

***\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*****By Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer****Congregational Study Guide by Rev. Yvette J. Schock and Robert D. Francis**Using This Study Guide*Organization of the Guide*

This congregational study guide is meant for small groups but can be adapted for use in a variety of settings. It is written within the Christian tradition, but the basic framework and approach can be adapted for other faith expressions.

The guide contains eight sessions: an introductory session followed by seven sessions that correspond with the book's introduction, five chapters, and conclusion. Each session begins with a welcome, then an opening prayer and Scripture reading. (More on how to use these items below under "Leading Prayer and Scripture Reading.") Next is one or more "Empathy Questions" meant to help the group form a rapport and to connect their own life experience with the experiences of those in the book. The guide then provides a number of content questions based upon the book, *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer. Each session closes with a quote for reflection and then a closing prayer. The closing prayer time may be an opportunity for those in the group to share any prayer requests, especially as the group gets more comfortable with one another.

At the end of each lesson you will also find a brief section labeled "Community Connections". These suggested activities are designed to deepen your group's knowledge and understanding of poverty in your neighborhood or broader community, and to connect the stories you will be reading with the lives of the people who may ring up your purchases at your local big box store, or live in a basement apartment down the street, whose children may play with your children in your neighborhood park, or attend the same school.

The sessions are designed to be one hour, but there are enough content questions to extend the session if desired. The empathy question alone might be enough to fill the hour, and in fact, the introductory session centers primarily on the empathy question. Group leaders can also break up any of the sessions into more than one session if a course of more than eight weeks is desired. Additional discussion questions about the book's content can be found at the book's website.

*Leading Prayer and Scripture Reading*

There are hundreds and hundreds of passages in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament that speak of the poor, and many more that might guide how we respond to poverty as individuals, as citizens, and as a society. While it is beyond the scope of this guide to offer a comprehensive study of Biblical perspectives on poverty, we do encourage groups to begin

each session with a reading of one or two Scripture passages. These readings hint at the full biblical witness and are intended to serve as a theological frame for participants' reflections on their own lives and the group's conversation about \$2 A Day. We invite study group participants to consider and share additional biblical passages or theological readings that have shaped their understanding of poverty.

The Scripture readings can be approached in a number of different ways. One common approach to Scripture is *lectio divina* (Latin for "divine reading"), a Benedictine practice in which the passage is read several times, each time with a different focus or intent. (For detailed instructions, simply do an internet search for "lectio divina.") The leader may also choose to use this time to allow for silent reflection. The questions that follow each Scripture passage invite participants to unpack and explore the passages, and may be used for group discussion, silent reflection, written response in a personal journal, or some combination of these.

We leave it to group leaders to choose appropriate prayers from their faith tradition to begin and end each session. You might consider inviting participants to take turns leading the opening and/or closing prayers.

### *A Word for Group Leaders*

While no one is "for" poverty, discussion about poverty can quickly lead to very familiar and entrenched perspectives: personal responsibility OR structural forces; private charity OR government assistance; personal piety OR social justice. We hope that this guide will help study groups move beyond those well-worn positions, and to that end, we offer a few additional points for consideration:

- We encourage group leaders and all participants to center the discussion on the personal stories in the book. This particular book is well-suited for transcending tired arguments about poverty and the poor because it tells fully developed stories of real people. The experiences you will read - if encountered in their fullness and heard on their own terms - should challenge all of us, regardless of our preconceived ideas, because they do not neatly fit into a single paradigm about poverty. The stories of the people in the book show what we all know to be true from our own lives: real life is messy, complicated, and often does not go as planned.
- In a similar vein, we encourage leaders to ground discussion as much as possible in the lived experiences of those in the discussion group itself. Be sensitive to the fact that some in the discussion group might be poor or have experiences with poverty that might not be known to the group, even to close friends and family. Try to avoid speaking as if those who are poor are somehow "out there" and not part of the group. Even someone who has not personally experienced poverty is still formed by his or her personal experiences, and we believe it will be productive and meaningful for study participants to consider how they relate to those whose stories they have read. While there will be opportunities in this guide to discuss possible policy responses, we encourage leaders to

avoid discussing poverty as an “issue” in the abstract. If conversation begins to turn too much toward abstract ideas, it may be helpful to ask participants, “What experiences have you had in your own life that make you think/feel this way?”

