

Session 4: Poverty as Violence

Goals of This Session

- To explore inconsistencies in society's thinking and behavior about poverty
- To explore ways in which poverty dehumanizes members of their community

Biblical/Theological Reflection

Scripture: Deuteronomy 24: 17 – 20; Psalms 72 (Particularly verses 1 - 2, 4, 12 - 14)

Most of the people for whom the laws in Deuteronomy were written lived in small agricultural villages. Their houses were close together and they all knew each other. Generally speaking, there was not a tremendous gap between the most affluent and the poorest people. These laws remind the people of God's having redeemed them from oppression and appeal to the compassion and generosity of individuals and families. In this way, society would care for those in need.

Under King Solomon, Israelite society was becoming more urbanized. Large landowners and wealthy city people could exploit or simply ignore the poor. Psalm 72 was written for King Solomon as a prescription for royal national policy under greatly changed social and economic circumstances. Notice the extent to which the highest level of government was expected to exercise initiative, not only to give immediate relief to people in times of need, but also to guarantee protection of the weak against the strong and punishment for those who oppressed the needy.

For much of our nation's existence, those who were poor depended largely on "charity" contributed by individuals and families, churches and local agencies. Beginning with the New Deal in the 1930s after the Great Depression, the federal government took initiative to respond to the needs of the poor. Now some critics say federal programs have become too bureaucratized and self-perpetuating. They say we should return to emphasizing faith-based agencies and volunteer workers; we should reduce government programs. Government assistance, the so-called "safety net" has been diminished greatly.

However, ending welfare as we had known it, has not necessarily reduced poverty as so many of our brothers and sisters know so well. In our modern, largely urban society, it is possible for many people to live and work and play

without ever coming in contact with poor people or observing the real circumstances under which they live. The gap between rich and poor constantly grows.

In the USA, we have no king as ultimate authority. Sovereignty now rests with the people, with all of us. How can we as a people take the initiative to fulfill the duties that in the Bible were laid upon the king?

Think Piece

Forty million of them have no access to health insurance and countless millions more are underinsured.¹ Some three and a half million of them are likely to experience homelessness in a given year.² More than 12 million of them are children who are hungry, at risk of hunger, living in worst case housing, or homeless.³ Many of the adults work. They are called “the poor,” and they live in every community in the United States.

There have always been “haves” and “have-nots” in our society, but as the income gap widens, the lives of people who are poor become more harsh, austere and frequently shorter. As lawmakers debate over how to improve welfare reform, those who have been removed from the welfare rolls still struggle to make ends meet.

Although they are frequently categorized as a group and labeled by their lack of economic stability, people who are poor include a wide variety of individuals whose specific gifts could make significant contributions to their cities and towns. Despite the fact that a person is poor and has few economic resources, each person has a unique set of assets and attributes which, given the opportunity, the community can draw upon and develop. Every person, no matter how poor, has ideas about who he or she wants to be and what he or she wants to do. When people are able to combine their efforts with others, the entire community can be strengthened. It is only because the poor tend to be labeled and marginalized that their true potential is often ignored.

¹ *An Affirmation on Advocacy on Behalf of the Uninsured*, 214th General Assembly (2002) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

² National Coalition for the Homeless, www.nationalhomeless.org.

³ Children’s Defense Fund, www.childrensdefense.org.

More than 11% of the people in our country live below the poverty line.⁴ That line was \$17,650 for a family of four and \$14,630 for a family of three in 2001.⁵ Most people living close to that line also struggle to make ends meet. Others live just a paycheck away from poverty.

Poverty in the United States, and what we do about it, reveals the kind of country we are. We can allow poverty to thrive and flourish in our neighborhoods and withdraw our support for people in need. Or, poverty can serve as a call to action to change our communities so that everyone has enough to eat, adequate shelter, access to education and health, protection from violence, and a voice in what happens in our neighborhoods. Peace in our communities can be achieved only through the fulfillment of all our citizens' basic human needs.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, www.census.gov.

⁵ Bread for the World, www.bread.org.

Agenda

- ❑ Gathering and Opening Reflection (7 minutes)
- ❑ Activity #1: Naming and Discovering Inconsistencies (15 minutes)
- ❑ Activity # 2: A Week in the Life of the Poor (20 minutes)
- ❑ Alternate Activity: Musical Chairs of Private Wealth (15 minutes)
- ❑ Discussion and Evaluation (10 minutes)
- ❑ Closing Reflection (3 minutes)

Materials Needed

- ❑ Bible
- ❑ Flip chart with newsprint
- ❑ Markers
- ❑ Masking tape
- ❑ One or more calculators
- ❑ Paper and pencils

Gathering and Opening Reflection (7 minutes)

1. Take a moment to welcome participants back and wait until they have settled into their seats to open with prayer.
2. (Optional) Ask for a volunteer to share an excerpt from their Peaceful Living Journal.
3. Ask a participant to read 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10.
4. Discuss briefly:
 - Are there contemporary instances of the attitude “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat?”
 - Does this include children and old people?
 - What about people willing to work but there are no jobs?
 - What about people whose full-time jobs do not provide enough to feed their families adequately? Or people who work more than one job?
5. Tell the participants that this session will explore other issues related to poverty.

