



Poverty Sunday

Organizers Toolkit

Sunday, September 21, 2008

— Produced by SOJOURNERS —

“The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.
Strength to Love, 1963.



Table of Contents

Introduction.....4

Understanding the Vote Out Poverty Campaign5

Putting Poverty Sunday into Action6

 Hosting a Poverty Sunday6

 Creative Ideas for Poverty Sunday8

 Ways to Get Your Church Leadership Committed9

Putting the Vote Out Poverty Campaign into Action11

 Vote Out Poverty Pledges11

 Tips for Voter Registration14

Preaching Resources15

 Tips for Preaching on Poverty Sunday15

 Scared to Talk Politics in Church?18

 Lectionary Reflections.....22

 God’s Economy

 Just Payment

 Sample Topical Sermon Outline23

 Hearing the Word24

 Good News to the Poor24

 Is God Really on the Side of the Poor?27

 Why People Are Poor31

 Putting the Text into Practice35

 Jesus Visits the Hamptons

Worship Resources39

 Responsive Reading.....39

 Prayer of Confession39

 Prayer of Blessing40

 Biblical References to Poverty41

Appendix43

 IRS Fact Sheet.....43

 Candidate Pledge.....48

 Voter Pledge.....49

 Church Leader Pledge50

Join the Movement

Dear Friend,

Thanks for your interest in hosting a Poverty Sunday in your church or faith community. Poverty Sunday is designed to help guide your congregation in learning how our faith informs the critical issue of poverty. This toolkit includes resources and advice on how to explore poverty and justice as central biblical themes during your worship through liturgy, prayer, scripture, preaching, and announcements.

Poverty Sunday is part of the national **Vote Out Poverty** campaign, which is working to put poverty on the national agenda for our political leaders. In addition to worship resources, your Poverty Sunday should also include an opportunity to educate, register, and commit people to the goals of the national Vote Out Poverty campaign. For more information about the campaign, visit www.voteoutpoverty.org.

Sojourners is aware that each congregation is different, so you should plan to tailor Poverty Sunday to fit your needs, worship community, and existing justice ministries. We know that some churches may be able to participate in the whole campaign, while others may only be able to do pieces of Poverty Sunday. Our hope is that each church or group, no matter how they choose to host a Poverty Sunday, keeps these three goals in mind:

Awareness: Poverty Sunday is the perfect opportunity to educate people about poverty in your community, in our nation, and throughout the world. By drawing a connection between God's concern for the poor and our responsibility to the

poor, we have the unique opportunity to move beyond simple awareness about poverty, to action for, and with, the poor.

Vote: One of the most important things we can do in the coming months is to vote. Poverty Sunday is designed to remind us of our responsibility as Christians to keep in mind the needs of the poor and forgotten as we enter the voting booth in November.

Movement: Poverty Sunday and the election in November are only the starting points of the campaign. Working together with partners like you, Sojourners is gathering a faith-based movement to secure commitments from both presidential and congressional candidates to provide leadership on specific poverty reduction goals if elected. After November, we will work to hold these officials accountable to their promises.

Sojourners is excited about each Poverty Sunday and we hope that you will take time to report back to us about the commitments signed, the number of voters registered, and the strengths and weaknesses of your local Poverty Sunday. Also, remember you are not on your own; Sojourners staff members are here to help you implement Poverty Sunday and the Vote Out Poverty campaign. If you have questions about implementing the campaign in your local context, feel free to e-mail us at voteoutpoverty@sojo.net.

Sincerely,
Kevin Lum
Congregational Coordinator
Sojourners

Introduction

Sojourners is excited to bring you this toolkit for Poverty Sunday 2008. This is an important election season. Christians and people of faith are playing critical roles in deciding our country's future and the impact U.S. policies will have at home and around the world in the years ahead. At Sojourners, we refuse to separate spiritual renewal from social justice. Our country desperately needs both—right now.

We've worked hard to bring you materials that are thoughtful, biblically grounded, and easy to use. Just about everything you

need to know about your Poverty Sunday worship service is included in this material.

Sojourners is a Christian ministry that publishes *Sojourners* magazine and other resources that address issues of faith, politics, and culture from a biblical perspective. We're not right-wing or left-wing Christians. We believe that the best Christian citizen is one who emulates Jesus' Sermon on the Mount,

offers a prophetic critique of power, and always asks, "How will this decision affect 'the least of these'?"

We especially want to thank you for lifting up Poverty Sunday as an opportunity to further the formation of conscience, deepen faith, and exercise biblical values in the public square.

To-Do List

- **Preach a sermon on poverty and the election.**
- **Incorporate a prayer and responsive reading into the service.**
- **Set up a Vote Out Poverty table for obtaining pledges and voter registration.**

Understanding the Vote Out Poverty Campaign

Overview of the Vote Out Poverty Campaign

The Vote Out Poverty campaign equips citizens to work within their church or faith community to educate, build awareness, and share the biblical call to social justice. These leaders organize local teams that are passionate about the issue of political leadership on the issue of poverty. Teams organize events and activities, like Poverty Sunday, to encourage fellow believers to vote, educate themselves on the issues, and make personal commitments on the issue of poverty. Leaders and teams then share these commitments with congressional candidates and ask them to do the same.

Why Vote Out Poverty?

While most elected officials say they want to reduce poverty, few have provided leadership on the issue. Why? Most Americans are disengaged from the lives of the poor *and* the political process, so poverty reduction is pushed to the end of the priority list.

Meanwhile, 30,000 children die everyday of preventable causes around the world and millions go to bed hungry. These statistics are unacceptable to Christians if we profess to follow the teachings of Christ. To change them, we must engage in personal service, community transformation, and political, structural advocacy. The Vote Out Poverty campaign is designed to equip participants to engage in political and structural advocacy.

Why is Poverty Sunday Important?

Organizing a Poverty Sunday can help provide a useful timeline and focus for your efforts in the Vote Out Poverty campaign. Poverty Sunday will give you an audience with which to share the importance of the pledge in the context of this election and the broader fight against poverty. It also gives you a ready-made community to register to vote. Finally, a Poverty Sunday can open doors to additional opportunities, such as speaking to ministry groups and Bible studies, that might be difficult to arrange on your own.

While we encourage you to interact with all of your acquaintances about the importance of voting and signing the Vote Out Poverty pledge, we specifically are aiming our efforts at getting the majority of our faith communities to sign the pledge. Why? Because impacting our faith communities is a first step to building a national movement that changes the grim reality of poverty in our time. And because the campaign is designed for Christians, since it rests on the teachings of scripture.

Putting Poverty Sunday into Action

Hosting a Poverty Sunday

So, you've decided to host a Poverty Sunday and now are asking yourself, "What do I do?" We encourage you to work with a team, so your first step is to recruit folks who are interested in the Vote Out Poverty campaign and Poverty Sunday. Then, follow the steps below to put together the event at your church:

1) Write out your vision of what a Poverty Sunday could do for your church.

When planning your local event, first think about what level of understanding your congregation has about the biblical call to social justice. Does your church regularly address the poverty in your community? Does the pastor teach and preach on poverty and how Christians are called to respond?

After discerning your congregation's level of understanding, think about your tradition or history with "themed" Sundays. Do you host them often or not at all? Why? How does this answer change how you might propose a plan to your church leadership?

2) Meet with church leadership to share your ideas and obtain approval and support for Poverty Sunday.

When planning Poverty Sunday, it is important to have the church leadership involved. Begin by talking with the senior minister/priest to request her or his support for Poverty Sunday and to ask for a commitment to preach on poverty and the election. Once you have the church leadership on board, talk with the worship leader/liturgist about the responsive readings and prayers, talk with the adult education director about making poverty and the election the focus of small groups and Sunday school classes, talk with the facilities manager about setting up a table in the lobby, and talk with anyone else who would be crucial to the success of the event. The more people you have in support of Poverty Sunday, the more successful it will be.

3) Spread the word.

You need to begin advertising Poverty Sunday at least one month in advance. Alert the local newspaper, advertise in the church bulletin, make creative announcements during services, and post signs around the church. Be creative and find new ways to spread the word.



4) Finalize the program with help from the Poverty Sunday toolkit.

Working with the church staff, finalize the outline for Poverty Sunday. Make sure you have arranged to pass out the pledge cards, received permission for a table in the lobby, finalized the prayers or reading to be printed in the bulletin, scheduled an announcement during the service, and confirmed other details.

5) Recruit volunteers needed beyond your local team.

You can't do it alone! Poverty Sunday should be a team effort. Recruit others to pass out pledge cards, spread the word, explain the campaign to their adult education class, staff the table in the lobby, and help with follow-up.

6) Secure necessary materials (voter registration cards, Vote Out Poverty pledges, etc.).

Do you have everything you need for this to be a successful event? Do you have pledge cards, have you picked up voter registration forms, and have you double-checked the voter registration deadlines for your states?

7) Create a follow-up plan for measuring success and collecting information.

Poverty Sunday has been a smashing success. Now what? As you plan for Poverty Sunday, think about what happens next and how you can engage those who have been inspired by the campaign. Ask the question, "what does success look like a year from now?" What would you like to see happen in your local church? How many people do you want to bring with you to Sojourners April 27-29, 2009, national mobilization to overcome poverty in Washington, D.C.?

Creative Ideas for Poverty Sunday

Present and discuss the Vote Out Poverty campaign at an adult education class. At many churches, an adult education series is a perfect way to discuss poverty from a biblical perspective and lead into the campaign. Bring copies of voter registration forms and Vote Out Poverty pledge cards.

Talk about poverty and the importance of voting during a sermon. Mixing politics and religion should have one of those warning labels: “Don’t try this at home, unless you really mean it.” But it’s better to address difficult questions rather than ignore them. Later in this toolkit are some ideas for incorporating poverty themes and an election-year message into preaching, to foster greater discernment among your congregation and even build common ground.

