

SOJOURNERS PRESENTS

THE LINE

Poverty in America | It's not what you think.

A DISCUSSION GUIDE

Length of film: Approximately 40 minutes • Language: English

SOJOURNERS is excited to share this film discussion guide with you as a way for churches, friends, and individuals to engage with various issues surrounding our national discussion on poverty in America. Many Christians are already involved in caring for their neighbors who are struggling economically, but have questions about how to fix the system.

Sojourners' short documentary **The Line** highlights different pieces of this complex issue to help spark conversation, discussion, and reflection about why and how we should work to end poverty in America.

The Line documents the stories of people across the country living at or below the poverty line. They have goals. They have children. They work hard. They are people like you and me.

From Chicago's suburbs and west side to the Gulf Coast to North Carolina, millions of Americans are struggling every day to make it above **The Line**.

To learn more about *The Line*, please visit thelinemovie.com.





Dear friends,

While millions tuned in to the Republican and Democratic National Conventions and more will watch the presidential candidate debates, I want to introduce you to a film that just might be the most important thing you watch this month—or this year, for that matter.

Lots of significant things will be said during this campaign season about how to build a stronger middle class and how to produce jobs. But Matthew 25 doesn't say, "As you have done it to the middle class, you have done it to me."

Instead, in the gospel Jesus says, "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me."

Chances are that this will never be the central message of political conventions during election years.

But every four years for the last 40 years (even before we were called Sojourners), our community has done what we can to lift up the issue of poverty during presidential elections. While political party platforms have changed, our commitment to the least of these has not.

So with that spirit, I am proud to present a new short film called *The Line*.

Written and directed by Emmy award-winning producer Linda Midgett, it chronicles the very real stories of four real people struggling with real poverty in America today.

You'll meet a banker in the suburban Midwest who used to earn six figures a year and now, after the economic collapse, must go to a food bank to feed his three kids; a fisherman on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana who has watched his livelihood and his culture wash away in the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (see page 8) and a devastating off-shore oil spill; a blue-collar guy in North Carolina who worked hard his whole life but lost his job, became homeless, and started over as a restaurant bus boy; and a single mom in Chicago who battles daily to ensure that her son is safe, healthy, and has the opportunity to go to college.

The idea of the film is simple: People living in and struggling with poverty telling their own stories. They are beautiful, inspiring, challenging, and full of grace. In a word, their stories are powerful. The kind you never forget. The kind that make you not only feel something, but compel you to do something.

My Sojourners colleagues and I want to share *The Line's* stories and message with as many people as we can. That's where you come in. We need your help. The first thing you can do is



watch the trailer at thelinemovie.com. As soon as you've seen it, I'm sure you're going to want to share it with everyone you know.

Next, I invite you to join us. *The Line* premieres at 8 p.m. (EDT), Tuesday, Oct. 2—the night before the first presidential debate. With your help, I believe we can make sure both candidates understand they will need to address the issue of poverty during that debate.

If you've already signed up to host a screening—thank you!

Sojourners and our partner, World Vision—as well as the other supporters, Oxfam America, Bread for the World, and the Christian Community Development Association, MacArthur Foundation, and The Annie E. Casey Foundation—thank you for taking this step and putting your faith into action.

We hope this discussion guide we've created to accompany *The Line* will spark lively conversation and forge a faithful way forward to ending poverty in America.

In Christ,

Jim Wallis

Jim Wallis, CEO of Sojourners, is the author of Rediscovering Values: A Guide for Economic and Moral Recovery. Follow him on Twitter @JimWallis.



Did you know?

Medicaid guarantees health services to 38 million children a year.

PART I

THE NEW FACE OF POVERTY: BEHIND THE PICKET FENCE

John introduces us to the new face of poverty in America.

He lives in a nice house in a well-to-do suburb of Chicago. He earned six figures a year working for a bank. He had a wife and children.

But the financial collapse became a landslide in his own life.

He lost his job. Financial worries strained his marriage. His wife left and the couple divorced.

