

# **Escalating Inequality**

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**Gathering Chimes**

**Gil Hanson**

**Welcome**

**Dixie Comeau**

**Announcements  
Trustees**

**Member of the Board of**

**Sounding of the Bell for Worship**

**Dixie Comeau**

**Prelude: The New Colossus**

Emma Lazarus

**In Verse**

**Barbara Coley**

I will read the verse and you join in song, which is on the yellow sheet (hold up).  
We will sing it twice, the second time more quietly.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. Give me your tired your poor,

**In Song**

**Congregation**

**Chalice Lighting:**

**Lem Coley**

Challenging extreme inequality is a moral imperative. The escalation of inequality undergirds so many injustices which our faith movement is committed to addressing:

- from economic injustice to mass incarceration;
- from migrant injustice to climate change;
- from sexual and gender injustice to attacks on voting rights."

UUA Congregational Study/Action on Escalating Inequality

**Vignette:****Marie Baltz**

**My name is Adriana Alvarez** (Konstantinides, 2015) I am a cashier at a McDonald's in Chicago where I have worked for five years. I earn \$10.50 an hour, well above the federal minimum wage of \$7.25. Yet I depend on food stamps, Medicaid and a child-care subsidy to help get through the week.

My three year-old son Manny eats a lot.” **laugh** He also drinks a lot of milk “a half-gallon every two days” — and because he is lactose intolerant, he requires a more expensive brand, using up most of my \$80 allotment of food stamps.

Most everyone I work with — including many 10-year-plus veterans— gets food stamps.

I depend on Medicaid for my family's health care, and I receive a subsidy for the day care center where I drop off Manny on my way to work.

**Opening Words****Gil Hanson**

Good Morning. We are representing the Humanist Discussion Group in presenting an argument for increasing the income of the working poor. We are going to base these arguments on the UUA first principle “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” and the American Dream. I am Gil Hanson. Joining me are

Barbara Coley,

Lem Coley

Marie Baltz, and

Rich Ohlrogge.

Will other Humanist Discussion Group participants please stand or raise your hand. Thank you.

Today we wish to give insight into

- What it is like to live on a poverty level income,

- How the American Dream no longer exists for families of the working poor.

The Unitarian Universalist Association selected escalating inequality during the 2014 General Assembly as a four-year Congregational Study/Action Issue. Upon hearing this decision, the Humanist Discussion Group decided that we should study Escalating Inequality, which we did last year. .

Escalating inequality is seriously affecting the middle class, but it is even harder on the working poor. During the Great Recession that began in 2008, many middle-income people lost their jobs and their houses. As a result, they joined the working poor because only low-income jobs were available.

Americans are concerned about the plight of the working poor. There is overwhelming support for raising the minimum wage across socioeconomic, regional and demographic groups. A national survey in January found that among registered voters

- 75% were in favor of raising the minimum wage to \$12.50 per hour from the present federal minimum of \$7.25 cents per hour (Molyneux, 2015).

Our approach today is to give you a better understanding of the plight of the working poor through vignettes. These are brief sketches in which the working poor describe in their own words how they cope with poverty wages.

We should not view increasing the income of the working poor only in terms of marketing and economics. We must view it in terms of our moral principles. Improving the life of the working poor, as I said earlier, is consistent with the first UU Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person. And, it is also consistent with the American dream.

We chose to sing “Give me your tired, your poor” because it explains why so many people immigrated to the United States. The poem emphasizes that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the United States considered the poor of the world as a valued resource. The world’s poor arrived and built a great Nation.

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

We must now open the Golden Door of the American Dream for today's poor and low income Americans. We absolutely need to improve the status of our homegrown poor so that they can build an even greater nation.

Let us now sing Hymn number 134 "Our World is one World". Please stand if you are willing or able.

**\*Hymn # 134 Our World is One World**

**Congregation**

**Responsive Reading:** Adam Smith, Wealth of Nations, 1776 **Rich Ohlrogge**

I read the Italic you read the Bold

*Servants, labourers and workmen of different kinds, make up the far greater part of every great political society.*

**But what improves the circumstances of the greater part can never be regarded as an inconvenience to the whole.**

*No society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.*

**It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed and lodged.**

**Meditation:**

**Barbara Coley**

***In Words***

My name is Shanna Tippen and I work for Days Inn and Suites in Pine Bluff, Arkansas (Harlan, 2015). I just received my first raise as result of a long, hard fight in Arkansas to increase the minimum wage from \$7.25 per hour to \$7.50. That means an increase in pay of 25 cents per hour. This extra 25 cents will not pull me out of

poverty, it will not free me from enduring the many occasions when I cannot pay my electricity bills, but the extra \$2 per day will mean that I can now buy Luvs diapers for my grandson that don't irritate his sensitive skin. *(Pause)*

In silent meditation, consider how an increase in pay of 25 cents an hour or \$2 per day would affect your lifestyle as compared to that of a working single mother receiving the minimum wage?