Introduce the campaign in your “minute for mission.” Many churches have a “minute for mission” or an announcement time during worship, when someone gives a pitch to teach Sunday school, volunteer for a mission project, or work at a food pantry. This can be a good time to introduce the VOP campaign and invite people to sign a pledge card and register to vote as they leave the service. Be creative. Every faith community is different, and you certainly know the nuances of yours better than we do. Think about constructive ways to reach out to people in your church that will be well received. Remember, there’s no magic formula.

Vote Out Poverty campaign table. Set up and staff a table in the lobby of the church before and after services to obtain Vote Out Poverty pledges and register people to vote. Coffee hours and fellowship times also are a great opportunity for connecting with people. Getting people to sign pledge cards is crucial to the success of Poverty Sunday.

Bulletin inserts! Bulletin inserts! We’ve prepared a Vote Out Poverty pledge card that would make a great bulletin insert. Sojourners also has a number of other informative bulletin inserts available at our online resources store—visit store.sojournalers.net.

Involve the youth. What about coordinating Poverty Sunday with World Vision’s 30 Hour Famine or One Homeless Night? Possibly coordinate with the youth director to host a youth poverty forum or have the youth group help gather signatures on the Vote Out Poverty pledge cards. Young people are excited about the changes happening in America, because it’s their future. Be sure to include them.

Work with your social justice committee. If your church has an existing social justice committee or compassionate ministries team, be sure to include them in the planning and execution of Poverty Sunday.

Ways to Get Your Church Leadership Committed

1) Identify mutual goals. Create goals that are mutually beneficial for both the campaign and the church leadership. Here is a list of possible shared objectives:

- **Break attendance records.** Work with the church leadership to ensure that Poverty Sunday breaks attendance records. Call church members, invite friends and family, and reach out to the broader community with this message: “Our church is doing something about poverty and we want you to be a part of this exciting event.” Church leadership appreciates seeing old and new faces come back to church.
- **Raise outreach funds.** Encourage signers of the Vote Out Poverty pledge to make a donation to the church outreach fund.
- **Create positive press.** Work with local media outlets to advertise Poverty Sunday and the desired outcomes. Poverty Sunday creates a positive image for the church and illustrates practical leadership to the community.
- **Reach young people.** Young people are looking for church communities that are engaging the world through both compassion and advocacy. Host a special outreach to the youth of the community in cooperation with Poverty Sunday.

2) Overcoming roadblocks. Depending on your church community and leadership, you may encounter some roadblocks along the way. Here are some possible challenges or questions with suggested responses:

- **Our church doesn't do politics.** The Vote Out Poverty campaign is nonpartisan and seeks to unite Christians from all perspectives around the goal of ending poverty in our country and the world.
- **What is Sojourners?** Founded in 1971, Sojourners' mission is to articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world
- **Isn't Sojourners partisan?** Sojourners is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) Christian organization that is dedicated to raising the biblical call to social justice. It is comprised of churches and individuals from across the religious and political spectrum. Sojourners believes that God is not a Republican or a Democrat and that faithful Christians can vote for candidates of either party. The goal of the Vote Out Poverty campaign is to get candidates from all parties to endorse our agenda of overcoming poverty.



- **I already have a sermon topic picked out for that Sunday.** Relate your sermon to the issue of poverty and/or work the campaign prayer and announcement into the service.
- **Some of the conservatives in our congregation will object.** Our goal is that everyone, no matter how they propose doing it, will commit to finding concrete ways to overcome poverty.

Putting the Vote Out Poverty Campaign into Action

Vote Out Poverty Pledges

We encourage you to incorporate the Vote Out Poverty pledge into your Poverty Sunday. Pledges give people an immediate way to take action on the issues they have learned about during worship or your presentation. Pledges also demonstrate the faith community's concerns to congressional candidates, providing incentive for her or him to sign the candidate pledge.

Individual Pledges. Ask people to sign a pledge committing to cast their votes by considering candidates and issues through the lens of the poor. These pledges will be sent to congressional candidates for consideration.

Candidate Pledges. Ask congressional candidates to sign a pledge committing to address the scandal of poverty when elected.

National Goal:

- 75,000 individual pledges
- 100 congressional candidate pledges
- Pledges from both presidential candidates

Why Pledge Cards?

The Vote Out Poverty pledge cards are designed to generate the political will among our nation's leaders necessary for them to prioritize the fight against poverty. In order to create this sense of urgency, we must demonstrate that a large group of citizens are equally committed to the cause. Many of you have been on the frontlines of this work by serving those affected by poverty in inner cities, developing countries, and rural areas. Now it is time to demand that those in positions of power use their influence on behalf of those who are the least, the last, and the lost.

In order to hold these leaders accountable to a goal of dramatically reducing poverty once elected, we first need for them to make clear commitments to us as the faith community.

The Vote Out Poverty pledges are aimed at first securing thousands of individual voter commitments, which will then be used as a tool to create the political will necessary to secure candidate commitments. We must let our candidates know that we are casting our vote through the lens of the poor and that we are watching what they do as leaders.

We have decided to put the focus of the first half of this campaign on securing pledges because nothing can create a sense of political will among candidates more than the threat of not being elected! Even if they are not interested in prioritizing the fight against poverty, we can make it in their interest if we are willing to unite in this cause and demonstrate our collective power.

Target Group:

While we encourage everyone to sign the VOP pledge card, we specifically are aiming our efforts at getting the majority of our faith communities to sign the pledge. In order to do this effectively, you will need a platform, which is the purpose of Poverty Sunday. Poverty Sunday will give you an audience with which to share the importance of the pledge in the context of this election and the broader fight against poverty.

Individual Pledge Process:

- 1) E-mail voteoutpoverty@sojo.net and let us know how many pledges you plan to secure. We'll mail you the pledge cards in time for your event.
- 2) Get as many people to sign the pledge as possible. Give them a copy to take home as a reminder of their commitment.
- 3) Make enough copies of all signed pledges for the candidates you'll be contacting.
- 4) Once you receive the pledges, enter the names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails into the database template that we will send you. This will build your local list of contacts—a key resource for an organizing group!
- 5) We want to know how you're doing! Report back with the number of pledges you've collected by e-mailing voteoutpoverty@sojo.net.

Approaches for Securing Individual Pledges:

- Find ways to distribute the pledge widely to people in your church (e.g. place it in the church bulletin), being sure to set up a means of collecting completed pledges, such as a labeled box in the church foyer.
- Have a table in the church with the pledge cards and a box for collecting them when completed.
- Do the big push for pledges on Poverty Sunday. Organize as many volunteers as you can to help you secure pledges that day. Have a Vote Out Poverty table in the

lobby of the church to collect the pledges and educate folks about the campaign.

- Send contact information from the database to Sojourners after the election so we can follow up with folks about Sojourners April 27-29, 2009, mobilization to overcome poverty.

Candidate Pledge Process:

We want you to ask for pledges from all candidates for national office where you live. This includes:

- your two current U.S. senators
- your senator's opponents (if her or his seat is contested)
- your current representative from the U.S. House of Representatives
- your representative's opponent(s) in the election

Here's How to Secure Candidate Pledges:

- 1) Combine the copies of pledges and a cover letter for each candidate you'll ask to sign the pledge.
- 2) Schedule an in-person visit with the candidate or their staff at their campaign headquarters.
- 3) Present the candidate pledge card along with a cover letter and signed individual pledges to the candidate or their staff. Be sure to leave behind your contact information and a self-addressed stamped envelope so they can send the pledge back to you.
- 4) Follow up! Call the campaign one week later and ask for an update. Tell them you'll be holding them accountable after the election on their plans to reduce domestic and global poverty.
- 5) Once you get a signed pledge, e-mail Sojourners with the news and fax or send us a copy of the candidate pledge. We'll keep track of the national total of candidate commitments.
- 6) After the election, signed pledges will remind your elected officials of the commitments they made during the election and will help you to keep them accountable as you continue to engage them, particularly during our mobilization in Washington, D.C., on April 27-29, 2009.

Tips for Voter Registration

The 2008 national election provides a groundbreaking opportunity to raise the crisis of domestic and global poverty to a national priority. Voting is the language of our democracy and a moral and religious responsibility. Registering people to vote, although it may seem complicated, is a tangible way to minister to your faith community, open the conversation about poverty in light of the election, and build interest and awareness for the Vote Out Poverty campaign.

Six Easy Steps to Voter Registration*

- 1) Get the cards.
 - Pick up a supply of voter registration cards from your secretary of state's office or your county or city elections office. Make sure you understand how to correctly complete the cards.
- 2) Help registrants complete the cards.
 - Make sure they are filled out properly with their full address, including "St." or "Ave.," and direction.
- 3) If the person says they will mail the card themselves ...
 - Try to persuade voters to let you turn in their cards.
 - Assure them that you are turning in many people's cards and that theirs will get to the right place on time.
- 4) Optional: Get their permission to contact them with information about the election and their polling place.
 - Have a clipboard with a sign-up sheet available for this purpose.
- 5) Remind the voter to bring their photo ID to the polls.
- 6) Drop off the cards to your local board of elections.
 - Familiarize yourself with your state's laws regarding when, where, and how to deliver cards. These can vary widely and it is best to be safe.

*Materials adapted from Rock the Vote: www.rockthevote.com.

Preaching Resources

Where do many people get their political information? Not the local news. Researchers with the University of Southern California's Annenberg School and University of Wisconsin found that only 44 percent of more than 10,000 local broadcasts they recorded and analyzed had any campaign coverage whatsoever. In fact, many people do not have regular access to the information they need to make informed decisions at the polls. Churches play a critical social role in providing not only information for civic dialogue, but also leading communities in the formation of conscience, deepening faith, and exercising values. Everything about the Bible can be understood to have political implications. But too often we don't have the tools for teaching the word in a constructive manner that equips Christians to be prophetic citizens.

Following are a number of resources to help prepare for a Poverty Sunday service, including reflections on the lectionary, tools for creating a topical sermon that focuses on poverty, and worship resources.