Activity #1: Naming and Discovering Inconsistencies (15 minutes)

1. Ask participants to brainstorm a list of doctrines and slogans that we profess as part of our basic philosophy about getting ahead in the world, such as “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” “You can make it if you try,” and “Hard work will equal success.” Write the responses on newsprint.
2. Ask participants to name specific instances where these slogans were inconsistent with what was actually possible for people to do.
3. Discuss the implications of inconsistencies between these statements and the poverty in their community.
4. Discuss how these inconsistencies foster and perpetuate poverty.
5. Ask:
Based on our discussion so far, what do people who are poor need to help escape poverty? How might their needs be addressed?

Activity #2: A Week in the Life of the Poor (20 minutes)

Advance Preparations

Write the possible expenses and the amount each would cost on newsprint.

The Activity Begins

2. Divide the group into groups of three or four people.
3. Hand each group a calculator, some paper and pencils and read the following scenario to them:

You are a single mother with two children, a daughter, age three, and a son, age six. You work two jobs, both part-time — a morning job cleaning houses and the afternoon/evening shift at a fast-food restaurant across town. You work 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, your pay is hourly, and you do not have health insurance, retirement or sick leave benefits. You earn \$14,269 per year, which is \$285.38 a week, or \$7.13 an hour — \$1.98 an hour more than the minimum wage. Your task is to take what you have made this week and your calculator and decide how to spend your money. Remember: you start with \$285.38. Here are your options.

3. Post the newsprint and quickly review the possible expenses.
 - ❑ A monthly bus pass is cheaper than buying the fare each day, but you never have that much cash at one time. Bus fare to get to work for the next week is \$15.00.
 - ❑ The rent is due by the first of the month, and if you do not have it on time the property owner has threatened to evict you and your children. This week's portion is: \$158.77.
 - ❑ Your daughter has had a cold, and now is complaining of an earache. You will need to spend the day waiting in line at the free clinic. The medical

visit is free, but the antibiotics are \$9.00 and the cost of missing a full day's work is \$53.16 for a total of \$62.16.

- Both children have outgrown their shoes, and you need a new pair for work, too. At the local discount store the children's shoes cost \$15 each and yours cost \$20 for a total of \$50.
- Your son loves snakes and is working at school on a unit about reptiles. You'd like to take both children to an outing at the zoo: \$13.00.
- There's a snow day and both your son's school and your daughter's day care center are closed. You can get a neighbor to stay with them while you go to work, but the trade-off is that you need to provide the videos (\$6.00) and pizza (\$12.00) for a total of \$18.00.
- Your electric bill is low. You don't own many appliances and are good at turning out lights, but it needs to be paid this week: \$38.50.
- You need groceries. Food stamps pay for most of the bill, but you still need some things that are not covered: \$14.85.
- Adequate and reliable daycare for your daughter has been very difficult to find in your neighborhood, but you finally found a woman who runs a daycare center out of her home. If you do not pay the bill on time each week, she will not keep your child. This week's services cost \$46.45.

4. Ask each group to work together for ten minutes to decide how to spend the \$285.38.

5. After ten minutes, call the groups back and ask each group to report how they spent the money, why they made their decisions, and share how they felt trying to live at the edge of the poverty line.

Alternate Activity: Musical Chairs of Private Wealth (15 minutes)

(Sources: United for a Fair Economy at www.ufenet.org; Economic Policy Institute at www.epinet.org)

1. Line up ten chairs in a row. Each chair represents 10% of the wealth in the United States.
2. Ask a participant to stand behind each chair. Each participant represents 10% of the population in the United States.
3. Ask one of those standing to stretch out on five of the chairs and the rest of the participants crowd together on the remaining five chairs. Explain that the one who is on the five chairs represents the 10% of the U.S. population in 1976 who owned 49% of the wealth and that the others represent the 90% of the U.S. population in 1976 who owned 51% of the wealth.
4. Ask the nine seated participants to squeeze themselves into only three chairs, and have the one lying down stretch out to take over seven of the chairs. Explain that this now represents the economic picture of 1999: 10% of the U.S. population owned 73% of the wealth, leaving 90% owning only 27% of the wealth.
5. Ask all the participants to return to their regular seats and discuss:
 - How did it feel to be the owner of the majority of the wealth?
 - How did it feel to be part of the large group that owned the smaller percentage?
 - How did it feel to watch?
 - Were you aware of the reality of wealth distribution?
 - Does your community reflect this reality?
 - What difference does this information make as we seek to address poverty?

