

Theological Discussion Questions

The video that accompanies the following questions was taken from the 146th Meeting of the Presbytery of Arkansas which took place March 5-6, 2021. There are three presentation sections and a fourth section where several ministries are highlighted that deal with the root causes of systemic poverty. Each section ranges from 15 to 22 minutes. It is suggested that groups plan to use this over a three-to-four-week period. There are discussion questions for the first three segments written by each of Hendrix College professors that delivered them. The ministries highlighted in the fourth segment are Changing Lanes - Rev Phil Blackburn (First, Ft Smith), Free Trade Coffee - Carolyn Nash (Westover Hills, Little Rock), and Mercy Church - Dr. Bobby Williamson each share about ministries they work with that deal with core issues causing systemic poverty.

Section 1: Dr. William “Bobby” Williamson (15 minutes video)

- (1) In the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), the lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” (10:29), which also implies the opposite question, “Who is not my neighbor?” Why do you think the lawyer wants to find the boundary between neighbor and not-neighbor? In what ways do you (or your congregation) draw the boundary of neighbor and not-neighbor today?

- (2) Jesus responds to the lawyer’s question by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, which ends with the command to show mercy to everyone in need (“Go and do likewise”). Why do you think Jesus refuses to answer the question of who is and is not a neighbor? What do you think it means to “show mercy” to those in need today?

- (3) While loving one’s neighbor (and not-neighbor) can sometimes involve individual acts of mercy, the book of Deuteronomy envisions a community founded on the principles of mercy and justice for everyone. What do you think of Deuteronomy’s command to observe fair labor practices (24:14-15) and food security for the most vulnerable (24:19-22)? What might be the parallel issues facing the most vulnerable today?

- (4) Deuteronomy 15 envisions a remission of debts every seven years, in which all creditors forgive the debts of everyone who owes them money (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). A similar command is called the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25. What do you think of this idea that the economy should be structured to prevent generational debt and to lift the poor out of chronic poverty? Do you think this kind of structural reform should be a goal of the church today?

- (5) In Jesus’s inaugural sermon in Galilee in Luke 4:16-30, Jesus quotes Isaiah 51 to declare that his ministry is “to bring good news to the poor” and “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” an apparent reference to the Jubilee Year in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. What do you think of the claim that “If it’s not good news for the poor, it’s not the Gospel”?

(6) If we were to take seriously Jesus’s call to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed, what might the church’s ministry look like today? In what ways do you already live out this vision of the Gospel? In what ways might you envision new ways of living out this vision?

Section 2: Dr. Peg Falls-Corbitt (15 minutes video)

(1) In this presentation the following distinctions were made in the ways that we work against poverty, acknowledging that they can and probably should overlap:

Justice: working to remedy or remove the causes of poverty; changing policies, laws, economic or cultural practices that create or sustain systems that lock people in poverty.

Charity and Service: providing financial support, goods, and services to care for the material (e.g. shelter), physical (e.g. food, health care), and educational needs of the poor.

Building Bridges of Relationships Between Rich and Poor

With these distinctions in mind, have each person in your group fill out the below chart and then discuss your answers as a group, using the suggested questions found below the chart.

In the far-left column, list activities at your church (or performed by you personally) that are a response to poverty. Across from each activity place an “X” in the column or columns that you think best describe how that activity fights poverty:

Activities List	Justice	Charity and Service	Building Bridges of Relationship between Rich and Poor

- (a) Compare and discuss similarities or differences in how individuals classified the aims or effects of the activities they listed.
- (b) Are there kinds of activities or goals for ending poverty that your church programs embody that do not fit well into the three categories listed?

- (c) Given what the group has discussed about what your church is doing now relative to justice, charity, and relationship-building, what does the group see as the growing edges of the church's commitment to help eradicate poverty?
- (d) What does the congregation need to know about poverty in its immediate area, across the USA, or world-wide, in order to meet those growing edges and deepen or enlarge its work against poverty?

(2) The claim was made in this presentation that whether we are working for justice or charity, we need to be breaking down the walls that prevent loving relationship between rich and poor and building relationships across the deep economic divide in this country. What are the challenges churches face in doing this?

(3) What are some ways that our "spiritual poverty" is seen in the way we treat our personal material resources or that of the church?

(4) What is an occasion when you have been struck by the spiritual well-being or even spiritual giftedness of someone who is extremely poor materially?

(5) The final slide sets all work against poverty in the context of faith journey and growth into agape-love (loving God and loving God's people as God loves them).

- (a) What experiences do you have of the way in which working against poverty has drawn you or your church more fully towards God?
- (b) What are the dangers of trying to work against poverty or "for the poor" on our own and without God?

* The distinction between spiritual and material poverty on slide 12 is adapted from "What is the Problem?" in *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor....and Yourself* by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert.

Section 3: Dr. Jay Barth (22 minutes video)

- (1) How do the driving forces for poverty in Arkansas resonate with you as you think about the shape of poverty in your local community?
- (2) In light of the findings about the forces most responsible for poverty across Arkansas, what are the organizations—faith-based or secular—that are doing the best poverty amelioration work in your local community and why?
- (3) In Arkansas, race and poverty clearly reinforce one another—although that varies across different regions of the state. How do race and ethnicity shape perceptions of poverty in your own community and how does racism serve as an additional barrier to effective poverty work?
- (4) What roles can and should schools play in poverty-alleviation work? What is the promise and pitfalls of schools serving as a "hub" of activities directed at transforming impoverished communities?
- (5) There is no doubt that the ongoing pandemic has enhanced poverty, at least in the short run. In what ways do you see COVID-19's legacy continuing to play out when it comes to meeting the needs of those who are impoverished (or on the cusp of poverty) in your community and across the state of Arkansas?