Tips for Preaching on Poverty Sunday

1. Start with Jesus

When preaching about poverty, voting, or social action, begin with Jesus and the biblical witness, not just the problems of the world. We find within scripture strong admonitions about injustices that prey upon the poor, the oppressed, and the powerless, and we discover a call to turn from injustice toward justice. At the same time, we discover a vision of what is possible when God's people take seriously the call of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection upon their lives and the life of the church. As we approach scripture, it is helpful to ask, "What does God look like in these texts and how should we respond?"

2. Overcoming Obstacles to Hearing the Word

What are the blocks that keep congregants from hearing God's call? For example, if you preach to an upper middle-class congregation about the poor of the city, your congregation may hear the message with certain preconceived ideas. They may think, "Sure, God loves the poor, but they chose their lot in life. People are poor because they're lazy or addicted to drugs or have children without being married." As ministers, we must think through the many obstacles that will keep people from hearing God's word and call clearly.

Once you have named the blocks that cause people to miss God's call, how can we overcome those obstacles? For example, to address preconceptions about the life and

struggles of the poor in your city, it might be helpful to have an individual in the congregation who has struggled with poverty talk about their life situation and what it is like to live in poverty. Ask them to explain the struggles they faced on a daily basis.

3. Share Stories

We should endeavor to make the text concrete and not simply abstract concepts. As we explore who God is and our response, we should also explore how that image of God shapes our response in today's world. It is helpful to create analogies to life and concrete pictures of what is possible. This section could include illustrations, personal stories, stories about heroes of the faith, etc.

Often our hesitance to get involved in the biggest issues of our day is rooted in a lack of connection with those who are suffering or a feeling of being completely overwhelmed by the problems at hand. To address this, begin by focusing on local and specific examples of problems, not global and abstract. Our goal is not to simply impart statistics about poverty, but to provide stories that help the poor and their struggles come alive to our congregation. Three helpful hints:

- Show how issues of poverty and injustice are directly impacting those within your local context.
- Ask congregation members to make friends with someone who can offer a different perspective on life.
- Encourage the congregation to begin asking questions about the world and why things are the way they are.

4. Applying the Text

Next we need to answer the question, "Now what?" For example, if the text shows a God who cares deeply for the poor and the call is for us to do the same, what are concrete ways this can take place? This could include practical tips, stories of what others are doing, or links to outside resources and organizations working on these issues.

As we head into an election season, it is important that we also make a critical link between caring for the poor and remembering the poor as we vote. Those for whom we cast ballots will have a lasting impact upon the lives of the poor and oppressed of our city and nation.

Simple Guidelines:

Highlight scripture. Stick close to the Bible and let its message come forth. You don't need to overlay or spin.

Be honest. Tell your congregation that you want to talk about these issues, but you will need their help. Let them know the guidelines you are following.

Promote civic participation. Talk to your congregants about their role as citizens and their call as Christians.

Ask questions. An authentic, thought-provoking question will stay with your congregation longer than a series of easy answers.

Avoid electoral partisanship. Your role as a church leader is not to get people to agree with your personal position or to vote your party line. Your call is to explore the Word of God in the context of the times in which you find yourself.

Encourage people to vote. Is everyone registered? Make voting a church event. Go to the polls together. Provide child care and transportation.

Scared to Talk Politics in Church?

You don't need to be partisan to be prophetic. by BRIAN MCLAREN

Sometimes I think that the most powerful and popular denomination in America is a stealth one. It's not the Baptists or the Catholics or the Methodists or the Assemblies of God. It's "radio-orthodoxy"—the set of beliefs promoted by religious broadcasting. Do you doubt the power of radio-orthodoxy? Just try contradicting it, especially in an election year.

The fact is, it's hard to be a good pastor any time, but during an election year in a country blanketed by religious broadcasting, it gets even harder. How do we preach to, and lead our churches in a year like this—with an important and divisive election underway? Over the years, I have tried three main options (I'm not proud about this):

1. Ignore the election completely.
2. Remind people to vote as their Christian civic duty, and leave it at that.
3. Preach on the moral issues related to the election about which my congregation is already in agreement.

This year, compelled by what's going on in our country and world, I hope to try a fourth option:

4. Preach and educate on the moral issues related to the election about which my congregation is *not* already in agreement.

It has been said that most Christians in America are, whether they know it or not, more or less Calvinists—simply because of the pervasive influence of Calvinism in our history and culture. Through radio-orthodoxy, I think it could also be said that many, if not most, Christians in America are more or less tacit members of the Religious Right. It doesn't matter that you preach prophetic sermons on social justice and care for the poor, the environment, the alien, the enemy. Every day during drive time, your people who tune into Christian radio hear radio-orthodox broadcasts from a different vantage point, and when your confused members have to decide who they agree with—you or the radio preacher—most will decide the guy behind the microphone has more authority than you. It's a democracy thing: Since he's on the radio, he's heard by *thousands*; he must be right.

So, if you're going to preach and lead during this election year in any direction other than that of radio-orthodoxy, and if you have even a small prophetic bone in your body, you've got a tough job on your hands. How can you do it?

As Adam Hamilton, writing in the Spring 2004 *Leadership Journal* puts it, “I have watched pastors who were quite proud of their ‘prophetic ministry’ drive churches right into the ground ... [or drive] away everyone who disagreed with them, attracting only the like-minded to their church. What they did *not* manage to do, unfortunately, was actually influence anyone to change.” Instead, Hamilton recommends a five-phase process, which I plan to follow this year:

1. Show respect for all positions on an issue, and for those who hold opposing opinions. It’s tempting, especially when one is reacting against a polemical, biased, chest-thumping opposition, to respond in kind and opt out of the Lord’s command about doing unto others.
2. Understand the opposing side so well that you can present its arguments as clearly as its proponents do. Each position has its upside and downside, as do opposing views. We tend to know *our upside* and *their downside*, but fairness requires we face *our downside* and *their upside* as well.
3. Begin your sermon by presenting the opposing case’s position. Present it so compellingly that people would believe it’s your position if you stopped your sermon midway.
4. Then present your position, rooting your position in biblical soil, admitting your position’s downsides.
5. Confess your openness to changing your thinking—thus modeling the teachability you hope your people will demonstrate.

This approach, Hamilton argues, is not easy. But it holds a higher probability of changing minds than more direct, confrontational approaches.

Let’s face it. It’s easy to preach up a sweat when you know your congregation is thinking, “Amen! Go get ‘em!” But when your congregation feels threatened, intimidated, rebuked, insulted, discomforted, and otherwise unsettled, it’s another matter. Think of the last time a parishioner sent an e-mail or letter telling you how and why you were wrong about something (which happens pretty often for many of us). Did you immediately say, “Wow. She’s right. I’m wrong. I have to call her and thank her for pointing out my errors and prejudices”? Chances are, you thought of packing up and quitting, or of firing off an angry e-mail in return. No wonder parishioners leave when we preach to them without necessary gentleness and respect.

I’ve been running through a thought experiment for the last couple of years that helps me as I prepare to preach in this election year. I imagine I’m living in Alabama or Mississippi, and it’s 1962. I’m pastoring an all-white church of Christians who share the views of their neighbors about integration, equality, and the like. I would like to be

truly prophetic. One option would be for me to preach some rip-roaring sermons that would either get me fired fast or send most of my congregation packing for a church more to their liking, leaving the church unable to pay my salary. Either way, I could then move to Massachusetts and get a job there, telling the story of my valiant stand for truth and consequent persecution among the Southern savages, and thereby become a certified hero, well-perched to preach similar fiery sermons against the bigotry of people in the South, to cries of “Amen! Go get ‘em!” from my New England parishioners. This would be very good for my career and very fulfilling. I could even write magazine articles about my exploits. But what good would it really do?

Another option: Avoid the subject of racism for 30 or 40 years, until other larger forces have already brought a change in the thinking of my people. Then I could preach about it with gusto. (I recently heard Dr. John Perkins share that he was invited to preach somewhere, and the organizer was very excited because John would be the first black ever to preach there. John wondered, “He’s *proud* about this?” Wait long enough, and you can have all the excitement of taking risks, with none of the risk.)

This year, I’m looking for a better option than either thundering self-righteousness or avoidance. It will involve risk. But it will also involve patience and gentleness and respect. Yes, I will need to be bold and courageous, but I will also need to be both clever as a serpent and harmless as a dove. Here are some specifics I’m planning for this election season:

First, I’m hoping to sponsor our first-ever “Presidential Dialogue” (not debate), where we’ll ask members of our congregation (perhaps on a midweek evening) to present why they’re voting for their candidate of choice. We’ll establish some clear guidelines for the evening to help people practice respectful dialogue. (I may invite them to follow Adam Hamilton’s five-phase process.) In so doing, I’m hoping that our people will be exposed to logic and concerns from “the other side.” I’ll probably give a few words before or after about 1 Corinthians 13—being patient and kind with one another, and so on. After all, “the love chapter” isn’t just for weddings! My guess is that this experience will stretch hearts to love their differing neighbors along with stretching minds to consider their differing perspectives.

Second, we might also encourage people to gather for the televised presidential debates to dialogue about what they see and how they’re impacted—from the vantage point of biblical faith. We’ll assume that there will be divergence of opinion; our goal will be to get people thinking with openness to new ideas and the guidance of the Spirit. And we’ll recommend that they unite in prayer for our leaders and our world to end the evening.

Third, I’ll have several more or less “prophetic” messages through the course of the year leading up to the election. This week, for example, we’re exploring the healing of the man with the shriveled hand (Mark 3:1-6). There, Jesus becomes angry and deeply distressed at the stubbornness of the religious leaders. That will give me an

opportunity to talk about how religious people like us can unintentionally find ourselves playing on the wrong side—worshipping a shriveled “household god” (out for me and my kin), or a paralyzing “tribal god” (out for my country and its national interests), rather than the Living God who loves every person, whether “us” or “them.” Later in the year, I may preach on Psalm 20 and Isaiah 13, where trusting in horses and chariots is contrasted with trusting in the Lord. These are biblical themes my people probably won’t hear on the radio.

