



*Tools for
Reflection
and Action*



Catholic
Charities
USA®

Poverty in America

A Threat to the Common Good

Tools for Reflection and Action

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Catholic
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Dear Colleague:

Thank you for investing your time in learning more about how we can work together to become more informed about poverty in our midst and what we can do to alleviate it in our communities and across our nation.

Every year Catholic Charities agencies across the country provide help and create hope for millions of low-income families who do not have the necessary resources to fully provide for their most basic needs. Recognizing the increasing burden of poverty and the escalating numbers of Americans living in poverty, the Board of Trustees of Catholic Charities USA decided to develop a policy paper in 2006 that examines the causes of poverty and present sensible solutions to help reduce the number of families who suffer from being poor. The paper, *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good* begins with an explanation of the moral and religious foundations that inspire commitment of the Catholic Charities community to fight poverty. It then describes the harsh reality of poverty and its causes; provides a detailed set of proposals for the kinds of economic and social policies that are required if we hope to reduce poverty; and concludes with a call to action.

During Catholic Charities USA's Annual Gathering in Minnesota in September 2006, members of Catholic Charities network overwhelmingly supported the principles outlined in the paper. At the same time, we also heard from many participants that Catholic Charities USA should provide further assistance and guidance to local agencies, parishes, and individuals with strategies to effectively utilize the paper.

We are pleased to present these tools as part of a series of materials that Catholic Charities USA will develop for our network in the coming months. These tools provide opportunities for agencies, individuals and parishes to explore the issue of poverty and to take action. Along with these tools we will develop a comprehensive Web site with resources from Catholic Charities USA and other Catholic organizations in the fight to reduce poverty. We will also form an implementation advisory committee to help us develop effective strategies to engage community, business, and political leaders in using the paper.

If we are to reduce poverty significantly in this country we must all work together. We must actively engage those we serve so they can become full partners in advocacy efforts within our communities. Poverty can be reduced and eliminated, but the first step is for each individual to become informed about the crisis that is a threat to the common good. We must then inform those we interact with about the impact of poverty and eliminate some of the public misconceptions about poverty.

We look forward to working with you in this campaign to raise awareness, develop sensible public policies, and help improve the lives of those with the least among us. We encourage you to **Read** the paper, **Learn** more about poverty, and **Act** on behalf of your brothers and sisters who are less fortunate. Together we CAN make a difference!

Sincerely,




Rev. Larry J. Snyder
President, Catholic Charities USA

I. Overview

For centuries the Catholic Church has focused on the moral dimensions of economic life. In recent years the U.S. Catholic bishops have provided great leadership and moral voice on this issue. In 1986, *Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* challenged our nation to put the common good and concern for the poor and vulnerable at the center of our economic life. The bishops demonstrated that the nation's economic decisions have an important impact on the lives of people. These decisions can strengthen or weaken families, and promote or diminish justice in our nation.

Yet 20 years later, poverty in the United States continues to be an 'unnatural' disaster – created by making economic, social and political choices that marginalize segments of the population. All of us need to better understand our responsibilities as a people, a Church, a network, and a nation to empower those we serve to break the cycle of poverty.

With this paper, *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good*, Catholic Charities USA and our member agencies are renewing our commitment to examining the causes of poverty and focusing our energies on this issue. This is in many ways a return to our roots. We are recommitting ourselves to a cause that is at the center of our network's activities and our Catholic traditions.

In order to assist you in sharing the paper, these tools provide options for more fully exploring issues that keep people in poverty. There are *options for individuals and local agencies (Section II)*, as well as *options for parishes (Section III)* to discuss the issue of poverty and *take action (Section IV)* to help reduce it in your communities and in our country.

II. How Agencies and Individuals Can Use These Tools

Introduction

Catholic Charities agencies across the country serve over 7 million people living in poverty and vulnerable situations each year. This is a testament to our deep commitment to serving those who are vulnerable and in need. As members of the Catholic community we should all be deeply troubled by the fact that in recent years the federal and many state governments have substantially reduced resources devoted to assisting those who are impoverished. There has been a conscious and deliberate retreat from our nation's commitment to economic justice for those who are poor. We believe that through our collective voice we can make a difference in reducing poverty in this country and helping to ensure the *Common Good*.

Why Should I Get Involved?

Poverty in the United States has increased every year since 2000. The number of hungry Americans has increased, the number of uninsured children has increased, and the recent housing boom has left too many Americans without a decent place to live.

This is a moral and social wound on the soul of our country. It is an ongoing disaster that threatens the health and well-being of our nation. We have the resources, experience, and knowledge to virtually eliminate poverty, especially long-term poverty; but we do not yet have the political will. Catholic Charities USA hopes to provide you with the tools to be part of our national campaign to create positive change for those living in poverty.

Solidarity... is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.

— Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern)

What Can I Do?

For individuals or Catholic Charities agency staff, the poverty paper itself is a tool to educate yourself on the crisis of poverty in the nation. The document is a source for developing talking points and utilizing the resources on the CCUSA website to identify national and local data on poverty. Please see the Executive Summary of the paper in Section V of this guide.

