



# Study guide: **Poverty**

*Lutherans ready to help*

**By Robert C. Blezard**

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Lutherans are joining Christians nationwide to help people hurt by the economic downturn. Congregations are finding creative and exciting ways to care for their neighbors in need.

### EXERCISE 1: 'I'VE BEEN POOR'

Describe a time when you were struggling financially.

- What were your fears? Dreams? Hopes?
- Who helped you? What help do you wish you would have received?
- Did that experience shape how you view the poor today?

### EXERCISE 2: 'THE LEAST OF THESE'

Hundreds of Bible passages command us to care for the poor, but Matthew 25 makes it especially clear. Carefully read Matthew 25:31-46 and explore:

- Why have people been gathered together?
- What is the significance of "sheep" and "goats"?
- What are the criteria for judgment of both?
- Who are "the least of these"?
- In 2012, who are the least of these?
- Who are the least of these in your community?
- Is your congregation more sheep or goat?
- How about you?

### EXERCISE 3: COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

- If you had to guess, what are the poverty and unemployment rates of your community, county and state?
- What do you base your guess on?

Now get the facts. Through an online search engine (type in "poverty for" your state, county, then community) or other means, get the statistics.

- Are they worse or better than your estimates?



## Study guide: **Poverty** (continued)

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- What does it say about the needs of people?
- How can you help?

### EXERCISE 4: COMMUNITY RESOURCES

How would your congregation handle this: a down-and-out family comes to the church office looking for help with shelter, food, clothing or work.

- What resources, services or referrals does your congregation offer?
- What community organizations do you partner with to help?
- What agencies in the area could provide assistance?
- Does your congregation have a ready list of such help? Is it up to date?

**For action:** Compile (or update) a comprehensive list of services and agencies where poor families can get help. Give copies to your church office and congregational council. Suggest forming partnerships with the agencies.

### EXERCISE 5: ASSET-BASED HELP

Whether it's land for farming, available meeting space, or folks who can tutor or mentor families, congregations have assets and strengths they can use to help others.

- What resources or assets does your congregation have, both tangible and intangible?
- What would it take to put these things in place?

### EXERCISE 6: SUDDENLY POOR

The economic crunch has impoverished many people who were recently self-sufficient. Maybe they are now unemployed or have taken jobs that pay much less. Savings drained, they can't pay their bills and may be losing their homes.

- Do you know people who are suddenly poor?
- If you lost your job, how long would you get by on savings and unemployment benefits?
- What changes would you have to make?
- How would you get by if your new job paid 60 percent of your old one?
- What if you wanted to downsize but couldn't sell your house?



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- How long would it take before you were poor?
- What can you and your congregation do to help the suddenly poor?

### EXERCISE 7: ARE CHURCHES THE ANSWER?

Churches—locally, synodically and churchwide—are doing much to help, and more are stepping up all the time.

- But is that the answer to poverty?
- Will the problem be erased as soon as enough churches open soup kitchens, food pantries, homeless shelters, job banks and training centers, etc.?
- Do churches have that capacity?
- How much can your church help?
- What else needs to be done?

### EXERCISE 8: WHY ARE PEOPLE POOR?

- It's vital that people of God assist the poor, but isn't it as important to question why—in the world's richest economy—so many people are poor?

Our church helps not only in direct assistance but also in organizing and advocating for public policies that will help bring fairness and prosperity to the poor and disadvantaged.

- Isn't this as holy a work as offering food and clothing?
- Is your congregation involved in Lutheran advocacy?

**For action:** Learn more about ELCA Poverty Ministries and get involved ([www.elca.org/justice](http://www.elca.org/justice)).

### EXERCISE 9: RISING INEQUALITY

Income inequality is a growing problem. In a study last year, the Congressional Budget Office ([www.cbo.gov/publication/42729](http://www.cbo.gov/publication/42729)) found that from 1979 to 2007 overall household income rose by 62 percent, but gains were disproportionately higher up the income scale: by 275 percent for the top 1 percent, 95 percent for the top fifth as a whole, 25 percent for the middle fifth and 18 percent for the bottom fifth.