Whether the best candidate gets elected in November or not, I hope through this process that Christians in our country will be wiser, more thoughtful, and more biblically formed and Spirit-guided after the election season than they are now. That’s a challenging enough goal of preaching and pastoring in an election year. And just between us, I hope that through your preaching and leadership, local congregations’ respect for their own pastors will be a little stronger, whatever their denomination, and radio-orthodoxy’s signal will be a little weaker.

Why? Because the gods of radio-orthodoxy tend to be of the household and tribal type, in part, I think, because radio-orthodoxy is funded largely through donations. And it appears that radio-orthodox donations are best raised through greed (prosperity gospel) and fear (watch out, or the liberals will turn all your children into homosexual, secular, humanist, postmodernist relativists who don’t believe in absolute truth). Sermon broadcasts that appeal to greed and fear tend to render their hearers into people who are (surprise) greedy and fearful. Tax cuts and national defense play well to people so rendered; care for the poor and love for enemies (surprise) do not. But this is exactly the kind of thing you shouldn’t say in your sermon. Or if you do, be careful—more careful than I’ve been here. ■

Brian McLaren was an author, speaker, pastor, and networker among innovative Christian leaders, thinkers, and activists when this article appeared in the September 2004 issue of Sojourners.

Lectionary Reflections

Revised Common Lectionary readings for September 21, 2008:

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

The following are reflections on themes found in the gospel reading.

God's Economy

by Shelley Douglass

God's economy is not like ours. We hoard and stockpile; we measure out the day's pay according to hours worked. God, however, simply sees that there is enough for everyone. Enough manna—but no more. A day's wages—no less.

In God's economy there is enough. In our world, which is God's, there is enough—but not if we take more than our share. What do I have that is more than my share?

In the human psyche, there is a bias against injustice. It amazes me to see how often my bias gets biased—I resent someone else's "enough" because they've worked less for it, come later, not fulfilled my expectations. Yet my sensitivity to injustice is remarkably tolerant when I'm the beneficiary of that injustice.

God in God's mercy forgives not only my greed but also my resentment and blindness. In God's economy, there is even enough forgiveness. ■

Shelley Douglass was a Sojourners contributing editor and lived and worked at Mary's House, a Catholic Worker community in Birmingham, Alabama, when this article appeared.

Questions: How does God's economy differ from our own? Do I have more than my share of wealth? How are we the beneficiary of injustice?

Just Payment

by Julie Polter

When Jesus told the parable of the laborers, his point may well have been that Gentiles would receive the same blessing in God's reign as the people of Israel (who had worked under the "burden" of the law for centuries).

But if life was fair, shouldn't the ones who labor longest get what they deserve? What about self-sufficiency, hard work, and earning your way in life? The early bird gets the worm. God helps those who help themselves. You get what you work for. Right?

Turn it all over. In God's economy we're worth more than we could ever earn.

New immigrants, homeless men, laid-off factory workers gather in parking lots or line up in front of storefront offices in the early morning, hoping to be picked for a day job (digging, moving office furniture, painting). Paid in cash, if they get picked.

Other people wait by the phone, hoping for a call from the temp agency. Formerly secure professionals find themselves laid off and then rehired as temporary workers or consultants in order to save their employers the cost of paying benefits. A young mother would like a job instead of government assistance, but she can't find one that pays enough for her to afford child care and health insurance. ■

Julie Polter is an associate editor of Sojourners.

Questions: Does God's economy have anything at all to do with our economy? How do we live as recipients of divine generosity in a society where we sort and rank each other according to employment status and income? How are we to reflect God's economy in our lives and interactions with others?

Sample Topical Sermon Outline

If you are preaching a topical sermon on poverty and the election, this outline provides a starting point. After the outline are articles on related themes to help guide your sermon preparation.

I. Good News to the Poor (Luke 4:16-30; Isaiah 61:1-11)

II. Who Are the Poor?

- A. In scripture: The alien, the widow, the orphan, the powerless (Malachi 3:5)
- B. Today: The homeless, the uninsured, those without quality education, the hungry

III. What Does the Bible Teach about Wealth? (Matthew 6:24-25, 31-33)

IV. Why Should We Help the Poor?

- A. Because God identifies with the poor (Proverbs 19:17; Matthew 25:34-35)
- B. Because God protects the poor (Deuteronomy 10:17-18)
- C. Because we are commanded to (Isaiah 58:1-10)

V. Why People Are Poor

VI. What Can We Do to Help the Poor?

- A. Get to know someone in need
- B. Advocate for and with the poor
- C. VOTE!

Hearing the Word

Good News to the Poor

by Samuel Escobar

*How blest are you who are in need, the Kingdom of God is yours.
How blest are you who now go hungry; your hunger shall be satisfied.
How blest are you who weep now; you shall laugh. —Luke 6:20-21*

Blacks, Latinos, and American Indians, the poor minorities of North America, need the fire of these words to warm their hearts. Prisoners of oppressive governments need these words. Harassed and helpless masses running desperate behind messiahs of the right and the left in the Third World need these words. Indigenous peoples of South America, chased by the oil companies and their native agents, need these words.

These words of Jesus for the poor point to the fact that there is a God who sees and judges, who is not indifferent to the human drama behind their poverty. The history of the world is not in the hands of Herman Kahn, or Alvin Toffler, or super-secret intelligence agencies of the West or the East, who will get from their computers cold, pragmatic devices to perpetuate the domination of the powerful and the rich.

Speaking about judgment, Jesus also said words that have to be heard today:

*But alas for you who are rich; you have had your time of happiness.
Alas for you who are well-fed now; you shall go hungry.
Alas for you who laugh now; you shall mourn and weep. —Luke 6:24-25*

Because of so much spiritualization we have forgotten that the people who rejoiced at Jesus' coming were the poor, the victims of a corrupt and abusive social system imposed by the Roman Empire and its native collaborators. A message about judgment and deliverance is never popular among those who benefit from the existing order, unless they repent and change.

The gospels tell us about two men who were among the rich. Though his lifestyle and belief were very unorthodox, one man, Zaccheus, confronted with the good news, repented and changed radically. The other was an articulate and morally righteous fellow, an "evangelical" in doctrine. But the existing order of which his fortune was a part was too dear to him. He did not repent. It was not that the message was not clear. He understood it quite well, but he preferred his wealth.

IS JESUS' MESSAGE, then, only for the "have nots"? Some have interpreted it that way. One of the most interesting Pentecostal pastors in Chile was Victor Manuel Mora.

In 1928 he founded a church to which only those who were mining workers and socialist could belong. It was a church for the poor; it proclaimed a message for the poor (see Christian Lalive d'Épinay, *Haven of the Masses*).

On the other hand, more than once I have talked with men in Latin America in the tradition of political liberalism who have said to me, "We, the enlightened classes do not need religion. We approve of you preaching to the poor. They need it. For them it is the only basis for a good behavior. Protestant religion is good to save them from drunkenness, laziness, sexual abuse, and their tendency to steal." I have also heard American business people in Latin America express the same idea. They are cynical about the relevancy of Christianity for themselves, but they are very supportive of the missionary enterprise if it produces "better natives."

We have also the missionary theory of receptivity to the gospel among the poor. A very articulate presentation of it is provided by Donald McGavran, the apostle of the church growth movement, in his book *Understanding Church Growth*. In it McGavran tries to make his readers aware that the masses of the world outside North America are poor today. He goes on to show that in biblical teaching God has a special concern for the poor: "These selected passages must not be distorted to mean that God loves the poor and not the rich," writes McGavran. "Nevertheless, it remains true that the common people are dear to God. The fundamental thrust of God's revelation demands a high valuation of the masses."

In accordance with these facts, then, McGavran advocates a missionary strategy that will concentrate on the masses and not on the small middle or upper classes: "Eurican (European and North American) churches are middle-class churches. Most missionaries are middle-class people. They have grown up with interior plumbing, electric light, and plenty of books. They ride in cars and travel to the lands of their work in jet planes. Really, in relation to the masses of the lands to which they go, they are not middle but upper-class people."

For the most part the strategy of winning the upper classes first has not worked. They will not be won. The middle classes "have it too good." Why should they risk losing it all to become Christians?

Although sociology and missionary history both prove McGavran's point, the fact of belonging to the poor classes of society does not in itself make one eligible for the kingdom of God. We must discover the deeper meaning of the term "poor" in scripture and consequently the real meaning of the gospel being "good news for the poor."

A STUDY OF THE biblical vocabulary about poverty throws helpful light on the subject (see the excellent study by A. Gelin, *The Poor of Yahweh*). Initially the Hebrew words described material dispossession and stressed the need for a social conscience to help the poor and provide for their needs (Exodus 21-23; Leviticus 19, 25; Deuteronomy 15, 24). Later, poverty became equated with piety, humility, and dependence on God. Thus the psalms and the prophets are filled with expressions in

which the Hebrew root for “poor” is translated as “humble” or “meek” by later New Testament writers quoting those passages (Psalm 37:11 and Matthew 5:5; Zechariah 9:9 and Matthew 21:4-5). Just before the Exile, the process culminates when the prophet Zephaniah tells us that the hope of the future, the hope of reconstruction and renewal after the national disaster, will be the poor (2:3; 3:12).

Those who were expecting the Messiah were those whose hearts could not trust anymore in human justice, human power, human wealth. Because they were victims of an order in which there was neither compassion nor regard for the poor and afflicted, they had turned their eyes upon God. By their hope and their trust in the promises of a just God, they were the only living witnesses in a world organized pragmatically around the principle of survival of the fittest. That was the social and spiritual context in which the prophets spoke clearly in favor of the poor, by stressing the justice of a God who was in favor of the poor: “Listen to this, you cows of Bashan, who live on the hill of Samaria, you who oppress the poor and crush the destitute. ... The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that your time is coming” (Amos 4:1-2). And, when the Messiah came, his words were very much in line with the psalms and the prophets and his lifestyle with that of the poor. For those who had nothing to lose but their chains, his words were immediately perceived as good news. For those who had something to lose, the choice was more difficult (John 12:42-43), but some chose him. The community that developed out of this evangelization took very seriously the problem of poverty, and was exhorted carefully and constantly about the dangers of wealth and status (Acts 2:44-45, 4:34, 20:35; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; James).

