

Restoring Justice and Democracy in America:

What faith communities can do

A six session congregation-based educational program

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**Assisted by a Neighbors In Need grant from the
Northern California Nevada Conference
of the United Church of Christ**

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Neighbors In Need Pilot Project

"Restoring Justice and Democracy in America: What Faith Communities Can Do"

Today is a Kairos moment for churches as our communities, nation, and world are going through seismic shifts, unprecedented in history. As a global community we face challenges and opportunities that will determine whether or not the future of this planet will be one where life can flourish for our children and their offspring, or become a wilderness of suffering and strife. Close to home, this future becomes tenuous as our own democracy is being tested as never before. Often people feel overwhelmed and sometimes paralyzed by the enormity of the issues facing us today. Churches stand as places where people can join together to honestly assess their lives and courageously respond to what they discover. In other words, churches are charged to speak truth and offer hope. As theologian Walter Brueggemann states it, we need “access to the crisis that can go deep into the crisis and so avoid denial and imagine past the crisis, and so avoid despair.”

The inspiration for designing a curriculum for congregations to address economic disparities in our communities, nation, and world, came from the involvement of interfaith leaders in the Occupy Movement of 2011-12. The Occupy Movement tapped into a pervasive malaise and discontent that “had no name” until people came together to talk, act, and take initiative to change the course of business-as-usual in the United States. The leading issue became the economic rift between the wealthiest 1% and the remaining 99% and the implications for this throughout our common life and shared governance. People are angry and no longer willing to be silent bystanders to the possible demise of our democracy. The next step is to plan, educate and strategize in order to address the critical issues of our time. The next step is to organize our churches to become a more vocal and critical voice in the public square.

The series of workshops proposed here seek to support churches in this task today. Each session will be grounded in scripture and tradition as a rationale for the tasks at hand.

Program goals and objectives:

The workshops will engage this overarching need by addressing these goals and objectives:

- Review, reconnect and deepen the congregation’s awareness and commitment to the church’s role in restoring democracy and promoting economic justice.
- Heighten an understanding of the church as an active participant in the “public square”.
- Provide theological and faith perspectives and rationale.
- Invite participants in the workshops to make connections between larger societal issues, their own communities and individual lives.

- Gain a clear vision of the role of the church in furthering community well-being today.
- Cultivate and provide venues and opportunities for direct involvement in cultivating personal and community well-being
- To help people look more closely at their social locations and how these influence our understandings of issues and decisions regarding them.

Educational methods:

The approach to reaching these goals in the workshops will be participatory:

- Each session will involve community-building activities with attention to social location.
- An overview of the topic of the day with attention to specific themes will be offered through various methods: presentations, video clips, short readings, conversations with people impacted by the issue, etc.
- Guided discussions on the topic of the day.
- Some mode of artistic engagement with the topic. (At least preparing the environment with visual displays that are evocative of the subject of the day.)
- Biblical/faith perspectives that undergird the topic.
- Presentation of possible actions in response to the topic.

The settings for the workshops will be designed so that people will be stimulated to think, reflect, feel and become motivated toward becoming engaged in “Becoming the Beloved Community: Responding to the Call to Love Our Neighbors as We Love Ourselves.” To this end the workshops will include creating an artistic/creative environment utilizing posters, quotes, pictures, use of scripture, poetry, literature.

The approach to reaching these goals will be a series of participatory workshops:

The series:

One: “Becoming the Beloved Community: Responding to the Call to Love Our Neighbors as We Love Ourselves”

What is a vision of a beloved community? (Scripture, tradition, theology, literature, art)

Legacies from the past: Where church communities have participated in social movements.

Implication for today: Why should we care? What shall we do?

Two: “Your Shrinking Pocket Book: The Growth of Inequality in the U.S. and its Consequences”

Three “Money and Politics”

Four: “The Demise of Objective Journalism in the U.S. through Corporate Control of the News Media and the Internet”

Five: “The Promises and Perils Facing Public Education”

Six: “ A Web of Injustice: A Hope for Equality”

The interconnectedness of all the economic justice issues with themes of race, gender, class – societal power dynamics, and how the church both participates in and resists these entrenchments will be noted. Again, what might a beloved community look like today, locally – where you live? (Scripture, tradition, theology, literature, art) How can we participate in it?

Format for Sessions

Prepare the room: Set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion. Place relevant books, magazines and articles on a table, and posters about the recent growth of inequality and its consequences on the wall. As prepared by participant volunteers, post the charts/visuals depicting the issue in a clearly visible location. Set up two flip charts and visual projection equipment. Have marking pens and tape available for posting reports.

In addition, make sure there is a recorder to note the main points that are presented from the various discussions. Have the recorder write these on newsprint. Post them every session as part of “preparing the room” for an ongoing record of insights and questions emerging from group reflections.

Session Schedule: 2 hours based on a version of the following:

- 10 minutes: Opening: Pitching the Theme: Introduce the topic of the day
- 5 minutes: Respecting the Spectrum Pledge. Listen, respect, respond
- 10 minutes: Reading the Room: Exercise where people place themselves in relation to the topic.
- 20 minutes: Presentation of the topic of the day: Video clips and or presentations
- 40 minutes: Responding with discussion
- 15 minutes: Why this matters: Faith/theological input
- 15 minutes: Possible actions: Sign-up sheets reflecting multiple levels of commitment.
- 5 minutes: Closing

Leaders Guide

Restoring Justice and Democracy in America:

What Faith Communities Can Do

Introduction:

A modest Neighbors In Need grant has provided an opportunity to develop a congregation-based educational program designed to help members of UCC congregations further understand and reflect theologically on critical issues concerning justice and democracy in America. Several UCC congregations have been identified to pilot the program and assist in making recommendations for its strengthening before dissemination to other UCC congregations and, hopefully, congregations in other denominations as well. It is proposed that a study group be organized in each of the pilot congregations. An outline of the project, including goals and objectives and a suggested session schedule, is provided under separate cover. The following guidelines are offered to help assure that the program goals are achieved.

Program implementation:

A key member of the congregation with a passion for justice should be identified to introduce the project to a committee with responsibilities for adult education. Once the project has been adopted, a leadership group should be identified to set the dates, time and location of the program. The leadership group should then promote the program and recruit the participants. Potential participants should understand that they are committing to attend a six session pilot group.

A program facilitator and a recorder should also be recruited. The facilitator should be skilled in leading groups; the recorder should be able to write clearly on flip charts and be able to transcribe the recorded information on a computer for timely transmission to group participants. The facilitator and recorder will participate in a training program and be responsible for implementing the pilot project.

Session facilitation: *

Effective session facilitation is central to the study group's success. The following guidelines provide theological undergirding for fostering healthy relationships among group members, procedures for developing commitments for following the theology, principles of session facilitation, and implementation procedures.

Respecting the spectrum: UCC congregations can be highly diverse in perspectives concerning the issues to be discussed in the proposed program. Considering this cultural dynamic, it will be important for participants to take the time to listen deeply and respectfully to each other, in order to build mutual understanding and avoid the potential for unnecessary conflict. We are therefore referring to this important step in the educational process as **respecting the spectrum**.

In the spirit of theologically grounding a faith based project, we turn to the Apostle Paul's teaching concerning the importance of listening to each other to best foster healthy relationships

among the members of Christian communities. In Chapter 5, verses 13 through 15 of Paul's letter to the Christians in Galatia he writes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." Paul advocates following the "Golden Rule" that is emphasized in the sacred texts of every major world religion. Following the Golden Rule can be supported by having the participants develop love thy neighbor commitments.

*Gratitude is expressed to Rabbi Dr. Milton Matz, playwright, dispute resolution specialist, retired Professor of Clinical Psychology (University of Chicago), and clinical psychologist for his generous assistance in developing the guidelines for facilitators and suggestions for developing ground rules.

During the first session participants will be introduced to the importance of developing, adopting, and following the love your neighbor principle—the covenant—to assure healthy relationships among group members during the study process. This can be accomplished in a number of ways. One might be through a very informal process, with the recorder writing "Love Your Neighbor Covenant" on the top of the flip chart, while the facilitator asks the participants to propose what should be expected from members of a study group following these commitments. Another is to have available the unison statement that has been developed and have participants agree to follow it. It could be posted on newsprint with space for participants to add anything else that would help them feel confident and safe to express themselves during the sessions. Facilitators can be sensitive to the needs and dynamics of their respective congregations as they address this task. Whatever approach is chosen, it is important that the group own their own commitments to the love your neighbor principle or ground rules for participation in the study group process.

The following ground rules were adapted from "Team Groundrules" by Kenneth Crow, DRM Associates, as posted on the Internet. These are offered for the benefit of the facilitation team in guiding the process of developing the covenant.

- We seek to understand differing perspectives on the issues being discussed rather than persuade others to accept our perspective or certain other perspectives.
- We treat each other with respect.
- We intentionally work to enhance personal relationships and offer feedback in a constructive manner, lifting up the good in the other.
- We strive to celebrate individual and mutual understanding of the issues being addressed.
- We pay attention to deep listening to understand individual perspectives on the issues being addressed.
- As group members, we will pitch in to help when necessary to enhance understanding about the issues being address

- We honor confidentiality—what is said in the group session stays in the group.
- We strive to assure a safe place for self-expression.

