

MISSION TRIP PREP ESSENTIALS:

Poverty

An introduction to the myths and
generational impact of poverty



25 YEARS OF CHRIST-CENTERED MISSION TRIPS

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THIS IS AN ESSENTIAL READ FOR HEALTHY MISSIONS

A quick note before you begin.

After 25 years of facilitating short-term youth mission trips, we've recognized a number of essential topics that every youth worker should include in their pre-mission trip prep work. This guide book is designed to introduce you to one of these topics in a way that you can utilize it on your own, with a group of your volunteers, with student leaders, and even in small groups of students going on your mission trip. It's not an easy topic but it's necessary in an effort to respond to these questions...

What is poverty and who is impacted?

Where is it and why does it exist?

How are we as Christ-followers supposed to respond to poverty, whether near and familiar or distant and foreign?

This guidebook invites you to explore these questions as we seek greater understanding of the lives of people in our communities and broader human family.

Here's a quick look at what is to come:

The Causes and Roots of Poverty

We will explore the roots and causes of poverty using the metaphor of a three-legged stool; the most significant factors leading to poverty are the circumstances of one's birth, the vibrancy of one's community, and political and economic policies governing one's options and possibilities.

Visible and Invisible Impacts of Poverty

When considering the impact of poverty, we often imagine empty cupboards, dilapidated homes and untreated illness. There are also less discernible impacts, things that indirectly and directly shape the lives of everyone in a community. In this chapter, we will focus on training our eyes and ears to notice the less obvious impacts of poverty.

The Differences Between Charity and Justice

Once we decide to engage the problem of poverty, it can be difficult to know where to begin. Should we volunteer at a food shelf, give money to the homeless shelter or advocate for a higher minimum wage? This chapter examines some strategies we can employ to address poverty at multiple levels.

We know this is a difficult topic, and one that can't be fully covered in a guide book like this.

This resource concludes with a recap and encouragement to keep taking steps towards greater understanding. We provide ideas for action that focus on personal growth of youth leaders and ways to integrate their insights on poverty into their youth ministry.

We're here to support you along the way. Don't hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or are looking for any more information.

Ready for it? Let's jump in.

INTRODUCTION:

Taking a Deeper Look at Poverty

Poverty is an evocative word. It often conjures images of haggard-looking people, dirty living conditions and idleness. Some of us may even have an emotional response to the mention of poverty, perhaps because of direct personal experience or an impulse to distance ourselves from “those people.”

The challenge for Christians is that “those people” is synonymous with “the least of these” that Jesus talks about in Matthew 25, making it impossible for us to distance ourselves too much from the poor. In this passage, Jesus identifies so closely with the hungry, naked, imprisoned, homeless and thirsty, he tells us that to serve these people is akin to serving him. If we are serious about our discipleship and the spiritual formation of our students, we cannot avoid the staggering reality that 12.3% of the US population lives in poverty, a total of 39.7 million people.

Many Christians and churches already share time or resources to help the poor; this guidebook is designed for youth workers who want to go a step further, to take a deeper look at what poverty is and how it happens.

Here are some suggestions for getting the most out of this resource:

- **Check your baggage.** Preconceived notions about poverty and the people who live in that reality is understandable given the cultural air we breathe, but it is not helpful to this exploration and could seriously hinder the effectiveness of this study. Be intentional about creating space in your mind and heart to learn something new.
- **Take notes.** Keep a notebook handy so you have a place to express your thoughts, questions and feelings as they come up. It will be easier to engage with new or challenging ideas if they are written down.
- **Say their names.** It is far too easy to detach ourselves from the humanity of people whose lives we don’t understand. Consider or imagine specific people and communities as you engage this material.
- **Buddy system.** Invite a trusted person or two on this journey with you. It will help with perspective, encouragement and creative action.

This guidebook includes three chapters, each with a mix of prompts that invite engagement and reflection. We are confident that you will gain important and empowering insights that will impact yourself and your ministry.