Thus, to understand the “poor” in the Bible as only a reference to spiritual poverty is to miss an important part of the message. As in biblical times, today there is a correlation between sociological and spiritual poverty that cannot be dismissed simplistically. Jesus Christ, the psalms, and the prophets are still a threat to the rich and the powerful. Jesus Christ is still the only power that can demythologize human idols of the right and the left. That is why, both in communist and capitalist countries, the powers that be, ask for a Christian message that will make no reference to material, social, and political realities. They want a domesticated message that will not challenge executives or commissars but will only be used in church buildings to produce somnolence and inaction. And we Christians, here and there, fall into that temptation. By cutting, trimming, and twisting, we produce a gospel that is inoffensive and bland: good for marketing but in no way “good news for the poor.” Today, the world is divided into rich countries and poor countries, and some of the very tensions in which we live come from that fact. Unfortunately, some of our leaders in the Christian world are rich or new rich, and find it very difficult to see the world with the eyes of an African American, a Latino, a Portuguese immigrant, or an American Indian on a reservation.

That is what conversion should do for them.

Repentance must come at this point. In terms of both the content of our message and our lifestyle, we have a long way to go to really be imitators of Christ’s incarnation.

Not all the poor of today automatically accept Jesus as Lord. Not all the rich of the world today automatically reject Jesus as Lord. The god of this world dominates men and women through their wealth in terms of money, power, civil or ecclesiastical prestige, status, culture, education, abilities, institutions, virtue, achievements, and so on. This god also dominates men and women through the fear of chaos, of principalities and powers, of persecution and suffering. From the god of this world, only Jesus Christ can deliver us when, like the beggar who cannot help his or her self, we extend our hand to him. But who wants to be a beggar? ■

Samuel Escobar was president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Canada, and a contributing editor when this article appeared in the December 1974 issue of Sojourners.

Questions: How did the message of Jesus both challenge and comfort the rich and the poor? Poverty is alternatively understood as solely material or solely spiritual. What does a biblical understanding of poverty look like? Escobar argues that both communist and capitalist countries tend to domesticate the Christian message. How so? Is this something we find ourselves doing?

Is God Really on the Side of the Poor?

by Ronald J. Sider

Is God, as some liberation theologians suggested in the 1970s, biased in favor of the poor? The Bible has a clear answer. God is not partial. God has the same loving concern for each person created. For precisely this reason, God cares as much for the weak and disadvantaged as for the strong and fortunate. In contrast to the ways you and I, as well as the comfortable and powerful of every age and society, always act toward the poor, God seems to take a special interest in the poor and oppressed.

The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches a fundamental point that we have often overlooked. At the crucial moments when God displayed mighty acts in history to reveal God's nature and will, God *also* intervened to liberate the poor and oppressed. God displayed power at the Exodus in order to free oppressed slaves. When God called Moses at the burning bush, God's intention was to end suffering and injustice: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Exodus 3:7-8).

Now of course the liberation of oppressed slaves was not God's only purpose in the Exodus. God also acted because of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God wanted to create a special people to whom God's self could be revealed. The liberation

of a poor, oppressed people, however, was right at the heart of God's design. (Exodus 6:5-7).

The preamble to the Ten Commandments, probably the most important portion of the entire law for Israel, begins with this same revolutionary truth. Before God gives the two tables of the law, Yahweh identifies God's self: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Deuteronomy 5:6; Exodus 20:2). Yahweh is the one who frees from bondage. The God of the Bible wants to be known as the liberator of the oppressed.

The Exodus was certainly the decisive event in the creation of the chosen people. We distort the biblical interpretation of this momentous occasion unless we see that, at this pivotal point, the Lord of the universe was at work correcting oppression and liberating the poor.

WHEN THEY SETTLED in the promised land, the Israelites soon discovered that Yahweh's passion for justice was a two-edged sword. When they were oppressed, it led to their freedom. But when they became the oppressors, it led to their destruction. When God called Israel out of Egypt and made the covenant with them, God gave them God's law so that they could live together in peace and justice. But Israel failed to obey the law of the covenant. As a result, Israel was destroyed, and God's chosen people were sent into captivity. Why?

The explosive message of the prophets is that God destroyed Israel not just because of idolatry but also because of their economic exploitation of the poor. The middle of the 8th century B.C. was a time of political success and economic prosperity unknown since the days of Solomon. But it was precisely at this moment that God sent the prophet Amos to announce the unwelcome news that the northern kingdom of Israel would be destroyed. Penetrating beneath the facade of current prosperity and fantastic economic growth, Amos saw terrible oppression of the poor. He saw the rich "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth" (2:7). He saw that the affluent lifestyle of the rich was built on oppression of the poor (6:1-7). Even in the courts the poor had no hope, because the rich bribed the judges (5:10-15). God's word through Amos was that the northern kingdom would be destroyed and the people taken into exile (6:4-7; 7:11, 17). Only a very few years after Amos spoke, it happened just as God had said.

CHRISTIANS BELIEVE that God revealed God's self most completely in Jesus of Nazareth. How did the incarnate one define his mission? His words in the synagogue at Nazareth, spoken near the beginning of his public ministry, still throb with hope for the poor. He read from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19).

After reading these words, he informed the audience that this scripture was now fulfilled in himself.

Some avoid the clear meaning of Jesus' statement by spiritualizing his words. Certainly, as other texts show, he came to open our blinded hearts, to die for our sins, and to free us from the oppression of guilt. But that is not what he means here. The words about releasing captives and liberating the oppressed are from Isaiah. In their original Old Testament setting, they unquestionably referred to physical oppression and captivity.

Jesus' actual ministry corresponded precisely to the words of Luke 4. He spent most of his time not among the rich and powerful in Jerusalem, but among the poor in the cultural and economic backwater of Galilee. He healed the sick and blind. He fed the hungry. And he warned his followers in the strongest possible words that those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners will experience eternal damnation (Matthew 25:31-46).

At the supreme moment of history, when God took on human flesh, we see the God of Israel still at work liberating the poor and oppressed and summoning God's people to do the same. That is the central reason for Christian concern for the poor. Not only does God act in history to liberate the poor, but, in a mysterious way that we can only half fathom, the sovereign of the universe identifies with the weak and destitute. Two proverbs state this beautiful truth. Proverbs 14:31 puts it negatively: "Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker." Even more moving is the positive formulation: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord" (19:17). What a statement! Helping a poor person is like helping the creator of all things with a loan.

BORN IN A SMALL, insignificant province of the Roman Empire, Jesus was first visited by shepherds, persons viewed as thieves by Jewish society. His parents were too poor to bring the normal offering for purification. Instead of a lamb, they brought two pigeons to the temple. Jesus was a refugee (Matthew 2:13-15) and then an immigrant in Galilee (Matthew 2:19-23). Since Jewish rabbis received no fees for their teaching, Jesus had no regular income during his public ministry. Nor did he have a home of his own (Matthew 8:20). Jesus also sent out his disciples in extreme poverty (Luke 9:3; 10:4).

His identification with the poor and unfortunate was, he said, a sign that he was the Messiah. When John the Baptist sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was the long expected Messiah, Jesus simply pointed to his deeds. He was healing the sick and preaching to the poor (Matthew 11:2-6). Jesus also preached to the rich. But apparently it was his particular concern to preach to the poor that validated his claim to messiahship.

Only as we feel the presence of the incarnate God in the form of a poor Galilean can we begin to understand. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). If this saying of Jesus is awesome, its parallel is ter-

rifying. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (v. 45). What does that mean in a world where millions die each year while rich Christians live in affluence? What does it mean to see the Lord of the universe lying by the roadside starving and walk by on the other side? We cannot know. We can only pledge, in fear and trembling, not to kill him again.

Certainly none of us would claim that we are fully implementing the biblical call to side with the poor. And we cling to the hope of forgiveness. But there comes a point (thank God, for God alone knows where) where neglect of the poor is no longer forgiven. It is punished. Eternally. Is it not possible that large numbers of Western Christians have reached that point? North Americans earn 14 times as much as the people of India, but we give a tiny amount to the church, and most churches spend much of that pitiful pittance on themselves. Can we seriously claim that we are imitating God’s concern for the poor and the oppressed?

God is not biased. But neither is God neutral in the struggle for justice. The Bible clearly and repeatedly teaches that God is at work in history casting down the rich and exalting the poor. Why? Because the rich have failed to aid the needy. Or because they have often become rich, as scripture points out, precisely because they have oppressed the poor. The God revealed in scripture is on the side of the poor precisely because God is *not* biased, precisely because God is a God of impartial justice. God longs for the salvation of the rich as much as for the salvation of the poor. God desires fulfillment, joy, and happiness for all creatures. But that does not contradict the fact that God is on the side of the poor. Genuine biblical repentance and conversion lead people to turn away from all sin—including economic oppression. Salvation for the rich will include liberation from their injustice. Thus God’s desire for salvation and fulfillment of the rich is in complete harmony with the scriptural teaching that God is on the side of the poor.

God’s concern for the poor is astonishing and boundless. We can only begin to fathom the depth of God’s identification with the poor as we see it disclosed in the incarnation. His passion for justice compels him to obliterate rich societies and individuals who oppress the poor and neglect the needy. Consequently, God’s people—if they are indeed God’s people—follow in the footsteps of the God of the poor. ■

Ronald J. Sider was part of the Jubilee Fellowship of Germantown in Philadelphia when this article appeared in the October 1977 issue of Sojourners.

Questions: How can one obey Jesus’ call to “feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the prisoners”? Sider argues that “God seems to take a special interest in the poor and oppressed.” Do you agree? Why, or why not? Have you ever avoided Jesus’ call to minister to the poor by “spiritualizing” his message? If so, why? If not, why do you suspect that so many people do?

