

2013 Book Study

Opportunity
Affirmation
Courage



Compassion
Imagination
12 Ideas

My Sisters and Brothers,

This past fall, a senseless act of violence took the life of a beloved member of our diocesan community. On Sept. 10, 2012, Jorge Fuentes, 19, was shot and killed on the street outside of his Dorchester home. Jorge started coming to our B-SAFE summer program at St. Stephen's Church in Boston when the program was new, back in 2000. By working hard over the years and taking advantage of everything offered through St. Stephen's, Jorge had become a leader and a role model, and his young life was full of promise. We do not know the names and faces of all the other young people killed by gun violence on our city streets, but we do know that each of them, like Jorge, was a beloved child of God. And we know that those who perpetrate violence are God's beloved, too. Jorge's death showed us something about how much we all belong to one another, and that even with all that we are doing to give city children and youth a place of safety and community, still more needs to be done.

I asked our Diocesan Convention to create a task force in Jorge's memory that will help us begin to pray and work, together with others, to find ways to continue to meet immediate needs while also trying to address some of the underlying causes of violence. While that work gets underway, I'd like to offer something that we can all do now. I'd like us to start by reading and studying together a book, *The Rich and the Rest of Us*, by Tavis Smiley and Cornel West. It's a book that frames the ending of poverty as America's 21st-century civil rights struggle, and it asks us to re-examine some of our assumptions about poverty in America, what it really is and how to eliminate it.

A subgroup of our task force reviewed a number of books and selected this one as a way to begin to educate ourselves about poverty, one of the root causes of violence. They've written this accompanying guide, which divides the book into a five-week study with Scripture passages and questions to help focus our reflection and discussion. We plan to set up a page at www.diomass.org where you can share your study group's questions and insights.

I commend this project, with gratitude to those who made the book selection and wrote the study guide, the Rev. Thomas Brown, the Rev. Tim Crellin, the Rev. Cathy George, the Rev. Kate Malin and the Rev. Sam Rodman, with assistance from diocesan staff members Amy Cook and Tracy Sukraw. It is my hope that groups and individuals in every congregation of our diocese will take up this book study project, either in Lent or at some other time during the upcoming year, and start a conversation that, with the Holy Spirit's leading, will invite us into meaningful action that will help bring Christ's peace and healing into this world.

Faithfully,

M. Thomas Shaw, SSJE



SESSION ONE Covering Chapter 1 "Portrait of Poverty" & Chapter 2 "Poverty of Opportunity"

Scripture Reflection:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that I need.

Proverbs 30:8 NRSV

- ✧ In what ways is this passage from Proverbs a critique of the American Dream that Smiley and West call into question?

In Summary:

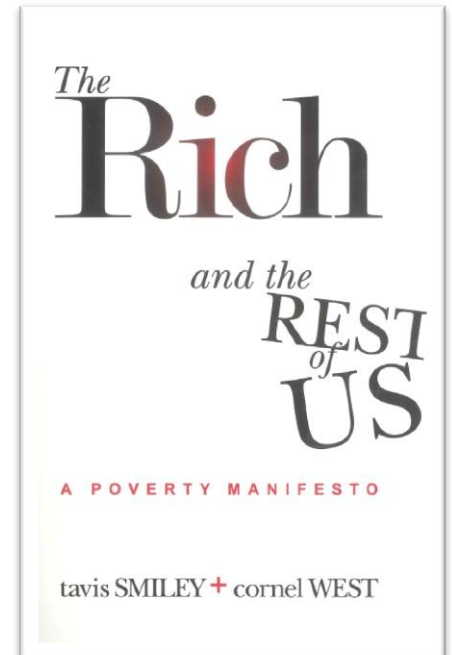
In their introduction, Smiley and West lay out the story behind the book. They describe their own respective backgrounds and then move to "Poverty in America: A Call to Conscience"—their 18-city bus tour that began in August 2011 and was "designed to highlight the plight of America's poor of all races, colors and creeds." Smiley and West identify themselves squarely within the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his work as an advocate and voice for justice, reminding us that his final mission was to stand behind the poor sanitation workers in Memphis, Tenn. They reference a symposium they sponsored in January 2012 in Washington, D.C., "Remaking America: From Poverty to Prosperity," and that it was in preparation for that event that they were invited to translate their experiences and observations from the bus tour into a book. Two quotations clarify their purpose:

