affected when contributions decline, impacting their ability to help members and neighbors—though in difficult times, there is sometimes an impulse to dig deeper.
- Providers of services face an ever-increasing need for service-oriented activities.
- Child poverty is deepening nationally and globally, and children living in poverty are at risk for irreversible cognitive damage caused by malnutrition, disease, and other factors.
- 200,000-400,000 children and infants die because of malnutrition⁴⁰—threatening the future of some societies.

Ignoring the impacts of poverty in our society doesn’t make it go away, and it is likely that they will only get worse.

What Does God Call Us to Do?

Some of the most important themes that permeate scripture speak to God’s call concerning what we must do with regard to poverty. These themes include **justice** and **righteousness**...responsibility for **protecting the vulnerable**...**love** of neighbor... **hospitality**... the **evils of predatory activity**...**jubilee** (debt forgiveness/ability to start anew)...the **special responsibility of the powerful**...and the **incarnation—with Jesus identifying with the poor**.

<p>Do to others as you would have them do to you.</p>
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While scripture is replete with passages that spell out specific directives from God, there is a handful of examples that quickly summarize what we believe to be God’s broad call concerning poverty. In the Hebrew scriptures, the prophet Micah speaks with great clarity and simplicity. His words speak volumes: “...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” In the New Testament,

Matthew and Luke share Jesus’ words, widely known as the Golden Rule—“do to others as you would have them do to you.” Jesus speaks more directly about what this means for our most vulnerable brothers and sisters in Matthew 25 when he says, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.”

How do we “do justice” and “do to others as you would have them do to you”? First, it is useful to be aware of the pitfalls—those things direct us away from what God calls us to do (see “What Are the Pitfalls?” below). Then, it helps to put oneself on the receiving end of the actions of others in considering our own actions. How would we want to be treated? It is highly likely that most of us would want to be treated justly. We desire to be loved, respected, treated fairly, and welcomed in our communities, congregations, and by government, businesses, and organizations. And we would like for those more powerful than us to be compassionate and act in the interest of the common good.

Perhaps the best and easiest to recall approach to responding to God’s call is to employ what may be referred to as “The 5 S’s”—Sustainable Living, Solidarity, Speaking Up, Sharing, and Systemic Change.

Sustainable Living. Sustainable living, or “voluntary simplicity,” has to do with living the “manna way”—taking only what we need, and leaving the rest for others. According to Doris Janzen Longacre, in *Living More with Less*, it’s about a journey of learning how to be conscientious consumers, shaping our consumption habits and lives according to five “life standards.” These are: “Do Justice. Learn from the World Community. Nurture People. Cherish the Natural Order. Nonconform Freely.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=30070&Cr=Financial+crisis&Cr1>

⁴¹ Longacre, Doris Janzen, *Living More with Less*. (Scottsdale, PA, Herald Press, 1980) 6.

Solidarity. Responding to poverty has to do with seeing ourselves as being part of a larger group. We must challenge individualism and speak to the concept of community as embodied in the early church, where “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).⁴² Though we have our differences, at some level, we are all part of one human family and all of creation, and therefore we must support one another. We must build connections in our congregations and communities that lead to better understanding for everyone—providing a safe space for people who are struggling to tell their stories is one way of doing this.

That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

Leviticus 25:11-12

Speaking Up. On a personal level, we can communicate gently but directly with our neighbors when they express positions that we believe run counter to God’s call to do justice and love our neighbors. We can remind them of Jesus’ healing acts, very often directed at those who were most vulnerable, and note that his actions empowered them—there are several examples in the gospels where, after healing someone, Jesus says, “Your faith has made you well.” We can remind them of God’s call to love our neighbors—all neighbors—by suggesting that “it’s not loving” to speak or act in ways that are harmful to our neighbors. Also, we must speak truth to power. We must reframe the discussion concerning why people are poor, because it is often government and other institutions that have taken actions and implemented policies that have placed many of our brothers and sisters into vulnerable positions.

Sharing. We must engage in the acts of charity that congregations do so well, sharing our time in service to the community, and our money through the church and agencies that provide assistance to those who are struggling.

Systemic Change. There is some confusion in the faith community about how we can best help our most vulnerable neighbors. While congregations often seem more comfortable with acts of charity, “In this complex age, one way we love our neighbors is to help shape the laws and policies that define how we live together in God’s world.”⁴³ We must work to remove roadblocks that prevent our neighbors from reaching their God-given potential. We must provide constant reminders about the “invisible backpack” of hidden privileges that perpetuates a caste system in our society. We must call for policies and actions that put an end to discriminatory practices or that punish vulnerable persons who are affected by circumstances that are beyond their control. In addition, we all have a responsibility to work for the redesign of community systems when they aren’t working. Two scriptural examples provide examples that we might bear in mind. Acts 6 contains a description of a community meeting to address the neglect of Hellenist widows in distribution of food. In Nehemiah 5, we read about the formation of an assembly to challenge the nobles and officials who were demanding too much in taxes from the people, causing them to lose their land and become slaves in order to get grain during a famine.

What Are the Pitfalls?

At every level, there are issues that cloud our understanding and get in the way of constructive dialogue:

- “Facts” can cut both ways. It’s easy to question them, and sometimes they can be inconvenient.
- Many assume “that’s just the way it is.” (John 12:8—“the poor will always be with you.”) Is this cause to give up, or is it a challenge? The concept of “jubilee” (Deut. 15) calls for periodic forgiveness of debt, and for us to meet need whenever necessary, so that the poor are not left to languish and suffer.
- Negative experiences with poor persons can affect the way we view and respond to them, but we have a responsibility to foster the understanding that one negative experience should not color our responses to all.
- There is a perception that some are more deserving than others—that some are just lazy and don’t try to help themselves. This is not God’s view.
- Some believe that our economic system—the markets—will take care of any problems. There is significant evidence to the contrary given the growing number of poor persons.
- We have such busy lives that feeling responsibility to do one more thing feels overwhelming, or we feel powerless to help. We need to provide ongoing reminders of our responsibility to love our neighbors and care for the “least of these,” and that “for God all things are possible” (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

⁴² There are other similar references. In Acts 11:27-30, the disciples determined that they would send relief to those expected to suffer the impacts of famine. In Romans 15:26 Paul speaks of sharing resources with the poor in Jerusalem, and notes in 2 Corinthians 8 and Philippians 4 where resources were shared to help in his ministry.

⁴³ www.pcusa.org/washington

Charity vs. Advocacy

Dr. Heidi Hadsell,⁴⁴ President of Hartford Seminary, suggests that congregations tend to focus on individual acts, or charity, rather than direct advocacy. Assisting in soup kitchens, or building for Habitat for Humanity, or sending contributions or traveling to damaged communities to help victims of natural disasters represent concrete ways of “loving our neighbor.” She says, “We admire acts of charity and compassion not simply because of the good they do, but also because we see such acts as a necessary and natural fruit of Christian conviction.” We are doing things that have visible results. However, she also suggests that when providing direct assistance to those in need crosses a line to include what might be characterized as advocacy, many religious folks get nervous. She says:

Don't you think we should go upstream, find out why this is happening, and put an end to it?

It is almost as if we understand God to be present in small scale, personal, acts of love towards the other, but absent or obscured in larger scale social acts, acts which may be beneficial for many unknown others for many years to come.

Perhaps the modern parable concerning people of faith strolling and talking along a riverside might be most instructive. After several days of pulling out persons who were in distress, floating down the river, one asked, “Don't you think we should go upstream, find out why this is happening, and put an end to it?”

⁴⁴ http://www.pcusa.org/washington/theology_hadsell.htm