Why People Are Poor

by Tom Hanks

If a poll were to be taken in North American churches concerning the causes of poverty, the results might be quite revealing. The major cause of poverty is widely assumed to be “underdevelopment.” Other prominent factors are believed to be laziness (we’ve all read about those exemplary ants in Proverbs 6), vices such as drunkenness, and, however subtly and discreetly expressed, the supposed racial and national inferiority of certain peoples. It’s a very comforting worldview and one that our most popular politicians delight to propagate.

But if you look up “underdevelopment” in a concordance, even an exhaustive one, it makes for a very short “quiet time”: You find precisely nothing. The Bible contains a few scattered references attributing certain instances of poverty to laziness, drunkenness, and other assorted causes, but hardly enough to substantiate any of them as the basic cause.

Looking up the words “oppress” and “oppression” in the concordance discloses an overwhelming avalanche of texts, however, representing 15 Hebrew roots and two Greek, occurring more than 300 times. Following through the concordance study with references to standard Hebrew and Greek lexicons uncovers even more references, many of them obscured by the traditional translations.

If the biblical vocabulary for oppression is then correlated with the vocabulary for the poor and poverty, we find that in 122 texts oppression is indicated as the cause of poverty. The Hebrew lexicons even indicate an overlapping of meaning in some cases, so some words for poor should be translated, the “oppressed-poor.” Other causes for poverty, such as laziness, are mentioned in very few texts, though somehow these are the texts we have heard most about.

Oppression is a major category in the Bible’s understanding and approach to reality. The Exodus has come to be recognized as playing a central role in the theology of the Old Testament, comparable to that of the cross in the New Testament. And it was in the Exodus that a people God recognized as oppressed won their liberation. In the period of the Judges, or Liberators, Israel repeatedly fell under the oppression of neighboring powers that impoverished them (Judges 6, for example), until they finally opted for a king. This temporarily solved the problem of foreign oppression. But beginning with Solomon, Israel began to feel the brunt of internal oppression.

Clearly there were relatively few years in the entire sweep of biblical history when oppression by foreign superpowers and/or local oligarchies was not the daily experience of the common Israelite. It is no exaggeration to say that 90 percent of biblical history is written from the perspective of a small, weak, oppressed, poor people. Small wonder, then, that oppression and the resulting poverty form so large a bulk of the literature that recounts the struggle.

The Exodus experience of oppression-liberation made such an indelible impression on Israel that the rest of the Bible continually hearkens back to it. Thus,

Deuteronomy 26:5-9, often referred to as the “Apostles’ Creed” of the Old Testament, reflects the experience as it tells us what Israel confessed annually when they brought their offerings of first fruits. The themes are few: patriarchal wanderings, oppression, resulting poverty in Egypt, the Exodus liberation, and possession of Canaan: “The Egyptians mistreated us and oppressed us [*labats*]. So the Lord brought us out of Egypt.” In other words, the Israelites were creedally committed to confess every year a sense of solidarity with their oppressed-poor ancestors and to celebrate the great liberation of the Lord in the Exodus. In Psalm 103 (so loved, perhaps, because so little understood) we see how the tremendous experience of the Exodus liberation becomes what Latin theologians like to call a “paradigm”—an experience to be repeated by other nations:

The Lord is working liberations (Hebrew: tsedeqot) and justice for all the oppressed (Hebrew: ashaqim): He revealed to Moses his characteristic ways of acting, his miraculous deeds to the people of Israel. —Psalm 103:6-7

Only in the light of this Old Testament background can we begin to appreciate the radical nature of the New Testament message. We have to put ourselves in the place of a people living like the Jews of the first century, under the boot heel of Roman oppression, to understand what Jesus said.

What does it mean to follow this Jesus as a disciple? Traditional theology has taught us to think in terms of ethics, a Greek philosophical category commonly used to describe absolutes unrelated to history. Latin American Christians are rediscovering another word that expresses better the biblical understanding: *praxis* (in the original Greek, the title of the book of Acts is the *praxis* of the Apostles). It involves, among other things, a commitment to work for the liberation of the oppressed-poor. Luke makes it emphatically clear (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37) that this remained a top priority for the early church. So does James, the Lord’s brother, in his classic definition of true religion:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to care for orphans and widows in their oppression (Greek: thilpsei) and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.—James 1:27

Our common English translations prefer to speak of affliction in this text, but Arndt and Gingrich’s Greek lexicon correctly recognizes that oppression is the first meaning and the reference to orphans and widows, repeatedly called oppressed classes in the Old Testament, makes the sense unmistakable.

Jesus takes his stand squarely in his family’s prophetic tradition. In his classic definition of his own understanding of his mission, he declares that God’s spirit has anointed him to proclaim “good news to the poor ... freedom for the prisoners ... liberation for the oppressed” and to inaugurate a jubilee epoch (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus says nothing about needing to energize the lazy, improve the IQ of the racially inferior, develop

the underdeveloped, or control the demographic explosion of the excessively prolific.

In fact, careful linguistic examination of the text reveals that Jesus basically directs himself to one group: the oppressed-poor. Prisoners in that time usually were not criminals. More often they were in prison for debt (crimes were commonly punished by fines and execution). The blind to be healed are almost always also beggars in the gospels.

However, Jesus comes not just to repeat the devastating socio-economic analysis of the prophets regarding the causes of poverty; rather, he comes to incarnate and herald the solution: “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it” (Luke 16:16, NIV). The emphatically evangelical character of Jesus’ approach to the oppressed-poor is everywhere evident throughout the gospel.

Jesus’ teaching and praxis in regard to the oppression that causes poverty can be observed in a number of areas: his liberating approach to women, particularly widows; his simple lifestyle and teaching against accumulated wealth; his denunciations and protests against the local religious-political oligarchy; and his more subtle critique and stubborn policy of non-cooperation with the Roman Empire.

The gospel of Luke begins by stressing Jesus’ identification with the poor in his incarnation. It reaches its climax with his death on the cross as God’s “oppressed servant.” God then liberated him from all his oppressors in the decisive event of the resurrection, through which he became the first fruits of the liberated children of God and all creation (Romans 8:18-23). The Old Testament paradigm was not “spiritualized” or “depoliticized” but made universal, even as God had promised Abraham (Luke 9:31; Genesis 12:1-3).

This discovery that oppression is a major category of biblical theology holds implications for the church.

First, in our approach to the poor, whether in our own slums or in the Third World nations, we need to stop justifying our privileges and start trying to discover, unmask, and denounce the mechanisms of oppression that make and keep people poor. The biblical prophets were geniuses at this. We need to enter into the depths of their social analysis and not content ourselves with the discovery of occasional messianic proof texts.

Second, we need to examine radically our understanding of the Christian gospel and Jesus Christ. We must ask whether Christ is presented as liberator of the oppressed or as champion of an unjust status quo, and whether our gospel is “good news to the poor” or a rationalization for the rich. Strange that John the Baptist should be portrayed in Luke’s version of the good news as declaring: “He that has two coats, let him give to him that has none.” That may sound like very bad news in an American suburb, but in a Nicaraguan slum that kind of teaching sparked a revolution. It all depends on whether you have two coats or none. We must study carefully what the Bible teaches about the kind of salvation-liberation Jesus came to bring.

The prophet Amos compared the Lord’s speaking to the roar of a lion (Amos 1:2:



3:8). It is time now for our North American churches to examine what the Bible says about the causes of oppression and let the lion roar. ■

Tom Hanks, a Presbyterian minister, taught Old Testament at the Seminario Biblico Latinoamericano in San Jose, Costa Rica, when this article appeared in the January 1981 issue of Sojourners.

Questions: What assumptions do we typically make about people who are poor? What messages about poverty do you hear most often in the media and in politician's messages? How does God's view of the poor relate to our own?

Putting the Text into Practice

Jesus Visits the Hamptons

by Will Willimon

Some time ago I was returning from a preaching gig in the Hamptons, home of Martha Stewart, Steven Spielberg, and numerous others of the very rich. There I had seen homes with two bedrooms on the market for \$6 million, a house with a 200-car garage, and other architectural obscenities. But we had a wonderful weekend among the beautiful people of the Hamptons and no one walked out of my sermon on Sunday. As my wife and I flew back to drab Durham, North Carolina, I asked her, “Would you please explain to me what Jesus has got against rich people? I like rich people. I’ve met some great people who are rich. What’s the problem with Jesus?”

Well, like it or not, built right into the fabric of the gospel and the practice of the Christian faith, there seems to be a deep suspicion of, even a hostility toward, the prosperous. I would have a much better time visiting the Hamptons if I were not forced to take Jesus with me.

As G. K. Chesterton said, “It may be possible to have a good debate over whether or not Jesus believed in fairies. It is a tantalizing question. Alas, it is impossible to have any sort of debate over whether or not Jesus believed that rich people were in big trouble—there is too much evidence on the subject and it is overwhelming.”

There is a peculiar pastoral burden of having to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified in the midst of a nation of prosperity, particularly if the affluent are among us when we preach. Most of us preachers (to the discredit of the American church) preach to relatively affluent congregations. Jesus makes a prickly pulpit partner when, in the pews, sit those for whom he appears to have had deep antipathy.

We were guests at an affluent Episcopal parish (a tautology?) in the mountains of western North Carolina where rich people go to retire. We made our way through a parking lot of Cadillacs and Lincolns. The liturgy went well enough until we got to the sermon. The lectionary’s assigned text was from 1 Kings, the reign of King Solomon. The priest told us that Solomon was the world’s wisest man, king at a time when Israel at last stood at the summit of national development. No longer was Israel jerked around by larger nations. Israel had a big army and lots of chariots. The economy was booming. A great temple was being built as a sign of national prosperity. Then he paused and said, “And yet Israel learned that the reign of Solomon was a time when the nation was as far from the heart of God as it could get” Then the preacher hammered us for our stock portfolios, our pointless leisure, and problems with our spoiled children.