Other commitments:

- We will hold six regularly scheduled sessions on Tuesdays at 7:00 pm in the x room.
- Additional sessions will be held if determined necessary to more fully understand the issues.
- All group members are expected to attend the sessions unless they are out of town, on business, vacation, or sick. If a group member is absent she/he will team up with another group member in order to understand the substance of the issues addressed in missed session(s).
- The facilitator will distribute an agenda and information about the session by noon the day before the session.
- Sessions will start on time and end on time. All group members are expected show up on time.
- A summary of any conclusions reached in the sessions and any recommendations for further work needed to better understand the issues will be distributed within 24 hours after the session.
- We will emphasize full discussion of the issues being discussed.
- We will focus sufficient time on group process and conduct process checks when one member believes we are deviating from our ground rules.

This all boils down to three little, but huge words: listen, respect, respond.

We recommend the following statement to be used during each session to remind participants of their covenant to follow the love thy neighbor principle throughout the study group process.

We can talk about things that really matter, even if we disagree.

We can stay in the conversation together, even if we feel uncomfortable.

We can respect each other, and trust that we are offering our best insights.

We believe that we each have an equal stake in healing of our communities, our country, and our lives.

We will speak from our own perspectives using “I” statements.

We can love our neighbor and receive love in return.

This unison reading is contained under the “Respecting the spectrum” heading in the narrative for each session. The statement should also be written on newsprint and posted on a wall in the front of the room. In this way it will stand as a visual reminder and also be available for participants to add any additional thoughts or suggestions.

Respecting the spectrum: Listen, respect, respond—our covenant to follow the love your neighbor principle. This can be written on newsprint and posted on the wall.

Facilitation principles: The following principles were adapted from those offered by group process specialists at Johns Hopkins University on the Internet will help study group participants follow their commitments to the love thy neighbor principle or ground rules throughout the educational program.

- Begin the study group sessions on time and conclude on time.
- Create ownership of the love thy neighbor commitments or ground rules.
- Foster a culture of honesty.
- Remind participants that they do not have to like everyone in the group in order to fully engage with them.
- Assure participants that they can fully express their perspective on the issues being discussed without judgment by others.
- Affirm collective responsibility for mutual education and the quality of related discussions.
- Include theological reflection as key part of the discussion; drawing upon Scripture related to the issue and having participants express how God is speaking to them about the issue being discussed.
- Highlight the importance of developing and practicing listening skills.
- Spotlight the need for full participation.
- Everyone needs to take a fair share in discussing the issues being addressed.
- Developmentally draw upon strengths of group members as they are revealed.
- Cultivate philanthropy and mutual responsibility for understanding the issues being discussed.
- Help participant's value creativity.
- Cultivate the idea of developing ways of better following the love thy neighbor commitments as a continuing agenda. It can be productive to review and renegotiate these commitments from time to time.
- Post the commitments so that they can be easily seen and referred to during each session.

Equipment needs:

The following equipment and supplies are needed to conduct the educational program:

- Laptop computer with an Internet connection.
- Projector with cord for making the connection to the computer.
- Extension electrical cords that enable proper placement of the projection equipment.
- Projector stand.
- A screen that can be easily viewed by all participants.

- A flip chart and easel (stand). Having two would be ideal.
- Blue tape unless the flip chart paper will adhere to room walls.
- Marking pens for recording.
- A microphone, if needed, as an aid to communication as well as an additional microphone for participant use in asking and responding to questions.

Recording information:

The recorder should clearly write the key points made by the group on flip charts that are visible to all study group participants. With assistance of the facilitator, after the session the recorder should review what is written to be sure of its accuracy. Recorded information should then be typed and sent to the participants in time to be received at least one day prior to the next session.

Technical support:

All of the video clips used in the sessions are “live links” on a flash drive. The location of the clip, beginning and end, is recorded in the narrative. It will be important to queue up the clip before the session.

Preparing the room:

Seek to build community by mixing the participants as much as possible. Set up tables of six in front of the focal point for leading the discussion and showing visuals. Number each table. Prepare a list of participants with their assigned table number in front of each name. Place list on a registration table with nametags. At each session assign participants to a new group; spouses/partners should be assigned to different tables. Help the participants associate with new people as much as possible. Be sure to set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion.

Set up flip charts, ideally two, in the instruction area with sufficient paper installed for recording comments. Have masking tape for posting recorded comments and marking pens available. Set up a lectern and a microphone in the instruction area. Have a spare microphone available for use by participants when raising questions or responding from the tables.

On a side table place books, magazines, and articles related to the session topic. Participants should be invited to bring topic relevant materials to be displayed on the table as well as visualizations of the issues being addressed. Post visuals on the walls. Volunteers should be recruited to prepare the visuals on large sheets of paper for easy viewing during the session. Let the participants express their creativity in preparation of visuals.

Each of the tables should contain a pitcher of water and enough glasses/cups for all participants. Water should be available for session leaders.

Session evaluations:

Before the close of the session it will be important to evaluate how the educational program went for the participants. A simple and helpful method of obtaining feedback is to ask the participants what went well for them during the session and what should be changed to improve the overall program and the next session. On one piece of butcher paper the recorder will list what went well during the session; on another the recorder should list what should be changed to improve the program for participants in the future. Another recorder can list what should be changed to improve the next session. This feedback should also be sent to the participants before the next session.

If time becomes an issue, an alternative would be to have participants take home a simple evaluation sheet with the same questions on them that they can answer at their leisure. They can return when they return for the next session.

Handout:

It is recommended that a one-page handout be prepared to remind the participants about the date, time and location of the next session, and to provide recommendations for further reflection on the current topic and preparation for the next session.

Prayer and song:

This is a partnership with God. We recommend opening the sessions with a prayer, seeking God's presence and guidance in the educational process. A song that serves as the transition into the substance of the justice issues being addressed, such as "Deep Waters" by Pepper Choplin, can be included as well. Appropriate texts from Scripture are included in the narratives. It is also recommended that the sessions conclude with a prayer circle and the recitation of a modified version of the Mizpah Benediction: [May] the Lord watch over [and challenge] you and me, [while] we are absent one from the other." (Gen. 31:49) Recruit volunteers to lead in prayer and song.

Session One: “Becoming the Beloved Community: Responding to the Call to Love Our Neighbors as We Love Ourselves”

Prepare the room: Set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion. Place relevant books, magazines and articles on a table, and posters about the recent growth of inequality and its consequences on the wall. As prepared by participant volunteers, post the charts/visuals depicting the issue in a clearly visible location. Set up two flip charts and visual projection equipment. Have marking pens and tape available for posting reports.

In addition, make sure there is a recorder to note the main points that are presented from the various discussions. Have the recorder write these on newsprint. Post them every session as part of “preparing the room” for an ongoing record of insights and questions emerging from group reflections.

- 5 minutes: Opening: **Pitching the Theme**

Good evening everyone, and welcome to the first session of “Restoring Justice and Democracy in America: What Faith Communities Can Do.” In this first of six sessions, we will reflect on the inspirational role faith has played in movements for social change and civil rights in the 20th century. Religious organizations/leaders have always played a significant role in social movements in the United States: For example, the abolition of slavery, suffrage, labor, temperance, civil rights, health care, abolition of nuclear weapons, farm workers, LGBTQ rights; immigration, environmental issues, and so forth. Furthermore, Stephen Carter, Professor of Law, Yale University, and author of *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*, emphasizes the critical role religious communities play in American life. In this work he uses the image of the three-legged stool to talk about the three foundational institutions that support and sustain a civil society necessary for democracy to flourish – family, school, religious organizations. Religious organizations have, and continue to play a critical role in exercising and sustaining democracy.

In this session, we will also reflect on a story from the life and ministry of Jesus and consider what it has to say to us about what it means to follow in his footsteps and address the issues of injustice we face in today’s world. But before we delve into our topic I would like to share some important guidelines for our group discussions each week.

- 10 minutes: **Respecting the Spectrum:** In this first session it will be important for you to take the time to establish the guidelines for how participants should interact with one another. Prior to the first session review the recommendations in the Leader’s Guide and summarize the ways that each participant is expected to listen, respect, and respond and

follow the love your neighbor principle during all group discussions. The aim during the sessions is to “build the beloved community” by both honoring our differences as well as finding ways to build on our agreements so that we can act together to effect change in our community and in our world.

To this end, I would like to introduce the following pledge as a unison recitation

We can talk about things that really matter, even if we disagree.

We can stay in the conversation together, even if we feel uncomfortable.

We can respect each other, and trust that we are offering our best insights.

We believe that we each have an equal stake in healing of our communities, our country, and our lives.

We will speak from our own perspectives using “I” statements.

We can love our neighbor and receive love in return.

- **10 minutes: Opening Song and Prayer**

We suggest that you begin the first session with a short gathering prayer song well known to your community. A suggestion you might consider is #742 in the NCH.

Invite participants to recite together The Prayer of Jesus from the New Zealand Prayer Book:

Eternal Spirit

Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver,

source of all that is and that shall be,

Father and Mother of us all.

Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the earth!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever. Amen.