- Finally, we encourage group leaders to give ample time for those in the group to get to know one another personally during this experience. This is one of the main points of the Empathy Questions. Discussion of poverty might be difficult for some and might arouse deeply-held beliefs. Honesty and openness are only possible in a setting of trust. The goal is not for the group to arrive at a single, uniform perspective, but for each person to have a safe space to reflect on their own experiences and empathetically hear the experiences of others in the group and those in the book.

Everyone who brings their values to bear on the situations of life is a theologian and ethicist. This guide begins and ends with the vital acknowledgement that many of us are informed and inspired by values that flow from our faith: love, mercy, justice, charity, responsibility, empathy, and so on. Often the challenge is not a lack of values, but awareness and reflection about how our experiences have shaped our values and how our values, in turn, might shape our action in response to poverty and other forms of suffering in our world.

Welcome to the journey!

## **SESSION 1: Building Community**

[This session is wholly devoted to introducing the group to one another and beginning to build trust and rapport. Reading the book begins before Session 2. The group leader should allow ample time for participants to respond to the Empathy Question in this session, which is expected to fill the majority of the time.]

### Welcome

### Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 10:24-25

*24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- Why were you drawn to participate in this study?
- What is one barrier in your heart or life that might prevent you from truly hearing from others?

Empathy Question: What experiences in your life have shaped your current understanding of poverty and those who are poor?

### Content Question

- Name one or two ground rules you think will enhance our conversation during the course of this study.

Closing Quote: “Strength lies in differences, not in similarities” — Stephen R. Covey

### Closing Prayer

## SESSION 2: Introduction

To Read Before This Session: “Introduction” from *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 22:1-5, Luke 4:16-21

Jeremiah 22:1-5

*1 Thus says the Lord: Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, 2 and say: Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. 3 Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. 4 For if you will indeed obey this word, then through the gates of this house shall enter kings who sit on the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, they, and their servants, and their people. 5 But if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation.*

Luke 4:16-19

*16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*18 ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’*

*20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- In the first reading, God sends the prophet Jeremiah to instruct the king of Judah. What is the content of Jeremiah’s message? What does this tell us about God’s character?
- What might it mean that Jesus began his ministry of teaching and healing by reading an Old Testament passage about bringing good news to the poor?

Empathy Questions: What was life like for you when you were growing up? Where did you live? How did your parent(s) or guardian(s) provide for your family?

### Content Questions

- The book's Introduction begins with the story of Devin, Susan and Lauren Brown. What is their experience? What about their story stuck out to you? What was familiar? What was surprising? What did you learn about poverty from hearing their story?
- Edin and Shaefer introduce the \$2-a-day threshold mentioned in the title of the book on page xiii. What do they mean by this measurement? How many people do they claim live under this level? Does this surprise you? How does it make you feel?
- The authors chose four sites for their work: Chicago, Cleveland, eastern Tennessee, and the Mississippi Delta. What do you think of their choices? Where might you choose to go if you were doing a similar project? Do you think there is this type of poverty where you live? Why or why not?
- On page xx, the authors call William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* "the most important book written about poverty in the last three decades." What is Wilson's argument according to Edin and Shaefer? What do you think of this claim? Do you have any experience in an area that Wilson might say is marked by "concentrated disadvantage?"
- The authors' claim on page xxiii that "throughout history, American poverty has generally been hidden far from most Americans' view." Why might they make this claim? Do you agree? Where do you see poverty around you? Where might it be hidden?
- At the end of the introduction, Edin and Shaefer tell us several things about the hopes and dreams of the people whose stories appear in the book. What do the authors say that the people in the book want? What do you think about these goals? What are your hopes and dreams?