Where else but church would you get a read like that on a “well-functioning economy?” The plight of the poor becomes particularly problematic in a time of prosperity. Books by Michael Lewis and Dinesh D’Souza celebrate the lives and psyches of the New Economy’s millionaires, seeing them as irrefutable evidence that America never had it so good. Yet a great book by Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, portrays an America many of us do not know. Ehrenreich, who holds a Ph.D. in biology, wondered what America is like seen from the bottom up, as a member of the “working poor.” Leaving her home in Key West, she traveled from Florida to Maine to Minnesota, working in low-paying jobs, determined to live on what she earned. Twelve million women have been pushed into the labor market by welfare “reform”; how do they survive on the wages of the unskilled—at \$6 to \$7 an hour, only half of what is considered a living wage?

AS A WAITRESS in Florida, Ehrenreich’s name is suddenly transformed to “girl,” and the manager explains that he won’t take the trouble to learn her name because people in jobs like hers only work for a few weeks anyway. She records what it is like to get down on your knees and scrub toilets in a hotel where the rooms cost more for a night than she took home in pay for a week of work. She shares her budget, showing how it was impossible to make ends meet—even with careful management, good health, and no kids—on the wages that she earned. Even when she works two jobs, seven days a week, she almost winds up in a shelter for the homeless. In Maine, she stretches to get housing for \$675 per month and is still called “trailer trash.” As Ehrenreich says, the laws of supply and demand have been reversed. Rental prices skyrocket, but wages never rise. Jobs are relatively plentiful but it takes more than one to survive. Behind those trademark Wal-Mart vests, she discovers, are the borderline homeless.

After her experience, she wrote that the working poor “are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high.”

One of the most revealing things in Ehrenreich’s book is what it’s like constantly to be reminded that you are poor in an America where—according to the TV advertisements and sitcoms, the radio commercials, and the movies—everyone is doing just great. Invidious comparison is a particular burden that must be borne by the poor in our culture. I remember hearing a sociologist note that poverty in a culture like ours is particularly cruel not only because the gap between the rich and the poor is so great, but also because the gap is so constantly self-evident. In cultures where there are large, visible numbers of the poor, poverty seems less dramatic, more a part of life than a judgment upon you as a person.

A man in my church, after telling me of the hardships his family endured during the Great Depression, concluded by saying, “Despite it all, it wasn’t so terrible,

because everybody, at least everybody we knew, was poor. When everybody's poor, it doesn't hurt so much to be poor."

TODAY, EVEN SOMEWHAT compassionate politicians now plead for the "working poor," as if simply to be poor were not a sufficient cause of concern. Just as we once made a distinction between the "deserving poor" and those shiftless, worthless, welfare cheaters who were just "poor," now we distinguish between the blessed "working poor" and all the others. We imply that we have a social responsibility to the "working poor" while the rest of those who, for whatever reason, don't work can be left to forage as best they can for themselves. This we call "compassionate conservatism."

Conservatism it may be, but whatever it is it doesn't sound Christian. Built right into this faith is God's concern for, blessing of, and promises made to the poor. If you are going to be a bona fide member of the Animal Protection Society, then you must cultivate a prejudice against the mistreatment of cats. If you are going to be a Christian, then there is no way to avoid a tendency toward condemnatory judgment of the rich and gracious, charitable compassion for the poor.

Therefore, in our land of relative prosperity and governmentally sanctioned greed, I see the following agenda for biblical Christians:

1. We must cultivate, in our churches and ourselves, a deep suspicion that affluence is a spiritually debilitating and morally dangerous condition. During the campaign debate over doing away with the inheritance tax, I recalled a statement by Augustine that anyone who inherits a great fortune has committed robbery—if not by himself, then at least by his father. A great fortune, unearned through hard work, reasoned Augustine, means that someone is living off unjust gain. Christianity and material prosperity are bad bedfellows.
2. Politicians often put a happy face on everything, telling us that we live in the best of all possible worlds and that if you are not doing well economically, then there must be something wrong with you. Therefore, Christians must practice resistance through a studied determination to notice, to care for, and to stand with the poor among us. They represent a visible, undeniable minority report on how well our society is doing.
3. One of the greatest gifts we have to offer this aggressively materialistic culture is a prophetic Christian critique of the present order. We created this economy; God did not. We have decided to reward some for certain sorts of work and not others. A "fully functioning economy" is to be measured by factors greater than the aggrandizement of the few. It falls to Christians to be among those who point this out.
4. Finally, we preachers must preach the doctrine that, no matter what we do or don't

do, God will finally have God's way with the world. God will get the world God intended. That, scripture suggests, involves good news for the poor and less than good news for the rich. Whether God's news is for me good or bad depends to a great extent on where I happen to be when I get the news.

On the first Sunday of the school year, we had a group of students over to our home after the university chapel service. We had a picnic for them, then some lingered to play basketball or to talk. I sat on our patio with one student. He said, "Dr. Willimon, thanks for having us over to your home. This is the first time I've ever been in a faculty home."

"That's a disgrace," I said. "I think that we faculty ought to have students in our homes as often as possible."

"Well, few faculty think that way, I can tell you," said the student. "And you have a beautiful home," he said. "Let me ask you, do you feel at all guilty being a Christian and living in such a nice house? How have you thought about that?"

And I responded, "Now I'm remembering why it was not such a great idea to invite you people over to my house."

Such are the challenges of attempting to be Christian in the midst of affluence. ■

Will Willimon, the author of more than 50 books, was dean of the chapel and professor of Christian ministry at Duke University when this article appeared in the March-April 2002 issue of Sojourners.

Question: What does it mean to live as a Christian in the midst of affluence? What does scripture say about the wealthy? What is our responsibility to the poor in an age of ever rising prices and increasing affluence? What kind of government policies could you, as a voter, support as a way of following the call to be generous to the poor, welcoming to the stranger, and be impartial to the rich?

Worship Resources

Responsive Reading

Leader: In response to the gospel and Jesus' call on our lives and the life of our church; in a nation where nearly 46 million citizens are without health care;
All: We as a church will work toward affordable health care for all people.

Leader: In a nation where nearly 13.5 million households suffer from food insecurity;
All: We as a church will work to make sure that all people have enough to eat.

Leader: In a nation of educational inequality;
All: We as a church will work toward quality education for all children.

Leader: In a nation of growing homelessness and housing foreclosure;
All: We as a church will work toward affordable housing for all people.

Leader: In a world of extreme global poverty, where two billion people live on less than a dollar a day;
All: We as a church will work toward a world where all people have their basic needs met, regardless of income, geography, or citizenship.

All: Almighty God, open our eyes to the poverty in our community, in the nation, and the world. Give us wisdom to address the needs of people and guide us as we carefully choose our elected leaders in the coming months. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

One: O God, for all the times we have failed to see the plight of the poor and their need for justice;

All: Forgive us for we know not what we do.

One: For overlooking the poor as we go about our busy lives;

All: Forgive us.

One: For the abandoned and the homeless we have ignored;

All: Forgive us.

One: For not giving drink to the thirsty;

All: Forgive us.

One: For not sharing our food with the hungry;

All: Forgive us.

One: For amassing great wealth and giving so little;

All: Forgive us.

One: For voting our own self-interest at the expense of the poor;

All: Forgive us.

One: Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.

All: Have mercy on us.

One: Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.

All: Free us from the bondage of sin and death.

One: Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.

All: Hear our prayer. Grant us peace. Amen.

Prayer of Blessing

Conveners: Gracious God, bless us in our desire to seek justice for the poor. Help us bring dignity to those who suffer from injustice.

All: We pray that our church would be known by our radical and practical acts of love. Open our eyes to the injustice in our world and help us to see the world with your eyes. Teach us to act for justice with those considered “the least and the lost”; guide us as we vote and in the choices we make. Amen.

Biblical References to Poverty

Though there are thousands of references in the Bible to God's love for the poor, here are a few that stand out:

Micah 6:6-8: With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He 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?

Isaiah 58:3-7: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? 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?

James 2:15-17: 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.

Matthew 25:31-46: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just

as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them. ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Luke 18:1-8: Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Appendix

IRS Fact Sheet

Election Year Activities and the Prohibition on Political Campaign Intervention

On Feb. 24, 2006 the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) published a fact sheet for charities and religious organizations that “is intended to help organizations understand what they can and cannot do when an election campaign is underway.” The guidance covers activities that brought IRS scrutiny on groups during the 2004 election, including voter mobilization, individual activities by leaders, voter guides, candidate appearances, issue advocacy, business activity, web sites and combined activities. It includes 20 examples of allowable and unallowable activities, but the IRS stresses it does not cover every situation. This article summarizes the fact sheet.

In its introduction the IRS says it “considers this fact sheet to be a living document, one that will be revised to take into account future developments and feedback.” Comments can be submitted by e-mailing a message to tege.eo.ceo@irs.gov, or sending a letter to the following address: Internal Revenue Service, 1111 Constitution Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20224, Attn: SE:T:EO:CEO.

A short summary of the tax code’s prohibition on partisan activity by charities and religious groups (501(c)(3) organizations) notes that the ban applies to candidate elections at the local, state and national level. It stresses that prohibited intervention includes “any and all activities that favor or oppose one or more candidates for public office. The prohibition extends beyond candidate endorsements.” The IRS will use all facts and circumstances to determine whether political intervention has occurred. Violations “may result in denial or revocation of tax-exempt status and the imposition of certain excise taxes.”

Information on Specific Activities

Voter Education, Voter Registration and Get Out the Vote Drives

These activities are permissible “if they are carried out in a nonpartisan manner.” Two examples illustrate extremes, but nonprofits will find many fact situations involving permissible voter mobilization activities that fall in the middle. The example of a permissible voter registration drive involves a booth where the only information available is the name of the organization, the date of the election, and voter registration forms. In contrast, the example of impermissible activity illustrates a group operating a phone bank targeting registered voters that only provides voting reminders to people that agree with the position of one candidate.