- **15 – 20 minutes: Introductions:** Ask each participant to briefly introduce themselves by sharing their name and completing the following sentence: I am here tonight because ...
- **20 minutes: Dialoging With Dr. Martin Luther, King Jr.**

We open this six week series by taking time to meditate and reflect on a few excerpts from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr Letter written in 1963 from Birmingham Jail and addressed to “my

fellow clergymen.” Dr. King wrote this letter in response to the ways in which white clergymen were critiquing his actions. The leader may read the excerpts out loud and invite the class to simply listen. Before the letter is read, ask the class to take note of the ways in which Dr. King connects the work of justice with his understanding of the bible, faith and the role of the church.

Handout: Excerpts from Dr. King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963:

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid. Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds... (Break in Text)

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, would serve as the channel through which our just grievances could reach the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: “Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother.” In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: “Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.” And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent—and often even vocal—sanction of things as they are.

But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.

For Silent Reflection: Take time again to read over these excerpts from Dr. King's letter. Underline a phrase or sentence that stands out for you from this excerpt. What is your response to what Dr. King has to say about the role of the church within society? What do you think Dr. King might say to the church today?

- **15 Minutes: Break into Groups of 3-6:** Ask participants to introduce themselves to one another and to share the sentence they underlined and why.

- **15 Minutes:** Large Group Discussion: What do you think Dr. King would say to the church today? What role is the church to play in enacting democracy and justice?
- **10 minutes: Introduce and Read the Gospel Text**

One way to introduce scripture story for this session is to note that both Dr. King and Jesus grew up within a particular religious tradition and that both spoke from within that tradition to the religious establishments of their respective times.

The Background of John 2:13-17

In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), the story of Jesus cleansing the temple appears at the end of his ministry as he enters Jerusalem during the final week of his life. However, in the gospel of John, the cleaning of the temple occurs at the beginning of his ministry not long after John the Baptist is seen preparing a way for Jesus by baptizing in the Jordan. This would not have been Jesus' first visit to the temple. It is likely that he was dedicated in the Jerusalem temple as a baby and that he grew up visiting the temple regularly and learning from his elders about the law and the prophets. Thus, when Jesus entered the temple, he was returning to a place that had been significant to his own spiritual development and had shaped his understanding of what it meant to love his neighbor as he loved himself. However, what Jesus found going on in the temple courts was the exact opposite.

The selling of animals for sacrifice had become a money making business for the priests and the teachers of the law. They had created a purity code by which they relegated certain people to the status of "less than" and thus unclean and unworthy of God's blessings. In order to get right with God and gain access to the temple, people were required to buy livestock to sacrifice. In this way the priests became brokers of salvation. In order for people to pay for an animal, they had to exchange their Roman coins for temple currency. In collusion with the Roman Empire, the priests worked the exchange system to maximize profit. The end product was that those who were poor went into debt and got poorer and poorer while the wealthy classes, which included the priests, got richer and richer. The temple system had become a means by which the Roman Empire kept the people oppressed. It is significant that Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers during the Passover feast, the very time when the Jewish people celebrated their liberation from slavery in Egypt.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'

- **15 Minutes: for Large Group Responses: Questions for consideration (choose one or create another appropriate for your congregation.)**
 1. Many have compared Jesus actions in the temple courts to the acts of civil disobedience that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement such as the lunch counter "sit-ins" and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. More recently, people of faith have understood the

challenges posed by the Occupy Wall Street Movement as a contemporary parallel to the challenge that Jesus posed to the religious, economic and political systems of his day. Do you see parallels between Jesus' actions in the temple and what our call is as Christians today?

2. Where are the "temple courts" of our day—those places where money, power and religion conspire to oppress people? In what ways might Jesus be calling us to drive out the livestock sellers and overturn the table of the money-changers in our society today?

(Good time for a break)

- **20 Minutes: Introduce and Watch the Video**—The National Council of Elders was formed in November, 2011 and brings together many of the people who played significant roles in the human rights movements of the 20th Century in the United States, including the Civil Rights Movement, the Farm Workers Movement and the Women's Movement. When the Occupy Movement began these respected leaders saw the potential of this movement to galvanize people of faith and the greater society to take on the issue of economic inequality as the next human rights movement. The aim of the National Council of Elders is to pass on the wisdom gleaned from past human rights movements of the 20th century to a new generation. To read more about the National Council of Elders go to <http://www.nationalcouncilofelders.net>

On September, 12, 2012, the Council of Elders held a press conference to announce their release of the Greensboro Statement. You can find the full statement at <http://www.nationalcouncilofelders.net/our-statement/>

The two short videos we are about to watch are from this press conference and contain opening statements by (3rd video clip) Fr. Paul Mayer (5:32) and (4th video clip) Rev. Dr. James Forbes (4:53) in which they talk about what it means for them as elders to "pass the torch" of working for justice to a new generation.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ms-gNKlbYas>

20 minutes: Large Group Discussion: What connections do you see between past, present and future movements for social change? What do you believe to be the human rights issues of our day that people of faith are called to address? In what ways do you see your church acting as an agent of social change? In what ways do you see your church maintaining the status quo? How might we interpret Reverend Forbes' call to carry the torch for our own communities?

You are invited to end the discussion with the reflections of Occupy Faith leader, Rev. Michael Ellick (2nd video clip) and the song sung by Tony Perry (first video clip)

<http://occupyfaithnyc.com/2012/09/24/video-council-of-elders-press-conference/>

Closing: -- The Mizpah Benediction

Have the participants make a circle around the room and recite the following modified form of the Mizpah Benediction: “[May] the Lord watch between [and challenge] you and me, [while] we are absent one from the other.” (Gen. 31:49)

Suggested activity: In preparation for the upcoming weeks, Have participants reflect on these questions and bring them to the next session: What is our church involved with now: How do we respond to the needs in our church, our community. How might “we carry the torch” forward?

Additional Resources:

The Work of Faith Leaders and the Interfaith Tent at Oakland

Video from Odyssey Network, “Occupy Oakland: A Commitment to Nonviolence”

<http://www.odysseynetworks.org/video/occupy-oakland-a-commitment-to-nonviolence>

Huffington Post Religion, “The Big Interfaith Tent at Oakland: Faithfully Engaging the 99%”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-laura-rose/interfaith-occupy-oakland_b_1101997.html

Gartner Top Predictions 2014: Plan for a Disruptive, but Constructive Future

“A larger-scale version of Occupy Wall Street-type movement will begin by the end of 2014, indicating that social unrest will start to foster political discussion.”

The information technology research firm, [Gartner](#), which describes itself as “the world’s leading information technology research and advisory company.” The firm, based in Stamford, CT “offers world-class, objective insight on virtually any area of IT.” The firm has more than 900 expert analysts that cover 1,200 topics across the IT landscape in 26 countries. They claim to produce “rigorous research process and proven methodologies provide the foundation for unbiased, pragmatic and actionable insight.”

Gartner has issued a report: *Gartner Top Predictions 2014: Plan for a Disruptive, but Constructive Future*. The report mentions the future of the protest and resistance movement and its impact on IT businesses. They see “a bartering based (sub) society” and the resurrection of “initiatives like Occupy Wall Street but on a much larger scale.” Gartner “flags” for the near-term that: “A larger-scale version of Occupy Wall Street-type movement will begin by the end of 2014, indicating that social unrest will start to foster political discussion.” And, they also flag: “By 2015, traditional paid jobs will be replaced by bartering-based systems and voluntary roles in such areas as patient care.” They warn companies not to be seen as the “culprit” that is “driving these labor effects.” They warn that there could be a “backlash in the form of buyer strikes, labor unrest and increased scrutiny of owner and executive compensation.” They urge executives to change their mindset “to start thinking in terms of participating instead of winning, giving the idea of sustainability a whole new meaning.”

For additional information go to: <http://www.popularresistance.org/technology-research-firm-predicts-occupy-on-a-larger-scale/>

Session Two: “Your Shrinking Pocket-book:

The Growth of Inequality in America and its Consequences”

(Estimated time = 106 minutes; ideal time for maximum discussion=2 hours)

Prepare the room: Set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion. Place relevant books, magazines and articles on a table, and posters about the recent growth of inequality and its consequences on the wall. As prepared by participant volunteers, post the charts/visuals depicting the issue in a clearly visible location. Set up two flip charts and visual projection equipment. Have marking pens and tape available for posting reports.

In addition, make sure there is a recorder to note the main points that are presented from the various discussions. Have the recorder write these on newsprint. Post them every session as part of “preparing the room” for an ongoing record of insights and questions emerging from group reflections.

10 minutes: Opening: Pitching the Theme: Introduce the topic

Good evening everyone, and welcome to the second session of “Restoring Justice and Democracy in America: What Faith Communities Can Do.” Our theme for tonight is, “The growth of inequality in America and its consequences.” I trust that you had an opportunity to review some of the recommended presentations concerning our theme by Paul Krugman, Robert Reich and others in the inequality links on the Moyers & Company web site as well as some of the articles and presentations on other web sites about inequality in America.

When Bill Moyers retired from his weekly broadcast in 2011 in his concluding remarks he warned his viewers/listeners that America is rapidly becoming a plutocracy and this force is undermining the foundations of democracy. In this session and those to come we will explore Bill’s concern. Fortunately, Bill became motivated to return to his weekly PBS shows thereby continuing his effort to provide expert perspectives on critical public issues of concern to Americans. This series of educational programs draws heavily upon clips of Bill’s recent interviews. Based on these presentations and the discussions to follow you will have a deeper awareness of and commitment to the role of faith communities in restoring justice and democracy in America.

