As part of my ongoing work with JSRI, I serve on the national Jesuit social analysis advisory group studying the ministerial implications of solidarity with inner-city populations in the U.S. The goal of this Consultation on Inner-City Populations is to inform leadership choices as well as to promote interdisciplinary/cross-regional networking and sharing of resources, information, and learning. We want to help leadership and institutions strategize about what it means to be in solidarity with inner-city populations. The hope is that leadership will have a better understanding of poor people’s needs and how the Society of Jesus can better serve these needs, incorporating this knowledge into strategic plans and apostolic decision-making at national, regional, and local levels. Our advisory group hopes to help U.S. Jesuit ministries increase capacity to serve the urban poor through collaboration—addressing common challenges and sharing knowledge and resources.

2008 Portrait

In 2008, our group sketched a portrait of inner-city needs and Jesuit responses to these needs in the U.S., identifying the following issues impacting inner-city populations and the Jesuit ministries serving them:

- The urban poor are increasingly unable to purchase basic goods for survival (food, gasoline to get to work, utilities to heat the home, etc.) due to dramatically rising costs.
- The urban poor lack access to power to address the underlying factors of poverty and to break the cycle of poverty and marginalization.
- There is a great spiritual hunger among the urban poor, but considerable lack of spiritual direction and spiritual support.

The effects of inflation on the poor:

- Research is needed not only on current situations, but future trends, e.g., food prices and related factors, such as how policies to counteract the effects of climate change will impact future price increases in the basic goods package.
- We need to improve dialogue with organized community groups about the direct impact of inflationary pressures on the poor and brainstorm possible solutions (enhanced ways to meet immediate basic needs and ways to affect longer-term change).
- We need to explore advocacy opportunities that facilitate collaboration across national Jesuit endeavors such as the Jesuit Conference staff and the Jesuit Commission on Social and International Ministries.

Empowerment:

- There are opportunities to strengthen community organizing within existing Jesuit ministries (especially inner-city parishes and charitable works).
- There is potential to strengthen ecumenical and inter-religious collaboration in community organizing.
- There is an opportunity to promote models for immersion, service learning, and community action programs that deepen and enrich partnerships between sending and receiving communities, which could lead to greater overall empowerment of the urban poor as well as their partner sending communities.
an poor during the economic recession

The Society of Jesus may be of assistance in developing dialogue with public schools in the inner city.

Spiritual Hunger:

- Ignatian retreat programs can be further developed to actively engage inner-city populations.
- We can learn much from some inner-city parishes that have developed comprehensive service models.
- Inner-city parishes provide an ideal forum for developing dialogue about the needs of the urban poor.

2009 – 2010 Surveys

At the start of 2009 we brainstormed many of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Jesuit inner-city ministries in the United States, and then developed some strategic directions for the future, focusing on:

- Listening to the poor
- Ignatian spirituality and social ministries
- Collaboration across Jesuit ministries
- Parish social ministry
- Educational ministries among the poor

In 2009, and again in 2010, our survey of selected Jesuit urban ministries indicated some impacts of the economic recession in the inner cities:

- Unemployment. The high rate of unemployment and underemployment among the poor continues, particularly among urban African American and Hispanic people. Many of the constituencies served by Jesuit urban ministries were living in poverty before the recession; however, these populations have been plunged into deeper poverty by the unemployment crisis. Minorities and lower-skilled workers have been disproportionately impacted by high levels of employment. Though there has been some marginal improvement in employment in certain cities, many people served by Jesuit urban ministries find themselves in the same difficult economic situation in 2010 as in 2009. There is a perception among ministry leaders that for the last two years people have had to skimp and save even more or try to find multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet. In 2010, many of inner-city poor now find themselves among the ranks of the long-term unemployed or underemployed.

- Housing instability and a rise in homelessness. The trend in the rise of homelessness, particularly among families, does not seem to have abated in 2010. Affordable rental properties are still scarce and foreclosures have not diminished. Gentrification is affecting some of the communities where our ministries serve, adding to a continued decrease in affordable housing units.

- Youth issues and violence. Lack of jobs for youth, state cut-backs in youth programs and education, and family issues related to housing instability and long-term unemployment were cited as having serious negative consequences for children and youth in the communities where many of our ministries serve in 2009 and 2010.

- Perceived limited impact of government stimulus funding in communities. Many of the ministries have not seen a direct impact of government stimulus funding in their communities to offset effects of the recession. Some ministry leaders report an awareness of some city-wide projects funded through federal stimulus money and grants, but few ministry leaders were aware of projects that are directly affecting the neighborhoods where the ministries operate or the people served by the ministries.

- A rise in the perception of discrimination against Hispanics. Among those working with urban Hispanic populations, the ministry leaders claim that people report that they feel a greater sense of discrimination than ever before—a demoralizing and frightening backlash directed at them that is prevalent in the media and society—and is evidenced by such measures as the 2010 Arizona immigration law.

- Deepening of personal and spiritual despair. There is concern among ministry leaders about a worsening of personal and spiritual despair as the recession drags on. This can be very dangerous as it inhibits people’s ability to help themselves out of the difficult situations. Spiritual and personal empowerment are essential elements of Jesuit ministry to the inner-city poor. Some ministry leaders report that they wish they could be freed from more administrative tasks to put emphasis on attending to people’s needs in this area.

The Consultation on Inner-City Populations Continues

I hope that this brief article offers a “taste” of the much fuller menu of dishes available at our website referenced in footnote 1. There, one can find further results of this research, as well as many references to other studies, briefings, statistics and action suggestions related to urban poverty and the Jesuit involvement in inner-city ministries.

1 Although I take responsibility for this article, it reflects the collaboration of many people, in particular Amy Newlon, research coordinator in the Jesuit Conference Office of Social and International Ministries, as well as the membership of our national advisory committee. Much of the information in this article is excerpted from the webpage Solidarity with Inner-City Populations, where much more detail, documentation and further resources are provided: http://bit.ly/bbUdF2