"Too many Americans are falling through gaping holes scissored out of America's safety net. Income inequality is real. There is an institutional divide between the wealthy and the poor... We are at a critical turning point in America, and we are obsessed with the ambitious goal of changing how we think about, talk about, and act on the issue of poverty and the poor." (page 9)

"The faces of poverty are no longer solely relegated to the easily maligned Black, red, or brown people. Poverty of all colors abounds unchecked in our cities, suburbs, and rural communities with ever-growing shameful numbers of impoverished children joining its ranks. Poverty is no longer confined by class or color; like an unrestrained and deadly virus, it doesn't discriminate." (page 10)

In Chapter 1, "Portrait of Poverty," the authors begin to make their case with both statistics and stories. They provide a summary of the ebb and flow of poverty in this country, including a timeline of poverty percentages from 1959 to the present, and a graph that shows the widening gap between the richest and the poorest Americans from 1967 to 2007.

They make a distinction between 20th-century poverty and 21st-century poverty. The main message here is that in this century, many middle-class Americans, through no fault of their own and due to forces beyond their control, have fallen into poverty. They quote Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed*, as saying: "The theory for a long time...is that poverty means that there's something wrong with your character, that you've got bad habits, you've got a bad lifestyle, you've made the wrong choices. I would like to present an



alternative theory...poverty is a shortage of money. And the biggest reason for that shortage of money is that most working people are not paid enough for their work... ." (page 22)

The authors chart the history of post-World War II poverty in this country and then level a pointed critique of the American Dream. "We are still 'driven by one tenet of American progress—that hard work will get you ahead,' but that belief has been shaken to the core by the intense economic downturn." (page 38) Finally, they outline the intent of the rest of the book: "We have to dissect the poverty of collective actions and thought that got us into this predicament and vow to do better. Lastly, we must map out a bold and courageous path for change—by all means necessary." (pages 38-39)

In Chapter 2 Smiley and West begin to make the case that poverty is systemic in this country and the effect it has on our citizens is debilitating, desperate and even shameful, for all of us. Poverty has had a disproportionate effect on women, children and people of color. There are some wonderfully provocative quotes here, including one from the policy paper of Catholic Charities, entitled "Poverty in America: A Threat to the Common Good" (2006) which says: "We have the resources, experience, and knowledge to virtually eliminate poverty, especially long-term poverty, but we do not yet have the political will." (page 46) The authors go on to detail the particularly devastating consequences for women and children, with charts and statistics, as well as a couple of stories, and then ask a pointed question: "What does it say about the priorities of a nation that allows 53 percent of its children—the most vulnerable and valuable—to live in or near poverty?" (page 55)

Next is a brief overview of the levels of poverty in this country and the impact of the various governmental programs of each administration from Roosevelt all the way up the present, concluding with a section on the Great Recession. Their bottom-line position on the poverty of opportunity might be summarized with the following quote:

"With the economic reality that real wages for the American working class have not increased for the past four decades, it is past time to challenge the distorted language and accompanying political rhetoric about the poor. We must move past Republican and Democratic versions of trickle-down economics... ." (page 66)

For Reflection and Discussion:

- What do you find most concerning or compelling about Smiley and West's portrait of poverty?
- What has been your own experience of poverty, either direct or indirect?
- What relationship do you see between the American Dream and Gospel values?
- What do you think are the priorities of this nation and how would you like to see them change?
- If you were to set out to change the political will of this nation about poverty, where would you start?