Opening prayer and song: Before examining our biblical text for the session, I would like to call on (name the person who volunteered) to offer an opening prayer and lead us in a song. Thank the volunteer and others who prepared visuals and those who brought resources to share.

Texts from Scripture: Our texts for this evening come from the Book of Amos in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament. Amos is writing to the Israelite people during a period of prosperity, at least for a few and—according to Amos—at the expense of many. For the Israelite people at the time there seems to have been a breakdown in the old tribal and family systems of

land ownership and the emergence of a wealthy class at the top of society. Over and over in this brief nine chapter book Amos announces to the people being addressed that, because of their social injustice and religious arrogance, the Lord will punish them by means of a total military disaster. Of particular relevance to our discussion of the recent growth of inequality and its consequences in America, I will read from Chapter 2, verses 6b, 7a, and Chapter 3, vs. 2 (NRSV).

“...because they sell the righteous, for silver,
And the needy for a pair of sandals—
They who trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth,
And push the afflicted out of the way;...
You only have I known of all the families of the earth;
Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

In the conclusion of the chapter we find the passage that inspired many human rights leaders in the past, including Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“But let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an ever flowing stream.” (5, 24)

Let us keep these words of hope and the concerns raised by this wise prophet in mind as we focus on our own situation in America today.

- 10 minutes: **Reading the Room:** Exercise where people place themselves in relation to the topic.

With the passages from Amos in mind, let us now share where we are in relation to the topic for tonight’s session. Break the group into triads to discuss the way inequality is developing in America and any related concerns about the implications of this trend for justice and democracy. How have you or members of your family or people in your community experienced the recent growth of inequality in America?

- 5 minutes: **Respecting the Spectrum:** Listen, respect, respond—our covenant to follow the love your neighbor principle. Before beginning the conversation, let us once again repeat our pledge in unison:

We can talk about things that really matter, even if we disagree.

We can stay in the conversation together, even if we feel uncomfortable.

We can respect each other, and trust that we are offering our best insights.

We believe that we each have an equal stake in healing of our communities, our country, and our lives.

We will speak from our own perspectives using “I” statements.

We can love our neighbor and receive love in return.

- 21 minutes: **Presentation of the topic**

As you found in the clips and statistics recommended for review for tonight's session, many leading public policy specialists in the United States have identified the recent growth of inequality in the U. S. and its consequences as a significant concern. We now turn to three clips about the issue from a September 20, 2013 interview of Robert Reich by Bill Moyers. Robert Reich is currently a professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. Before joining the Berkeley faculty Professor Reich had a distinguished career in government service, including the position of Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration. Time magazine named him as one of the 10 most successful cabinet secretaries of the century. He has published 13 books and co-directed the recently released film, "Inequality for All," being shown in theaters and available on several internet sites.

Moyers & Company: September 20, 2013 interview of Robert Reich:

The three clips to be shown and their location on the entire interview are: the issue, 4:47 to 11:00; proposals for its resolution, 40:30 to 45:30; the hope, 49:00 to 52:35. Total time=14minutes, 38 seconds.

<http://billmoyers.com/episode/full-show-inequality-for-all/>

AN OPTIONAL EXERCISE: The growth of inequality demonstrated: The 10 Chairs Exercise (15 minutes)

Go to the 10 chairs exercise developed for the Faith-Rooted Economics training program presented in 2012 to selected Bay Area faith community leaders by Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice-California (CLUE-CA) and the FAITHS Program of the San Francisco Foundation (see web site at www.CLUECA.org) and follow the Faith-rooted economics link). Modify the beginning of the exercise under "TRAINER 1." Explain to the participants that through this exercise you will experience the recent redistribution of wealth in America and its consequences as described by Professor Reich. The exercise uses the period from the mid-1990s to 2012. If used, 10 volunteers will be needed. Have each of the volunteers take a seat. Continue with the narrative under: [SCENE IS THIS, ALL 10 PEOPLE SEATED IN 10 CHAIRS]. It will not be necessary to include the material under "TRAINER 2."

- 15 minutes: **Responding with discussion**

The following are suggested questions to help participants discuss and reflect on the information presented in the video clips:

What stood out for you in watching these video clips? Did anything surprise you? What issues related to the recent growth of inequality in America and its consequences for justice and democracy are of particular concern to you? How do you assess the hope in resolving the issues of concern?

If the group is large have each table of six discuss the questions. If the group is small break the group down into groups of three. One person in each group will need to lead the discussion, another will need to serve as the recorder. After 10 minutes of discussion, have each recorder report to the group as a whole. The report process should be no longer than 5 minutes. The key points made during reports from each group should be recorded on a flip chart, with the facilitator (overall discussion leader) concluding by noting the key points.

- 30 minutes: **Theological reflection or why the findings matter and possible actions.**

In the Gospel of Luke, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry we find him being invited to preach in his hometown synagogue (see Luke 4:14-21). As is customary, the preacher turns to a portion of scripture upon which the sermon is based. Here Jesus turns to the place in the scroll where the following words of the Prophet Isaiah are recorded:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
And recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Portions of Isa. 61:1-2 and 58:6,NRSV)

As you reflect on this text used by Jesus to define his ministry and the concerns raised by the Prophet Amos in the light of recent trends in inequality in America, what is God saying to you about justice and democracy and possible actions that could and should be taken by you personally and by your faith community to turn the situation around? First identify and reflect on the injustices and the implications for democracy. Then identify what God is saying to you about these situations. Lastly, identify practical actions that you and members of your faith community can do to help resolve the situation. Arriving at a consensus is not important here. What is important is sharing what God is saying to each participant about the issues and related actions.

Suggestion for facilitators: Maintain the same groups and group leaders/recorders as established earlier. For a period of 15 minutes, have the participants follow the same directions used earlier in sharing with each other. Post the questions to be used to guide the theological reflection sessions. Refer to these points as you are instructing the group about what to do. Remind the groups how much time they each have for sharing, when they have only one minute left, and when they should switch to enable everyone in the group to respond to the questions. When making reports from each reflection group, the recorder should jot down on a flip chart the injustices and consequences for democracy of concern and the actions proposed, both personal and faith community actions. Once again the facilitator can note the key points made.

Possible actions: Commitment sheets reflecting multiple levels of engagement.

Have participants express possible actions on the following levels of engagement concerning the growth of inequality in America.

Sheet One: Commitments to explore the issue of inequality in America through reading books, articles or browsing web sites, including reading blogs about inequality.

Sheet Two: Commitments to talk with workers in different sectors of the economy and those who are unemployed or underemployed to find out how they are being impacted by the recent growth of inequality in America.

Sheet Three: Commitments to influence the thinking of public officials about the consequences of the rapid growth of inequality for justice and the quality of democracy in America.

- 10 minutes: **Closing**

Distribute the handout concerning Session Three and related preparation.

Remind the group about the date, time and location of the next session.

Recommend that they take the time to follow up on the commitments, and further *reflect* on what God is saying to them personally and to the faith community as whole about this critical issue. These further reflections could be identified and recorded at the beginning of Session Three.

Conclude with the prayer circle: The modified Mizpah Benediction

Have the participants make a circle around the room and recite the following modified form of the Mizpah Benediction: “[May] the Lord watch between [and challenge] you and me, [while] we are absent one from the other.” (Gen. 31:49)

Preparation and Additional Resources:

In preparation for the third session that addresses money and politics, we recommend reviewing the interview of Clara Jeffery, Monika Bauerlein & Thomas Frank, “Dark Money in Politics”, by Bill Moyers recorded on Moyers & Company (June 17, 2012)

<http://billmoyers.com/2012/08/15/two-dark-money-groups-outspending-all-super-pacs-combined/>

Also the following articles can be found in the Washington FCNL (Friends Committee on National Legislation) Newsletter: January/February 2013 issue: “Money in Politics,” “Did Campaign Spending Matter in 2012,” “After *Citizens United*-What Changed?,” “Can One Man Turn an Election?,” “What’s a PAC? A Money in Politics Glossary,” and “Six Steps Away from Citizens United.”

SUGGESTED SESSION TWO-RELATED FURTHER STUDY (if this material was not reviewed in preparation for Session Two):

Paul Krugman interview by Bill Moyers, Moyers & Company, January 12, 2013:

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/paul-krugman-on-recessions-and-recovery/>

There are additional interviews listed on the Moyers & Company Web site in the link to Inequality.

Check out other web sites concerning the recent growth of inequality in America and its consequences for justice and democracy.

Review the film “Inequality for All,” available on iTunes, Google play and amazon.com, and the following YouTube clip concerning the distribution of wealth in America:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM>

Become informed about the issue of “rent-seeking” (see Wikipedia definition and discussion), and reflect on how this practice is affecting justice issues and the quality of democracy in America.

Also have participants consider the following questions in preparation for Session Three: What are the consequences of big money in politics for justice and democracy in America, and what are the potential collaborating organizations seeking to turn the current situation around?

Note to facilitator: The above information should be placed on a handout.