***In Silence***

***In Song*** [#123 Spirit of Life]

**Offering**

***Invitation to the Offering***

***Dixie Comeau***

***Offertory***

***There but for fortune*** Joan Baez

**Linda Cortese, Greg**

**Galluccio**

**Vignette:**

**Lem Coley**

My name is Denise Rush. I am a home health care worker in Durham, N.C. and often work seven days a week, not returning home until near midnight (Cohen, 2015). By that time my two teenagers have already gone to bed. I earn \$9.50 an hour That is \$1400 a month. My monthly rent is \$700. There is little left for other expenses.

It's a crazy dilemma, Do I pay the whole bill or do I gas up the car to go to work?

I am on Medicaid that covers my children's health care and receive about \$300 a month in food stamps. Still I am struggling. "I'm talking about basic needs," including such staples of modern life as a cellphone to keep in touch with work and my children and to pay for home Internet connection to allow my children to do their homework.

My paycheck fails to pay for the uniforms and fees for the lacrosse, basketball and soccer teams that I believe are essential to keep my son and daughter occupied and out of trouble while I am working. Fortunately the school has helped pick up that tab.

**Sermon:****Gil Hanson**

More than [16 million children](#) in the United States live in poverty (Annie E Casey Foundation, 2015). 22 % of all children. Their families have Incomes of less than \$24,000 per year. Close to 40% African-American and Hispanic children live in poverty. That is 10,000,000 African-American and Hispanic children, about 4 million black children and 6 million Hispanic children. There are a greater number of these poor black and Hispanic children than all of the people living in New York City. Picture visiting New York and you see nothing but poor black and Hispanic children.

It is not just the African-American and Hispanic children who are living in poverty, there also some 5 million white children who are also living in poverty.

Unless we move children out of poverty, their children will also be poor. The percentage of children in poverty will grow and grow and grow. These children should be our leaders in the future. And, they should be our innovators so that our economy can be globally competitive. How can they do so if we do not invest in their education and lifestyle now? Increasing their families' incomes is not an expense but is an investment that will bear fruit for the United States.

The increase in the number of needy children in the nation's public classrooms is an inexcusable phenomenon. These children often are not able to get an education that will allow them to rise out of poverty.

**Vignette:****Marie Baltz**

My name is Sonya Romero-Smith; I am a veteran teacher at Lew Wallace Elementary School in Albuquerque where a fair number of students are homeless (Layton, 2015). When students come in my door in the morning, the first thing I do is an inventory of immediate needs: Did you eat? Are you clean? A big part of my job is making them feel safe. Fourteen of my 18 kindergartners are eligible for free lunches. I help them clean up with bathroom wipes and toothbrushes, and I stock a drawer

with clean socks, underwear, pants and shoes. The kids in this school aren't thinking, 'Am I going to take a test today?' They're thinking, 'Am I going to be okay?'

## **Sermon**

**Gil Hanson**

The American dream includes

- democratic government by the people, of the people and for the people,
- religious freedom,
- Equality, opportunity, and prosperity for all.

A bedrock of the America dream is that everyone has an opportunity to rise above his or her circumstances. Yet compared to other developed nations social mobility in the United States is very low.

Our Declaration of Independence says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain "unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

One of the problems with the truth that all men are created equal is that some people in the United States feel that if everyone is created equal then everyone had the same opportunity. Some people argue that persistent poverty and income inequality are largely attributable to dysfunctional lifestyles among the poor. The people who are now poor did not make wise choices and did not work hard enough. Government benefit programs such as aid for dependent children, Food Stamps, and Medicaid actually exacerbate the problem. These safety net programs do so by discouraging the poor from working and otherwise assuming personal responsibility. Thus, the poor are people who have not tried, made bad choices and did not work hard enough. Thus,

- We are wasting money on them
- They should receive very little support.
- They deserve to suffer.

Because many African-Americans and Hispanics are living in poverty these attitudes may also be based on latent racism.

Some feel strongly that

- People who have tried hard and have good jobs have saved money for retirement. We do not need social security.
- People who have tried hard, have good jobs and saved their money can afford health insurance. We do not need Obama Care, Medicare or Medicaid.
- People who have tried hard, have good jobs and saved their money can afford the ever rising college tuition. Those who cannot can go into grinding debt.

Studies show that safety net programs boost economic mobility, making poor children more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and to enter the middle class. The safety net programs do not discourage the poor from working and are not preventing them from assuming personal responsibility (Steinberg, 2014).

Let's get back to the Declaration of Independence. Life and Liberty are understandable. However, why is the pursuit of happiness among our unalienable rights? Did it mean that governments should support us in our inalienable right to be in a happy frame of mind? US Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy notes that in the context of the Declaration of Independence written in 1776, "happiness meant that feeling of self-worth and dignity you acquire by contributing to your community and to its civic life." (Bridgeland, 2012)

I repeat "happiness meant that feeling of self-worth and dignity you acquire by contributing to your community and to its civic life."