Developing your Plan:

Part of our Catholic tradition teaches us to help those who are less fortunate, but also to empower them to reach their full potential. Economic justice should be a part of your continued mission. It is important to feed the hungry, but it also calls for advocacy on behalf of the hungry. Effective social justice must seek solutions that actively engage the poor to help themselves.

Poverty is not merely the lack of adequate financial resources. It entails a more profound kind of deprivation, a denial of full participation in the economic, social, and political life of a society and an inability to influence decisions that affect one's life. ¹

Individuals and agency staff can utilize paper in the following ways:

To engage your staff and co-workers in discussion about poverty and identify some of the causes of poverty in your community:

- Use the paper to develop group and staff discussions
- Use the information to identify some of your misconceptions about poverty
- Remember that the first place to start is your local community;

Here are some questions you can use to guide your discussions:

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Poverty as a Moral Issue (“Poverty as a Moral Issue”, page 5 of *Poverty in America*)
 - a) How do you understand poverty as a moral issue?
 - b) How do you see yourself or your agency called to respond or already responding?
 - c) What challenges you about Catholic Social Teaching with regard to poverty? How are you, how is your agency strengthened in response to this teaching?
 - d) Do you agree or disagree that “tolerance of widespread poverty weakens our democracy”? Why or why not?
- 2) The Reality of Poverty in the United States (“Weaknesses in Current Economic and Social Policies”, page 11 of *Poverty in America*)
 - a) From the realities and statistics presented in the document, what shocked or disturbed you?
 - b) Did anything in the sections on defining poverty, correcting conventional wisdom, concentrated poverty or growing inequality surprise you? Challenge you?

¹ United States Catholic Conference, *Tenth Anniversary Edition of Economic Justice For All* (1997), page 76.

- c) Did anything in policy strengths and weaknesses challenge your thinking?
 - d) What does poverty look like in your community? Is it visible?
 - e) What experience with people living in poverty have you had and what have you learned from them?
- 3) Specific Policy Proposals (“Call to Action”, page 17 of *Poverty in America*)
- a) Which of the specific policy proposals would be easiest for you, for your agency to support or endorse?
 - b) Which would be most difficult?
 - c) Why?
- 4) Action Plan (“Call to Action”, page 23 of *Poverty in America* and “Things You Can Do To Address Poverty” Section IV of this guide)
- a) Using the suggested action steps provided as a guide, what concrete steps are you willing to take to decrease poverty in your community and in our nation?
 - b) Using the suggested action steps provided as a guide, what concrete steps can your agency take to decrease poverty in your community and in our nation?

Identify a single issue that you are comfortable with and become more informed

- *It's always easier to become engaged in something you know.*

Engage your clients in discussion about how poverty impacts their lives and identify what changes they would like to see within the community

- *Paternalistic programs which do too much for and too little with the poor are to be avoided.*²

As individuals we are all called to help the poor. Private action and voluntary service are important, but we must also carry our moral responsibility to assist and empower the poor by working collectively through government to establish justice and effective public change.

- *Once you have identified your issue area for advocacy, and have collected sufficient information for change, work with clients to engage local media, elected officials, business and community leaders.*

² United States Catholic Conference, *Tenth Anniversary Edition of Economic Justice For All*

Partnerships

While we know that we must expand our own commitments as Catholics and social service providers, we also know that faith-based groups and the nonprofit sector do not have the resources to replace those functions which are the legitimate responsibility of government and the private sector.

- *We simply cannot accept the proposition that agencies such as ours should substitute for some of the basic functions of government.*
- *Catholic social teaching tells us that one of government's central responsibilities is to ensure that no one goes without the basic material necessities of life.*

Despite its imperfections, government is the instrument of our collective will as a society. It is the means by which we achieve together those things we cannot achieve alone. Reducing poverty is one of those goals which require the active involvement of government, for no other institution has the capacity or the scale necessary to attack poverty in a comprehensive way.

- *Therefore, we must engage government at all levels in helping to fulfill this responsibility of combating poverty. We share in this responsibility, and we believe that we have a moral mandate to lift up those who are tied down by the bonds of poverty.*

Our Agency Plan Of Action

Advocacy Plan

10. Be accountable and ask policymakers for accountability
9. Fight for change
8. Present solutions to leaders
7. Work with partners to develop solutions
6. Engage local leaders
5. Identify opportunities in your community to raise concerns
4. Engage your clients, friends, and families
3. Identify your issue area for advocacy
2. Collect information on poverty in your community and nationally
1. Read the paper

Actions We Commit To:

Reflecting on what you have learned from the paper and the steps outlined above, refer to the suggested advocacy actions in Section V of this guide, “Things You Can Do to Address Poverty”, and write down and begin to formulate your own plan of action for your agency in the space below.

We Commit to Reflection by:

We Commit to Get Informed by:

We Commit to Get Organized by:

We Commit to Get Involved by:



III. How to Use These Tools in Parishes

Introduction

On behalf of the Catholic Church, Catholic Charities agencies across the country serve over 7 million people living in poverty and vulnerable situations each year. Our work is a blessing and a challenge. *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good* represents what we have learned about poverty in our midst and outlines what we need to continue to do.

Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good presents an opportunity to process our experiences of poverty, grow to a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith tradition, and strategize together how to respond to poverty. It has been and continues to be a valuable process for many at Catholic Charities agencies in communities across the country, and we believe it can be valuable for you.

Using These Tools in Your Parish

These tools are designed to be used in either of two ways: *a) focused discussion or b) a small group study*. The focused discussion is designed to look at the topic of poverty through new lenses: through the eyes of faith, through the experience of others and from the trends that highlight what the reality of poverty is. In this way, the suggested focused discussion can be integrated into an existing lecture or discussion series, such as a Lenten or Advent program. The small group study provides the opportunity for parishioners to delve into the material and formulate a personal or a parish response to poverty.

a) Focused Discussion or One Session Option

We suggest two parts to a focused discussion on poverty. The first part will be descriptive. People will be asked to speak about poverty from three different perspectives: faith, personal, and trends. The second part will engage participants on the topic.

The descriptive portion will require a skilled facilitator who will be responsible for keeping the agenda moving when the speakers are presenting and facilitating the small and large group discussions that will engage participants. The agenda will need to be modified depending upon the amount of time that you have, but we suggest at least an hour and a half be reserved for the event and suggest that an optional reception be available at the end.

Sample Agenda

Welcome and Prayer – led by the facilitator or pastor

Leader: Let us pause for a moment to acknowledge God's presence in our midst.

Women: Create in me a compassionate heart, O God,

Men: and put a new and right spirit within me.

Women: Create in me a caring heart, O God,

Men: That remembers how you went in search of the one that was lost.

Women: Create in me a merciful heart, O God,

Men: that reaches out to those in need this day.

Women: Strengthen us, O God, as we work to eliminate poverty in our land.

Men: May our humble actions serve as leaven that invites others to join us who exercise leadership in government, religious, and civic arenas.

Women: We pray for our local church community as well as our sisters and brothers from other faith traditions

Men: that we may serve as a sign of hope to all those in need.

Women: Create in us clean hearts, O God,

Men: Hearts of compassion and loving service,

Leader: Hearts that are moved to action so that others may see hope.

All: That together we can rejoice and pray, fill us with joy and gladness. Amen.

Reading: Isaiah 42:6-7

Share reflections on reading

Leader: As we continue our prayer, I invite you to share any special intentions that you may have at this time.

All: Our Father...

Leader: May the peace of God which passes all understanding guard our hearts in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Introduction of the Discussion and Presenters – facilitator (5 minutes)

Suggested script:

Poverty in the United States is a moral and social wound on the soul of our country. It is an ongoing disaster that threatens the health and well being of our nation. We have the resources, experience, and knowledge to virtually eliminate poverty, especially long-term poverty; but we do not yet have the political will.

On behalf of the Catholic Church, Catholic Charities agencies across the country serve over 7 million people living in poverty and vulnerable situations each year. Recently, Catholic Charities USA wrote a paper, *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good* which represents what they have learned about poverty in our midst and outlines what needs to happen in order to reduce poverty. A reduction in poverty demands a commitment not only from Catholic Charities, but from the broader Catholic community and people of good will.

Tonight, we are going to use *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good* to process our collective experiences of poverty, grow to a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith tradition, and outline some strategies for responding to poverty.

To help us do that, we have invited three panelists to speak about poverty from three different perspectives: from our faith tradition, from personal experience and from the national (or local) reality of poverty.

(Introduce speakers)

Each speaker will be given 15 minutes to present their ideas. Then, you (the attendees) will be given the opportunity to engage with other attendees around this very important topic.

Part I – Poverty Presentations

Speaker 1 – Faith Perspective – 15 minutes

Invite someone who can speak from the perspective of Scripture and Catholic social teaching about an individual and communal response to poverty.

Speaker 2 – Personal Experience – 15 minutes

Invite someone who can speak from their own experience of poverty in your area. Or invite someone, perhaps from Catholic Charities in your local area, who works directly with clients who can speak to the challenges of living in poverty.

Speaker 3 – Local or National Reality – 15 minutes

Invite someone who can speak to the demographics of poverty at the local or national level. This person should be able to speak to trends.

Thank you and questions – facilitator – 5 minutes

Thank the presenters and give a few attendees the opportunity to ask questions of the speakers.

Part II – Focused Conversation

At this point, the facilitator is going to invite attendees to form small groups of no more than four people. These small groups are going to be given questions, one at a time, to discuss in the small group. It may help if the questions are written in a visible location and unveiled individually to facilitate discussion. When you unveil the fourth question, pass out copies of the action steps “Things You Can Do to Address Poverty” that are listed in Section IV of this guide.

Question 1 – From the presentation, what concepts stood out for you? – 5 minutes

Question 2 – How did this make you feel? – 5 minutes

Question 3 – Why is this important? – 5 minutes

Question 4 – What does this mean for you or our parish? – 10 minutes

Large Group Discussion – facilitator – 10-15 minutes

After the small groups have had an opportunity to discuss each of these four questions for about 20 minutes total, the facilitator will bring all of the small groups back into one. Attendees will be asked if they would like to share insights with the full group. Ask attendees what action steps they would consider taking as individuals or as a parish to address poverty. The facilitator should allow the discussion to go for 10-15 minutes.