Closing Quote: "God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house...God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with them." — Bono, at the 2006 National Prayer Breakfast

### Closing Prayer

#### Community Connections:

Concerning the place where you live: do you think there are any people living in extreme poverty in your town/city? Why or why not? Do you know where the location of the low-income neighborhoods or areas? Does anyone you know, including members of your congregation, live there?

Use the internet to look up basic statistics, such as the unemployment and poverty rates, for your area. As appropriate, consider a visit to one of these low-income neighborhoods, possibly for a meal at a restaurant or for a community or cultural event. Reflect on your experience.

### SESSION 3: “Welfare Is Dead”

To Read Before This Session: Chapter 1, “Welfare Is Dead,” from *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture Readings: Leviticus 19:9-10, Psalm 82:3-4, James 1:26-27

Leviticus 19:9-10

*9 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. 10 You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.*

Psalm 82:3-4

*3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan;  
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.*

*4 Rescue the weak and the needy;  
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.’*

James 1:26-27

*26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- What values are reflected in the verses from Leviticus? Is the command in these verses still relevant in a modern economy? How would you rephrase it to apply to a modern context?
- What do you make of the scriptural theme of protection of the weak, the widow, and the orphan, which we see exemplified in the Psalm and the passage from James?
- The Psalm pleads, “*Give justice to the weak and the orphan,*” and James urges believers “*to care for orphans and widows in their distress.*” How are these different? How are they the same?

Empathy Questions: What is your current work situation? How do you make a living?

Content Questions

- The chapter begins with the story of Modonna and Brianna Harris. What is their experience? What about their story stuck out to you? What was familiar? What was surprising? What did you learn about poverty from hearing their story?

- How does Modonna's complicated story confound simplistic notions of poverty as either the result of poor personal decisions or structural barriers to getting ahead?
- Modonna took some of her last money and used it for a hotel for her and her daughter. What do you think of that decision? What values and experiences shape your response? What would you have done if you were in her shoes? Why?
- Edin and Shaefer say on page 2 that "one way the poor pay for government aid is with their time." What do they mean by this?
- On page 7, the authors state that fewer than 2 in 100 Americans get cash welfare. There are more avid stamp collectors than welfare recipients in the U.S., and only one-quarter of the poor even get welfare. Does this surprise you? Why or why not?
- According to the authors (pg. 7), what are some of the key changes brought about when welfare was reformed in 1996? Why were lifetime limits and work requirements put into place? How do these measures make sense? What might be some unintended consequences?
- On pages 9-10, the authors compare Modonna's situation before and after working. She got significant governmental assistance when she worked full-time but less help when she had no income. Why the difference? What observations do you have about this difference? How do you think government assistance programs should work?
- Much of the chapter is a brief history of welfare. How much of this history did you know? What surprised you? What strikes you about the evolution from "mother's aid" to ADC to AFDC to TANF? Do you or someone you know well have experiences with any of these programs?
- The authors' say on page 19 that David Ellwood's realization was that "Americans didn't hate the poor as much as they hated welfare." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- What do you think are the core American values when it comes to the poor? What are the core values of our faith? How are these the same? How are they different? How might the culture influence the church's values and vice versa?
- The authors say on pages 27-28 that there was no apparent political fallout from the decision to reform welfare despite the concerns of many officials, some of whom resigned. Why do you think there was so little response?
- A common challenge in any assistance program, whether public or private, is balancing the charitable impulse to offer help with the impulse to ask something of the recipients. How would you balance those values? Does your feeling change based on whether the

help is public or private? Does the size of the program matter, such as the difference between a federal program and something like a church's benevolences?

Closing Quote: "True compassion is more than flinging a coin at a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." — Martin Luther King, Jr.