Discussion and evaluation (10 minutes)

1. Ask the participants to share how they feel about the day's activities; what went well and what could be improved.
2. Point out the Reflection Questions for the Peaceful Living Journals, Follow-Through Activities, and Resources List as ways to continue to address issues raised in this session.
3. Encourage people to read the Biblical/Theological Reflection and the Think Piece for the next session.
4. Remind participants to continue their *Peaceful Living Journals* in which they may reflect upon the questions and issues raised during this class and as they seek to live nonviolently, if it is helpful to them to do so.

Closing Reflection (3 minutes)

1. Invite a participant to read the following:

One of the insights I have gained after having lived on the streets for many years is that the deepest tragedy of poverty is not the lack of objective material wealth (poverty was not brutal because I did not have steak and lobster). It is the fundamental communication that an individual has absolutely no intrinsic worth whatsoever that is the real violence of poverty. It is looking at people with their homes and cars and TVs and wealth and cafes and knowing that those comforts seem to be more important than your survival. And since that is the worst aspect of poverty, the people looking to end poverty need to understand how to build deep relationships with poor people so they can communicate how precious and valuable they are as human beings. It is, in the end, a spiritual endeavor, at least on one important level.

Jesse Mentken, formerly homeless man

2. Lead participants in the closing prayer.

Help us God to build relationships with our sisters and brothers who live in poverty so that we can love them, learn from them, and together work to create a world where your abundance is shared so that all your children have enough. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Next Steps

- Learn about and support the work of the Presbyterian Hunger Program (www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/hunger/) and the Self Development of People Program (www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/sdop/).
- Join Bread for the World (www.bread.org), a faith-based anti-hunger lobby or another group working on issues of hunger and poverty.
- Join a living wage campaign in your community. If you are an employer, pay a "living wage" to your employees working in traditionally low-paying jobs. For more information on the living wage, visit www.livingwage.org.
- Make informed financial choices that help to promote economic opportunity and justice in your neighborhood. As examples, support locally owned businesses or learn about the effort to unionize Wal-Mart.
- Question your local elected officials about how they are working to end poverty. Encourage them to design programs to aid people who are poor.
- Volunteer at a soup kitchen or a mentoring program.

Resources

Hunger No More, Adult Study from Bread for the World focuses on hunger and poverty in the United States. Includes related children's activities and bulletin inserts. Order a free copy or download at:

www.bread.org/howtohelp/church/hunger_no_more_pamphlet.html

Collins, Chuck and Felice Yeskel, *Economic Apartheid in America — A Primer on Economic Inequality & Insecurity* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

Ehrenreich, Barbara, *Nickel and Dimed* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001).

Sider, Ronald J., *Just Generosity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).

Web Sites

Presbyterian Hunger Program

www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/hunger/

Presbyterian Health Education and Welfare Association

www.pcusa.org/phewa/

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office on Urban Ministry

www.pcusa.org/evangelism/churchdevelopment/um.htm

National Council of Churches Mobilization against Poverty

www.ncccusa.org/poverty/

Bread for the World

www.bread.org

Call to Renewal – People of Faith Overcoming Poverty

www.calltorenewal.com/home.cfm

Community Farm Alliance

www.communityfarmalliance.com

National Interfaith Campaign for Worker Justice

www.nicwj.org

Reflection Questions for the Peaceful Living Journals

- What stereotypes do I have about people who are poor?
- When I hear people talking about “the poor,” what do I feel? What causes these feelings?
- Who is responsible for causing poverty in the United States?
- Who is responsible for dealing with poverty in the United States?
- What difference does poverty make to people in a democratic society?
- How can I move out of my comfort zone to work with people who are poor?
- Where does the poverty in my community fall on the Violence Pyramid?

Quotations to Consider as Textboxes or Sidebars

Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall...who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!

- Amos 6:4, 6

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 not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, without works, is dead.

- James 2.14-17

The problems I have are no adequate accessibility to job training or job skills — and no funds to obtain this training to get into the workforce.

- Resident, K.C. Rescue Mission, Kansas City, MO

We must address the problems that render people homeless in the first place rather than focusing simply on getting them off the streets for the night.

- Former HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros

Every 44 seconds in the U.S., a baby is born into poverty. Every 60 seconds in the U.S., a baby is born without health insurance.

- Children's Defense Fund

Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! --

- Isaiah 5:8

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

Peace and justice are yoked in the very nature of things. There can be no enduring relationships between persons if exploitation, unchecked and arbitrary exercise of authority, or excessive disproportion of access to the fruits of the created are prevalent.

- *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling*, 192nd General Assembly (1980) of The United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America