And we pray that you don't stop with this guide book.

The last chapter includes a short list of resources that we recommend as next possible steps in your education. We hope you utilize those resources and many more as you dive deeper into this massive conversation.

- CHAPTER 1 -

The Causes & Roots of Poverty

Do you ever have one of those moments on a walk or drive when you suddenly notice where you are but can't quite remember how you got there? No matter how hard you try, you cannot remember the sequence of events that led to you being in that place at that time; it is like you were plopped there out of nowhere.

Noticing our social location – where we fit within the broader social network of our community, country and world – is kind of like that. With so much going on in life, the sequence of events that led to us living the life we have right now can easily fade to the background.

This chapter focuses on noticing things we often take for granted, things that are so embedded into our life experience that we don't see them unless we look carefully.

What makes this exploration even more interesting is that we are looking at some hard-to-see things that shape a life of poverty, something we may not experience directly or personally.

As a warm up, consider these questions:

- What was it about your family that made you want to be part of it?
- Why did you decide to choose your particular birth day and place?
- How did you decide on your skin and hair color, along with your body size and shape and the language you first learned to speak?

These rhetorical questions point to one of the most significant causes of poverty – **the circumstances of our birth**. There is an incredible array of factors that shape our lives from the moment of our conception, things that are completely beyond our control, yet profoundly influence our life experience.

Were you born during an economic boom or bust?

Historic markers like these have an impact on all of us, although in different ways and at different levels. The wealthy are often insulated from financial crises that simultaneously, and significantly, impact the poor.

What is your ethnicity?

Race and ethnicity continue to be one of the strongest predictors of poverty in the United States. While there are numerically more white people that live in poverty, the percentage of Native, Black and Latino people is much higher, making the impact on those demographics more significant.

Did your grandparents own their home?

Generational wealth begins to positively impact us long before we're a twinkle in our mother's eye. Home ownership is one of the strongest predictors of financial and social stability and is a primary way wealth is transferred from one generation to the next.

The circumstances of our birth are one determining factor of whether we experience poverty or not; another factor is the **health of our community and social networks**.

This is where it is helpful to dispel a common myth of poverty:

Poverty is not simply about a lack of money.

Poverty is about a lack of options, a lack of resources.

It is more likely to be experienced by people with a thin or absent network of reliable people. Poverty is a lack of community.

Take a few moments to reflect on this more nuanced understanding of poverty by imagining yourself in the following scenario. The sequence of these events happens in one person's life over the course of three months. Put yourself in her shoes and respond to the prompts based on your actual life circumstances. What would you actually do in that situation, given your resources and relational networks? Take the time to jot names, ideas, and plans in the spaces provided.

Setback #1

Your car breaks down on your way to work. After calling the tow truck and your boss, who do you call for a ride home?

Setback #2

Your car needs significant repair and will be in the shop for at least 2 weeks. Your insurance does not cover a rental. You do not have a job that allows you to work remotely, you do not have coworkers that live near you and you do not have paid vacation as a benefit. Public transportation is available, but inconvenient; it requires you to make 2 transfers and get home 2 hours later than usual. How do you get to and from work?

Setback #3

In your mailbox one day, you find a notice from your landlord that he is selling the building you live in and you have a month to find another place to live. The citywide vacancy rate for your income level is 3% and the only available units will require you to move across town, changing your kids' school and extending your commute to work. How will you approach finding a new home?

Setback #4

The final bill from the mechanic is double what you have in your bank account. Your two credit cards are maxed out, partly because you took in your teenage niece and her infant son, which tapped your food budget and adds to your utility bills. If you don't get your car back, your employment is in jeopardy. If you take out another credit card to pay the mechanic, your mountain of debt grows. What do you do?

Now imagine if the people you asked for help were unavailable or unable to offer any support. How might the outcome at each stage be different?