### Closing Prayer

### Community Connections

Learn about the social services available in your town or city. Do the necessary research to answer the following questions:

1. If you needed rent assistance, emergency shelter, or food stamps, where would you go? Be specific: find the address and the appropriate office for each kind of assistance. Note if the offices for these services are located near to one another or separated by some distance.
2. Which services are available to you in your immediate community? Which are not?
3. What distance would you have to travel to access such services?
4. What is the process by which you would apply for such assistance?

After you complete your research, reflect on your experience. Were you surprised by what you found? Do you think it would be difficult or easy to find assistance in meeting your basic needs in your town or city?

## SESSION 4: “Perilous Work”

To Read Before This Session: Chapter 2, “Perilous Work,” from *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading: Genesis 2:2-3, Proverbs 6:6-11, Jeremiah 22:13-16

Genesis 2:2-3

*2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*

Proverbs 6:6-11

*6 Go to the ant, you lazybones;  
consider its ways, and be wise.  
7 Without having any chief  
or officer or ruler,  
8 it prepares its food in summer,  
and gathers its sustenance in harvest.  
9 How long will you lie there, O lazybones?  
When will you rise from your sleep?  
10 A little sleep, a little slumber,  
a little folding of the hands to rest,  
11 and poverty will come upon you like a robber,  
and want, like an armed warrior.*

Jeremiah 22:13-16

*13 Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,  
and his upper rooms by injustice;  
who makes his neighbors work for nothing,  
and does not give them their wages;  
14 who says, ‘I will build myself a spacious house  
with large upper rooms’,  
and who cuts out windows for it,  
paneling it with cedar,  
and painting it with vermilion.  
15 Are you a king  
because you compete in cedar?  
Did not your father eat and drink  
and do justice and righteousness?*

*Then it was well with him.  
 16 He judged the cause of the poor and needy;  
 then it was well.  
 Is not this to know me?  
 says the Lord.*

#### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- What does our faith teach us about the place of work in our lives?
- In the story of creation in Genesis, for six days God works in creating the world, and on the seventh day God rests. What does this suggest about the places of work and rest in God's created world and our lives?
- How do you think being unemployed or underemployed affects the spiritual and mental well-being of a person? What about working multiple jobs with minimal pay? What impact does it have on the fabric of a community when there is an imbalance of work, rest, and compensation?

Empathy Questions: What is the worst job you have ever had? Why was it so bad? What would have made it better?

#### Content Questions

- At the beginning of this chapter, Edin and Shaefer introduce us to Jennifer Hernandez and her two kids, Kaitlin and Cole. What is their experience? What about their story struck you? What was familiar? What was surprising? What did you learn about poverty from hearing their story?
- On page 41, the authors write that “even the worst jobs in Chicago weren’t easy to find for someone like her [Jennifer].” What do they mean by this? What challenges did Jennifer face in securing and maintaining employment?
- The authors say on page 42 that most families that experience extreme poverty are connected to the labor force but have trouble finding or keeping jobs. Does this surprise you? Is Jennifer who you pictured when you thought about the extremely poor?
- It was hard for Jennifer to make ends meet even with a job. What are some of the challenges of low-paying jobs besides the low pay itself?
- On page 45, the authors assert that “service sector employers often engage in practices that middle-class professionals would never accept.” What practices do they highlight? Do you agree? Have you ever worked a service sector job? What is your experience?
- Jennifer’s vision for a job would be considered modest by many: a wage of \$12-13 an hour, a set schedule, and decent conditions. What do you think of Jennifer’s vision?

