Thanks. I’m honored to be here. To speak briefly with the members of this commission. I’ve learned something of your schedule and your pace and, most important, your commitment to what is a long haul. And I can imagine what your schedules are, outside these deliberations, in your normal professional lives. It is a tribute to Charlotte how deeply you are rooted in this effort. It’s a potent tribute to each of you as well. Thanks for letting me join you for just a bit.

I must say, too, I’m honored to be part of any program involving our good partners at Crisis Assistance Ministry. From whom my young colleagues and I have learned much in the last three years about the challenges facing low- income folks in Charlotte. Carol & Raquel and their colleagues are gifts to this community. And, maybe most pointedly, I know you are going to hear from 3 of the remarkable Circles women who’ll represent the broader group of low income Charlotteans we’ve been interviewing and meeting with over the last 24 months. Among the most heroic folks I know. Struggling, against the odds, to push back against the challenges of poverty and affordable housing, and child care costs and the expenses entailed in supporting a family in Mecklenburg County. I think you’ll learn a lot from them. I know I have.

I start with a quick word about the data – which I won’t focus on. You’ve talked much, of course, of Charlotte’s noted mobility problems. As you are charged to do. But I remind, too, that this great city – North Carolina’s most potent source of income and wealth – also has experienced one of the country’s sharpest municipal increases in poverty over the last decade. And, as Brookings reports, one of the nation’s steepest rises in concentrated poverty. Now with almost a quarter of all Charlotte residents living in areas of concentrated poverty.

Four of North Carolina’s eight most economically distressed census tracts – which we’ve historically equated with deep pockets of hardship in rural North Carolina – half of the most distressed districts in the state are here in Charlotte. [Lockwood, University City South, Grier Heights and Capitol Drive/Jackson Blvd.] 64,000 residents living in extreme poverty – on incomes of less than $11,500 a year for a family of four. Reminding that, despite the intense chronic poverty of much of Eastern, North Carolina, the poorest parts of this state are actually located in the middle of Charlotte, Raleigh, Durham, Winston-Salem and Greensboro. And Charlotte, on many fronts, produces the sharpest dichotomy.

And, as you’ve come to know, concentrating poverty is not just a matter of aesthetics. Poverty is tough. Ample research demonstrates that living amidst concentrated poverty is a good deal tougher. In such neighborhoods, the poor cope not only with the challenges of their own deprivation, but also with that of those surrounding them. Unsafe neighborhoods, depressed property values, substandard housing, foreclosures, troubled schools, sparse transportation, inadequate private and non-profit resources, isolation from
commercial opportunities and services, diminished community assets and hope.

So high poverty areas exact an additional toll on their residents, beyond the burdens visited on the individual households within them. As the Federal Reserve has explained: “there is a double burden imposed on poor families living in extremely poor communities.” And those double burdens, and their segregations, as you’ve learned, help produce massive problems in mobility.

So it’s understandable then that when Chairman Fuller announced the creation of this commission, months ago, he said that a surprising, unacceptable and (quote) “intractable poverty” now plagues greater Charlotte. “We have the worst concentration of poverty in the state,” he chided, “we cannot allow this any longer.”

You know, too, that almost 30% of full-time workers in Charlotte can be characterized as ‘low income workers.’ Making less than $23,500 a year. They don’t typically reflect the profile often urged in our public narratives. They aren’t fresh-faced teenagers looking for work experience before they head off to Stanford. The majority are over 30. They’re disproportionately female, black, Hispanic and Native American.

They report, in our extended interviews, here, and I quote: “Everybody knows it is impossible to pay for food, rent, electricity, transportation, health and child care on eight dollars an hour in Charlotte, NC.” That’s true if you work overtime. It’s true if you work two jobs. “We work as hard as the people in the offices do,’ they explain. Even harder. “Why don’t the folks we work for care whether their employees, who work hard and do right by them, can have a decent life in return?”

Reflecting an absence of mobility, they explain, over and over, that “they feel trapped.” “They don’t want to help you when you’re in a crisis, with child care or food stamps.” But “they also refuse to pay you enough so that you can get by without those things.” “It looks to me like they do it that way on purpose,” they argue. The modest benefits available subsidize employers who treat their workers “like their lives don’t count.”

Most of the low income Charlotte residents we’ve interviewed say they’re not after a “big government program designed to help with housing or welfare. They want wages they can live on in exchange for a difficult and demanding days work. They want a chance to advance and make economic progress. Then we wouldn’t have to be worrying about food stamps or rent subsidies.” We could “make it on our own. That would be giving us a ‘fair shot.’”
Isolation, jeopardy and separation appears in the discussions as well. “We have a lot of young men in our neighborhood, and they have no outlet so they’re hurting each other.” There’s nothing for them to do, no jobs, no community centers, no programs for teenagers. “If my son goes out with the kids he sees, he’s getting in trouble.” There is no transportation where you can hop on a bus. To “get somewhere you have to be prepared to walk a mile to the bus stop.”

“There is nothing but bad stuff for the kids to do. When they get 12 or 13 there are summer camps, but no one I know can afford them. The kids learn from what they see around them.” “The church I go to is in Grier Heights and it’s a very tough neighborhood, it seems like every week somebody is killed. We always have flowers at church on Sundays, let over from the funerals.”

“For me,” another mother explains, “independence means being able to take care of my kids, being there for them is all that matters.” It’s the “only thing I ever think about.” Another concedes the “stress can be enormous, but I have my daughter and my little granddaughter, they need me, I teach them what matters – respect, honesty, simplicity, faith. That’s what I’m put here for.”

So, I’m heartened that you may increasingly be looking beyond mobility alone, or narrowly, to the poverty, segregation and marginalization that feeds it. Practically speaking, mobility, inequality and poverty can’t be effectively separated. They are the joined cousins of economic injustice.

Separating them is a little like trying to talk about equal educational opportunity without exploring the impact of poverty. Most North Carolinians, me included, think that education is the most important pathway out of poverty. But poverty, as you’ve seen, is also a potent barrier to meaningful education. As Larry Mishel has put it, “opportunity without the foundations for success can be a dodge.”

Maybe the lousy marker of the 50th place mobility showing can provide an opening for these wrenching and even more challenging issues. I know that the Commission would not be satisfied if Charlotte moved from 50th to 47th or 45th and, still, tens or hundreds of thousands of its residents continue to live at the edge or desperation – or beyond it. Concentrating on future mobility alone can tempt us to look past the present, crushing experiences of thousands of hard working, low-income residents.
As one who looks at poverty around the state, let me close by saying, too, there seems a different moral issue here, in North Carolina’s wealthiest community. We’re studying poverty, right now, in Goldsboro and Hickory and Roper and Salisbury. Communities that enjoy none of the economic might and prowess of Mecklenburg County. Here, with such commitment and resources, I’m trusting that it won’t be true that if a non-embarassing percentage of our sisters and brothers can work their way out of soul-wrenching poverty, it’ll be seen as morally acceptable for the rest to stay where they are.