Now a single dad, John struggles to put food on the table.

In an effort to better the situation, he went back to school to become a teacher, but so far, his efforts have not resulted in a full-time job.

Between substitute teaching and tutoring, John manages to bring in only about \$12,000 annually. Still, he doesn't qualify for food stamps and must depend on public charities and governmental partnerships to provide food for his family.

Suburban poverty now is growing at a higher rate than urban poverty.

Discussion Questions

1. What stereotypes do we have about what poverty looks like? How does John's story challenge those stereotypes?
2. Suburban poverty is outpacing urban poverty. Does this surprise you? Why? What are the reasons for and implications of suburban poverty?
3. John slipped beneath the poverty line because of one thing: he lost his job. How close are any middle-class Americans to "the line"? What would happen if you experienced a car accident, divorce, illness, or unemployment? How close are you to "the line"?
4. What emotional and spiritual effect might needing to rely on a food bank or other charitable/government assistance have on someone who is used to being "successful"? What effect might it have on you?
5. How can we be more aware of and understanding of poverty in our midst?



PART II THE TRAUMA OF POVERTY

What might it feel like to believe you will always be poor?

Sheila grew up amid the trauma of poverty—apathy, scarce educational opportunities, gang violence, the drug trade, hopelessness.

She says people in her Chicago neighborhood are lucky to make \$10,000 to \$12,000 a year with government assistance.

Sheila tells the story of her sister who was shot and killed in the neighborhood where she grew up. Her family, she says, never fully recovered.

Living in poverty can already be a traumatic experience, but it also often means living in neighborhoods where you and the ones you love are more likely to face even more painful or traumatic experiences.

The 1 in 4 young children now living in poverty in the U.S. are often surrounded by a world in which they don't see much hope and opportunity to succeed.

The Rev. Julian DeShazier sees things differently: Poor is not who you are. Poor describes your circumstances—and circumstances can change.

Discussion Questions

1. Where are the neighborhoods or communities like this near you? What are they called? What do you know about them and their residents? How have you learned about these areas? TV news? Newspaper reports? Church?
2. How is violence—in a city, neighborhood, or other community—connected to poverty? Why?
3. How is education, or lack thereof, connected to poverty? Why?
4. Outside influences and influencers might offer a real solution to the problems of poverty in communities. Who and what are they? What would they do?
5. What can be done at the local level to address the underlying issues of education and violence in areas battling endemic poverty?

Did you know?

Three out of four working-age adults who live in poverty have jobs. Millions more are looking for work.



PART VI DRAWING A LINE

If we tell people that they are better than they think they are, they will do better than they think they can.

Rev. Julian DeShazier's ministry in Chicago helps young people living in poverty tell their stories and claim their experiences. Julian says once you can tell your story, you own your life.

The young people who can tell their stories no longer define themselves according to how the rest of the world might see them. "Though I am poor, I do not consider myself poor," says one of the teens.

Discussion Questions

1. What unites each of the stories in the film?
2. What is the difference between being in poverty and being poor?
3. How has seeing firsthand accounts changed the way you view and understand poverty? Can you picture yourself in any of their shoes? How might you handle the challenges and struggles that each of the people profiled in the film has faced?
4. What are ways your faith community, organization, or family can address the issues of poverty in your own community?
5. How might we shine the spotlight on poverty in this country, both during the election season and beyond?

TAKING ACTION

Be ready to act. If you want to engage people who have been inspired by the film, consider providing an opportunity for immediate action on the night of the event. For example, you could have a sign-up sheet for those interested in joining a small group for further discussion, or you could have materials ready to send letters to your member of Congress.

Sojourners is a Christian organization whose mission is to articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world. To learn more, visit us at www.soj.net.

Did you know?

From 1949 to 1959 America cut its poverty rate from 40.5 percent to 22.4 percent (almost in half) and from 1959 to 1973 we cut the rate from 22.4 percent to 11.1 percent (more than half).