RECAP

This scenario may seem sensationalized, but it is more fact than fiction. Millions of people live with razor-thin margins, making relatively small life setbacks fuel for growing exponentially into major crises.

Whatever our socioeconomic status, our relational networks tend to be generally homogenous; the people at the top of our "I need help!" list are likely to have very similar resources as we do, which is great if we have a lot of resources and limiting if we do not.

Did you notice that this person was working a full-time job through all of these setbacks? One common myth of people in poverty is that they are unemployed, when in reality, many of the people who fall below the federal poverty line (\$25,750 for a family of 4 in 2019) work part or full-time jobs. It is not uncommon for some adults near the poverty line to work multiple jobs in order to afford the living costs in their area.

We hope this journey in another person's shoes helped to illuminate the broader variables that affect a person's experience with poverty. When we encounter someone in a financial pinch, we often instinctively impose our coping strategies – and all of their hidden privileges – to others who may have to manage setbacks entirely differently.

Remember, poverty is not about a lack of money, but a lack of options.

In addition to ***circumstances of our birth*** and the ***capacity of our community*** to offer necessary support, the third most influential factor in determining an experience of poverty is Uncle Sam. ***Policies at all levels of government*** impact how much mobility is possible for people who experience poverty at some point in their lives.

This can often be where the stereotype of the poor as idle, lazy or morally inferior shows it's strength. If we only allow a lens of personal laziness tell the story of why people are poor, we logically conclude that the only possible reason is personal failure or deficiency.

Let's test this out with John Doe. As you read the factual statements about John's situation, brainstorm a few reasons for why these things might be true.

John is poor.
John never went to college.
John is considering leaving his job.
John visits a food bank once a month.

We could be cynical and assume that the reason for each of these aspects of John's life boils down to one word: laziness.

Let's choose curiosity instead!
It turns out there is more to John's story.

What if John did not go to college because he did not want to? Facing the tremendous debt he would incur as a low-income person, John decides it is a more responsible decision to work his way through vocational school. He is considering leaving his job because he wants more than the 30 hours he has now, possibly even a higher wage with health benefits so he can move off of Medicaid. He visits the food bank to supplement his food budget, which is based on his sole income but has to feed the three people who live in his house, none of whom are able to work because they are disabled or too young.

A cursory review of John Doe’s situation reveals several points of intersection with government policy.

- Lending and repayment policies for higher education can disproportionately affect low-income students. Fees and penalties are assigned equally among all income groups, but impact the poor to a greater degree because of thin margins. The cost of education at four-year institutions has increased twice as much as the national inflation rate since 2000 and there is a lack of consumer protections in the higher education industry.
- People who live at or near the poverty line have a lot to juggle when it comes to services and benefits. It is enough to make one’s head spin! Medical assistance, housing, food assistance and help for family members with disabilities are all heavily regulated and sometimes have different, or even conflicting, qualification guidelines. Many people find themselves in a position of making too much to qualify for assistance but not enough to survive without it.

It seems that “lazy” does not describe John at all. To the contrary, he demonstrates resourcefulness, ambition, creativity, generosity and financial responsibility – descriptions and virtues too often reserved only for middle and upper-income people.

REFLECT

Unpacking the causes and roots of poverty can be mind-bending work, especially if we find out our assumptions or understandings are incorrect. Here are some questions to guide you through a short reflection and processing of this chapter:

- What has shaped your understanding of poverty so far in your life?
- To what degree have you considered factors outside of poor decision-making as reasons people find themselves in poverty?
- What questions do you have?

- CHAPTER 2 -

Visible & Invisible Impact of Poverty

Youth groups are ground zero for creative activities that foster connection and understanding of one another. In a typical ice-breaker, students flow in and out of conversation as they share about who they are as individuals, often mingled with outbursts of laughter and a tinge of social awkwardness. Sometimes, though, there is a breakthrough moment of authentic connection. Ah...youth worker bliss! Even better is when they can bring that skill to their encounters with people beyond youth group.