Income inequality accelerated as time went on. The report said: "In fact, between 2005 and 2007, the after-tax income received by the 20 percent of the population with the highest income exceeded the after-tax income of the remaining 80 percent."



## Study guide: **Poverty** (continued)

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- Should the benefits of an expanding economy be shared more equitably among people?
- How does systemic income inequality discourage people from getting ahead through hard work?
- How can we work for a more just economic system?
- Why is it important that people of God be concerned?

### EXERCISE 10: WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

David Brondos' article challenges us to look anew at the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Through the lens that identifies unjust economic systems, the Samaritan is more than simply a compassionate foreigner, and the Levite and Pharisee more than callous insiders.

Review Luke 10:25-37 with today's economic reality in mind.

- Among today's economic players who are the *lēstai* (social bandits)?
- In what ways are you and your congregation—us and our church—like Levites and Pharisees? How can we be more like a Samaritan?

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*Pritchett is the communicator for the Southwestern Washington Synod and a newspaper reporter in Bremerton, Wash.*

By Rachel Pritchett

Lutherans coast-to-coast are responding to Americans facing poverty at levels not seen since the Great Depression. We are bent over sinks at crowded meal sites and tugging out produce from once-fallow fields. We are hunched at computers helping with résumés, and slapping down more shelter mats.

Between 2000 and 2010, 15 million Americans tumbled from prosperity into poverty, pushing the total to 46 million people, or 15 percent of the population, says the U.S. Census. One in six (49 million people) went hungry in 2010.

Today, 12 million Americans still can't find work. Seven million homes are mired in foreclosures.

Mark S. Hanson, ELCA presiding bishop, said he is grateful for Lutherans' stepped-up response. He called for strengthened advocacy and ecumenical partnership in a historic time of need. "We have a greater capacity when we work together than when we work alone in our individual congregations," he said.

Josselyn Bennett, ELCA director for poverty and justice ministries, said, "We have to listen to people living in poverty and their stories. We need to see how those stories are repeated over and over. And then we



CHAD GREENE

**Nancy Oppinger (left), Marlene Brown and Samantha Lowery sort through donated clothes for Appalachian Helping Hands Ministry in Greeneville, Tenn. The ELCA effort provides free clothes, household items and food for more than 2,000 families in need throughout east Tennessee. A shopper (inset) selects shirts.**

## Poverty unpeeled:

# A glimpse of what's happening at home

Facing unprecedented need, Lutherans refuse to blink



need to not be threatened because we can't immediately fix the problems."

Following are 12 initiatives from Pennsylvania to Alaska that have burst beyond traditional responses to poverty. They prompt the question, "What else can be done?"

### 80,000 pounds isn't enough

In Pennsylvania Dutch country sits a potato patch that yielded 80,000 pounds of Kennebecs for 250 food pantries in three counties last season.

The Potato Project began in 2008 with Walt Zawaski of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kutztown, Pa. He'd lost his computer job and got inspired by a TV report about a Colorado farmer who had a bounty crop of potatoes, invited takers and

was overrun. "Well, I didn't think things were that bad [here], but we could do something," Zawaski said.

In his backyard, he stuck some potatoes in the dirt. Pantries gladly accepted the 7,500 pounds Zawaski and volunteers gave in 2009.

The patch grew to 13 acres. Last year, 988 volunteers harvested the crop in 103-degree heat. In four-hour shifts, they traipsed behind a dusty tractor that turned the potatoes up to the surface. Sent to the Greater Berks Food Bank for distribution, the 80,000 pounds quickly vanished.

"I had no realization that I would be in the potato business," Zawaski said. "[Volunteers flock to Louisiana and Tanzania] but nobody comes here to Kutztown."



