

# Wrestle with the Topic – Economic Inequality

## *Task Force on Economic Inequality, Desert Southwest Conference Board of Church & Society*

### 1: Opening prayer

A Prayer for Economic Justice

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of your world as your love would have it:

- a world where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;
- a world where the riches of creation are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;
- a world where different races and cultures live in harmony and mutual respect;
- a world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.
- Give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Source: [ucc.org/justice\\_economic-justice\\_inequality](http://ucc.org/justice_economic-justice_inequality)

### 2: What is going on? (Two videos to help understand of the scope of the problem)

Wealth Inequality In America

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTj9AcwkaKM>

Global Wealth Inequality - What you never knew you never knew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWSxzjyMNpU>

### 3: Scriptures to consider

#### *Isaiah 1 (NIV)*

“The multitude of your sacrifices— what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. 12 When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? 13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me... 17 **Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.**

#### *Ezekiel 34:1-4 (The Message)*

34 1-6 GOD’s Message came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherd-leaders of Israel. Yes, prophesy! Tell those shepherds, ‘GOD, the Master, says: Doom to you shepherds of Israel, feeding your own mouths! Aren’t shepherds supposed to feed sheep? You drink the milk, you make clothes from the wool, you roast the lambs, but you don’t feed the sheep. **You don’t build up the weak ones, don’t heal the sick, don’t doctor the injured, don’t go after the strays, don’t look for the lost. You bully and badger them.** And now they’re scattered every

which way because there was no shepherd—scattered and easy pickings for wolves and coyotes. Scattered—my sheep!—exposed and vulnerable across mountains and hills. **My sheep scattered all over the world, and no one out looking for them!**

*Luke 16 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus said to the disciples... <sup>13</sup>**You cannot serve God and wealth.**” (Or, as the King James version put it, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”) <sup>14</sup>The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.

*Acts of the Apostles 4:32 (NRSV)*

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but **everything they owned was held in common.**

*Acts of the Apostles 20:35 (Message)*

In everything I’ve done, I have demonstrated to you **how necessary it is to work on behalf of the weak and not exploit them.** You’ll not likely go wrong here if you keep remembering that our Master said, “You’re far happier giving than getting.”

*2 Corinthians 8:13-15 (NRSV)*

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, **but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need,** so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’

**4: Fish bowl exercise—**

- A. Review the videotape of the Conference event, or**
- B. Hold your own fishbowl exercise. See Appendix for questions prepared for the Conference event.**

**5: More questions for group discussion—**

- A.** Nearly a decade ago, two British scientists published a ground-breaking book which documented the close correlation between inequality and a wide range of social ills--from incarceration rates to life expectancy to high school drop-out rates, to mental illness, to name a few. Last year, they published *The Inner Level*, which “explains how inequality affects us individually, altering how we think, feel and behave. **It sets out the overwhelming evidence that material inequities have powerful psychological effects: when the gap between rich and poor increases, so does the tendency to define and value ourselves and others in terms of superiority and inferiority.**” They describe how inequality gets into our hearts and minds, and the resulting individual and social consequences.

- How do you see inequality changing our perception of the world?
- How is our perception of the world we are called to seek impacted when we see inequality as an inevitable part of the way things need to be?
- When inequality gets into our hearts and minds, how does it alter our understanding of scripture?
- How does contemporary society shape our thinking to make even our extreme levels of economic inequality appear to be inevitable?

B. Mainstream culture in the U.S. often teaches that social injustice arises from *individual* shortcomings. Why are our churches so reluctant to acknowledge that social injustice is also rooted in *corporate* sin—in our silent (or at times even enthusiastic) acceptance of economic and political ideologies and policies which result in extreme levels of inequality? **Does the church’s silence about the structures of economic power reflect a decision to steer clear of politics, or is it a “gesture of legitimation?”**

C. What will it take to inspire us to envision an economic system that would reflect our responsibility for the common good?

- How many people need to be sleeping on the streets?
- How many people need to die because they lack medical care?
- How many people need to work 2-3 jobs to afford even bare-bones housing?
- How many children need to be denied suitable educational opportunities because of underfunded schools?
- What makes this such a difficult challenge?
- What would we need to give up in order to achieve a more equitable society? What would we get in return?

D. Even though we may regularly pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth, **imagining what that kingdom might look like is something we rarely get around to doing.** Our ability to imagine—even our willingness to imagine—seems strangely absent given the importance of God’s kingdom in Jesus’ ministry and teaching. It may well be that our difficulty in imagining alternatives to the status quo is no accident. **One author has concluded that an active “war on the imagination” is being waged**—a war designed to ensure that those who wield great economic and political power will continue to exercise that power. Perhaps that is why we can recite the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray without giving much consideration to what we’re actually praying for. Perhaps that is why even in a democracy a very small number of people can persuade the vast majority of voters to embrace economic and political systems which create radically inequitable concentrations of power and wealth. **Jesus shared numerous parables in which he told us what the kingdom was like, but he never specified that unregulated markets were part of the deal. When we allow our economic ideology to dictate that capitalism—or any other human-constructed economic system—necessarily defines our vision of the world we are called to seek, that ideology becomes idolatrous.**

- Assume for a moment that a “**war on the imagination**” is being waged. Consider the resources and the strategies available for fighting such a war (social media, screen time addiction, etc.). How might those resources and strategies be employed to limit your ability and even your desire to see a “beyond”?
- What can our scriptures and our congregations do to help people recognize and overcome the influences which are so effective in preventing us from seeking an economic system that would better reflect our responsibility for the common good? (See, for example, *Sabbath as Resistance*, a book by the highly-respected biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman)
- In the 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah we find these words: “Thus says the Lord... I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” **If we were to permit ourselves to perceive a new thing—a world beyond the realm of what our current economic ideology dictates—what might it look like?**

**6: An excellent study guide entitled Fair Balance: Reducing Inequality in the U.S. and around the World, prepared by the United Church of Christ, is available at**

<https://www.ucc.org/justice-economic-justice-inequality>. Suggested discussion questions provided with the study guide are reproduced below.