How would you describe yourself?

This question empowers the individual to name the most important parts of his or her identity. In conversations guided by this kind of inquiry, people are invited to see others for who they really are and share the most authentic parts of themselves. It allows opportunity for discoveries beyond the obvious; a student known for her athletic abilities reveals her love of cooking, an academic all-star reveals his Saturday morning routine of breakfast with his grandfather, or a shy middle schooler shares about his talent for singing.

These students, like all humans everywhere, also have aspects of their lives they would rather keep hidden. Maybe they feel misrepresented by a reputation, embarrassed by a mistake or that what people see on the surface is only a small part of who they are.

INVISIBLE IMPACT OF POVERTY

This gets at one of the most damaging hidden impacts of poverty – people being defined and identified by the outside world by *what they are NOT more than what they ARE*.

We have done that in this study already. **Poverty is about a lack of resources, a lack of community, a lack of options.**

These statements represent a way to understand poverty, but it is not the end of the story. The problem starts when we attribute or assign these social realities as personal deficiencies or define the humanity of people only by their circumstances.

None of us would want to be known only for our experiences, social standing, or past. Consider these examples from the gospels of how Jesus sees beyond external circumstances to the inherent value and contributions of people he encountered.

- Jesus sees leadership potential in Simon and begins to call him Peter, leader of the church.
- Jesus frees the bleeding woman and the blind man from their physical limitations so they can pursue the abundant life God had in mind for them.
- Jesus recognizes the grit and passion in James and John when he calls them, “sons of thunder.”
- Jesus interrupts the stoning of a woman caught in adultery and validates her as a worthy and valuable contributor to the community.
- Jesus refuses to see children as unimportant, instead holding them up as examples to follow for their eagerness, innocence and trust.

What are the qualities, contributions and achievements that you want people to most recognize in you?

Have you ever had an experience of being widely known by, or associated with, qualities that reflected poorly on you or misrepresented who you are? If so, how did you respond?

Regardless of our socioeconomic status or the size of our bank accounts, *we all deserve the dignity of being known for what we can do, become or accomplish.* It is not about pretending or naiveté, but about looking at the same situation with different lenses or from a different standpoint. When we change our angle, we will have a new perspective.

People who are accustomed to stretching their resources are likely to be proficient at collaboration, creative problem-solving and innovation. They could teach the rest of us a thing or two! Especially those of us who are accustomed to having more than we need or have not experienced extended times of financial uncertainty.

As Christians, we can lead the way in viewing people in poverty for their assets, strengths and contributions, showing the rest of the world that socioeconomic status does not get the last word.

This can help mitigate a damaging, largely hidden impact of poverty – being defined by perceived deficiencies. We can refuse to assign value to humans solely based on their economic footprint and recognize the important contributions people of all backgrounds can make to our communities.

VISIBLE IMPACT

We do not need to look as hard to see some of the obvious impacts of poverty on the lives of individuals, families and communities. Our view does, however, depend on where we line up on the socioeconomic spectrum.

Data collected by public and private entities over the past 30 years indicate the same trend – an increasing divide between the rich and the poor.

Times have certainly changed; the middle class used to make up the largest portion of the population by a long shot, but has shrunk significantly over the past several decades; the distance between the top and bottom earners was much smaller than it is now, with some CEOs making hundreds of times what their average employees make; between 1979 and 2007, the top 1% of earners saw wage increases at 15 times the level of the bottom 20% of earners.

Another trend contributing to the rich/poor divide is the socioeconomic segregation of neighborhoods, communities and schools. All across America, people generally live near people who have similar income and education levels. Demographic maps of most cities show concentrations of poverty and wealth that correspond to concentrations of the population sorted by race or ethnicity. This is another trend that has increased in the past 30–40 years, so many of us have not known anything else, making segregation seem normal.

