

**ECONOMIC INEQUALITY:  
A Christian Perspective**

***Leader's Guide***

Produced by the Economic Inequality Subgroup  
Desert Southwest Conference Board of Church and Society



Thank you in advance for your leadership in bringing this important topic to the attention of your congregation. Economic inequality is such a multi-faceted issue that it is difficult to address in a short-term course. Evidence shows that there are a large number of social ills associated with it, and it threatens the very survival of democratic self-governance. All of these economic, social and political issues deserve close examination. From the perspective of Christian faith, extreme economic inequality is a symptom of a deeper, spiritual problem. Our acquiescence in the continued growth of economic inequality reflects an acceptance of the cultural values which have been so deeply instilled within us, resulting in a disregard—or even outright rejection—of a more faithful sense of who we are and what we value.

Great care has been taken to provide you with a curriculum that grounds its analysis in scripture and in historic teachings of the Church, while confronting current day economic and political realities associated with rapidly increasing economic inequality. Deeply held political ideologies can make this subject difficult and divisive. Prayerful consideration should be given to how these divisions should be managed. Your role as a facilitator will be especially important in encouraging effective dialogue. For example, you may find it helpful at times to suggest that each person be given an opportunity to speak before returning to someone who is tending to dominate the conversation.

The curriculum consists of 5 sessions. It is recommended that each class meeting include at least as much time for discussion as is needed for the video presentation. The contents of the segments, and their approximate times, are as follows:

#### SESSION ONE (24 minutes)

- Introduction
- What is going on?
- Why should we care? A political perspective

#### SESSION TWO (18 minutes)

- Why should we care? An economic perspective

#### SESSION THREE (26 minutes)

- Why should we care? A prophetic perspective

#### SESSION FOUR (16 minutes)

- Why should we care? A kingdom perspective
- Why should we care? A Wesleyan perspective
- Why should we care? A United Methodist perspective

#### SESSION FIVE (11 minutes)

- What should we, the Church, do about it?

As you shepherd your group's discussion of the questions which have been supplied, please remember that the goal is not to debate the merits of competing economic and political ideologies; rather, the objectives are as follows:

1. To raise the awareness that existing economic inequality is incompatible with a faithful reading of the prophets and with Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God;
2. To build a foundation for hope—to begin the visioning work our churches must do if we are to provide good news to people who increasingly see their lives as dedicated to producing wealth for other people; and
3. To honor the intent of a resolution overwhelmingly passed by our 2015 Annual Conference which calls on all of our congregations to
  - “recognize the destructive power of economic inequality on human potential, relationships, and our relationship with God, to advocate for the vulnerable and disadvantaged, and to work for greater equality;”
  - “request the congregations of our Conference to use study materials produced by the Conference Board of Church and Society, for congregation-wide study and reflection on the nature, extent, and effects of economic inequality prior to the 2016 Session of the Desert Southwest Annual Conference;” and
  - “request the Conference Sessions Committee to use the results of the studies described above for discussion at the 2016 Session of the Desert Southwest Annual Conference, to the end of creating strategies for the congregations of the DSC and the communities they serve to address economic inequality..”

The questions are generally open-ended, and consequently, there are no easy answers. As you prepare for each session, preview the DVD presentation, and examine the questions. Contemplate issues they raise for you, and anticipate areas where strongly-held ideologies may impede faithful discussion. We recommend that printed copies of the discussion questions be provided to each participant; they will find it easier to reflect and respond if they can refer to their own copy. Some questions refer to scripture. Plan to read these passages in advance, and have a Bible available during study sessions, so cited verses can be referred to during discussions.

Finally, there is at least one question with a reasonably straightforward answer which we'll provide at no cost. Session One, question #3 of the questions pertaining to the “What is Going On?” portion reads as follows:

For three decades after World War II, the economy boomed and income inequality was low. What were some of the factors that influenced that? What factors brought these favorable trends to an end?

Here's one way to answer that question:

*More than 1/3 of workers were represented by a union. Americans with very high incomes paid federal income taxes at rates as high as 70% to 91%. By the late 1950s, U.S. had the best-educated workforce in the world, in part because higher education was affordable. The "GI Bill" paid for education for many returning service members. Then, unions underwent political and*

*economic challenges which greatly reduced their size and impact; tax rates for high income earners were sliced dramatically; and costs of attending college skyrocketed due to a number of factors, including sharp drops of state support of public universities.*

Again, thank you for facilitating your congregation's study of this issue. Our prayer is that this curriculum can help you and the study participants in your congregation deepen your commitment to a more equal world, and indeed to the Kingdom of God on earth.

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