Final Remarks – 5 minutes

The facilitator will thank all of the attendees for sharing their insights. Then the group will be offered resources to take with them. The facilitator should make the policy paper available and will want copies of the action steps in Section IV of this guide for attendees. There may be some additional materials that the parish has to share; this is the place to offer those. If your group is ready to take action, please see “Our Parish Plan for Action” at the end of this section to commit your actions to paper.

Closing Prayer – led by the facilitator or pastor – 5 minutes

b) Small Group Study Option

This option is designed to help parishioners reflect on *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good*. The purpose of studying the paper itself is not only that parishioners know more about poverty in our country when they finish; it is also to provide people with an opportunity to discern their unique, faith-filled response to poverty in their communities and across our nation.

To formulate our responses, we suggest a process called the pastoral circle, which was developed by Joe Holland and Peter Henroit.³ “The pastoral circle is process of answering four very basic questions about some experience that we have, either as individuals or in a community setting. These questions help us to respond more effectively to the experience through deeper understanding and wider evaluation.”⁴

The four questions are:

1. “*What is happening here?*”⁵ – This is our opportunity to reflect on the experience and reality of poverty. The stories of poverty in *Poverty in America* are told from the perspective of Catholic Charities agencies and those they serve, but it is important for group members to recall their own experiences of poverty. Think about your experience of poverty. Think about the experiences of poverty of people that you care about and acquaintances that you interact with.
2. “*Why is it happening?*”⁶ – The purpose of this step is to analyze why poverty exists. It is the opportunity to ask why our experiences continue to happen. It is an opportunity to look at the causes and consequences of our experiences more deeply.
3. “*How do we evaluate it?*”⁷ – At this step, we will borrow from the wisdom of our Catholic faith tradition, Catholic Charities’ experience and the members of our group. We will evaluate the situation in light of our faith, our values, and our reactions.
4. “*How do we respond?*”⁸ – Based upon all that you have thought about in the first steps consider a response to the experience. Consider what you will do and how you will evaluate your effort.

While the process is called the pastoral circle, the steps are designed to prepare you for your next experience which will lead you back through the process. In reality, the circle is in many respects a spiral. After each experience, the questioning will help each subsequent response. It will encourage spiritual growth and mature action on behalf of faith.

The ideal small group will consist of eight to twelve members. This group can already exist or it may be a group that forms specifically to study the policy paper. Before the group meets, all members will receive and will be asked to read *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good*.

3 The pastoral circle was first described in *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* written by Joe Holland and Peter Henroit and published by the Center of concern in Washington, DC in 1980. The pastoral circle has been used in a variety of situations including formation programs for social ministry to help people respond to the gospel challenge to create a just society on earth by developing a response in the supportive environment of a small faith community.

4 Wijssen, F, P. Henriot, and R. Mejia, editors. (2005) *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation*. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY 10545. Pp. 229

5 Ibid

6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Ibid

We suggest the group be led by a facilitator or a team of two or three facilitators. The facilitator(s) takes responsibility for recruiting group members, ensuring that the group and its members have the materials they need, preparing the session (snack, prayer materials, etc.), and facilitating the discussion.

We suggest that each session last approximately two hours, with a short break to provide an opportunity for group members to get to know one another and enjoy more relaxed conversation.

Small Group Study: Session I

Part I: What is happening?

This is our opportunity to reflect on the experience and reality of poverty. The stories of poverty in *Poverty in America* are told from the perspective of Catholic Charities, but it is important for group members to recall their own experiences of poverty. Think about your experience of poverty. Think about the experiences of poverty of people that you care about and acquaintances that you interact with.

Opening Prayer – 15 minutes

Leader: Loving God, open our hearts and minds to your presence in one another. We call on your assistance and wisdom as we strive to serve the many needs of people in our communities, especially those who are poor and without hope. As we gather this day to discuss and reflect on *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good*, send your Spirit and open our minds and hearts to new possibilities for service, advocacy and collaboration. We ask this in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

All: The Lord will reign forever: come let us praise God in prayer and song.

Song: *Psalm 34: The Cry of the Poor*

Refrain: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord

1. I will bless the Lord at all times, with praise ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the Lord, who will hear the cry of the poor. R/
2. Let the lowly hear and be glad: the Lord listens to their pleas; and to hearts broken,
God is near, who will hear the cry of the poor. R/
3. Every spirit crushed, God will save; will be ransom for their lives;
will be safe shelter for their fears, and will hear the cry of the poor. R/
4. We proclaim your greatness, O God; your praise ever in our mouth;
every face brightened in your light, for you hear the cry of the poor. R/

John Foley, *GIA Comprehensive*, GIA, 2004 (Song #33) Used with Permission

Reading: James 2:14-16

Invite group to share thoughts on reading

Intercessions: Through the intercession of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, two exemplary models of service to the poor, we pray:

Response: Fill us with your love, O Lord!

For the hungry, that we may find the means to feed them: R/

For the naked, that we may find the means to clothe them: R/

For the homeless, that we may find the means to shelter them: R/

For our donors and volunteers in thanksgiving for their support and dedication: R/

Personal Intentions

All: Our Father...

Leader: May the Lord bless us in all our services and undertakings. Amen.