- In the middle of the chapter, the authors return to the story of Susan Brown from Chicago and follow her through the application process for a service sector job. What do you think of the process she encounters, especially the computer “test”? How would you answer the sample questions the authors discuss (pages 49-51)? Do you think this is the best process for finding workers?
- On page 51, the authors write that “when living on less than \$2 a day, you can’t afford *not* to be strategic.” What do they mean by this? How have you seen this in the stories so far?
- On pages 52-55, the authors explore the question of why is it so hard for Jennifer and Susan to find work. What answers do the authors suggest? Have you faced any of these challenges? How did you address them?
- Toward the end of the chapter, we meet Rae from Cleveland and her daughter, Azara. What is their experience? What about their story stuck out to you? What was familiar? What was surprising? What did you learn about poverty from hearing their story?
- In this chapter, we heard three stories of perilous work: Jennifer, Susan, and Rae. Did any one story strike you more than the others? Why? What did they have in common? What were the differences?

Closing Quote: ““Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work hard at work worth doing.” — Teddy Roosevelt

### Closing Prayer

### Community Connections

Consider the town or city where you live: who are the major employers? What kind of jobs are available? Are they part-time, full-time, salaried, or hourly wage positions? Has there been a shift in the kinds and number of jobs available in recent years? If so, how has that affected your community?

Explore the website of Interfaith Worker Justice ([www.iwj.org](http://www.iwj.org)), a faith-based organization dedicated to advocating for the rights of workers. Consider contacting IWJ or a similar job association that may be able to help your group locate an individual in your area who is willing to speak about their experiences doing low-wage work.

## SESSION 5: “A Room of One’s Own”

To Read Before This Session: Chapter 3, “A Room of One’s Own,” from *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading: Leviticus 25:35-38, Matthew 6:25-27

Leviticus 25:35-38

*35 If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens. 36 Do not take interest in advance or otherwise make a profit from them, but fear your God; let them live with you. 37 You shall not lend them your money at interest taken in advance, or provide them food at a profit. 38 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.*

Isaiah 65:21-23

*21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
22 They shall not build and another inhabit;  
they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
23 They shall not labor in vain,  
or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—  
and their descendants as well.*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- The book of Leviticus describes the holiness of God and calls God’s covenant people to holy living. Do the laws given in these verses from Leviticus affirm or challenge your understanding of holiness? How? What might holy living look like in our contemporary society and economy?
- Who are those who build, plant, and labor in vain in modern economies?

Empathy Questions: Consider all of your past residences: houses, apartments, dorms, military housing, your parents’ basement, a shelter, a relative’s couch, etc. Where is the place where you have felt most at home? What made that particular place home?

Content Questions

- The authors begin the chapter by returning to Jennifer and her children. How does their story exemplify the housing instability faced by many families living in extreme poverty?
- Housing is often the biggest expense in a family budget. Starting on page 77, what are some of the reasons the authors give for why the \$2-a-day poor experience housing instability?
- On page 77, the authors point out that housing assistance is not an entitlement, meaning that families are not guaranteed housing or housing assistance even if they have need. They also note that only about one-quarter of eligible families receive any type of rental subsidy. What do you think of this discrepancy?
- Should housing be a right? If so, how might we as a society provide for safe, affordable housing for all who need it?
- On page 78, the authors introduce the concept of adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs. The authors say that if Rae were to take the ACE questionnaire, she would “blow a hole through the top of the scale.” What emotions does Rae’s story evoke in you?
- The conditions the authors describe of George and Camilla’s home are visceral and stark. How do you react to these depictions? Are you surprised that people in America in the 21st century live in such conditions?
- At the end of the chapter, the authors talk about the intergenerational nature of the challenges faced by parents like Jennifer and Rae. Despite the parents’ best efforts, it is almost inevitable that the “toxic stress” of these situations will have adverse consequences on the children. What do you think can be done to support parents like Jennifer and Rae, dedicated parents who are navigating the complicated challenges of poverty?

Closing Quote: “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” — Maya Angelou

#### Closing Prayer

#### Community Connections

Identify the affordable housing options and emergency shelters in your city or town. Consider: What form does affordable housing take in your town? Is it low-income housing developments, neighborhoods set apart from others, affordable units included in new development projects, private properties, or properties developed and managed by the government? Is the affordable housing stock adequate for the needs of your community? What condition is it in?