Ask for several volunteers: One to open the next session with a prayer and possibly a song, others to prepare visuals illustrating the influence of big money in politics at national and state levels of government, and still others who will bring books and other materials concerning the issue.

Session Three: Money and Politics

Prepare the room: Set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion. Place relevant books, magazines and articles on a table, and posters about the recent growth of inequality and its consequences on the wall. As prepared by participant volunteers, post the charts/visuals depicting the issue in a clearly visible location. Set up two flip charts and visual projection equipment. Have marking pens and tape available for posting reports.

In addition, make sure there is a recorder to note the main points that are presented from the various discussions. Have the recorder write these on newsprint. Post them every session as part of “preparing the room” for an ongoing record of insights and questions emerging from group reflections.

Distribute handout: “Money in Politics.” *FCNL Washington Newsletter*, January/February 2013, pages 1-4, 9, 10, 12. Downloadable at:

<http://fcn.org/resources/newsletter/janfeb13/>

(FCNL is the Friends Committee on National Legislation.)

Be sure that videos are ready to be shown.

- 5 minutes: Opening: **Pitching the Theme: Introduction to the topic**

Good evening everyone, and welcome to the third session of “Restoring Justice and Democracy in America: What Faith Communities Can Do.” Our theme for tonight is “Money in Politics.” This seems to be the elephant in the room as it influences political decision-making at the national level of government today, the emphasis of our conversation.

Before examining our biblical texts for the evening I would like to call on (name the person who volunteered) to open our session together with a prayer and anything else on her/his heart to spiritually ground our deli

Our biblical texts for this evening come from books of Leviticus and Amos in the Hebrew Bible--the Old Testament.

Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great,
but judge your neighbor fairly.

Leviticus 19:15 NIV. If you like a longer selection, add v 13a “Do not defraud...”

You trample on the poor
and force him to give you grain.

Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them ...
You oppress the righteous and take bribes
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts...
Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts.
Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy
on the remnant of Joseph.
Amos 5:11-15 NIV, excerpts

- 10 minutes: **Reading the Room:** Exercise where people place themselves in relation to the topic.

Participants express their views about tonight's theme. Break the large group into triads. In the light of our biblical passages, have the participants express their views about the influence of money in political decision-making at the national level of government today.

- 15 minutes: **Respecting the spectrum:** Listen, respect, respond—our covenant to follow the love your neighbor principle. Before beginning the conversation, let us once again repeat our pledge in unison:

We can talk about things that really matter, even if we disagree.
We can stay in the conversation together, even if we feel uncomfortable.
We can respect each other, and trust that we are offering our best insights.
We believe that we each have an equal stake in healing of our communities, our country, and our lives.
We will speak from our own perspectives using “I” statements.
We can love our neighbor and receive love in return.

- 10 minutes: **Presentation of the topic**

To gain perspective on tonight's theme, we turn to the clips of interviews of experts on the topic of money in politics by Bill Moyers. The first is a January 15, 2012 interview with Clara Jeffery and Monica Bauerlein, co-editors of Mother Jones magazine since 2006. Before her current position Clara Jeffery worked at “Washington City Paper” in Washington, D.C. and was a senior editor at Harpers Magazine. Monica Bauerlein was the editor of “City Pages” in Minneapolis-St. Paul.

The second is a November 8, 2013 interview of John Nichols and Robert McChesney. John Nichols is Washington correspondent for the The Nation magazine and a pioneering political blogger. Robert McChesney is professor and leading scholar of communications at the University of Illinois. He is the author and editor of 23 books. Together they recently published, Dollarocracy: How the Money & Media Election Complex is Destroying America.

Video 1

Moyers&Company: Clara Jeffery & Monica Bauerlein: January 15, 2012 interview “dark money.” The overall discussion considers the conspiracy of cash that allows the rich to influence the most fundamental political freedoms of Americans.

Start video, moving selector to 07:15, play. Stop at 09:17. Total time=2min, 1sec.

<http://billmoyers.com/2012/08/15/two-dark-money-groups-outspending-all-super-pacs-combined/>

Video 2

Moyers&Company: John Nichols & Robert McChesney: November 8, 2012 interview, “How Big Money & Big Media Undermine Democracy.”

Start video, moving selector to 02:20, play. Stop at 04:50. Total time=2min, 30sec.

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/john-nichols-and-robert-mcchesney-on-big-money-big-media/>

- 30 minutes: **Responding with discussion**
 1. To say that big money controls all of politics, would be an overstatement. It’s a matter of degree of influence. Has the influence of big money gotten out of control?
 2. What are the likely justice implications of big money in politics?
 3. How is big money influencing democracy in America?
 4. Many of those in Congress are, themselves, wealthy people. Does this fact influence the laws they make, or don’t make?
 5. In 2010, the Supreme Court ruled that “individuals and corporations that control wealth are able to spend large and concentrated amounts in a democratic election.” How has this ruling influenced the election process in America?
 6. What can be done to limit the influence of big money in politics and who are potential collaborators?
- 30 minutes: **Theological reflection or why the findings matter and possible actions.**

Have the participants take a few minutes to reread the text from the prophet Amos at their tables. Then ask the participants to express what God is saying to them about the implications for justice and democracy in America of the influence of big money in politics at national and state levels of government. Have the participants identify practical actions that they can do as individuals and as a faith community to help resolve

the issues identified. Arriving at a consensus is not important here. What is important is sharing what God is saying to each participant about the issues and related actions.

Possible actions: Commitment sheets reflecting multiple levels of engagement.

Sheet One: Commitments to explore the issue of money and politics in America through reading books, articles, and browsing web sites, including reading blogs about the issue.

Sheet Two: Commitments to talk with people who are well informed about the issue of money and politics and those who may know about potential collaborating organizations that are doing something to change the situation.

Sheet Three: Commitments to influence the thinking of public officials about money and politics and the implications of the current situation for justice and democracy in America.

The handout includes six steps that people could ask legislators to take. (Back page, then continuing on page 10.) Five of these six steps don't require constitutional change.

- 10 minutes: **Closing**

Distribute the hand out concerning Session Four and related preparation.

Remind the group about the date, time, and location of the next session.

Recommend that they take the time to follow up on the commitments, and further *reflect* on what God is saying to them personally and to the faith community as whole about this critical issue. These further reflections could be identified and recorded at the beginning of Session Four.

Recommend that they review the following interviews conducted by Bill Moyers. Moyers & Company Web site: Marty Kaplan, "Big Money's Effect on Big Media," April 27, 2012:

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/marty-kaplan-on-big-moneys-effect-on-big-media/>

And: Susan Crawford, "Why U.S. Internet Access is Slow, Costly and ...," February 8, 2013.

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/susan-crawford-on-why-u-s-internet-access-is-slow-costly-and-unfair/>

Question to consider in preparation for Session Four: What are the consequences for justice and democracy in America of the decline of objective journalism?

Note to facilitator: The above information should be contained on a handout.

Ask for several volunteers: One to open the next session with a prayer and possibly a song, others to prepare visuals illustrating the decline in objective journalism and its consequences for justice and democracy in America, and still others who will bring books and other materials concerning the issue.

Conclude with the prayer circle: The modified Mizpah Benediction

Have the participants make a circle around the room and recite the following modified form of the Mizpah Benediction: “[May] the Lord watch between [and challenge] you and me, [while] we are absent one from the other.” (Gen. 31:49)

Session Four: “The Demise of Objective Journalism in America through Corporate Control of the News Media and the Internet”

(Estimated time =100 minutes; ideal time for more discussion=2 hours)

Prepare the room: Set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion. Place relevant books, magazines and articles on a table, and posters about the recent growth of inequality and its consequences on the wall. As prepared by participant volunteers, post the charts/visuals depicting the issue in a clearly visible location. Set up two flip charts and visual projection equipment. Have marking pens and tape available for posting reports.

In addition, make sure there is a recorder to note the main points that are presented from the various discussions. Have the recorder write these on newsprint. Post them every session as part of “preparing the room” for an ongoing record of insights and questions emerging from group reflections.

10 minutes: Opening: Pitching the theme: Introduce the topic

Good evening everyone, and welcome to the fourth session of “Restoring Justice and Democracy in America: What Faith Communities Can Do.” It is hard to believe that we are two-thirds of the way through the educational program that we committed to four weeks ago. Our theme for tonight is, “the demise of objective journalism in America through corporate control of the news media and the internet.” I trust that you had an opportunity to review Professor Kaplan’s research on the way the corporate media has evolved into a form of entertainment in the U.S. rather than the journalism needed for an effective democracy. Hopefully you also had an opportunity to examine Professor Crawford’s work on how the Internet has come under the control of large media corporations as a generator of profit that has accelerated the demise of objective journalism.

Opening prayer and song: With this brief introduction, let us now anchor our time together with a prayer and a song. Call upon the person who volunteered at the end of Session Three. Thank the volunteer and others who prepared visuals and brought refreshments and resources to share.

Texts from Scripture: Our scripture for this evening was used by a retired UCC pastor at centering gatherings just prior to protests at banks that were foreclosing on homes. Each protest was carried out with the family that was losing its home. The text was selected verses from Proverbs, Chapter 29. Before the reading the leader briefly defined the meaning of the word “righteous” as used in the text and in many other biblical texts as, “People living in rightly ordered ways with other people—all people—the environment, and with God.”