Individual Activity of Organization Leaders

The IRS notes that leaders can speak on important public policy matters, or on partisan matters as individuals. It advises organization leaders to “clearly indicate that their comments are personal and not intended to represent the views of the organization.” The four examples stress

that leaders cannot use organizational resources and events to express personal partisan viewpoints.

Examples of permissible activities are:

- A disclaimer that an organizational title and affiliation in an endorsement ad are noted only for identification purposes, and
- An endorsement made at a non-organizational event where the leader makes no reference to the organization, even if news reports identify him or her with the group.

Examples of impermissible activities are:

- Using a column in an organizational newsletter to state a personal, partisan view, even if the author reimburses the organization for the space, because the newsletter is an official publication of the group, and
- A leader asks members to vote for a certain candidate at an organizational meeting.

Candidate Appearances

The fact sheet notes that candidates can attend a group's events in many capacities, as a candidate, a public official, expert or member of the general public. The IRS warns that "the candidate may not be familiar with the organization's tax-exempt status and that the candidate may be focused on compliance with election laws that apply to the candidates' campaign rather than the federal tax law that applies to the organization." Therefore, organizations should make their own determination about how to handle candidate appearances.

Speaking as a Candidate - When a group invites a candidate, the IRS says it should:

- Provide all candidates seeking the same office an equal opportunity to appear. This includes consideration of the nature of the event as well as the manner of presentation.
- Not indicate support or opposition to any candidate, and explicitly state its neutral position when the candidate is introduced and when publicizing the event.
- Not allow any campaign fundraising.

Public Forums - Forums and debates are considered educational activities if they do not show bias for or against any candidate. The IRS suggests a group sponsoring a forum consider the following questions:

- Are questions presented and prepared by an independent, nonpartisan panel?
- Do the topics discussed cover a broad range of issues of interest to the public and that the candidate would address if elected?
- Is each candidate given an equal opportunity to present his or her views?
- Are the candidates asked to agree or disagree with the organization's positions?
- Do the moderator's comments imply approval or disapproval of the candidates?

The IRS uses three examples to illustrate these standards. The examples of permissible forums involve separate appearances by candidates made at similar meetings where each has an equal opportunity to address questions on a wide variety of topics and the publicity had no comments on candidate qualifications. Where one candidate declines to appear the organiza-

tion notes that the order of candidate appearances is random, and that one declined to participate. The example of an impermissible forum involves a group that only asks one candidate to appear.

Speaking or Participating as a Noncandidate - The IRS says when a candidate appears at events in some other capacity, such as officeholder or expert, or attends an event open to the public, the event is not converted into a partisan activity. If the organization recognizes the candidate, it must make sure that:

- There are non-electoral reasons for the candidate to speak.
- The individual does not speak as a candidate.
- There is no mention of the election or candidacy.
- There is no campaign activity.
- A nonpartisan atmosphere is maintained.
- And the organization clearly indicates what capacity the candidate appears in and does not refer to the election in announcing his or her attendance.

The three examples relating to permissible appearances note events where a group customarily recognizes officeholders present, invites an elected official to a groundbreaking ceremony during the election season, but makes no reference to the election during the event, and includes current campaigns in an alumni newsletter biography. The impermissible event occurs when the chair of a group sponsoring a concert welcomes the mayor, but goes on to say “We will need his help if we want these concerts to continue next year so please support Mayor G in November as he has supported us.”

Issue Advocacy vs. Political Campaign Intervention

The blurry line between advocacy on issues, including criticism of public officials, and support or opposition of candidates was a controversial issue during the IRS’s 2004 enforcement program. In this section the IRS states that “501(c)(3) organizations may take positions on public policy issues, including issues that divide candidates in an election for public office...” but “must avoid any issue advocacy that functions as political campaign intervention.” It notes that “A communication is particularly at risk of political campaign intervention when it makes reference to candidates or voting in a specific upcoming election. Nevertheless, the communication must still be considered in context before arriving at any conclusions.”

The IRS will consider all facts and circumstances to determine which is which, and lists factors that help determine whether a statement is issue advocacy or partisan, examining whether an activity:

- Identifies one or more candidates.
- Expresses approval or disapproval of one or more candidates’ position on an issue or an action taken.
- Is made close to the date of the election or refers to voting and the election.
- Raises an issue that distinguishes candidates.
- Is part of an ongoing series on the issue that are not timed to the election.
- Is timed to influence a non-electoral event, such as a vote on specific legislation.

The IRS provides three examples:

- Permissible issue advocacy is illustrated by an ad asking the public to “call or write Senator C to tell him to vote for S. 24” because the ad does not mention the election, is tied to legislation that is scheduled for a vote and identifies Senator C as a legislator in a position to vote on the bill.
- Impermissible issue advocacy occurs when a radio ad urges the public to tell the governor, who is also running for re-election, “what you think about our under-funded schools.” The ad is not part of a regular series and the Governor’s opponent has made education a major issue in the campaign. There is no upcoming legislative activity on the issue.
- The executive director of an organization promoting mass transit intervenes in an election by ending a speech with this statement—“You have the power to relieve the congestion and improve your quality of life in District W. Use that power when you go to the polls and cast your vote in the election for your state senator.” In this case the candidates have disagreed strongly on investing in roads vs. transit and the speech occurs a month before the election. It is considered impermissible intervention even though there is no mention of the candidates or a political party.

Voter Guides

The guidance stresses that voter guides must not focus on a narrow range of issues or be structured to reflect bias. It cites key questions for determining if a voter guide violates the prohibition on campaign intervention. These are:

- Are the questions and descriptions of issues clear and unbiased in both structure and content?
- Are the questions in the guide the same as the ones sent to the candidates?
- Do candidates have a reasonable amount of time to respond and explain his or her position in their own words?
- Are the answers those provided by the candidates, unedited and in close proximity to the questions?
- Are all candidates running for an office included?
- Do the questions cover most issues of interest to the electorate as a whole?

The IRS notes that “If the organization’s position on one or more issues is set out in the guide so that it can be compared to the candidates’ positions, the guide will constitute political campaign intervention.” In addition the IRS notes that distribution of biased voter guides prepared by other organizations can still amount to a violation of the ban on partisan activity. No examples are included in this section.

Business Activity

When a charity or religious organization sells or rents mailing lists or leases office space to candidates, or accepts paid political advertising it must consider whether:

- the goods and services are available to all candidates equally, and whether they are available only to candidates and not the general public
- the fees charged are its customary and usual rates,
- the service is an ongoing activity or is only made available to a particular candidate.

Two examples illustrate permissible and impermissible provision of services to candidates. In the first, when a charity rents a hall for a campaign event at its standard fee on a first come, first served basis it does not support the candidate. In contrast, renting a mailing list to only one candidate and refusing to rent it to others, even when a standard rate is charged, constitutes prohibited support for a candidate.

Web Sites

The IRS notes that statements on web sites will be treated the same as statements made in print. It notes that links to candidate materials are not prohibited intervention if all candidates are represented or there is an exempt purpose served by offering the link. All facts and circumstances will be taken into account. Three examples illustrate the IRS position:

- An online voter guide that presents candidates in a neutral manner and contains links to their websites is permissible.
- A web page on a charity's site that links to an article relevant to its work on another site, which contains an endorsement on a separate web page, is permissible.
- A posting on a church site urging members to support a fellow parishioner in an upcoming election is impermissible.

Effect of Conducting Multiple Activities

The IRS notes that "Where there is a combination of activities, the interaction among them may affect whether or not the organization is engaged in political campaign intervention."

This article is reprinted with permission from NP Action (www.npaction.org). For the full text of IRS guidelines for election year activities and the prohibition on political campaign intervention, go to www.irs.gov/newsroom/article/0,,id=154712,00.html.



Candidate Pledge

As an elected official, I pledge to make overcoming poverty a central issue during my time in public office. To this end, I will **develop specific plans to address the crisis of poverty** both locally and globally.

More specifically, my plan will include **concrete actions** to achieve the following goals:

- Cutting the number of Americans living in poverty in half over the next 10 years.
- Providing leadership to achieve the Millennium Development Goals to end global poverty.

During my time in office, I will work to **put poverty on the national agenda** by partnering with local community leaders and colleagues in Congress, so that together we can change the face of poverty in the United States and around the world.

Name: _____

Date: _____

U.S. Congressional District/State: _____

*Vote Out Poverty is a faith-based movement to put overcoming poverty on the national political agenda.
For more information, visit www.sojo.net or e-mail Sojourners at voteoutpoverty@sojo.net.*



Voter Pledge

Dear Candidates,

Because of my faith, I pledge to make **overcoming poverty central to how I cast my ballot** in 2008.

I want to hear your commitment and plans for achieving the following goals:

- Cutting the number of Americans living in poverty in half over the next 10 years.
- Help end extreme global poverty by achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

I want to see your **leadership** on these important issues and will inform my friends and family of your positions.

Sincerely,

Name (please print) _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

E-mail/phone _____

*Return your pledge card to your Vote Out Poverty Organizer
or mail to Sojourners, 3333 14th St. NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20010.*



Church Leader Pledge

As a person of faith and as a leader of my congregation, I commit to the following actions:

1. Educating my congregation about the biblical call to social justice and the necessity of addressing injustice through personal action, congregational action, and policy change.
2. Educating my congregation about the crises of poverty in the U.S. and globally.
3. Sharing about the Vote Out Poverty campaign and specifically about the opportunity to join thousands of people of faith on April 27-29, 2009, in Washington, D.C., for a special accountability moment on poverty with our new president and Congress.

More specifically I will:

1. Host a Poverty Sunday gathering. Date: _____ (Target date: Sept. 21)
2. Help members exercise faithful citizenship by registering them to vote. Check yes no
3. Distribute Vote Out Poverty pledge cards yes no

Name (please print) _____

Signed _____

Church/Organization _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

E-mail/phone _____

*Thank you for your commitment to respond to the cry of the poor in our midst.
Please return this form to your Vote Out Poverty team leader.*