Considering all of this (whew!), most Americans on an average day simply do not encounter people very different from themselves. So, even though marginalization based on economic status is “visible,” we still have to be very intentional about looking for it or we can easily miss the opportunity to encounter people outside of our personal experience.

Invitation to Action

- Even if we have a lifetime of negative stereotypes about the poor running on autopilot in our heads, we can renew our minds by reframing what is the most true thing about each human being – their status as image-bearers of God. (Genesis 1:26; 2 Corinthians 10:5)
- When you talk about poverty and the people with that experience, notice the words you choose and the way you represent their humanity.
- Intentionally reflect on your life routines – where and with whom you spend time, the places you shop and visit, the media you consume, etc. Consider introducing new things in your routine that expose you to people and circumstances outside of your normal circles.
- Advocate for and participate in integrated spaces throughout your community; do the same for businesses and institutions so that they are accessible and inviting to people of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

- CHAPTER 3 -

The Differences Between Charity & Justice

Once we decide to engage the problem of poverty, it can be difficult to know where to begin. Sometimes there are conflicting messages about what kinds of interventions or advocacy is effective and the last thing we want to do is harm the people we are trying to help.

Should we volunteer at a food shelf, give money to the homeless shelter, or advocate for a higher minimum wage? Is it best to send money or volunteer? How do I know if anything I am doing is making a real difference?

You may have asked versions of these questions yourself or heard them uttered by your students or volunteers. Then there is that perplexing passage in Matthew where Jesus says, “the poor you will always have with you,” causing us to wonder what Jesus wants us to do, if anything, about people living in poverty.

In many other places in the gospels, though, Jesus leaves no room for confusion as he clearly states a priority for helping the poor, whether by individual acts of charity or by calling out systemic injustice and working to establish a different way of ordering society.

Does that mean charity and justice are different? Yep!

For this part of our exploration, we are going to dig into this distinction to see what we learn about how charity and justice impact people who are working towards getting out of poverty.

The similarities and differences between justice and charity, specifically related to addressing poverty, can be understood through the following parable:

One summer in a quiet, happy village, the people gathered for a picnic. As they shared food and conversation, someone noticed a baby in the river, struggling and crying. The baby was going to drown!

Someone rushed in to save the baby. Then, they noticed another screaming baby in the river and they pulled that baby out.

Soon, more babies were seen drowning in the river and the townspeople were pulling them out as fast as they could. It took great effort and they began to organize their activities in order to save the babies as they came down the river.

As everyone else was busy in the rescue efforts to save the babies, several of the townspeople started to run away along the shore of the river.

"Where are you going?" shouted one of the rescuers. "We need you here to help save these babies!"

"We're going upstream to stop whoever is throwing them in!"

Where do you see charity at work in this story?

What about justice?

Everyone involved was motivated by compassion and a desire for the well-being of their fellow humans. They agreed that babies drowning in a river was a problem. This is an important, undergirding similarity between those involved in addressing the need.

The difference is revealed in the strategies for relief. Those involved in pulling babies to safety were doing the important work of **charity**. Meeting people's immediate needs and keeping them safe is a necessary response to crisis.

Those heading to the source of the problem are involved in **justice** work, addressing systems and laws that make throwing babies into a river possible.

Below is a simple overview of these strategies for addressing social problems:

CHARITY

- A social service meeting direct needs like food, clothing and shelter
- A response to immediate needs
- Directed at *effects* of injustice, its symptoms. It addresses problems that already exist.
- Tends to be private, individual acts