What about emergency housing? What options are available for men, women, and parents with children who are in need of emergency shelter in your community?

Consider contacting organizations that own, operate, or in some other way provide affordable housing in your community, such as Habitat for Humanity, Lutheran Social Services, or the local public housing authority. Request a speaker who can share about the challenges of providing affordable housing in your community.

If there is emergency housing in your community, consider setting up a tour. Imagine how you might feel living there. Does it seem safe? Is it clean? Comfortable?

## **SESSION 6: “By Any Means Necessary”**

To Read Before This Session: Chapter 4, “By Any Means Necessary,” from *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:43-47

*43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Romans 14:7-13

*10 Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. 11 For it is written,*

*‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall give praise to God.’*

*12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*

*13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another.*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- What does the passage from Acts tell us about the attitudes of the early Christian community toward wealth and poverty? What guidance can we take from this picture?
- What stumbling blocks have you encountered in your life, and how did they shape you? In what way might extreme poverty be considered the kind of stumbling block to which Paul refers in the verses from Romans?

Empathy Questions: Have you ever experienced a period of financial hardship when your income could not cover the expenses for your household? If so, what “survival strategies” did you employ to make ends meet? If you have not had such an experience, why do think you have been able to avoid it?

Content Questions

- This chapter transitions us to rural America and introduces Jessica and Travis from Tennessee. What is their experience? What about their story stuck out to you? What was familiar? What was surprising? What did you learn about poverty from hearing their story?
- In this chapter, the authors give a glimpse into the budgets of poor families and the ways they try to make ends meet when there is no formal work. According to the authors, what has changed in the ways poor families make ends meet before and after welfare reform? How might you make ends meet if you did not have a job but still had bills to pay?
- Starting on page 99, what are the three survival strategies the authors say are utilized by the \$2-a-day poor?
- Public spaces play a key role for the poor, but often this can cause conflict with other patrons and those who operate these public goods. Have you had an experience with the poor in a public place like a library? Does hearing the story of Jennifer and her kids change the way you might react in the future?
- From pages 101 to 105, the authors paint a picture of the role private charities play in the lives of the poor. What did you make of their description? How are charities helpful and sometimes less helpful? Many people of faith and congregations are integrally involved in private charity. What have been your experiences? How do private efforts and the government safety net work together?
- Starting on page 105, the authors give a rather detailed description of how SNAP benefits operate in the budgets of the poor and the \$2-a-day poor. The central point is that while SNAP is vital, it cannot do what cash does. What do you make of this argument? What do you think of the decision by some to turn their SNAP into cash?
- In the fictional scenario the authors pose, would you take Option 1 (\$55,000) or Option 2 (\$53,000 plus \$5,000 in SNAP)? Why?
- The authors point out that the criminal penalty for selling SNAP can be greater than the penalty for child molestation. How does that comparison strike you? Should selling food stamps for cash be punishable? If so, what should be the penalty? If not, why not?
- In this chapter, we meet Paul and his very large household. His story is a bit different in that he worked his way into the middle class as a small business owner, only to have things fall apart. What reaction did you have to Paul's story? Do you view him differently because of his middle-class background? Is it harder or easier to have sympathy for him? Do you ever worry that you might fall on hard times and end up in much worse circumstances than you are now?

- On page 124, the authors ask, “Is Paul a worker?” How would you answer their question? What about the others we have met in the book?

Closing Quote: “The Gospel takes away our right forever, to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor.” — Dorothy Day

#### Closing Prayer

#### Community Connections

Find out where in your community one can get any amount of one-time cash assistance. Do any congregations offer it? What is the process to receive it, if it is offered anywhere? What does your congregation do when someone asks for money?

Encourage your group to pick a day, two days, or perhaps even an entire week during which they will make no purchases of goods or services beyond the bare necessities. If participants agree to do this, encourage them to keep a journal and note what kinds of purchases they miss, and how the experience makes them feel.