### 'God left me here'

The lucky ones in the shadow of West Virginia's Capitol triple up in ramshackle houses or are closeted in subsidized high-rises. Those that aren't lucky live on the streets.

Two years ago, Ed Burch of Trinity Evangelical

Lutheran Church, Charleston, W.Va., and others began Trinity's Table, which today serves 300 Sunday-evening dinners to the elderly, mentally ill, sex offenders and the lonely.

Volunteers put in 12-hour days of worship, food preparation, and sharing soul and spirit with the hungry visitors. "But when we leave on Sunday night, it's a euphoria," he said. "A lot of people eat three, four, five meals. They're that hungry."

Parishioners join with butchers, food banks and farmers' markets to bring down the cost.

Late one night two struggling middle-aged women quietly knocked on the church door. They clutched a bushel of beans and a sack of chickens. "You took care of us, so we want to help you," they said.

Burch, 64, has had lung cancer but is still kicking. "God left me here to start this ministry," he said.

### Leave your wallet at home

Deep in the heart of Appalachia stands a thrift store so needed it draws families and the elderly from Greene, Cocke, Hamblen and Washington counties in Tennessee.

No one has to pay for the clothing, appliances, furniture and food at Appalachian Helping Hands. In nine years, 2,200 families have found

**For a study guide, see page 26.**



RHONDA VANOVER

**While they prepare peach delight, a dessert, Jericho Moses (left), Rhiannon Mercurief and Lindsey Beans-Polk get direction from Jana Deiss, pastor of Table of Grace Lutheran Church in Bethel, Alaska. Table of Grace and other community partners launched Kids in the Kitchen to help children like Fiola Dema (inset) learn to grow produce, read nutrition facts and cook healthy, affordable meals.**



help. They are young single parents. They are widows and former farmers.

“Tobacco’s gone now. That’s really had an impact,” said Sharon Seneker, the agency’s director.

Appalachian Helping Hands has a special heart for children, with Easter baskets and Christmas presents, along with baseball and dance outfits. It has its own bicycle ministry.

Local churches, including St. James Lutheran, Greenville, began the ministry and remain strong supporters. But money is scarce.

“We roll pennies to keep this ministry going,” Seneker said.

### Where family helps family

“Family” is a big word for Richard Suero, pastor of Faith/Santa Fe Lutheran Church, Milwaukee. It’s how he built this church’s membership from 45 to 600 in seven years.

Transplanted Latin American families were growing the neighborhood. But when Suero arrived, the church had a rule that its pantry could only be used by members—even if they didn’t attend worship.

“It wasn’t ... a real ministry. It was about coming, taking and going,” he

said. So Suero opened up the pantry to the community.

At dawn on Saturdays, he greeted and prayed with pantry visitors. Soon they came to worship. Like a brother, he tended to their needs. A man with a wrenching ulcer couldn’t get health insurance. Suero knocked on clinic doors until a willing surgeon answered.

And now the pantry, called *Dispensa Latina*, serves 150 families.

“When people know you are here for them, they have another part of the family ... the church,” Suero said.

There is another aspect of family for Suero, and that’s the greater community of businesses, social-service agencies and other churches that now help him. “This is my calling: to make the family grow,” he said.

### Filling the gap in the suburbs

The Community Resource Center at St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Mahtomedi, Minn., connects hundreds of needy families in the northeast Twin Cities suburbs to the help they need.

Four years ago, St. Andrew’s members already were working hard to lessen poverty in the inner city. But

with the downturn, the church was getting calls from the neighborhood, where services were scattered, non-existent or hard to get to.

“People were feeling lost,” said Kellie Cardinal, center director.

St. Andrew’s leaders met with agencies and churches to figure out what a one-stop center might look like. A member then donated \$150,000, enough to start the Community Resource Center in the church’s great hall. In a year, the center has helped 750 families with food, hotel stays, case management, résumés and prayer.

### A welcoming place

They came from refugee camps in Africa a half dozen years ago, drawn to Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Glen Ellyn, Ill., for English

classes, then joining the church.