Closing Prayer:

God of love and boundless creativity, give us courage and energy to look at the challenge of poverty as our challenge, to see the ways in which we are all affected by the widening gap in this country between the richest and the poorest. Open our hearts to one another as we seek a deeper understanding of your will for us, and a way forward. Keep our sights on the values of the Gospel and the promises of your kingdom, for all your children. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

During your study, go to www.diomass.org to share thoughts and comments.



SESSION TWO

Covering Chapter 3 "Poverty of Affirmation"

Scripture Reflection:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

James 2:14-17 NRSV

- ✘ As a Christian, regardless of your political affiliation, where do you hear Christ calling you to advocate for the poor?
- ✘ Is there a call to make a prophetic stance about the excesses of the rich?
- ✘ Must we collectively affirm the marginalized?

In Summary:

A woman in Columbus, Miss., is upset that Cornel West and Tavis Smiley are coming to town with their bus tour. She and the authors end up having words outside the local YMCA. To affirm poor people is dangerous because, among other reasons, it raises the question, "Can it happen to me?" But affirmation isn't fun. For Brenda Caradine, the aforementioned woman, even talking about poverty was a blight on an upstanding community. True or false?: By not affirming the poor, by not talking about poverty or about poor people, we are keeping ourselves from alleviating poverty.

The chapter continues with a vignette about the Cotton family, who went from \$60,000 annual income to \$15,000 and ends with a call to stop treating poverty like a contagious disease that's somehow caught by talking about it.

Poverty has become a dirty word. Americans' perceptions about poverty have shifted in the years between President Roosevelt and President Obama, but one theme has emerged: being poor has come to mean, in most of our minds, bad—drug addicts, or thieves or lazy. During the Great Depression being poor was not a moral indictment; today it is.

Federal policies about welfare continue to shift in ways that make matters worse, not better. In June 2011 almost 4.5 million Americans were receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and for the first time in history middle class whites were dependent upon the system that was created for low-income people of color. The increase in enrollment of TANF resulted in drastic nationwide cuts of the program. Affirming the existence of poverty confirms our need to change what is.

The chapter, like the rest of the book, reveals the authors' political biases, but each criticism of certain economic and political policies is backed up with statistics. The Heritage Foundation, statements by President Reagan, statements by 2012 presidential nominees, policies established by President Clinton and discussion of the Tea Party role in denying poverty are grist for the mill of discussion. The gist is that many of our leaders and our policies have perpetuated our ignorance about and denial of poverty.

Despite the evidence to the contrary, many of us hang on to the myth of American prosperity and opportunity. But leaving the argumentation and debate to the realm of politicians, news pundits and comedians will not advance affirmation. The chapter concludes with a siren to affirming that the poor, it turns out, are not them, but us.

For Reflection and Discussion:

- If Brenda Caradine, the woman who resented the poverty tour coming to Columbus, Miss., were to join your study group now, what would you say to her? What would you ask her to say?
- The section in this chapter "Reagan's Ghost" indicts some of the 2012 Republican presidential nominees. Can you appreciate why they, and their constituents, might hold these views (aside from garnering votes)?
- The figure \$22,400 is what the US Census Bureau defines as the "poverty standard." Talk about how that standard fits in your town.
- If the Pew Research poll is right (two-thirds of us believe the wealth gap is the greatest cause of tension in America), how might you and your congregation help bridge this gap?

Closing Prayer:

Almighty God, look upon those who are in need but cannot work, or who lack employment and search for it in vain: on those who struggle to meet exacting claims with inadequate resources: on all who move in insecurity, attended by worry or despair. Stand by them, O God, in their deprivations, their dilemmas, and guide them as they try to solve their problems; let them come to open doors of opportunity or refuge; and so quicken and extend our concern that all may be ensured a livelihood and a safety from the bitterness of want; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (From Miles Lowell Yates, 1890-1956)



SESSION THREE

Covering Chapter 4 "Poverty of Courage" & Chapter 5 "Poverty of Compassion"

Scripture Reflection:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:1-8 NRSV

- ✧ What practices help you adopt, for yourself, the mind of Christ described in this passage?

