

Discussion Guide for A Call to Prayer, Conversation, and Action

From the Lutheran Bishops of Minnesota (ELCA)
Endorsed by the Catholic Bishops of Minnesota

Format: *A basic issue or assumption is described below, with questions for consideration.*

Foundational Assumptions

In 2004 religious leaders from a wide spectrum of faith traditions together drafted and signed “A Common Foundation: Shared Principles for Overcoming Poverty.” Two years later, these principles (and this document) brought into being the Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020, a bipartisan group that in January 2009 issued a set of recommendations to guide public policy decisions for the next decade. What follows are three of the eight shared principles, with a question that may launch you into discussion that relates to our current state policy debate (“A Common Foundation: Shared Principles for Overcoming Poverty” is included as an appendix to this document):

We believe it is the Creator’s intent that all people are provided those things that protect human dignity and make for healthy life: adequate food and shelter, meaningful work, safe communities, health care, and education.

For Discussion: Do you agree that God intends all people to have these basics? Why or why not? Do you agree that being faithful disciples in the world means we are to be active in finding ways for all people to have access to these fundamental needs? Are there passages in Scripture that inform your thinking? Describe the passages that undergird your thinking.

We believe we are all called to work to overcome poverty, and that this work transcends both any particular political theory or party and any particular economic theory or structure. We believe that overcoming poverty requires the use of private and public resources.

The obligation of God’s people to care for those in need applies to all people in all faith traditions, and therefore becomes the measure by which all policy decisions should be made. Liberals and conservatives alike are called to justify their solutions by explaining how the whole of society is best served, particularly the most vulnerable. Activities in both private and public sector, to be expressions of the vocations in the world God has called us to, are called on to similarly make clear how the whole is served by what they do, particularly the most vulnerable.

For Discussion: Do you see a difference between liberal and conservatives or moderates and independents in ability to best serve the needs of the poor and vulnerable? Republicans or Democrats? Capitalists or Socialists? Describe the differences. Are there arenas in which the convictions and contributions of these groups intersect?

We believe government is neither solely responsible for alleviating poverty, nor removed from this responsibility. We believe government is the vehicle by which people order their lives based on their shared vision.

Our legislators are engaged in pointed debate about the preferred role of government. Some argue that only government can have the broad reach to equitably share resources and address needs in a fair way because government levels the playing field and makes resources available to the poorer communities. Others argue that government is clumsy and unresponsive to local conditions, and local communities should raise their own money and shape their own responses to local needs.

For Discussion: In your view, is the general well-being of all, and the well-being of the most vulnerable in particular, best served by state programs or local programs? Which services are best shaped at which level? What are weaknesses of each approach?

The Question of Revenue

The sound byte debate is between calls for no new taxes and calls to raise taxes. For our conversation, let's reframe the question. The people we elect to represent us in government are the tools for shaping the kind of life we want to have together in this state. Then we pool our resources through a wide variety of income streams and methods to fund those things we decide we need.

Three of those taxing mechanisms are most obvious: the state income tax (a sliding scale higher for higher incomes and lower for lower incomes); the state sales tax (with some additional local increases) levied on goods as they are purchased; and local property taxes, levied on the value of one's property and used to fund local services, such as schools, police and fire, local roads, etc.

But there are a host of other taxes—estate and business, for example. And there are a host of other income streams—everything from fees to licenses to parking tickets. All these streams fund our life together in this state. And at this moment, they are substantially less than needed to continue to fund the variety of services we have in place. Thus, the very large state deficit.

The role and value of the various streams are an integral part of the current debate. Those who favor returning the income tax to the rates prevalent in the 90s argue that option is the most “progressive” (i.e., calls on those most able to pay) and point out that our shortfalls would not be so significant if we had maintained those tax rates.

Those who favor reduced taxes overall argue, among other things, that the key to a state's health in the long term is a vibrant economy and that we are in competition for businesses and business growth with other states which have lower tax burdens on businesses and their executives.

For Discussion: Given current hard choices, is the well being of all in general and the most vulnerable in particular best served by responding to the deficit by expenditure cuts alone? If so, which cuts are most obvious, and which should be reconsidered? If not, what revenue enhancements should be considered?

State vs. Local Support Base

Another major issue in the current debate is whether services provided locally in every community are best supported by statewide funding strategies and mechanisms or by local funding. Several decades ago, Minnesota committed itself to sharing across the state a large share of the funding of education and raising statewide revenues that were then shared back with local communities in the form of Aid to Local Governments (ALG), which those local cities and towns used for fire, police, roads, and other local services. The rationale was that state revenue burdens fall more equitably, providing these basic needs more equally across wealthy and poor communities and benefitting the entire state.

In the past decade, with state tax levels frozen and revenues decreasing in a weakened economy, local governments have had to resort to a significant increase in local property rates to provide those basic services and even so have had to impose many cuts.

For Discussion: Compared to the late 1990s, local property tax rates are now higher and state income tax rates are lower. If revenue needs to be increased, how are those revenues gathered most fairly? What other incomes streams might be the most fair and equitable?