Faith's immigrant members had been farmers in Africa. While life in Glen Ellyn was good, they missed planting and cooking white eggplant and other foods of their culture.

Faith picked up on the desire.

Today adjacent to the church stands the New Village Garden, also called *Terimber* (moving forward). Families plant, water and harvest under the direction of Beatrice Ndayisenga, who is from Burundi via a Tanzanian refugee camp.

Last year, its first, the garden fed 50 people. The immigrants took the remaining produce to a food bank, where some were once clients.

Witnessing the influx of newcomers at Faith has touched member Sue Cheshire. "We are learning from and appreciating each other more and more in this journey," she said. "And there will be more to come."

### 'Chasm is huge'

He got his start as a voice for the disenfranchised as a Capitol Hill intern for the late Sen. Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. A lifetime later, Paul Benz is an ELCA pastor and the advocacy director for the Faith Action Network in Seattle, one of 16 ELCA advocacy offices.

Benz collars politicians in marbled halls, urging them against cuts in housing and health care. He hosts advocacy days at lawmakers' offices where legions echo his call. He's at the pulpit urging letter campaigns.

He recently advocated for start-up monies to fund the new National Housing Trust Fund and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Benz continues to beat the drum for involvement. "It's about how we perceive our faith and our commitment to the gospel, and the work God calls us to do," he said. "Because the chasm between poverty and wealth is huge."

### New life on a floodplain

In 2008 monstrous rising waters from the Cedar River took no lives but destroyed 90 homes in Waverly, Iowa. Rebuilding was forbidden, and residents of this close-knit city wondered if the land could be anything other than a useless moonscape.

Mark A. Anderson, an assistant to the bishop of the Northeastern Iowa Synod, proposed a garden to provide Waverly's most unfortunate with fresh produce.

Soon a partnership formed that included the city, Wartburg College students, extension-service experts and truck farmers. Last year yellow squash, corn and beans sprang up at the Waverly Sharing Garden.

"Everybody has pitched in and done such a great job," said Tab Ray, Waverly's director of leisure services.

Today at meal sites seniors and struggling families find nutritious, organic vegetables on their plates. Plots for individuals and an orchard will soon be added.

"This is Iowa, and this is how we do things here," Anderson said.

### 'I pray for them all the time'

Being homeless is hard enough. Being young, homeless and gay is much harder.

Since 2010 providing a safe place for homeless youth ages 13 to 21 has been the work of Montrose Grace Place, a ministry of Grace Lutheran Church, Houston. The church is in the city's Montrose neighborhood, a magnet for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Each Thursday evening as many as 25 homeless youth come to Grace Place, where a dinner of macaroni and cheese or fried chicken is waiting. Wary at first, the visitors don't say much. With time, trust builds.

Some of the young people have aged out of the foster system and have been rejected by family. They

## How to help

Is it time for you to join the fight against poverty at home? Here are some resources:

- ELCA congregations are the most grassroots way to help. Visit [www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org) and click on "Find a Congregation" at the top.
- The ELCA's 65 synods have initiatives addressing poverty ([www.elca.org/synods](http://www.elca.org/synods)), as do the nine regions ([www.elca.org/regions](http://www.elca.org/regions)).
- The ELCA will distribute \$866,550 in domestic-hunger grants to congregations and other groups in 2012. The efforts on these pages received ELCA support. To find out if your initiative might qualify in 2013, visit [www.elca.org/domestic-hunger-grants](http://www.elca.org/domestic-hunger-grants).
- If meeting the needs of immigrants is compelling, visit [www.elca.org/immigration](http://www.elca.org/immigration).
- To find a nearby ELCA advocacy office, visit [www.elca.org/advocacy](http://www.elca.org/advocacy).
- To help Americans coping after a disaster, visit Lutheran Disaster Response ([www.ldr.org/volunteer](http://www.ldr.org/volunteer)).
- To share prayer for relief of poverty, click on [www.elca.org/prayer](http://www.elca.org/prayer).
- Lutheran Services in America ([www.lutheranservices.org](http://www.lutheranservices.org)) assists 6 million people a year.
- Bread for the World ([www.bread.org](http://www.bread.org)) helps globally and at home.
- Wheat Ridge Ministries ([www.wheatridge.org](http://www.wheatridge.org)) helps launch Lutheran human-care initiatives.
- Thrivent Financial for Lutherans ([www.thrivent.com](http://www.thrivent.com)) supports a wide range of domestic poverty initiatives.