In Summary:

Chapter 4, "Poverty of Courage," reviews stories of seven people whose personal commitment and courage allowed them to address: The Affluence of the Few; The New Civil Rights Battle; War—The Enemy of the Poor; and The Audacity of Courage—resulting in the closing question: "Will we have the King-like courage to demand that our government invest wisely to enable and ennoble the one out of two Americans who are presently in or near poverty?" (page 116)

In Chapter 5, the poverty of compassion for America's poor children is addressed through stories of poor parents' sacrifices for their children, and historical figures' inspiring action in their time. The chapter challenges our priorities as a country and as individuals. The ultimate call to action in the chapter is this statement: "There can be no genuine compassion [in America] without a resurrection of an explosively radical movement of righteous indignation directed at eradicating poverty." (page 124)

For Reflection and Discussion:

- Chapter 4 begins with stories of actions taken to address "immoral laws which allow banks to gain billions in profits while human beings are made homeless." Do you think banking laws are immoral? Do you think Christian courage and action should get involved in banking? Why, or why not?
- Do you agree that the affluence of the few supposes the poverty of the many? When the rich exploit the poor do we call it sin, or is sin only personal?
- The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. thought war was the "enemy of the poor." Why did he see it this way? Do you? He believed that change in society requires those who have a voice to commit themselves to the needs of those who have no voice. Have you ever had the courage to do something like this? When? Do you ever wish you had? Could you imagine being willing to risk your life for someone else?
- Chapter 5 notes that military spending trumps spending on poverty and poor children in our country. Do you think these priorities can change? How could the church play a role in this? What are the repercussions in American culture of allowing poverty to be ignored?
- "Jesus Christ was the world's most famous social-justice activist." Not everyone sees Jesus this way—do you agree? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that if change is to come about for poor people the church and its leaders must "stoke the embers of righteous indignation into an almighty, inextinguishable blaze"? (page 134) How do you, or would you, in your life, church and community try to ignite compassion for the poor?
- What is the basis for compassion? Share a story of someone doing something compassionate for you. When have you acted with compassion? How important is compassion for social action to take place that changes the lives of poor people?
- Read aloud page 135 in your group. What is it like to have this cloud of witnesses behind and beside you? Does it inspire compassion? What inspires your compassion?

Closing Prayer:

Grant, O God, that your holy and life-giving Spirit may so move every human heart [and especially the hearts of the people of this land], that barriers which divide us may crumble, suspicions disappear, and hatreds cease; that our divisions being healed, we may live in justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer, page 823)



SESSION FOUR Covering Chapter 6 "Poverty of Imagination"

Scripture Reflection:

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.

Joel 2:28 NRSV

- ✘ What is the 21st-century American Christian's dream or vision for the future of this nation?
- ✘ What do we imagine when we pray "Thy Kingdom come"?

In Summary:

This chapter begins with truth telling from Silicon Valley: America's days as an industrial and manufacturing superpower are over and those middle-income jobs are not coming back. In the 21st century, "profit trumps people." (page 138) Manufacturing jobs have been shipped overseas and the government has chosen to side with the CEOs instead of helping to create new industries and skills for middle-class workers.

The authors argue that we need creativity, imagination and vision if we are to turn this around. They describe the American people as "victims of imaginative impotence" stuck in the mindset of an earlier century, and hold our "poverty of vision" responsible for political paralysis, record unemployment, corporate greed and ever-widening divide between the rich and the rest. (page 139) We need to tap into American ingenuity and innovation if we are to break this cycle.

After reporting on feedback from a panel of pre-eminent thinkers on contemporary capitalism, present and future, the authors look to the last century and reflect on the Marshall Plan, Truman's program of aid to a starving, poor Europe after World War II. Compassionate and pragmatic, the Marshall Plan recognized that "seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want." (page 142) Truman argued before Congress that it was in our national interest to provide immediate relief to those suffering after the war in order to nurture hope that things would get better. The Marshall Plan "was the result of bold political imagination and leadership" that turned Europe's industrial production around within just a few years. (page 143)

Where is the 21st-century American Marshall Plan?, the authors ask. History celebrates examples of courageous visionary leaders like Helen Keller, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela who inspired millions to demand societal change. Are we waiting for such a leader to emerge? Or perhaps, in this digital age, with a class-based political system, we need a new model for revolution. The Occupy Movement is an example of a leaderless grassroots uprising against injustice and inequality. Must we rise up as a nation and demand an end to injustice?

