

There is a New Poor People's Campaign, a moral revival sweeping across the United States. PC(USA)'s co-moderators have asked us to be involved, and the Mission and Social Justice Division of Heartland Presbytery is furthering that call. **Specifically, the Mission and Social Justice Division calls on the presbytery to endorse this campaign, to promote its work in our congregations, and to participate in efforts to improve our communities through its mission.**

Five days before his tragic death in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was speaking at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, part of his effort to organize a Poor People's Campaign in his time and place. On March 31, 1968, he said, "We are coming to demand that the government address itself to the problem of poverty. We read one day: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But if a man doesn't have a job or an income, he has neither life nor liberty nor the possibility for the pursuit of happiness... We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic non-violent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible."

King envisioned the Poor People's Campaign as a mission to unite people of all races behind a solid platform for substantive change. This initial campaign was cut short by his death, but it lives on in the New Poor People's Campaign, organized by Revs. William Barber II and Liz Theoharis, endorsed by PC(USA) co-moderators Revs. Tawnya Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston, and carried forward by thousands of faith leaders, organizers, and activist networks around the country.

Dr. King organized the first Poor People's Campaign because he recognized the limits of civil rights activism. He came to see that civil rights and desegregation could only go so far in changing the material realities for African-Americans—that substantial improvements would only come when the lives of all poor people of every race and creed were improved, and this would only come when people organized to work for change in their communities. The New Poor People's Campaign continues in this spirit, coordinating with local groups like Stand Up KC to create a national, grassroots movement. With the support of this campaign, people are already working with state legislatures in Missouri and Kansas, advocating for Medicaid expansion, increased wages for low-income workers, environmental protection, and other policies designed to improve the lives of the most vulnerable among us. On Mother's Day, local organizers will launch six weeks of direct action around these issues.

Why should the church, as a denomination, a presbytery, or a congregation, be involved in this kind of work? We worship a God who is concerned with the lives of the nations, who threatens judgment against nations "who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right" (Isaiah 10:1-2). In Matthew 25, we see "the nations" gathered before the Son of Man (25:32). Did they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger? We know that those who did these things "for the least of these" did them for Jesus Christ (25:40), but do we know that we are called to do these things as individuals and as nations?

When Jesus began his public ministry in the Gospel of Luke, he declared that God had anointed him “to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). We take Jesus at his word when he proclaims this as his mission. We do not seek to spiritualize or reinterpret his words, to make them more palatable or comfortable for us. We believe he came to bring good news to the poor, and that with this good news would come genuine, substantive improvement in the lives of those who struggle. Just as Dr. King believed that people could not pursue happiness without some basic level of material security, we also believe that people cannot be who God has fully called them to be until they can live with dignity, justice, and the material security of enough.

That is why the church, as a denomination, as a presbytery, and as congregations, is called to the work of the New Poor People’s Campaign.

Therefore, the Mission and Social Justice Division calls on Heartland Presbytery to endorse the New Poor People’s Campaign, to promote its work in our congregations, and to participate in efforts to improve our communities through its mission.

We further call on minister-members, ruling elders, and others connected to our congregations to engage in two specific actions:

1. Go to the website, www.poorpeoplescampaign.org. Learn about the history and principles of the campaign and consider signing up to receive updates and be contacted by a local organizer.
2. Follow the lead of Westport Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church in Liberty, MO by hosting a Poor People’s Campaign 101 event. These events are invaluable opportunities to learn about the mechanics and intricacies of the campaign and to become more involved. Those who wish to learn more about these events and the possibility of hosting may contact MSJD moderator Steven Andrews at stevenandrews@parkvillepresby.org or 816-741-1641.