Song: Anthem

Refrain: We are called; we are chosen. We are Christ for one another. We are promised to tomorrow, while we are for him today. We are sign; we are wonder. We are sower; we are seed. We are harvest; we are hunger. We are question; we are creed.

1. Then where can we stand justified? In what can we believe? In no one else but Christ who suffered, nothing more than Christ who rose. Who was justice for the poor. Who was rage against the night. Who was hope for peaceful people. Who was light. R/
2. Then how are we to stand at all, this world of bended knee? In nothing more than barren shadows. No one else but Christ could save us. Who was justice for the poor. Who was rage against the night. Who was hope for peaceful people. Who was light.
3. Then shall we not stand empty at the altar of our dreams: When Christ promised us ourselves. Who mark time against tomorrow. Who are justice for the poor. Who are rage against the night. Who are hope for peaceful people. Who are light.

Tom Conry, *GIA Comprehensive*, GIA, 2004 (Song #681) Used with Permission

Introductions – 30 minutes

All participants are given five minutes to introduce themselves and say why they came and what they hope to get out of coming.

Break – 15 minutes

Dialogue – 30 minutes

In *Poverty in America* review the “Introduction” and “The Reality of Poverty in the United States” (page 11). Use the following questions to spark discussion. Be sure to ask the final question.

- From the realities and statistics presented in the document, what shocked or disturbed you?
- Did anything in the sections on defining poverty, correcting conventional wisdom, concentrated poverty or growing inequality surprise you? Challenge you?
- Did anything in policy strengths and weaknesses challenge your thinking?
- What does poverty look like in your community? Is it visible?
- What experience of poverty have you had?

Closing Prayer – 5 minutes

Small Group Study: Session 2

Part II – Why is this happening?

The purpose of this step is to analyze why poverty exists. It is the opportunity to ask why our experiences continue to happen. It is an opportunity to look at the causes and consequences of our experiences more deeply.

Opening Prayer – 15 minutes

Leader: Let us pause for a moment to acknowledge God’s presence in our midst.

Women: Create in me a compassionate heart, O God,

Men: and put a new and right spirit within me.

Women: Create in me a caring heart, O God,

Men: That remembers how you went in search of the one that was lost.

Women: Create in me a merciful heart, O God,

Men: that reaches out to those in need this day.

Women: Strengthen us, O God, as we work to eliminate poverty in our land.

Men: May our humble actions serve as leaven that invites others to join us who exercise leadership in government, religious, and civic arenas.

Women: We pray for our local church community as well as our sisters and brothers from other faith traditions

Men: that we may serve as a sign of hope to all those in need.

Women: Create in us clean hearts, O God,

Men: Hearts of compassion and loving service,

Leader: Hearts that are moved to action so that others may see hope.

All: That together we can rejoice and pray, fill us with joy and gladness. Amen.

Reading: Isaiah 42:6-7

Share reflections on reading

Leader: As we continue our prayer, I invite you to share any special intentions that you may have at this time.

All: Our Father...

Leader: May the peace of God which passes all understanding guard our hearts in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Guest Speaker – 45 minutes

Invite a representative from a local Catholic Charities agency to speak with your group. The type of person that you are looking for is one who interacts with clients on a daily basis. Ask them to speak about why clients come to see them. What are the things that cause them to rely on Catholic Charities? What are the biggest impediments to the success of their clients? After the speaker has presented, engage the speaker in discussion on the reasons why poverty exists.

Break – 15 minutes

Part III – How do we evaluate it?

In this part, we will borrow from the wisdom of our Catholic faith tradition, Catholic Charities' experience and the members of our group. We will evaluate the situation in light of our faith, our values, and our reactions.

Dialogue – 40 minutes

In *Poverty in America*, review "Poverty as a Moral Issue" (page 5). Use the following questions to spark discussion.

- How do you understand poverty as a moral issue (flowing from a sacred covenant proclaimed in Scripture)?
- How do you see yourself and your parish called to respond or already responding?
- What challenges you about Catholic social teaching with regard to poverty? How are you/how is your parish strengthened in response to this teaching?
- How do the values outlined in this section compare/contrast to our nation's cultural values? What could our culture learn from this teaching?
- Do you agree or disagree that "tolerance of widespread poverty weakens our democracy?" Why or why not?

Closing Prayer

Small Group Study: Session III

Part IV - How do we respond?

Based upon all that you have thought about in the first steps consider a response to the experience. Consider what you will do, and how you will evaluate your effort.

Opening Prayer – 15 minutes

Leader: Loving God, open our hearts and minds to your presence in one another. We call on your assistance and wisdom as we strive to serve the many needs of people in our communities especially those who are poor and without hope. As we gather this day to discuss and reflect on *Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good* send your Spirit and open our minds and hearts to new possibilities for service, advocacy and collaboration, we ask this in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

All: The Lord will reign forever: come let us praise God in prayer and song.