America's identity was forged and refined in the fight for freedom—freedom from unfair taxation, from the denial of fundamental liberties, from slavery. The authors argue that "poverty is the new slavery" and "it's time to reawaken American democracy." (page 153) If we are to end poverty, we must change how we think and speak about the poor. The rich are getting richer, with ever more help from the government, while the rest are struggling. Worse, those who "break the rules" walk away scot free.

Instead of trying to fix the current system, the authors suggest, we must use our imagination to create a whole new system. This means new economic opportunities, new innovation, a new infrastructure dependent not on the federal government but on local resources, perhaps even a commitment to "shared community living" and "pooled resources" to reinvigorate neighborhoods and local businesses. From there, we would move to address our educational, food production and criminal justice systems.

The chapter concludes with a call to be both stirred and inspired by past leaders and movements, and fearless and inventive as we imagine a better way.

For Reflection and Discussion:

- In your lifetime, how has witnessing social change in policy or new language around difference transformed your perception of a marginalized community?
- How do you respond to the interplay between Ehrenreich and Orman about the need for a “leaderless movement” vs. an inspiring visionary (page 144)?
- Do you agree with the authors that as our nation grows more “techno-savvy,” the more the American imagination has declined? Why or why not?
- What do our baptismal promises to “strive for justice and peace” and “respect the dignity of every human being” demand of us practically when it comes to income inequality?
- If Jesus were running for President, what do you imagine his “sound bite” would be?

Closing Prayer:

God of peace, let us your people know, that at the heart of turbulence there is an inner calm that comes from faith in you. Keep us from being content with things as they are, that from this central peace there may come a creative compassion, a thirst for justice, and a willingness to give of ourselves in the spirit of Christ. Amen. (A New Zealand Prayer Book, page 464)



SESSION FIVE

Covering Chapter 7 “A Poverty Manifesto”

Scripture Reflection:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah 58:6-12 NRSV

- ✘ As you hear Isaiah’s words, written more than 2,500 years ago, what emotions come to you? Hope? Fear? Others?
- ✘ Why do you think it has been so hard for us to embrace God’s vision as presented to the prophet?
- ✘ Where have we made progress, and where have we fallen back?

In Summary:

In the final chapter of the book, the authors lay out concrete steps that they feel should be taken to alleviate poverty in our country. First, they expose some of the untruths about the poor that have often been used as reasons not to work to end poverty, such as the idea that poverty is a character flaw, that no one really goes hungry in America and that poverty is primarily an urban problem.

They then identify 12 ideas for ending poverty, including investing in 21st-century jobs, focusing on the employment of women who are heads of households, ensuring that all people have health insurance and ending abuses in the prison system. They call for a White House conference on ending poverty, to be convened as soon as possible to begin to put together a plan to address poverty and its related social ills.

They end with the hopeful idea that we have as a nation the opportunity, affirmation, compassion, courage and imagination to eradicate poverty, if we work together.

For Reflection and Discussion:

- The authors suggest that the number one lie about poverty is that it is a character flaw. In what ways have you seen the poor marginalized or blamed for their circumstances? Have you seen this dynamic change as previously working and middle-class families have slid into poverty or near poverty?
- The authors speak often of profit, as on page 196 where they say “that the profit motive of privatization can lead to dangerous outcomes.” What is the role of profit and incentive in our society? How does it lead to increased wealth, but also to increased poverty?
- The authors offer several concrete steps that can be taken to alleviate poverty. Which of them do you feel are most achievable, and how could the people of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts play a role in working toward these goals?
- What could you do to make a difference?

Closing Prayer:

Look with pity, O heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer, page 826)