The Climate for Business and Jobs

Democrats and Republicans agree that it is of critical importance that people have good jobs, thus promoting family and community stability, contributing to a healthy society, paying taxes, doing productive work. Strategies for how to best reach these ends vary.

Some point out the value historically of being what some call a “high-tax, high-services” state, a state attractive to businesses because it has a well educated and productive work force, strong communities with good schools, cultural and recreational advantages, and solid infrastructure. Others argue that has now positioned us to be at a competitive disadvantage as business becomes increasingly mobile and seeks states (not to mention other countries) with low business tax climates.

For Discussion: How important do you view the “business climate” factor as determining what choices we should be making to address the deficit, raise revenues, etc.? Is it acceptable to lower taxes to achieve a more attractive business climate if it results in lower levels of expenditure to schools, public services, social services to the poor, etc.?

Social Services

Past cuts have hit hard a number of areas of social services provided to the poor and disabled. Earlier this legislative session, a key issue was the restoration of the General Assistance Medical Program, which provides medical care to 35,000 single adults, mostly very poor, many disabled and/or mentally ill. As this guide is written bipartisan efforts are proposed that will maintain this program, although at a substantially reduced funding level. The impact of these kinds of reductions are felt not only by those persons when eligibility is cut, but by the hospitals that serve them because they are required to provide the services, but are compensated for the service at a level lower than the service-provided costs. Other services that assist the poor in living decently and/or making their way out of poverty have also been cut, and face further reductions: rate cuts for providers of long-term care and waived services; child and community services grants; basic monthly grants of \$203/month for impoverished single adults; and child care subsidies for the working poor, to name a few. Such life-affecting decisions are often complex and difficult to track as a legislative session unfolds, but they are critically important to the people needing such services and thus merit our attention.

For Discussion: Some argue that only the state has the resources and the broad reach to adequately provide such services. Others argue that the churches and others in the not-for-profit sector should respond to the needs more than they have. What decisions should be made for carrying out our shared commitment to the needs of “the least of these?” If such services are best provided by non-government agencies, how should the money needed for such services be raised?

Our Stewardship of the Future

We hear many analysts lament the lack of attention to the long range implications of current decisions: namely, the pressure on business to have a profitable next quarter; the focus by politicians to secure the next election; the cultural shift from building a world for our children to having the best life possible now. Those studying climate change raise alarms about the need for expenditures and changes now in order to preserve the environment for future generations.

We now face making policy decisions that seem to pose the question of current sacrifice for the sake of a better future. According to a research analysis by Jeff Van Wychen, “Minnesota leads the nation in terms of the decline in non-federal general revenue from 2002 to 2007....In fact, on all categories of revenue and expenditures,...Minnesota ranks among the top ten states in terms of the decline (or least growth) from 2002 to 2007. This is true for no other state.” In other words, Minnesota’s tradition of being a “high tax, high services” state that invests in our common life is eroding.

For Discussion: Some argue that times are harder now and our public life will have to get along with fewer of the services, amenities, and public expenditures we’ve enjoyed in the past. It is argued that our formerly high ranking provides acceptable space for us to cut back and still be in line with other states. Others argue that we should be willing to sacrifice in order to secure a strong and stable state for our children and grandchildren. How important is it to you that we have above average education, sufficient public services, and a skilled work force? In a world of limits, how much is too much? If more sacrifice is needed, from whom should it come?

A Common Foundation

Shared Principles for Overcoming Poverty

As a people of faith, with varying theologies and traditions, we are convinced of a remarkable convergence on fundamental principles that call us to common work in combating poverty and walking with people living in poverty:

We believe it is the Creator's intent that all people are provided those things that protect human dignity and make for healthy life: adequate food and shelter, meaningful work, safe communities, health care, and education.

We believe we are intended to live well together as a whole community, seeking the common good, avoiding wide disparities between those who have too little to live on and those who have a disproportionate share of the world's goods.

We believe we are all called to work to overcome poverty, and that this work transcends both any particular political theory or party and any particular economic theory or structure. We believe that overcoming poverty requires the use of private and public resources.

We believe we are called to make alliances within the faith community and with others in society who share the commitment to overcome poverty.

We believe that overcoming poverty involves both acts of direct service to alleviate the outcomes of poverty and advocacy to change those structures that result in people living in poverty.

We believe government is neither solely responsible for alleviating poverty, nor removed from this responsibility. We believe government is the vehicle by which people order their lives based on their shared vision.

We believe society is well served when people of faith bring their values into the public arena. It is this remarkable convergence around issues of poverty and the common good that leads people of varying faith traditions to unite in calling on government to make a critical commitment to overcoming poverty.

We believe the desire to overcome poverty is not simply a human idea, but is the desire of our Creator, and that the work to create a more just and whole society will be empowered by the Creator's presence.

We invite each faith tradition to make explicit their expression of faith and how it understands this common foundation. On these shared principles, we together commit ourselves to work to ensure that no person is forced to live in poverty.