The UU first principle “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” expresses the same sentiment.

What happens to one’s dignity if one is working many long hours, on multiple jobs and on ever-changing schedules, yet does not receive enough income to support one’s family? While we may not agree exactly on what dignity is, we may be able to understand the conditions under which one would feel a lack of dignity, which is indignity or it could mean humiliating or demeaning.

- Would you feel demeaned if you could not provide enough food or only poor quality food for your family?
- Would you be humiliated if, even though you work full time, your family lives in a homeless shelter, or in a car?
- Would you feel demeaned if your schools provided your children an inadequate education?
- Would you be indignant if law enforcement harasses you and your children?

Some say that the working poor made bad choices. The children in the following stories did not make bad choices. They had no choice.

**Vignette:**

**Rich Ohlrogge**

My name is Logan. **I am 3 months old** (Contreras, 2011). My mother is 22 year old Brandi Wells who has been a waitress since she was seventeen. We live in West Virginia. One week after I was born my mother went back to work because she absolutely needed the money. But, she could not find reliable day care for me. As a result, she missed a couple of shifts and was fired after three weeks. A requirement for our subsidized apartment was that my mother be employed. So we were then evicted. Now I am living with my grandmother in another town while mother stays with a friend in a filthy house with no running water.

**Vignette:****Barbara Coley**

My name is Jaivon and I am speaking for thousands and thousands of children, no millions of children, across the United States in my situation. I am 11 years old. I have a younger sister who has severe sickle cell disease and often needs care. I want to become a doctor to help find a remedy for sickle cell disease. My father is a janitor. My mother quit her job as a health care worker to be available to take care of my younger sister. The students in my school are 90% minority, some with English as a second language and many from single parent, low income or dysfunctional families. As a result, the quality of education at the schools in this area is so low that I may not be able to get into college, much less into medical school. My mother and father would dearly like to move to where schools are better. They cannot afford to.

**Sermon****Gil Hanson**

There are some 30,000 University faculty many with Ph.D.'s who are adjunct faculty who make between \$20,000 and \$25,000 a year. They receive about \$3,000 per class. In order to make \$24,000 a year, the federal poverty level, they need to teach at least four classes a semester. Summer is the bleak time when there are no classes to teach and there is no income. More than 60% of adjunct faculty teach in more than one college in order to get enough classes to teach. Adjuncts usually do not have office space, they receive no benefits, and there is no job security.

**Vignette:****Lem Coley**

My name is Alyssa Colton (Wessler, 2015). I have a Ph.D. in literature from SUNY Albany and have been teaching college for nearly two decades. I landed a full time job at the College of St. Rose in Albany in 2008. However, when my contract ended in 2012, no permanent offer followed. With a mortgage to pay, a husband whose business had recently failed, and two teenage daughters, I started looking for other teaching work. A semester later, I was offered another gig at St. Rose, teaching some of the same English and writing classes I taught previously. This time, however I was a

part-time adjunct professor for a fraction of the pay and without the healthcare or retirement benefits that my full-time position had provided. I earn \$3,200 for each four-credit class I teach which is less than \$10 an hour after course preparation and office hours.

To support my family, we use food stamps, about \$600 a month, to buy groceries and we are enrolled in Medicaid. Last year our family income was so low that we received several thousand dollars from the Earned Income Tax Credit, a program for poor families.

**Sermon**

**Gil Hanson**

Let Us now sing Hymn # 121, We'll build a land. Please stand if you are willing or able.

**Hymn We'll build a land p. 121**

**Congregation**

**Closing words:**

**Marie Baltz**

Please be seated.

- Many say that the working poor should improve themselves and get higher paying jobs. Janitors, food servers, garbage collectors and health care workers, for example, are doing jobs that need to be done. It is demeaning to imply that these jobs are only worth a poverty level salary.
- We help the working poor through a safety net including earned income tax credit, food stamps, housing assistance, etc. This help is not adequate to bring the working poor out of poverty. This assistance is very bureaucratic and often difficult for the working poor to receive. This aid adds to the tax burden of the middle class who are subsidizing the likes of Walmart and McDonalds by allowing them to keep wages low.
- Families of the working poor have little hope of rising out of poverty. They are not living the American Dream: of opportunity for all and a life of inherent worth and dignity.

- Poor children did not make bad choices, which led to their poverty. They need more support.
- Nick Hannauer a billionaire plutocrat is concerned that as Americans get poorer and poorer as the rich get richer the American poor may revolt against the plutocrats replicating the French and Russian revolutions.

If you would like to learn more about these issues, please join us in our Humanist Discussion Group meetings. If you are an activist, we really need you. We are mainly academically oriented and need your help.

**Chalice Extinguishing:**

**Rich Ohlrogge**

*No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country.*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

**Sounding of the Bell for Closing**

**Dixie Comeau**

**Moment of Silence**

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