Song: *Psalm 34: The Cry of the Poor*

Refrain: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord

1. I will bless the Lord at all times, with praise ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the Lord, who will hear the cry of the poor. R/
2. Let the lowly hear and be glad: the Lord listens to their pleas; and to hearts broken,
God is near, who will hear the cry of the poor. R/
3. Every spirit crushed, God will save; will be ransom for their lives;
will be safe shelter for their fears, and will hear the cry of the poor. R/
4. We proclaim your greatness, O God; your praise ever in our mouth;
every face brightened in your light, for you hear the cry of the poor. R/

John Foley, *GIA Comprehensive*, GIA, 2004 (Song #33) Used with Permission

Reading: James 2:14-16

Invite group to share thoughts on reading

Intercessions: Through the intercession of St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, two exemplary models of service to the poor, we pray:

Response: Fill us with your love, O Lord!

For the hungry, that we may find the means to feed them: R/

For the naked, that we may find the means to clothe them: R/

For the homeless, that we may find the means to shelter them: R/

For our donors and volunteers in thanksgiving for their support and dedication: R/

Personal Intentions

All: Our Father...

Leader: May the Lord bless us in all our services and undertakings. Amen.

Song: Anthem

Refrain: We are called; we are chosen. We are Christ for one another. We are promised to tomorrow, while we are for him today. We are sign; we are wonder. We are sower; we are seed. We are harvest; we are hunger. We are question; we are creed.

1. Then where can we stand justified? In what can we believe? In no one else but Christ who suffered, nothing more than Christ who rose. Who was justice for the poor. Who was rage against the night. Who was hope for peaceful people. Who was light. R/
2. Then how are we to stand at all, this world of bended knee? In nothing more than barren shadows. No one else but Christ could save us. Who was justice for the poor. Who was rage against the night. Who was hope for peaceful people. Who was light.
3. Then shall we not stand empty at the altar of our dreams: When Christ promised us ourselves. Who mark time against tomorrow. Who are justice for the poor. Who are rage against the night. Who are hope for peaceful people. Who are light.

Tom Conry, *GIA Comprehensive*, GIA, 2004 (Song #681) Used with Permission

Dialogue – 30 minutes

In *Poverty in America*, review “Specific Policy Proposals and Call to Action” (pp 17). Use the following questions to spark discussion.

- Which of the specific policy proposals would be easiest for you and/or for your parish to support or endorse?
- Which would be most difficult?
- Why?
- What about the call to action section did you find most compelling?
- What did you find to be most realistic (or unrealistic)?

Break – 15 minutes**Personal Reflection** – 20 minutes

Take some time by yourself and review the list of things that you can do (listed in Section V of this guide) to address poverty. Consider the following questions. The facilitator may want to put on some quiet music.

- Using the suggested action steps provided as a guide, what concrete steps are you willing to take to decrease poverty in your community and in our nation?
- Using the suggested action steps provided as a guide, what concrete steps can your parish/agency take to decrease poverty in your community and in our nation?

Group Reflection – 30 minutes

Bring the group back and share insights from the personal reflection. If your group is ready to take action, please see “Our Parish Plan for Action” below.

Closing Prayer – 5 minutes

Our Parish Plan Of Action

Actions We Commit To:

Reflecting on what you have learned from the paper and your discussions, refer to the suggested advocacy actions in Section IV “Things You Can Do to Address Poverty,” and write down and begin to formulate your own plan of action for your parish in the space below.

We Commit to Reflection by:

We Commit to Get Informed by:

We Commit to Get Organized by:

We Commit to Get Involved by:



IV. Things You Can do to Address Poverty

Reflect

- 1) Pray for those whose lives are impacted by poverty.
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/poverty/pray.cfm>
- 2) Use scripture to deepen your understanding of poverty.
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/poverty/pray.cfm#Scriptures>
- 3) Familiarize yourself with Catholic social teaching on the poor.
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/poverty/cst.cfm>

Get Informed

- 4) Educate yourself about poverty in your community and in the United States.
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/poverty/downloads/policy06.pdf>
- 5) Identify an issue (such as health care, housing, hunger, economic security, or moral budget priorities) that you are passionate about and can take action on.
- 6) Make yourself familiar with legislation and policy proposals that impact those low-income families and individuals. <http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/advocacy/index.cfm?cfid=12063969&cftoken=34378161>
- 7) Reach out to those living in poverty in your community by participating in parish and community activities and service.

Get Organized

- 8) Invite those who are directly impacted by poverty to join your discussions of the paper and become participants in the actions you all take to address poverty.
- 9) Identify existing resources or advocacy groups working on your issue in your community.
- 10) Reach out to those living in poverty in your community by participating in parish and community activities and service.
- 11) Develop a working group within your church and community- to help spread the word and raise concerns about “your issue” - make sure to involve some low-income families on your work group.
- 12) Share what you have learned with others in your community and encourage them to take action too.