Let us now read our text for tonight’s session, as those gathered prior to the protest. I will read the dark print; you will follow by reading the light print.

The facilitator should pass out the following to each participant.

A Litany Based Upon
Selected Verses from Proverbs, Chapter 2

When the righteous are in authority the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan.

By justice a king gives stability to the land; but one who makes heavy exactions ruins it.

In the transgressions of the evil there is a snare, but the righteous sing and rejoice.

When the wicked are in authority, transgression increases; but the righteous will look upon their downfall.

Many seek the favor of a ruler, but it is from the Lord that one gets justice.

Following the reading of this message of hope, the leader offered a prayer for the safety of all involved in the protest and God's presence. The prayer concluded with the words of the prophet Amos addressing the people of God living under oppression: "[May] justice role down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream (Amos 5:24, NRSV)."

In the context of the message of hope and encouragement from Proverbs and the prophet Amos, let us also consider a text from the prophet Jeremiah that provides perspective on the problem of the demise of objective journalism that tonight's session is addressing. I am reading from Jeremiah Chapter 5, verses 30 and 31 (NRSV):

"An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land;

The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct;

My people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes?"

- 10 minutes: **Reading the room:** Exercise where participants place themselves in relation to the topic.

With Jeremiah's concerns in mind and your impressions of the issues raised about the demise of objective journalism in the recommended clips and resources, what has been your personal experience with this concern?

Before we begin our conversation about tonight's topic, let's first check on how we are doing as a study group.

- 5 minutes: **Respecting the spectrum:** Listen, respect, respond—our covenant to follow the love your neighbor principle. Before beginning the conversation, let us once again repeat our pledge in unison:

**We can talk about things that really matter, even if we disagree.
We can stay in the conversation together, even if we feel uncomfortable.
We can respect each other, and trust that we are offering our best insights.
We believe that we each have an equal stake in healing of our communities,
our country, and our lives.
We will speak from our own perspectives using “I” statements.
We can love our neighbor and receive love in return.**

- 15 minutes: **Presentation of the topic**

The concern being addressed in tonight’s video illustrates the way big money influences the political process and public policy making at the national level in America, and most likely at state and local levels of government policy making as well. The interview of University of Illinois professor of communications and internet/public media specialist Robert McChesney on a Democracy Now news program provides further evidence for the points made by professors Kaplan and Crawford. Recall their concern about the way corporate controlled media is hurting democracy in the U.S. and the way corporate control of the Internet is working to accelerate the problem.

Democracy Now: April 2013: Interview with McChesney: “Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet Against Democracy.”

Begin the clip at 25:50; end at 38:00. Total time=12 minutes, 10 seconds.

http://www.democracynow.org/2013/4/5/digital_disconnect_robert_mcchesney_on_how

- 15 minutes: **Responding with discussion**

The following are suggested questions to help participants focus their discussion on the key points made by Professor McChesney. Break the group down into groups of three, with one person—the one with the first letter of the last name the highest in the alphabet leading the discussion, and another person—the one with the first letter of the last name the lowest letter in the alphabet—serving as the recorder. The facilitator should be sure that everyone in the group has an opportunity to express him or herself and respond to the questions. Following the discussion of the questions within the small groups, the facilitator should call for reports from each group, with the study group recorder jotting down the key points on a flip chart.

- 1) What evidence is presented supporting McChesney’s contention that major news media is controlled by large corporations in in the U.S. with profit motives blocking journalism’s role of serving the public interest?

- 2) How does control of the Internet, as described by McChesney, accelerate the process of controlling public access of information and deteriorating journalism's role in serving the public interest?
- 3) What are the implications for freedom of access to information and democracy in the U.S. of commercial and government controlled media mostly providing entertainment and carefully screening or censoring the news that is presented rather than engaging in objective journalism?
- 4) McChesney describes the political process in the U.S. as corrupt. How would you describe the dynamics of the corruption process?
- 5) What are the justice implications of the findings reported by Kaplan, Crawford, and McChesney?
- 6) What does McChesney recommend for curtailing current trends in the media, and for providing an alternative to the present corporate/government controlled media system in the U.S.?

- 5 minutes: **Recording the main points or “take away insights.”**

Have newsprint ready for recording responses to the question: What are the main points or “take away insights” that surfaced during the discussion?

- 30 minutes: **Theological reflection or why the findings matter and possible actions.**

With the participants remaining the small groups used in the discussion of the video clip, provide the following instructions for the theological reflections. The same persons can be asked serve as facilitators and recorders.

Part 1: Before the reflections in small groups, the facilitator sets the context in scripture as follows: The prophet Micah was deeply concerned that the Israelite people had become influenced by the pressures of secular society and strayed from following God's commandments. In the conclusion of his address to the Israelite people and us he says, “He [God] has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8, NRSV)

As you reflect on this text, and the situation we find in America's media system today, including the Internet, what is God saying to you about the justice issues? Give the participants about three minutes to prayerfully reflect on the issues and then have each of the facilitators provide an opportunity for each participant to express the issues that God has placed on her or his heart. The recorder will jot down what has been reported.

After each group has completed the reflection component of Part 1, have the recorders report back to the total group, with the study group recorder jotting down the key points made on butcher paper. The facilitator can note the key points made.

Part 2: Begin with a further text from scripture that provides hope and remind the participants of the hope expressed in the text from Proverbs read earlier. The prophet Jeremiah provides words that have long given hope to the people of God: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11, NRSV)

Have the participants take about three minutes to prayerfully reflect on what God is saying to them about the hope in reversing the trends in corporate and public media today and about the hope for providing objective journalism through alternative sources at local and national levels. Have the participants identify actions that can be taken personally and as a faith community. The facilitator in each small group should have each participant report, with the recorder taking notes. The recorders in the small groups should then be asked to report the information to the total group, with the study group recorder jotting down the key points on flip charts. Once again the facilitator can note the key points made.

Possible actions: Commitment sheets reflecting multiple levels of engagement concerning the decline of objective journalism in America.

Sheet One: Commitments to explore the issue of the decline of objective journalism through corporate and government controlled sources of media through reading books and articles or browsing web sites, including reading blogs, about the issue.

Sheet Two: Commitments to establish/support independent sources of news and information at national, state, and community levels.

- 10 minutes: **Closing.**

Remind the group about the date, time and location of the next session.

Recommend that they take the time to follow up on the commitments, and further *reflect theologically* on what God is saying to them personally and to the faith community as a whole about the issues related to the media in America today.

Resources concerning the demise of objective journalism:

Democracy Now

The Financial Times

Truthout.org

Truthdig.org

Note to facilitator: The above information should be contained on the handout.

Ask for several volunteers: One to open the next session with a prayer and possibly a song, others to prepare visuals illustrating the issues facing public education in America, and still others who will bring books and other materials concerning the issue.

Evaluate the session using the method recommended in the Leaders Guide.

Conclude with the prayer circle: The modified Mizpah Benediction

Have the participants make a circle around the room and recite the following modified form of the Mizpah Benediction: “[May] the Lord watch between [and challenge] you and me, [while] we are absent one from the other.” (Gen. 31:49)

Session Five: “The Promises and Perils Facing Public Education”

Prepare the room: Set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion. Place relevant books, magazines and articles on a table, and posters about the recent growth of inequality and its consequences on the wall. As prepared by participant volunteers, post the charts/visuals depicting the issue in a clearly visible location. Set up two flip charts and visual projection equipment. Have marking pens and tape available for posting reports.

You might consider: Use quotes from John Dewey, Marian Wright Edelman, and other contemporary educators
Children’s art
Classroom pictures

In addition, make sure there is a recorder to note the main points that are presented from the various discussions. Have the recorder write these on newsprint. Post them every session as part of “preparing the room” for an ongoing record of insights and questions emerging from group reflections.

- 15 minutes: **Opening: Pitching the Theme: Introduce the topic of the day**

In the United States, we have prided ourselves for generations on a system of public education that has been envied by nations all over the world. Public schools are publicly funded, universally available, and accountable to the public. Today there are myriad attacks on the public in public education. Why is it critical that we keep public education public, and accessible to all young people?

Public education is critical for forming citizens who are capable of thinking deeply and broadly about our shared life. Education is key to the success and continuation of a vibrant democracy that seeks to provide life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to all people. This is compatible with Christian beliefs in the full flourishing of all people, indeed, all forms of life and our habitable environment. It is imperative that a public educational system be maintained and supported in order to uphold the democratic principles and vision that gave rise to these United States.

