

Bible Study 5: Economic empowerment

Introduction

These two stories from the Old and New Testament show how people have always struggled with poverty and debt, and how they have found resources in themselves and by working together as a community to overcome such poverty. In today's world, our community is both local and global, and economic decisions in one part of the world impact on people in other parts. Fair economic structures, opportunities, skills and support for economic empowerment help people to develop a sustainable livelihood and to live in dignity. The passage from 2 Kings shows Elisha helping an indebted widow to identify her assets and help herself out of poverty. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles describes the first group of Christians supporting each other as they live in community.

This Bible study is for use by small groups or individuals, and can be adapted to your own context.

You may wish to open in prayer. Read the Bible passage *twice*, if possible using different translations. If time allows, you may also discuss the second Bible passage, which offers other insights.

Acts of the Apostles 2.42-47 ~ The first Christians share in community

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Discussion

You can begin the discussion by highlighting several key words from the Bible passage and why you think they stand out for you. Then continue with the questions below.

In biblical times:

- *What is this passage about? Please re-tell it in your own words.*
- *What were the people in this community doing together?*
- *How did the community organise itself to ensure no one was in need?*
- *What inspired the community to act in this way?*
- *Why did they have 'the goodwill of all the people' beyond their own community?*

In our time:

- *How does this example of a community compare with our own times – as a local or global community?*

- *How can our own community become inspired to act like this?*
- *How can we ensure fairness and support for the poorest among us – as a local and global community?*
- *What are the local skills and resources available that can help promote ideals of self-help to support each other and promote dignity?*
- *What practical actions are we going to take, at individual and community level that promote sustainable livelihood and human dignity in our communities?*

2 Kings 4: 1-7 ~ Elisha helps a widow to help herself

Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, ‘Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves.’ Elisha said to her, ‘What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?’ She answered, ‘Your servant has nothing in the house, except a jar of oil.’ He said, ‘Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbours, empty vessels and not just a few. Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside.’ So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, ‘Bring me another vessel.’ But he said to her, ‘There are no more.’ Then the oil stopped flowing. She came and told the man of God, and he said, ‘Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest.’

Discussion

In biblical times:

- *What is this passage about? Please re-tell the story in your own words.*
- *What problems did the widow and her children face?*
- *How did Elisha help the widow to help herself? Why do you think he did not just give her money?*
- *How was the widow able to use her own assets with help from her neighbours?*
- *What released the widow from debt and made her stronger economically?*

In our time:

- *Do people in our communities suffer from bad debt or cannot afford a decent livelihood? What causes this?*
- *How can we help ourselves and others to avoid or escape debt or have a decent livelihood?*
- *What assets do we have to help become economically strong in our families and communities? (think creatively about skills, opportunities and actual things)*
- *How can we help each other, especially the most vulnerable, to identify our assets or opportunities and learn useful skills?*
- *What practical actions are we going to take as individuals and as a community that would enable us identify opportunities, skills, and other resources or assets in order that we or our community become economically self-sufficient or deal with debt burden?*

How could we be changed by these Bible studies?

By knowing:

- *that our local and global community is interconnected and so we must act to promote justice and opportunities for the economic well-being of all.*
- *how to identify skills, assets and opportunities for economic empowerment through self-help and mutual support.*

By feeling:

- *inspired to read the Bible and pray to understand our calling to live in caring communities.*
- *energised to support each other, through advocacy and practical action, to live in dignity without poverty.*

By acting:

- *to advocate for just economic systems that enable people and nations to develop economic sustainability.*
- *to help ourselves and others to identify assets, skills and opportunities for gaining a sustainable income and livelihood.*

Prayer

Loving Father,

We thank you for your Word, showing your concern that no one should suffer through poverty. We thank you that Jesus always cared for the poor and saw that no one should hunger. Forgive us where we have failed to help others in need. Forgive us where we have allowed a world where some become too rich while others get poorer and trapped in debt. Help us to come together as one people, as one community, caring for the well-being of all. Inspire us to see opportunities and assets within and without through which we can help ourselves and others to live without fear of poverty or debt. As we pray for an end to hunger, give us a hunger for justice and fairness, that all may live in equality and dignity.

In Jesus' holy Name we pray. Amen.

Further passages for reading

John 10:10: Jesus talks of the abundant life.

Matthew 5: 13-16: Followers of Christ should be active examples in their own communities.

Matthew 6: 25-34: Living according to the principles of God's Kingdom where everyone will have enough

References and other Bible studies

Bible text cited from NRSV 1989

Bible studies on economic empowerment: "Economy matters":

http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/manuals/Economic_matters_series_1_1.sflb.ashx