JUSTICE

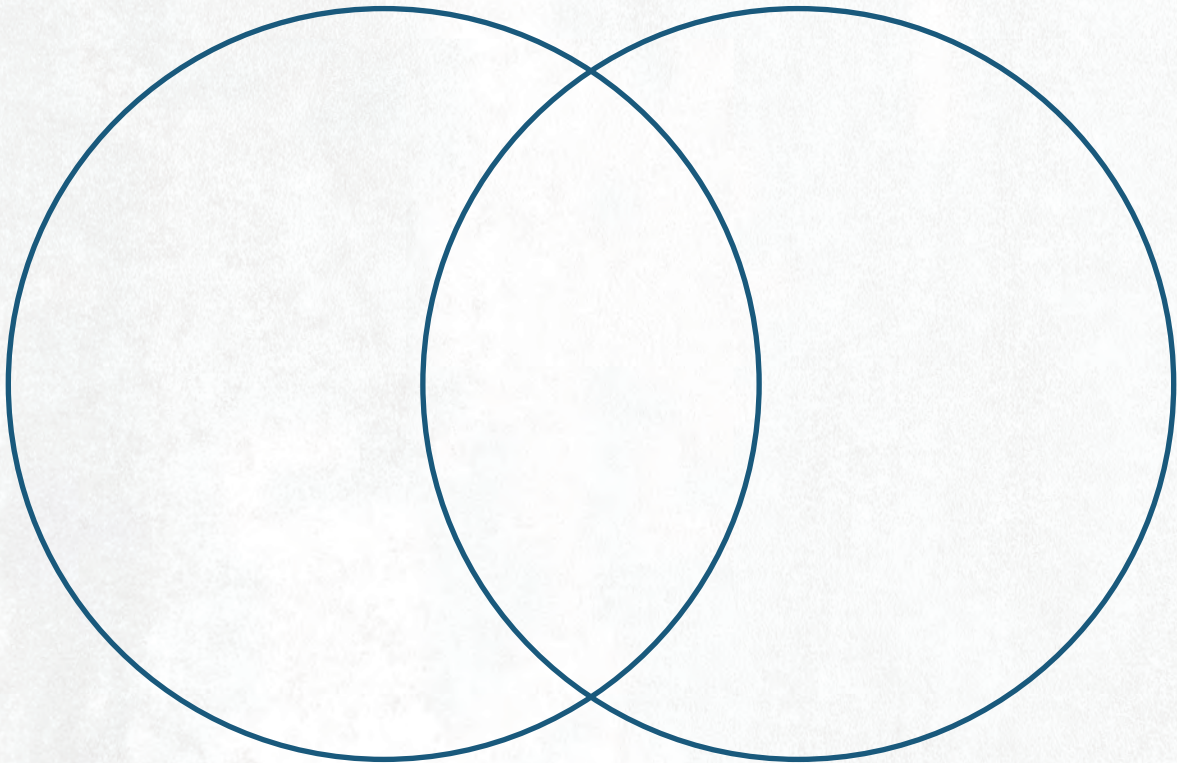
- Social change promoting different institutional policies and political structures
- A response to long-term needs
- Directed at *root causes* of social problems, addressing the underlying causes of problems so they will not exist.
- Tends to be public and collective

But charity and justice are not mutually exclusive. Do you remember learning about Venn diagrams in middle school? Organizing this discussion into that format would work really well for these ideas. They overlap in significant ways, yet also have distinct characteristics that define their goals and measurements of success.

Using the Venn diagram below, choose one of the following social problems and consider ways to address it that reflect strategies of charity and justice (if you know of a different social problem in your immediate area, choose that one instead!).

How might you suggest addressing this issue in a comprehensive way?

- Homelessness
- Chronic hunger
- Failing schools



DEBRIEF

Seeing a social problem mapped out like this might make you feel overwhelmed and hopeful at the same time. Or maybe just overwhelmed?

That is not the goal of the exercise, so let's take a moment to figure out what we can do with all this information. Stepping back to organize our thoughts and recognize our questions is like taking deep cleansing breaths when we are about to start a new task or need to decode a difficult problem. It can be helpful to center us and help us understand more about what we're facing.

It also helps to remind ourselves that fighting against the problem of poverty does not rest on our shoulders alone. We all definitely have a part to play in alleviating symptoms and addressing root causes, but let's remember to do that hand-in-hand with an army of others working toward the same goal.

