

## WHAT IS THE OPTION FOR THE POOR? Discussion Guide

### TWO DIMENSIONS

*The 'option for the poor' is one way of talking about the Gospel call to follow Jesus' example by placing the poor and the marginalised at the centre of things and judging reality by their experience.*

It is a call to disentangle ourselves from unjust structures, processes and institutions in our society, and to work instead to transform them.

To make an option for the poor is to make a conscious choice to:

1. be in solidarity with the poor; and
2. work for structural change to transform the causes of poverty and marginalisation.

Donal Dorr explains it this way:

“When we speak of an option for the poor we usually have in mind a choice freely made by people who are not already poor. Becoming aware that they are relatively wealthy or privileged, they decide freely to relinquish their privileges (to some degree at least) and to become identified with the underprivileged. (An option for the poor can also be made by those who are already poor or disadvantaged; in their case it means a choice to be in solidarity with other underprivileged people rather than trying to take advantage of them and join the rich and powerful.)”<sup>1</sup>

*It is an option in the sense of a choice, and a commitment, rather than something that is 'optional' for Christians.*

It is a profoundly religious choice, but it has political implications because it calls us to disentangle from serving the interests of the

<sup>1</sup> Dorr, D., “Poor, Preferential Option for”, in Dwyer, J., (ed), *New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 1994, p 755.

powerful, and instead to serve those who are relatively powerless.

To give preference in our love to the poorest and most vulnerable is not to reject those who are not poor or marginalised, but is rather an invitation to all – rich and poor alike - to enter into right relationships. To make this clearer, the terms ‘preferential option for the poor’ and ‘love of preference for the poor’ are often used.

To give preference in our love to those who are poor or marginalised is not to idealize these people or groups, or to romanticise poverty. Poverty and exclusion are concrete evils to be overcome. Our voluntary simplicity and solidarity should be transformative, and should acknowledge that people who are poor or marginalised are people, and are not immune from the ordinary shortcomings and struggles of humanity.

### PERSONAL & COLLECTIVE

To make an option for the poor not just as an individual, but as a group or institution – as the Jesuits have done – calls for an orientation of our policies, priorities and resources which places the poorest and most marginalised at the centre. It is an enormous challenge requiring constant reflection, discerning strategic planning, and an openness to honest evaluation.

#### FOR REFLECTION

- Imagine that you did not finish high school and have never lived in a household where anyone had ever had a job.
  - What might your hopes and dreams be?
  - What sorts of help might you need to find a job?
  - How would you like to be treated?
- In what ways does the story from Jesuit Social Services on the next page reflect an option for the poor?

## HOPE IN HARD TIMES

*This article appeared in the Autumn 2009 edition of the Jesuit Social Services Newsletter. In it Jesuit Social Services Policy Director, Michael Gourlay, reflects on the impact of the global economic crisis on participants in Jesuit Social Services' programs. The article is reproduced with permission.*

What a different world we find ourselves in compared with twelve months ago.

The scale of the global economic crisis has shocked us all. Governments and policy makers the world over have been scrambling to determine the most appropriate ways to respond.

In Australia we have seen the Rudd Government announce two major economic statements aimed at stimulating the economy and stemming the rising tide of unemployment.

Nobody is sure how high unemployment figures will rise but already we have seen a significant increase from 457,800 people (4.1%) in February 2008 to 521,200 people (4.6%) in January 2009 - and it seems certain that much worse is to come. ANZ Chief Economist Saul Eslake is predicting 6% unemployment in 2009 and 7% in 2010. That's about 800,000 people.

There are enormous challenges ahead. Government at all levels and the business sector are grappling with how best to respond to the employment crisis. Jesuit Social Services and the broader health and community sector are already starting to feel the pressure of increased demand for services.

During past recessions there has been a tendency by governments to focus employment and training assistance on a narrow group of the 'most employable', with the needs of the most disadvantaged being ignored or considered as secondary. This time around we must all be vigilant to ensure that we don't go down that path again.

It is imperative that every person who is unemployed is given the opportunity to develop and maintain both their employment skills and their social connections within their community. Special attention and effort must go to supporting our most disadvantaged citizens, many of whom have been unemployed for years and may never have had the experience of living in a household where anyone has ever had a job.

In the coming years this group of people will most likely find it harder to gain employment. Nevertheless it is crucial to maintain their sense of hope and assist them to be ready for work when the economy recovers, as it surely will. Jesuit Social Services' experience tells us that often it can take years of concentrated effort to build the skills and confidence necessary for somebody to gain and maintain employment. Let's use the time ahead well.

We know from experience gained through delivering our Gateway program, which provides pathways to education, training and employment to some of our community's most disadvantaged young people, that a successful approach will incorporate the following components: attention to the unique support needs of each individual; innovative, well-designed programs that provide opportunities to gain and practise accredited skills; work experience programs where people develop and practise general work place behaviours and targeted industry skills.

Our experience also shows that our staff's commitment - manifested in an approach that never gives up on people no matter how far back they are in the employment queue - builds hope and engenders confidence. And this is the ingredient that makes the difference.



*Gateway participants Gabby and Nettie proudly show off Easter Eggs produced by Gateway's social enterprise program, Abbotsford Biscuits. These treats are prepared by the young people at Abbotsford Biscuits who learn skills to prepare them for further training and employment.*

*To view the range of products and place orders, visit [www.abbotsfordbiscuits.com.au](http://www.abbotsfordbiscuits.com.au)*