Economic justice plays a key role in education at this time. “The questions we must ask when private alternatives are promoted are whether the market has a greater interest in serving the poorest and most vulnerable children and what all children and our society have to lose or gain if we privatize all or part of the vast institution of public education. We in the churches have advocated for a long, long time to make public schools more equitable. Because they are public institutions, we have been able to do that.” –ucc.org “Privatization of Public Education”

In July of 2010, seven prominent civil rights organizations released a major statement that questions the school “turnaround” plans that the U.S. Department of Education proposes to include in the reauthorization of the federal education law. These changes include imposing a very punitive regimen for “turnaround” on schools with persistently low test scores by closing the school and/or firing the principal and a large percentage of

the staff, or privatizing or chartering the school. Here is part of the response of the civil rights organizations: “Because public schools are critical community institutions... they should be closed only as a measure of last resort... Schools are more than buildings; they are social institutions whose closure could threaten the organized provision of necessary health and social services to their communities.”— Civil Rights Framework for Providing All Students an Opportunity to Learn through Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, (pp. 8-9) See:

<http://www.otlcampaign.org/resources/civil-rights-framework-providing-all-students-opportunity-learn-through-reauthorization-el>

A Litany for Education and Schools

Leader: Today we remember the children and youth of this congregation and those involved in their education. The call to be involved in education is a high calling. Those who teach our children help shape the future. We give thanks to a gracious God for the teachers, school administrators, counselors, school volunteers, support staff, cafeteria workers, school bus drivers and all others in our congregation who work in our schools.

People: Education involves a partnership between school, home and community. The support of parents and guardians is essential to a child’s success. We hold in prayer all those in this congregation who have children and youth in school and pray that learning is valued and encouragement offered.

Leader: Let us pray—Gracious God, we lift up to you all those involved in education in this community and in all the communities in our nation and world. Guide us, great God, that we will know the best way to show our interest and support for our students, teachers and all those involved in education.

People: We pray for wisdom and strength to make a positive difference in the lives of those in school. We pray for courage to explore new ways of supporting the people and institutions that teach our children and youth. We pray in the name of the great teacher, Jesus. Amen. -Adapted from National Council of Churches

<http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/litanyforeducationandschools.pdf>

- 2 minutes: **Respecting the Spectrum:** Listen, respect, respond—our covenant to follow the love your neighbor principle. Before beginning the conversation, let us once again repeat our pledge in unison:

We can talk about things that really matter, even if we disagree.

We can stay in the conversation together, even if we feel uncomfortable.

We can respect each other, and trust that we are offering our best insights.

We believe that we each have an equal stake in healing of our communities, our country, and our lives.

We will speak from our own perspectives using “I” statements.

We can love our neighbor and receive love in return.

- 15 minutes: **Reading the Room:** Exercise where people place themselves in relation to the topic.

Break into triads and talk about what their educational experience was like. Where they went to school. What advantages they had, challenges they faced. One concern they have about what is happening to public education today.

- 15 minutes: **Presentation of the Topic of the Day**

Views on Public Education: Video clips and/or speakers:

Diane Ravitch (7 min): Expressing concerns about current approach to testing as the only measure of successful education.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CC9fFOsdSI> (begin with 4:00)

Mission School: Why We are Here (5 min.): Introduces a school that is approaching education with children in a holistic way.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzXOmDVHXug>

or

Invite representative teachers (and students) from local public school and have them talk about their experiences in public school and the trends and policies that are affecting them.

- 30 minutes: **Responding with Discussion**

1. What stood out for you in watching these video clips? Or, what stood out for you by engaging the guests? Did anything surprise you? What questions do you come away with?

2. How does public education impact you directly? Your children? Your grandchildren? Your community?

3. What resources does your church have to engage the issues and situations facing public education today?

- 25 minutes: **Why this Matters: Faith/theological reflections**

Possible Scriptures: Fragments of wisdom concerning children and leaders:

Proverbs 22:6

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.

Ephesians 6:4,

And, (parents/elders), do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Matthew 18: 5-6

⁵Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. ⁶“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Psalm 25:4-10 –From a Prayer for Guidance and for Deliverance Of David.

4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness’ sake, O Lord!

8 Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

9 He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.

10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Luke 2: 52;

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Recovering the Moral Promise of Public Education

Review some of the materials and resolutions put out by the UCC related to public education: “The public schools belong to us, the people, and are controllable by democratic means. If we have the will, we can act to ensure that all schools offer equal education for all children, that the funding, multicultural and academic offerings, and enrichment programs which exist in one school system exist in or are accessible to all schools and all children. We can and must act to protect the public schools against those who slander them out of hidden anti-democratic, racial or class biases. But most particularly, we must protect the children in those schools, for such is not only the kingdom of heaven but also the future of our country and of the yet-to-be-realized democratic dream of equal opportunity for all...”

*See Message on Public Education 2013

<http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Message-13-web-version.pdf>

A Prayer for Teachers

God of Love ... Thank you for every teacher who notices a child's special gift. Thank you for teachers who are listeners and gentle guides. Thank you for teachers who expect much and love enough to demand more. Thank you for the special teacher each one of us remembers.

God of Mercy... Sustain teachers who give everything they have and feel abandoned when society expects too much. Strengthen teachers who assume the blame for so many problems beyond their control. Help exhausted teachers rest.

God of Strength... Encourage teachers to care and inspire them to nourish. Motivate teachers to keep on learning for the fun of it and to make learning fun for children.

We wonder at teachers who know how to quiet a class of five-year-olds or help fourth grade girls be empathetic. We admire teachers who enjoy middle school writers, or teach physics or math or civics. We cannot even imagine how to help every single student achieve Adequate Yearly Progress. Bless the people who are expected to accomplish these miracles and who know how to comfort children when miracles don't happen.

God of Justice... help our nation find a way to steward our vast wealth to support teachers in their special calling, wherever they teach and whatever the race or religion or gender or wealth of the children.

We pray these things in the name of our great teacher, Jesus Christ. Amen.

—ucc.org “Message on Public Education 2006”

- 10 minutes: **Possible actions: Commitment Sheets: Reflect multiple levels of engagement:**

Sheet One: Commitment to explore the issue of public education:
Read one of the important blogs about public education:

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/index.html>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/>

Sheet Two: Commitment to become more familiar with neighborhood schools:
Walk or drive around your neighborhood or community and stop by one of your community's public schools. Stop for a few moments to reflect. Think about the things this school contributes to your community's overall well being. Do you have memories of experiences with this school as a parent or even as a student there many years ago? Who are the people in that school who blessed your life, your children's lives, or your neighbors' lives? How has this school made a difference in your life? How has this local school impacted the lives of children in your church and community?

Sheet Three: Explore ways your church can partner with a local school.
Sheet Four: Write your congress person to support public education

5 Minutes: **Concluding the Session**

Closing Prayer:

God of justice, we give thanks for public education as the core of our communities and as the foundation of democracy in the United States. We confess that we have permitted our public schools to serve some children better than others and we confess we have not worked hard enough to ensure justice in these institutions. We ask you to help us understand how to preserve our vast system of public schools that offers so much promise to help repair the lives of individuals and communities who have been left out. Help us see how to keep the blessing of public education even as we work to help public schools serve all children more fairly. Amen.

The Mizpah Benediction

Have the participants make a circle around the room and recite the following modified form of the Mizpah Benediction: “[May] the Lord watch between [and challenge] you and me, [while] we are absent one from the other.” (Gen. 31:49)

Resources:

Journey to Lent, Journey to Learn: A Reflection on Public Education in God’s World Today

National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy

Jan Resseger Chair

United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

<http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/specialministries.htm#anchorwgpel>

Message on Public Education 2013

United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries

Resources to support stronger and more equitable public schools

<http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Message-13-web-version.pdf>

On the Privatization of Public

<http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/privatization.html>

Experiencing Public Schools...

A Process of Immersion and Discernment UCC Justice and Witness

<http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-education/pdfs/Experiencing-Public-Schools.pdf>

My Pedagogic Creed, by John Dewey. *School Journal* vol. 54 (January 1897), pp. 77-80

Children and poverty Children's Defense :

<http://www.childrensdefense.org/policy-priorities/ending-child-poverty/>

I would suggest that the following be copied and handed out:

Kevin Welner

Director, National Education Policy Center

Posted: 01/27/2014 11:54 am

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kevin-welner/poverty-and-the-education-sotu_b_4665211.html

Poverty and the Education Opportunity Gap: Will the SOTU Step Up?

Tuesday's State of the Union address will apparently focus on issues of wealth inequality in the United States. The impact of poverty is extremely important for issues such as housing, nutrition, health and safety. Additionally, education researchers like me have been hollering from the rooftops, hoping policymakers and others will understand that poverty is the biggest impediment to children's academic success. So this focus is long overdue and certainly welcome. Yet I worry that the President will slip from an accurate diagnosis to unproven and ineffectual treatments.

The diagnosis is straightforward. I expect that the President will have no trouble describing enormous and increasing wealth gaps. We learned from Oxfam last week that "the world's 85 richest people own the same amount as the bottom half of the entire global population," which is over 7 billion people.

In the U.S., the picture is just as shocking. In a 2013 UNICEF report on child poverty in 35 developed countries, the U.S. came in 34th, **second to last** and between Bulgaria and Romania, two much poorer countries overall. Twenty-three percent of children in the U.S. live in poverty.

According to analyses in an **October 2013 report** from the Southern Education Foundation, 48 percent of the nation's 50 million public school students were in low-income families (qualified for free or reduced-price meals). This level of child poverty implicates not just access to breakfast or lunch. These children face issues of:

- Housing security and housing (and thus school) transiency,
- Resources available at the local school,
- Resources available in the child's home and community as well as the safety in that community,
- Access to enriching programs after school and over the summer (and within the school),
- Access to medical and dental care,
- The expectations that educators and others have for a child's academic and employment future,
- The likelihood of the child being subjected to disproportionate discipline and

being pushed into the school-to-prison pipeline, and
The viability and affordability of attending college.