Get Involved

- 13) Let your voice be heard by involving yourself in advocacy activities at the local, state and national levels.
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/advocacy/index.cfm?cfid=12063969&cftoken=34378161>
- 14) Identify key power brokers within your church and community who can assist you with your advocacy efforts.
- 15) Join your diocesan or Catholic Charities legislative network and become an active participant.
- 16) Contact your local elected officials with specific concerns about poverty in your community and ask for a staff contact to follow up with. Follow up with that staff. <http://capwiz.com/catholiccharitiesusa/home/>
- 17) Engage your state legislators and U.S. Congressional members.
<http://capwiz.com/catholiccharitiesusa/home/>
- 18) Once you have a strong understanding of your issue, have organized some community support, and know what changes you would like to see, engage your local media to call attention to what is happening in your community. <http://capwiz.com/catholiccharitiesusa/home/>
- 19) Donate to your local Catholic Charities agency or to Catholic Charities USA
<http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/donate/index.cfm?cfid=12063969&cftoken=34378161>

V. Executive Summary of the Paper

Poverty in the United States is a moral and social wound in the soul of our country. It is an ongoing disaster that threatens the health and well-being of our nation. We have the resources, experience, and knowledge to virtually eliminate poverty, especially long-term poverty, but we do not yet have the political will.

As members of Catholic Charities, one of the largest networks of social service providers in the nation, we are deeply troubled by the fact that in recent years the federal government has substantially reduced the resources devoted to assisting those who are impoverished. There has been a conscious and deliberate retreat from our nation's commitment to economic justice for those who are poor. We believe that poverty remains our nation's most serious political blind spot and one of our nation's most profound moral failings.

A Violation of Our Moral and Democratic Values

From a Judeo-Christian perspective, poverty means that the covenant with God has been ruptured. Our relationship with God is not in right order, and the injustice of poverty and extreme inequality cries out for change. Among the moral values that should govern our analysis of poverty are the following: human dignity, the common good, human rights, and the option for the poor.

The tolerance of widespread poverty in our midst undermines our social contract and weakens our democracy. It violates our basic sense of fairness and equity, and it diminishes our legitimacy as a beacon of political values that are admired around the world – freedom, justice, equality, and “liberty and justice for all.”

The Scope and Nature of Poverty in the United States

- 37 million people – about 12.6 percent of the population – live below the official federal poverty level, which in 2006 is \$20,000 for a family of four.
- Poverty rates are highest in central cities and in rural areas.
- Between 2000 and 2004, the number of people living in poverty increased by 5.3 million.
- Poverty rates did not decline, even though the economy as a whole was in a long recovery.
- The current poverty line significantly understates the number of people who are impoverished because of the inadequate methodology used to measure poverty.
- While most poor Americans are white, the percentage of people of color living in poverty is much higher. For example, the poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites is 8 percent, while the rate for African Americans

is 24.1 percent, for Hispanics, 21.8 percent, and for Native Americans, 23.2 percent. For children, the poverty rate for whites is 10 percent, while it is 28 percent for Hispanic children, 27 percent for Native American children, and 33 percent for African American children.

- Most of the poor are workers. Nearly two out of three families with incomes below the poverty line include one or more workers.
- Poverty affects many Americans. Almost half of all Americans will have experienced poverty for a year or more at some point in their lives by the time they reach age 60.

Growing Inequality

There is a growing gap between the haves and have-nots in our nation. For example, in 1998 (the latest year for which figures are available) the top 20 percent of the population held 83 percent of the total net wealth in the country while the bottom 80 percent held only 17 percent of the net wealth. Our nation has not seen such extreme inequality since the 1920s.

Successful Policies

We should not overlook the fact that the United States has an important set of basic public structures that work effectively to ameliorate poverty and provide opportunity. The poverty rate for individuals in 2004 would be nearly double if it weren't for these and other successful policies that are in place:

- Social Security, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid, Medicare, and housing assistance
- Minimum wage, civil rights laws, and labor laws

Weaknesses in Current Economic and Social Policies

Despite these successful programs, there are serious weaknesses in our economic and social policies that make our poverty rate much higher than it should be. Compared to other Western industrialized nations, we have one of the highest poverty rates and one of the lowest spending rates in terms of programs aimed at reducing poverty. The weaknesses in our current policies fall into two broad categories:

- Lack of livable wage jobs
- Lack of adequate social welfare policies

Specific Policy Proposals Supported by CCUSA

To combat poverty systematically and effectively, the federal government must implement policy changes to address the current weaknesses in our economic and social policies. These policy changes include steps to:

- 1) Create more livable wage jobs and raise wages, including the minimum wage
- 2) Invest in social policies that support low-income families and individuals
 - Strengthen and protect our nation's nutrition safety net

- Improve the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to benefit more families
- Ensure universal health insurance coverage
- Improve access to safe and stable child care
- Support policies that strengthen families
- Create more affordable housing
- Improve the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) to be more inclusive
- Improve access to education and training
- Address the growing wealth disparity

To assist in paying for these policy changes, Catholic Charities USA supports progressive tax policies that will benefit lower and middle income taxpayers while asking those who have more to pay more.

Role of Government

Faith-based groups and the non-profit sector do not have the resources to replace those functions which are the legitimate responsibility of government and the private sector. Catholic Charities USA will not accept the proposition that agencies such as ours should substitute for some of the basic functions of government.

We are committed to expanding our partnerships with other organizations in the private sector, the public sector, and the non-profit world. As members of Catholic Charities, we declare our firm commitment to act boldly in fighting poverty in our nation. *We propose that a major national goal be established to steadily decrease poverty in our nation so that by the year 2020 the rate of poverty will be reduced at least by half.* Only if we work together can we succeed in reaching this goal.

VI. Resources

This section contains information on poverty in the United States, policy analysis, and other strategies and resources to reduce poverty.