- A. Describe inequality in your own words. Have you seen evidence of rising inequality in the United States? Globally? Are you or members of your family experiencing or observing this?
- B. What is the impact of poverty on people’s lives?
- C. What is the impact of inequality on people’s lives? Does it seem reasonable that inequality could have such a wide-reaching impact, affecting the rich, poor, and middle class?
- D. Several measures were suggested for reducing inequality including raising wages and salaries for the lowest paid workers, job creation, broader and more equitable provision of health insurance and pensions, and a fairer tax structure. Which of these would you support?
- E. In your view, how would God want us to share our resources? What is a “fair balance” between one person’s need and another’s abundance?
- F. Can we rely on voluntary actions and charity to bring about the sharing necessary for a fair balance? Or will public programs funded through taxes also be necessary?
- G. The U.S. constitution and Bill of Rights guarantee many political and civil rights to all citizens of the U.S. Should people also have economic rights, the right to necessities like food, shelter, quality education and health care, higher education? If so, how can we best guarantee these rights?

## Appendix

### Fish bowl questions

1. Do you know someone, or a family, that finds it difficult to make a living that sustains them and/or their family, providing for food, housing, child care if needed, and other necessities? What effect does this have on them/their family? What is the cause of their inadequate income? What is the solution?
2. Do you know anyone who either: a) has been unable to get health insurance; b) has been unable to get needed medical care on their insurance policy; or c) has major financial challenges or even bankruptcy because of medical costs? What effect does this have on that individual and/or their family? What are the causes of these problems? What are solutions to prevent these things from happening?
3. Do you know any family wherein: a) the parents are unable to afford child care, limiting the family's employment opportunities; b) the children must attend a school with oversize classes, limited resources for special needs and/or gifted students, and/or are at risk because of discipline issues with other students; or c) middle and senior high students in the family are given little encouragement in their interests, and/or advanced academics, arts, and/or athletic programs that could enhance their chances for college admission are absent? What are the causes of these issues? How can they be addressed?
4. Do you know anyone, or several people, who either: a) have found it impossible to get the college education they need due to the rising costs of tuition and other expenses; b) have incurred student debt that severely impacts their financial well-being and/or will for some time to come, or c) have had to take on employment commitments while in school, in order to afford their educational expenses, such that their ability to function well in educational environments was compromised? What effects do these situations have on the future of the students involved? What is the cause of these situations? What are the solutions?
5. Do you know anyone who either: a) is retired, and must choose between buying prescriptions and food?; b) is caring for an elderly spouse or relative, and has no options if they require more care than they can provide; or c) faces complete uncertainty if their pensions are compromised, if they live longer than their retirement accounts can support, and/or if their need for care exceeds their fixed income? What is the cause of these difficulties? What are the solutions?
6. For questions 1 through 5 above, in many cases, in previous decades, financial resources were available to meet the needs described, or situations that currently restrict financial

resources, such as those needed for education and health care, did not exist. In any of those cases, where have the financial resources that used to be available for these needs gone? Are those changes a good or bad thing? Do the moral and ethical resources of our faith tradition address those changes? What do they say?

7. According to current statistics, in the United States, approximately 450 people or families own as much wealth as 150 million people, or the poorest half of our nation's population. And on a global basis, approximately 85 people or families own as much wealth as 3 billion people, or the poorest half of the world's population. From the perspective of our Judeo-Christian faith tradition, is this the way things should be? Why or why not?
8. From the perspective of our Judeo-Christian faith tradition, is there ever a circumstance in which it is permissible for the pure profit of one person or entity, after expenses and payroll, to cause another person or group of people to lose something essential, such as food, housing, health care, education, or financial security? Why or why not?
9. In our United Methodist denomination, through the resources of UMCOR, the General Board of Global Ministries, and other ministries, including those in our local churches, we readily support efforts that support food and medical assistance, infrastructure reconstruction, educational institutions, security for vulnerable populations, and assistance for children, families, the disabled, the elderly, and others who may not have the ability to provide for their own needs. Yet, when issues are raised in our faith communities regarding public policy which addresses the identical issues in our own communities, state, and nation, those conversations are labeled as "Political," and rejected by many. Why do you think that is? Is there a way to address these issues without being labeled as "Political" or "Partisan?"
10. The patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus, many of his disciples, and John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist tradition, were unanimous in teaching a priority on serving the needs of the less fortunate, and on condemning the personal accumulation of superfluous wealth (citations needed). Yet, many in our congregations, and in those of other Christian denominations, resist public policy that would act to give vital assistance to those with less resources by requiring individuals and entities with abundant resources to make contributions, without significant sacrifices. Is this a reasonable response? Why or why not? If policies such as these are not defensible from a faith perspective, what other means can be used to effectively address issues of inequality?
11. Given the content of these scripture references and many others (citations needed), is the phenomenon of drastic and increasing economic inequality a political or a spiritual problem? If it is spiritual, how should people of faith respond?
12. What can you, and/or your congregation do, to help ease economic inequality in your community? In our state? In our nation? In our world?