are couch-surfing, sleeping in parks or forced into sex by predatory adults in exchange for shelter. "They don't have families through this period from childhood to adulthood," said Lura Groen, pastor of Grace.

An art project, board games or karaoke comes next. Then talk with peers. The evening ends with the





CHRIS OCKEN

**Food and family are what folks get at Faith/Santa Fe Lutheran Church in Milwaukee. Richard Suero, pastor, helped open the congregation's food pantry to the community. Today the pantry serves 150 families, and the congregation has grown from 45 to 600 members.**



young people taking food that's left and slipping back into the night.

Volunteer Barbara Carroll watches as the door closes. "I pray for them all the time," she said.

### Facing enormous need

Unemployment is at 50 percent in the endless desert punctuated by the tiny town of Rock Point, Ariz.

Diabetes, alcoholism and suicide are far too common among its 3,000 inhabitants. Food and water are scarce. Residents drive 20 miles to windmill-driven wells, where they fill plastic tubs and toss them back onto their trucks.

"Life's a struggle here," said Lynn Hubbard, an ELCA pastor and executive director of the Navajo Evangelical Lutheran Mission, in operation since 1953 with House of Prayer Lutheran Church, a grade school and clinic.

He recently opened the Hozho Café at church, where mostly elderly people find sustenance. *Hozho* means harmony in Navajo.

A clinic staffed by a nurse's assistant is the only available health care. The sickest routinely wait an hour

for an ambulance. One in four of the schoolchildren lacks running water or electricity at home.

Not all are Christian. Some practice traditional spirituality. It doesn't matter. The mission is here first to meet human need. "And then, oddly enough, they think that you love and care about them, and then they start coming to Christ," Hubbard said.

### Home to mega-shelter

The promise of a job draws a young family from Ohio. But they find no work in Vancouver, Wash., where the high-tech, timber and fishing industries are down. They land in a shelter at St. Andrew Lutheran Church, joining the new homeless that the pastor, Jim Stender, sees so much of now.

For nine years, St. Andrew and nearby St. Paul Lutheran Church have helped the homeless as part of one of the biggest shelter initiatives in the Pacific Northwest: the Winter Hospitality Overflow, or WHO.

Every day from November to March, WHO swings open the door to its sites when all other Vancouver shelters are full. That's all the time.

The numbers have "gone off the charts," said Chris Nolte, pastor of St. Paul. This past winter 10,000 bed-nights were provided by 1,500 WHO volunteers who served 13,000 hours.

Support comes from 40 Vancouver churches and social-service agencies.

"This has been a marvelous cooperative effort," Stender said.

### Nutritious eating starts early

A Yup'ik girl wanders in during fellowship, damp and shivering. Sores cover her face and arms. She wolfs down hotdogs and barbecued meat before vanishing.

Jana Deiss, pastor of Table of Grace Lutheran Church, Bethel, Alaska, knew what she was seeing. Boarding schools of the past that separated Alaska natives from subsistence traditions had birthed a lost generation of people now in their mid-years who never learned to hunt and fish.

Their descendants, like the girl, hadn't tapped into traditional skills either, much less those needed today to prepare nutritious meals. This resulted in greater risk of hunger or of lifetimes of dependence on Spam meat and ramen noodles.

From that encounter last year, Kids in the Kitchen was born. It's a once-weekly cooking class that teaches third- to sixth-graders how to select and prepare healthy foods. Table of Grace was an organizer.