## **SESSION 7: “A World Apart”**

To Read Before This Session: Chapter 5, “A World Apart,” from *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

*12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; 13 esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- Many of the Apostle Paul’s letters were written to Christian communities whose values put them in conflict with those around them. Paul wrote to encourage them to persevere despite these challenges. In the above verses from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonian community, he reminds them of the values that are to shape their daily lives - reconciliation, nonviolence, gratitude - and urges them to “test everything; hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil.” Have you ever confronted a situation - at school, work, in your neighborhood - in which it was difficult for you to “hold fast to what is good” and act according to your own values? How did that feel? Were you ultimately able to do what you thought was right? If not, how did that affect you mentally and spiritually?

Empathy Question: Have you ever broken a rule or a law in order to do what felt right or necessary for you or your family?

Content Questions

- This chapter takes us to the Mississippi Delta, where we meet Martha Johnson and her sweet shop. What is her experience? What about her story stuck out to you? What was familiar? What was surprising? What did you learn about poverty from hearing her story?
- The description of the Mississippi Delta is jarring: poverty rates over 40%, with child poverty over 65%. Have you experienced the Delta or a place of similar deprivation?

- In previous chapters, we encountered the \$2-a-day poor in places where at least there is some possibility of jobs, but the Delta is a place where work has also largely disappeared. Why is this the case? What unique barriers do the people of the Delta face?
- In describing the situation in Percy, the authors write on pages 143-144 that “it’s all but impossible to tell where the formal economy end and the shadow economy begins.” What do they mean by this? What are some examples from the chapter?
- On page 144, the authors make a thought-provoking comparison between the illegal ways some resident make ends meet (sweet shop, selling SNAP, selling Social Security numbers) and the legitimate businesses like Salvatore’s liquor store and rental business. Which activities seem more ethical to you?
- On page 147, the authors give additional background on the fathers of Alva Mae’s children, including the abusive and controlling Cliff. Upon first learning that Alva Mae has 13 children, a common reaction might be to wonder why she continued to have children in her poverty. Did learning about Cliff change your feelings about Alva Mae?
- Tabitha and the kids express anger at Mr. Patten when the group prepared to leave Washington, DC: “You take us all the way out here, you show us *this*, and then you take us back to the Delta where there’s *nothing*?” What do you think about exposing kids to the opportunities that many of them have been denied? Do you think it does more harm or more good?
- There are many powerful scenes in the story of Tabitha: the trip to DC, her intense hunger to the point of wanting to be dead, the abuse at the hands of a teacher who was never prosecuted, her brother’s death, her mother choosing abusive Cliff over her, and the opportunity to go to boarding school in Tennessee. Do any particularly stick with you? Why?
- The authors are careful to point out that most of the people in these towns are good people, but they wonder how even the most caring people can make a difference when so much is working against the local schools and economies. How would you answer this question?
- In this and the previous chapter, we see several people confronted with difficult choices that seem to require them to compromise their values or see their children go without clean socks or underwear, housing, or food. How did you feel reading these stories? What do you think you would do in their place? Would you sell your SNAP dollars for cash in order to provide for your children, or exchange sex for a safe place to live?
- The authors close the chapter by saying that while the Delta history is unique in many ways, there are other “forgotten places” (155) with the same toxic combination of a lack

of a cash safety net and few formal-sector jobs. Do you know of any of these places? What might be done in places with so little formal economy to build upon?

Closing Quote: “We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.” — Cesar Chavez

Closing Prayer

Community Connections

See if anyone in the group or congregation has lived in, visited, or done a service trip to a place like the Mississippi Delta, Appalachia, or a Native American reservation. Have them share about the experience.

If there is no one to share, consider watching a film or documentary about poverty, such as “Rich Hill”, “American Winter”, or “A Place at the Table.” What is similar and different in the film from the accounts in *\$2 A Day*?

