

Community Dialog on Economic Inequality
At the Haven 112 West Market St. Charlottesville
Sponsored by Clergy & Laity United for Justice and Peace
Thursday, 6:30 pm, April 27, 2017

A group of about 50 was welcomed by Dianne Murray. Among the supporters assembled were folks from Charlottesville Center for Peace and Justice, Casa Alma, Charlottesville Catholic Worker, Virginia Organizing: Charlottesville Albemarle Chapter.

Chip Sanders and Bob McAdams then gave a 15-minute summary of CLJP's 2-year study of Economic Inequality (EI). The group had become convinced that EI was the most important contribution to the problems facing the U.S. in these times, not only economically, but politically, culturally, morally, and spiritually as well.

In fact, one of the books studied, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, was an extensive study written not by an economist but by two British epidemiologists, comparing the so-called advanced nations and laying out the costs of U.S. inequality in such areas as community life and social relations, mental health and drug use, obesity, violence and social mobility.

Following WW II, the top income group was 17% of the nation's wealth, now it is 1%. In today's economy one even can accumulate enormous wealth, not by investing in new enterprises that create industries and encourage growth, but by what is called "rent seeking" *

In answer to the critics—Making the economic field more level is a restoration, not a redistribution. The redistribution occurred when so much of the wealth flowed up the top 1%. In calling for a more equal playing field, we are not the ones starting a war, the war had already started. According to the prophet, righteousness is not supposed to "trickle down," it is meant to "flow!" Amos 5:24

Stiglitz's current argument: an economic order is not some "divine ordering" or "natural order," but is designed by humans and can be changed by humans, where a more fluid middle class can find the work that makes saving and accumulating wealth actual and dreams possible. The function of government should be to make sure the playing field is level, not tilted by and to large donors.

CLJP concluded that EI was just too big to just study. We needed to find ways in which we could involve as much of the larger community as possible, to act locally by sharing with other organizations and individuals involved in justice issues, with the vision of making our community a more even field of economic opportunity from increased wages to affordable health care and housing.

The first step was to have a day where we could expose as many people as possible to the issue. So, CLJP joined forces with the Virginia Festival of the Book, inviting the Nobel prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz to speak on EI on the evening of March 24 at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Performing Arts Center, preceded that afternoon by a panel of authors of recent books on EI—Daniel Hatcher, Thomas Shapiro, and Jennifer Silva, moderated by Frank Sesno, director of the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University.

The second step was to sponsor community dialogues to determine problem areas in our community and the urgent need to find effective ways to address them, the first of which these minutes hope to describe.

Next on the agenda was a 20-minute power point presentation by Ridge Schuyler, Dean Community Self-Sufficiency Programs, Piedmont Virginia Community College, giving a powerful profile of areas of wealth and poverty in both Charlottesville and Albemarle County, available on this link—
<http://www.clujp.org/pdf/Income-Inequality-Presentation.pdf>

Schuyler posted two quotations:

Martin Luther King, standing at the Lincoln Memorial in his famous March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963, and speaking of “Lonely islands of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

Followed by Bobby Kennedy and the need to create “a world of constantly accelerating economic progress—not material welfare as an end in itself, but as a means to liberate the capacity of every human being to pursue his talents and to pursue his hopes.”

Also sharing space with these quotes—King’s tough challenge: change is hard. This scribe was reminded of a phrase from a prayer book asking the Almighty to “Enrich the poor and show the rich their poverty.” Change *is* hard. Mostly for those of us who are beneficiaries of “the way things are.”

In the presentation, Schuyler presented maps of both the city and the county, showing pockets of income, from the wealthiest to the poorest neighborhoods.

Some statistics shared by Schuyler:

“In order for a family to live independently in Charlottesville, a single parent with two children would need to earn \$35,000 a year. The single parent with three children would need to earn at least \$40,000 a year.”

“There are 24,504 families living in Albemarle county. Of these, 3,861 (16 percent) do not make enough money to pay for the essentials of life and the added costs associated with working. “

“Number of Charlottesville and Albemarle families making less than self-sufficient income—5,661 or 18%”

The above figures are from Schuyler’s 2015 Report 2.0, *Realizing the Dream*. Since then, the figures have improved slightly. For example, the figures in the third paragraph are 5,612 or 17%. <http://www.clujp.org/pdf/Income-Inequality-Presentation.pdf>

The assembly was then divided into 30-minute learning circles “to learn from each other” with each having two minutes to answer two questions: “What concerns about our economy brought you here tonight? And “What do you hope will happen as a result of our work together.”

Ed Murray concluded the meeting, stating that the CLJP Committee will review those hopes and concerns gathered from the learning circles, forming “Task Groups on the most critical issues our community faces and Task Groups to manage the processes of outreach, data management, and logistics.”

The next meeting of the Community Dialog on Economic Inequality will take place on Thursday, May 25, 6:30 PM again at the Haven,

The meeting adjourned at 7:54.

Respectfully submitted, Hal Horan

* Rent-seeking is the use of the resources of a company, an organization or an individual to obtain economic gain from others without reciprocating any benefits to society through wealth creation. An example of rent-seeking is when a company lobbies the government for loan subsidies, grants or tariff protection. These activities don’t create any benefit for society; they just redistribute resources from the taxpayers to the company. <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/rentseeking.asp>