The last step in this chapter is to turn our focus towards the students in your ministry.

- How can you help them understand the impact of different strategies when addressing poverty?
- What are some ways to inspire and invite them to take the next step in their engagement?
- What do you need to stay thoughtful and strategic in your approach to serving the poor?

BEFORE YOU GO

Next Steps as You Continue to Explore This Topic

Our goal with this guidebook is to walk alongside you as you dig deeper into your understanding of poverty. We have looked at some of the ways it manifests in people's lives, some of the misconceptions or myths about people in poverty, and some strategies for how to fight against the existence and impact of poverty in our communities.

We have only scratched the surface, so please consider extending your inquiry by checking out some of the resources listed below. This is by no means comprehensive, but will point you in the direction of further exploration. You likely have people in your church and community who could be great resources for you, so consider how you could schedule intentional conversations with people who can help to deepen your understanding.

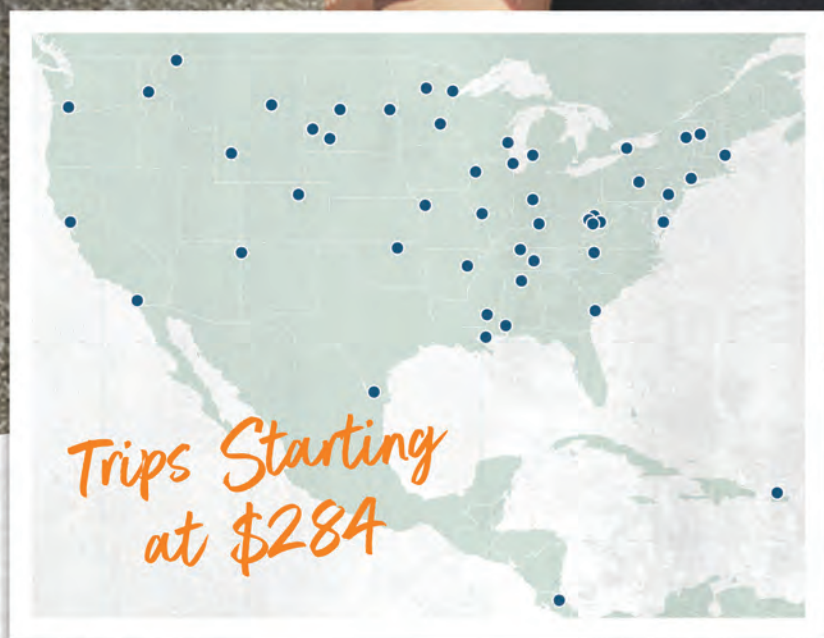
- ***American Winter*** – americanwinterfilm.com – Documentary about the impact of the 2008 recession on the lower-middle class, 2013.
- ***Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*** by Matthew Desmond, 2016. An in-depth study of the recession that focuses on several families from Milwaukee, WI as case studies.
- ***The Very Good Gospel*** by Lisa Sharon Harper, 2016. Harper lays a biblical foundation for justice as she ties everyday life to practices of Shalom.
- ***Everyday Justice*** by Julie Clawson, 2009. Highlighting how Americans tend to consume global commodities in unsustainable ways, the author walks readers through discovery, reflection and action towards more justice-oriented consumer habits.
- **Learn about where you live and serve.** Check into demographic information about your community or region to find out about the intersections of income, race, education, affordable housing, and employment opportunities. Local, state and federal government offices are required to publish this kind of data, so internet searches focused on government agencies are a good place to start.

Remember that you are not alone on your journey towards greater understanding of poverty. We are right there with you, taking our own diligent steps towards greater love, mercy, peace and justice to all people, no matter their circumstances. Learning and growing in our awareness of the world's complexities is part of life; engaging as disciples is part of following Jesus.

We are thankful to be on this road together!

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