Young people learn about sharp knives and how to identify spoiled food. They make simple snacks and soups. They harvest from plots they have planted. They take trips to grocery stores, where they study labels.

"I hope that I'm empowering kids to love nutritious food and to hand that down to the next generation," Deiss said.

As for the girl, "As far as I'm concerned, she was Christ," Deiss added. □

# Can we identify with the good Samaritan?

Jesus' parable can tell us a lot about poverty & wealth

By David Brondos

Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) may seem an odd text on which to base a discussion of poverty and wealth. None of the characters appear to be either wealthy or poor.

While the traveler attacked by robbers and left for dead needed assistance, the parable doesn't portray him as poor.

Priests and Levites like the ones in the parable were usually neither wealthy nor poor. The Jewish high priests and their families had amassed immense wealth by controlling the vast resources that flowed into the Jerusalem temple from all over the world. But most common priests and Levites who assisted in the temple service had to find other income to make ends meet.

Similarly, neither the Samaritan nor the innkeeper is presented as wealthy or poor.

But let's not forget about the robbers. Who were these people?

In *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (Fortress Press, 1993), biblical historian Richard Horsley describes how the powerful, merciless and corrupt Roman Imperial system (with which the high-priestly families were in close collusion) generated tremendous poverty among the population in the region. As we know from Jesus' parables and sayings, many people were forced to go into debt, forfeit their land and inheritance, sell themselves off as servants or even as prostitutes, and look for any work they

could find as day laborers.

Hardships led some to flee to the hills as outlaws, where many turned to banditry to survive. The Greek word *lēstai* used in Jesus' parable referred not simply to robbers or thieves but to these brigands or social bandits.

The traveler who was attacked was a victim not just of the bandits but of the unjust, oppressive system that resulted in such widespread poverty and led many to fall into violence and thievery.

The priest and the Levite who passed by were part of that system. Their work in the temple required that they remain ritually pure and observe the Jewish law carefully. Their concern for this work may have been behind their refusal to show compassion to the victimized traveler.

They probably thought the system benefited them, even though it was widely believed that the high priests unjustly took many resources generated by the temple that the law of Moses assigned to the common priests and Levites. Even they were being robbed by the system, rather than benefiting from it.

When Jesus took a whip and angrily overturned the tables of the traders and money changers employed by the high priests, he called the place a "den of thieves," using the same Greek word, *lēstai*.

The fact that control of the temple system by the corrupt high-priestly elite was largely responsible for the poverty that led many into banditry

means that, ultimately, not only were the high priests among the thieves responsible for the violent attack on the traveler, but their own thievery had given rise to the thievery of others.

It took a Samaritan—an outsider oppressed and despised by the Jewish and Roman systems—to reach out in compassion and help the victimized traveler. When we read this parable, most of us want to identify with the good Samaritan. Yet if we really wish to do so, we must intentionally place ourselves outside of the unjust and corrupt systems that lead to the same reality today as they did in Jesus' day.

What unjust systems? Those that enable a privileged few to enjoy enormous wealth while breeding desperation and hardships that result in widespread crime, violence and social disintegration here and around the globe. Many are left with no alternative but to migrate far from home in an attempt to survive.

Like the priest and Levite, most of us prefer to do nothing to challenge sinful systems and structures that we wrongly believe actually benefit us. We simply look the other way when confronted with the damage they do to the lives of so many.

If we truly desire to see ourselves in the Samaritan, we must not only reach out in solidarity to other victims of those systems but must be willing to step outside of these systems to become true neighbors to those whose well-being they destroy. Only then can we work alongside them and others to build alternative systems and structures that truly benefit all.

So do we *really* want to identify with the good Samaritan, the despised outsider? Do you?

*Brondos, an ELCA missionary, serves as professor of theology and biblical studies at the Theological Community of Mexico, a Mexico City-based ecumenical consortium of seminaries including Augsburg Lutheran Seminary.*