

“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.

Let’s Talk About Poverty

January is Poverty Awareness Month. The Poor People’s Campaign was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s last major area of focus before his assassination. He believed addressing poverty was the next necessary step in the civil rights movement. You can learn about that effort from his own perspective in the last chapter of his autobiography, available for free online here: [Chapter 31: The Poor People’s Campaign | The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute \(stanford.edu\)](#) The Fair Housing Act was passed a week after King was murdered, and this has slowly made a difference in the racial disparity of home ownership. After King’s untimely death, however, income disparity in our country has not diminished; it has skyrocketed. In 1976, 8 years after his death, the top 1% of earners possessed about 8% of the country’s total income. At the end of 2021, the same top 1% took home 32% of the country’s total income.

While King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would definitely emphasize the racial inequality that shows up in the distribution of wealth in our country, and that is important to recognize, poverty is also a huge problem for people of all races here. Throughout American history, at least as early as the American Revolution, wealthy landowners have encouraged racism in the poorer classes. If white tenants thought, “At least we’re not black,” then they would be far less inclined to collaborate with their similarly-situated Black neighbors to rise up against the ruling class. As a nation, we’ve made some great strides in rewriting that narrative and uniting the working class, and there is still a long way to go if we want to be free of that foundational story. We have seen unions striking throughout 2023, some with impressive gains to show for it. There is reason to hope for lasting changes in our economy as a nation.

In the meantime, though, there are people in our community living in poverty. There are unhoused people all around us. There are housing-insecure and food-insecure families all around us, too. And often, we do not know who around us is struggling to make ends meet. So, while we do what we can to try to change the systems that fail to support our neighbors, how can we be good neighbors to people living in poverty?

1. Challenge assumptions (your own and others’). For example, the issue of homelessness is overloaded with misconceptions that politicians and media sources have built into our societal narratives. Here are just a few things that surprise a lot of people: There are homeless people who work and still cannot afford housing. There are a small minority who actually choose a houseless lifestyle. There are people who are, in fact, homeless but have a place to sleep indoors, maybe on a friend’s couch or in a family member’s loft. People experiencing homelessness are just as complex and diverse as people in general. Even among the housed population, a worrying number of individuals and families are housing-insecure, meaning they live paycheck-to-paycheck and one unexpected bill could put them on the streets. A large portion of what appears to be the middle class today is actually working class with a lot of credit card debt. Realize that we are all far closer to being unhoused than we are to being billionaires, and do what you can in your conversations with other housed people to foster empathy.
2. Treat people, like people. It seems overly simple, but this is an important practice. Even if you have nothing to give the person at the intersection holding a cardboard sign, make eye contact. The dehumanizing nature of so many experiences of people in poverty takes a massive mental and emotional toll. Something as simple as meeting someone’s eyes, acknowledging your shared humanity, can make a big difference.
3. Take action. Donate food to Aurora Interfaith Community Services. Bring the supplies needed for Colorado Village Collaborative. Talk to legislators and express that fighting poverty needs to be a high priority. Look into possible responses and support the ones you see as most viable and/or impactful. Even if your solution never happens, pushing for it shifts the conversation

towards caring about people in poverty instead of measures like criminalizing homelessness. If you don't know where to start, our Missions Committee (chaired by Sharon Davis and Wendy Hanson) and the Positive Change Committee (chaired by Sue Ricker) are excellent resources!

Our "Let's Talk About..." column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you'd like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at virginiag@smokyhillumc.org.