Catholic Resources

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB): www.usccb.org

The USCCB is an assembly of the Catholic Church hierarchy who work together to unify, coordinate, promote, and carry on Catholic activities in the United States

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development: www.povertyusa.org

The CCHD philosophy emphasizes empowerment and participation for the poor. By helping people to take a meaningful role in the decisions and actions that affect their lives, CCHD empowers poor people to move beyond poverty.

Office of Social Justice Archdiocese of St. Paul/Minneapolis: www.osjspm.org

This site highlights major themes from Catholic social teaching documents of the last century.

Federal Agencies

U.S. Census Bureau: www.census.gov

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: www.hhs.gov

U.S. Department of Agriculture: www.usda.gov

USDA leads the federal anti-hunger effort with the Food Stamp, School Lunch, School Breakfast, WIC Programs and other nutrition assistance programs.

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: www.hud.gov

National Public Policy Organizations

Brookings Institution: www.brookings.edu

The Brookings Institution is a private nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and innovative policy solutions. Research areas include health care financing, labor and wages, and welfare reform.

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life: <http://pewforum.org/>

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, launched in 2001, seeks to promote a deeper understanding of issues at the intersection of religion and public affairs.

Center for Budget and Policy Priorities: www.cbpp.org

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities is a national policy organization working at the federal and state levels on fiscal policy and public programs that affect low- and moderate-income families. The Center conducts research and analysis on proposed budget and tax policies and develops policy options to alleviate poverty, particularly among working families.

Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good

Center for Law and Social Policy: www.clasp.org

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) is a national non-profit that works to improve the lives of low-income people. It works to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects, and family stability of low-income parents, children, and youth and to secure equal justice for all.

The Food Research and Action Center (FRAC): www.frac.org

FRAC is a national nonprofit and nonpartisan research and public policy center that works to improve public policies to eradicate hunger and undernutrition in the United States. FRAC serves as the hub of an anti-hunger network of thousands of individuals and agencies across the country.

The Children's Defense Fund (CDF): www.childrensdefense.org

CDF is a national policy and research organization that provides an advocacy voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. CDF's mission is to ensure every child a successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities.

Heritage Foundation: www.heritage.org

The Heritage Foundation is a national research and educational institute - whose mission is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.

MDRC: www.MDRC.org

MDRC is a national public research organization that focuses on mounting large-scale evaluations of real-world policies and programs targeted to low-income people. The organization focuses on five main policy areas including Promoting Family Well-Being and Child Development; Improving Public Education; Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College; Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities; and Overcoming Barriers to Employment.

Kaiser Family Foundation: www.kff.org

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation is a non-profit, private operating foundation focusing on the major health care issues facing the nation. The Foundation is an independent voice and source of facts and analysis for policymakers, the media, the health care community, and the general public.

The Institute on Race & Poverty (IRP): www.irpumn.org/website/

IRP investigates the ways that policies and practices disproportionately affect people of color and the disadvantaged. A core purpose for IRP's work is to ensure that people have access to opportunity. Another is to help the places where people live develop in ways that both promote access to opportunity and help maintain regional stability.

Coalition on Human Needs: www.CHN.org

The Coalition on Human Needs is an alliance of national organizations working together to promote public policies that address the needs of low-income and other vulnerable people.

Annie E. Casey Foundation: www.aecf.org

The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

Center for Responsible Lending: www.responsiblelending.org

The Center for Responsible Lending is a nonprofit research and policy organization dedicated to protecting homeownership and family wealth by working to eliminate abusive financial practices.

The Workforce Alliance (TWA): www.workforcealliance.org

TWA is a national coalition of community-based organizations, community colleges, unions, business leaders and local officials advocating for public policies that invest in the skills of America's workers.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU): www.seiu.org

SEIU is an organization of more than 1.8 million members united by the belief in the dignity and worth of workers and the services they provide and dedicated to improving the lives of workers and their families and creating a more just and humane society.

AFL-CIO: www.aflcio.org

The AFL-CIO aims to improve the lives of working families- to bring economic justice to the workplace and social justice to our nation.

Publication Resources

“The Effects of Government Taxes and Transfers on Income and Poverty: 2004, Census Bureau, February 2005:
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/effect2004/effectofgovtandt2004.pdf>.

David Leonhardt, A Closer Look at Income Mobility, N.Y. Times, May 15, 2005: <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/national/class/>.

Unemployment Insurance: Role as Safety Net for Low-Wage Workers is Limited, Government Accountability Office (GAO-01-181). This report notes that in the 1990s low-wage workers were twice as likely to be unemployed, but less than half as likely to receive unemployment insurance. <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d01181.pdf>

The Common Good: Social Welfare and the American Future, Ford Foundation
www.fordfound.org/elibrary/documents/0144/toc.cfm

Mark Robert Rank, *One Nation, Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All*

Jason DeParle, *American Dream*

David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor*

Beth Shulman, *The Betrayal of Work*

James Lardner and David Smith, *Inequality Matters: The Growing Economic Divide in America and Its Poisonous Consequences*

Jared Bernstein, *Common Sense for a Fair Economy*

David Hollenbach, S.J., *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*