## SESSION 8: Conclusion

To Read Before This Session: "Conclusion" from *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin & H. Luke Shaefer

Welcome

Opening Prayer

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 31:8-9, Isaiah 58:1-12

Proverbs 31:8-9

*8 Speak out for those who cannot speak,  
for the rights of all the destitute.  
9 Speak out, judge righteously,  
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

Isaiah 58:1-12

*Shout out, do not hold back!  
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their rebellion,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.  
2 Yet day after day they seek me  
and delight to know my ways,  
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness  
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;  
they ask of me righteous judgements,  
they delight to draw near to God.  
3 '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.  
4 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.  
5 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?*

6 *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?*

7 *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?*

8 *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.*

9 *Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.*

*If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

10 *if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.*

11 *The Lord will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;*

*and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail.*

12 *Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.*

#### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

- In the verses from Isaiah, God informs his people that spiritual practices like fasting and worship are meaningless if the practitioner does not also attend to concrete needs of his or her neighbors. What do you think about this? How might God assess you, your church, or your community by this measure?
- This section from Isaiah is a familiar and often-quoted passage. If you already know it, does anything new strike you in light of the book? If this is a new passage, what lines or images are most moving?

Empathy Questions: What is one way you are thinking differently after encountering the stories of the people in the book and the others in the group? Is there one person or family from the book who you have continued to think about? Why do you think their story stuck with you?

### Content Questions

- The authors begin the Conclusion by returning to David Ellwood, whose “crucial insight” according to the authors was that “any program out of sync with American values was doomed to fail.” Do you agree with this statement? What are the four values that Ellwood held up? Do you agree with these four? What is missing? Are these also faith values?
- The reason any response to the \$2-a-day should be in line with American values is because when it is not, the poor are further separated from society. The authors propose that the “ultimate litmus test... for any reform is whether it will serve to integrate the poor... into society” (158). Cash welfare, while it did provide a cash floor, stigmatized instead of incorporated.
- The authors propose three principles that should guide the discussion about ending \$2-a-day poverty: 1) all deserve the opportunity to work, 2) parents should all have a place of their own, and 3) when work won't work, we need a cash safety net in keeping with American values. Do you agree with these three principles?
- Concerning Edin and Shaefer's first principle (all deserve the opportunity to work), they make many suggestions, including ways to create more and better jobs. They also write that we need a system of support for those who cannot work enough to support themselves. What specific idea of the authors' was most appealing to you? Are there any ideas you think are missing?
- The authors' second principle is that parents should all have a place of their own. What ideas do the authors offer? What specific idea of the authors' was most appealing to you? Are there any ideas you think are missing?
- Possibly the most challenging of the authors' three principles is the last, which says that we need a “temporary cash cushion” to break the fall of families when other options, especially work, don't work. Knowing that cash welfare has always been unpopular and its recipient stigmatized, what would a cash safety net look like that is in keeping with American values? What ideas do the authors give? What are your ideas?
- Towards the end of the book, the authors lift up the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) as a model of how to successfully craft a program in tune with American values that incorporates people rather than stigmatizes them. Did you know about the EITC before reading this book? Do you think the authors are correct in seeing this as a model program?
- How do you feel about how the authors ended the book? What point do you see them making by returning to the stories of the families we met in the book?

- What story or moment from the book do you think will have the most lasting impact on you? Why?

Closing Quote: “We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty.” — Mother Teresa

#### Closing Prayer

#### Community Connections

Take time individually and as a group to think about how what you have experienced in this study might live on in your lives and actions. What is one thing you as an individual will do differently? What about you as a group? What about your congregation?

Connect with the social ministry, service, or justice team at your congregation. What about what you have learned do you want to share with them? How might your congregation get or stay involved in response to the needs in your community?

To help the lessons from the study live on, the group leader might have each person write a letter to themselves about what they have learned and what commitments they have made. Have group members seal the letters in stamped envelopes and give them to the group leader, who then can mail the letters back to the members of the group at some point in the future as a reminder - from themselves - of what they learned and committed to do.