Many of the opportunity gaps of the sort described above arise from policies and practices within our schools. But many more -- and arguably the most devastating -- arise from opportunities denied to children in their lives outside of schools.

When the speeches are rolled out on Tuesday, watch out for evidence-free policy promises. President Obama, I fear, may continue to push for more test-based accountability policies like No Child Left Behind and may hold out the false hope of so-called high-achieving charter schools. The Republican response, I fear, will hold out the related false hope of vouchers, "neo-vouchers," and other policies that shift public money from public to private schools. Neither charter schools nor voucher programs have been shown to make a meaningful dent in opportunity gaps or achievement gaps.

Poverty is the main cause of these gaps, and addressing poverty is the most sensible and practical approach for closing those gaps. Our nation will not escape its devastating educational inequality so long as we have massive wealth inequality. Yes, if we ever truly invested in the schools serving our children in poverty -- invested in a way that provided tremendously enriched opportunities for those children, giving them equal overall opportunities with the nation's more advantaged children -- we might expect to see a meaningful reduction of intergenerational inequality. But that's not what we do. Instead, we heap demands on those schools, deprive them of the resources they urgently need, and then declare them to be "failing schools" when they don't perform miracles.

These nonsensical policies come with an astronomical economic cost and cost to our democracy. Economists Clive Belfield and Hank Levin conservatively estimate that the economic benefit of closing the opportunity gap by just one-third would result in \$50 billion in fiscal savings and \$200 billion in savings from a societal perspective (for example, by lowering rates of crime and incarceration). These figures are annual in the sense that, for instance, each year a group of students drops out and, over their lifetimes, that dropping out will collectively result in a fiscal burden of \$50 billion. By point of comparison, Belfield and Levin note, total annual taxpayer spending on K-12 education, including national, state and local expenditures, is approximately \$570 billion. (These analyses are from their chapter in *Closing the Opportunity Gap*.)

The President's State of the Union Address and the Republican response will both, it seems, speak to the American people about wealth inequality. They will both, it seems, offer some policy proposals aimed -- rhetorically, at least -- at addressing this major impediment to the American Dream. To some extent, we may hear about wise, evidenced-based approaches like expanding access to high-quality preschool. But watch out for speeches that identify real problems but then offer nothing more than repackaged, failed policies.

Those who are not serious about addressing inequality will cynically try to figure out, "How do I repackage my existing policy agenda and sell it as a cure for inequality?" Instead, the serious question we should be asking is, "How do I design, pass, and implement a package of policies that have been shown to be effective at addressing

wealth inequality and the damage caused by that inequality?"

The nation's most vulnerable children deserve answers to that serious question. We should honestly consider policies like a guaranteed minimum income, increases in the minimum wage, and a tax structure that shifts the burden toward the extremely wealthy. The way to reduce wealth inequality is to do just that: reduce wealth inequality. Our public schools can help, but they cannot do it alone.

This post originally appeared on [WashingtonPost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com).

Session Six: “Web of Injustice: A Hope for Equality”

Prepare the room: Set up chairs (and tables if desired) in half circles around the focal point for showing visuals and in a way where participants can see one another during the discussion. Place relevant books, magazines and articles on a table, and posters about the recent growth of inequality and its consequences on the wall. As prepared by participant volunteers, post the charts/visuals depicting the issue in a clearly visible location. Set up two flip charts and visual projection equipment. Have marking pens and tape available for posting reports.

For this final session you might consider having on hand:

Quotes from ML King and other leaders

A quote representing each previous session—perhaps something from discussions

Poems, posters, and art from previous sessions.

Session Schedule: Two hours

- 10 minutes: **Opening: Pitching the Theme -- Reality of Hard Times Today**

This session could be opened with the following poem and psalm, or something else of your choosing:

Poem: “How hard to take the hard day and ease it into your heart”

- By Charles Wright

In the still places of the world
nobody there to see, to hear
the vast network of tangled roots
spreading underground
a thick mass
alive with possibilities.

In the newspaper today
tales of war, houses destroyed
orchards bulldozed, young men
killed.

Hard times, days of iron and fire
the bruising of the light.
We are told to rejoice
but the machines of death
advance over the land
their steel mandibles clicking
their wheels spinning on and on.

Psalm 13 (or another sacred text)

1 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? **2** How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? **3** Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, **4** and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. **5** But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. **6** I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Re-cap theme from opening Session One and thread some of the main points from the following sessions to help integrate the series. Remind people that the themes of restoring democracy and economic injustice are not new. They have surfaced time and again throughout the history of the United States. More recently they have been key themes, particularly during the later parts of the Civil Rights Movement, when M.L. King, Jr. began to make links between the pervasive racism, militarism and classism in the U.S. His "Poor People Campaign" began to articulate the reality that economic justice is a matter that crosses all racial ethnic communities and that we ignore this to our peril and that of our democracy. The latest focus on economic justice, highlighted by the various Occupy expressions, and others, is a continuation of the warning and challenge that King offered to all citizens.

- **2 minutes: Respecting the Spectrum:** Listen, respect, respond—our covenant to follow the love your neighbor principle. Before beginning the conversation, let us once again repeat our pledge in unison:

We can talk about things that really matter, even if we disagree.

We can stay in the conversation together, even if we feel uncomfortable.

We can respect each other, and trust that we are offering our best insights.

We believe that we each have an equal stake in healing of our communities, our country, and our lives.

We will speak from our own perspectives using "I" statements.

We can love our neighbor and receive love in return.

- **10 minutes: Reading the Room:** Exercise where people place themselves in relation to economic justice and feeling trapped in a web of injustice:

Create a line across the room where people can place themselves between feeling extremely hopeful about restoring a vibrant democracy and achieving some measure of economic justice in our lifetime, and giving up hope for such a dream.

- **15 minutes: Presentation of the topic of the day**

Video clip from Bill Moyers: Interview with James Cone and Taylor Branch: Moyers and Company.

Start video, moving selector to 7:53. Stop at 18:06.

<http://billmoyers.com/segment/james-cone-and-taylor-branch-on-mlks-fight-for-economic-equality/>

- 30 minutes: **Responding with Discussion:**

What stood out for you in the clip from the interview?

Where do you see connections to earlier discussions during this series on democracy and economic justice?

Where do you see signs of hope in the midst of economic hard times today?

Where are people doing something constructive today?

In what way is your congregation already engaged in addressing some of these issues? What resources does your church have to join in additional constructive work that is already going on?

[Good time for a break.]

- 15 minutes: **Why this Matters:** Faith/theological input:

Possible scripture references to explore: Dream of a Healed Creation: Revelations 21: 1-6

The New Heaven and the New Earth

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home^a of God is among mortals. He will dwell^b with them as their God;^c they will be his peoples,^d and God himself will be with them;^e ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” ⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶ Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Recall some of the things mentioned during the first session “Becoming the Beloved Community: Responding to the Call to Love Our Neighbors as We Love Ourselves” and tie them to this final discussion.

Ask participants what are some of the insights and challenges they will take with them from the series on restoring democracy and economic justice. Where do they find hope to become involved? Why is this a faith matter and why should we be involved?

- 15 minutes: **Possible actions:** Commitment sheets reflecting multiple levels of engagement

Bring out commitment sheets from previous sessions. People can review opportunities that have been presented, add their names, change where they are willing to become involved, etc. Have a sheet where any new ideas can be recorded.

Have a large piece of butcher paper, or a foam-core board, (or something like that) ready so participants can make comments about why it matters to become involved today—from a human point of view, from a citizen’s point of view, from a faith point of view.

- 15 minutes: **Closing Ritual/Exercise**

You can try having participants create spontaneous “poems” called cinquains and share them. It is quite a simple exercise. Cinquains are five-line poems in three basic patterns created originally by Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914) based on the Japanese 17-syllable Haiku. She did not originate the five-line poem, but instead altered it for starkness associated with the Haiku.

The first line is one word depicting the theme of the poem.

The second line has two words (adjectives) that help describe that word.

The third line is composed of three active words (verbs) that animate the word.

The fourth line is a short phrase that gives a meaning from the first three lines.

The fifth line is again one word that gives a fresh meaning to the original word in the first line.

If you use this exercise, don’t be too strict about how it is interpreted. Folks often say “I can’t do this” and when they actually do it find that it offers a profound experience.

Don’t let folks take too long to “think” about what to write. When I do this with groups – in church, a classroom, with young children, people of all ages -- I offer the first word for them to work from, for example, “Hope.” Then I have them work with it for no longer than five minutes.

At the conclusion let them volunteer to read out loud what they wrote – quickly. They will be surprised and moved by what gets expressed in the room.

Possible themes: A Cinquain on “Hope” or “Justice” or “Citizenship” or “Democracy” or “Image of God” or -- come up with another word that fits the evening.

An Example:

Hope
strong , weak
yearning, striving, aching
active, on the move
Beginning!

This exercise could be a powerful way to conclude the series. After they share their poems, close with a blessing.

End with Pete Seeger's "God's Counting on Me, God's Counting on You" (5 minutes):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvnsB_kVNYI#t=290

Closing Blessing: Romans 15:13 "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."