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# Sounding the Jubilee Horn for Abundant Life

By William J. Barber II and Liz Theoharis, Co-chairs of Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival

“  
**there need be  
no poor people  
among you.”**  
(Deuteronomy 15:4)

The word *jubilee* comes from the Hebrew “yovel,” meaning a “trumpet blast of liberty.” It was said that on the day of liberation, the sound of a ram’s horn would ring through the land.

On June 20, 2020, the “Jubilee” horn was heard, when nearly three million people, including many United Methodist Women members, tuned in for the Mass Poor People’s Digital Assembly & Moral March on Washington<sup>1</sup> to express the untold stories and demands of a growing social movement for potential solutions to a host of injustices. Social media, radio and TV (in English, Spanish and American Sign Language) broadcast the program with toll-free numbers to homeless encampments and other places where people were abandoned by much of this society long before COVID-19 hit. 300,000 listeners sent the agenda of the Poor People’s Campaign to their governors and Congress. United Methodist Women is a national co-sponsor of the Poor People’s Campaign, serving on the Prophetic Council of faith leaders.

The same day, the Poor People’s Campaign launched a “Moral Policy Agenda to Heal America: The Poor People’s Jubilee Platform.”<sup>2</sup> The Jubilee platform is a blueprint for the moral reconstruction of a society; it reminds us all that ending poverty and systemic racism, working to mitigate climate change and halting this country’s ever-growing militarism, at home and abroad, is not only possible, but that we know what it will take to get us there. It holds up the right to a living-wage job, universal single-payer healthcare, quality and free education through college, debt relief, a guaranteed basic income, true environmental protections, indigenous and immigrant rights, and an adequate standard of living for all, including the poor — in a country with national elected officials focused mainly on the rich and on funding the Pentagon and militarizing our communities at evermore staggering levels.

## Historical Perspectives

The inclusion of Jubilee in our policy platform is not meant as just another rhetorical flourish. It is meant as a rallying cry, an economic and social vision of justice, a political roadmap for our moment and an expression of the moral heart of movements of the oppressed in this country. Indeed, Jubilee has often been invoked as a shorthand for the promise of freedom in this country, from the pre-Civil War abolition movement to today.



1. Poor People’s Campaign, <https://www.june2020.org/> accessed September 13, 2020  
2. About Poor People’s Campaign Jubilee Platform, <https://www.june2020.org/poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/jubilee-platform/>; accessed September 11, 2020.



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“

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On December 28, 1862, on the eve of the moment when President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves, Frederick Douglass gave a speech, “The Day of Jubilee Comes,”<sup>3</sup> that he began: “This is scarcely a day for prose. It is a day for poetry and song, a new song.” He then warned that it was unwise “for the friends of freedom to fold their hands and consider their work at an end. The price of Liberty is eternal vigilance.”

Two and a half years of death and struggle later, on June 19, 1865, the Union Army arrived in Galveston, Texas, and the enslaved people of that city — the last to do so — learned that they had been emancipated. The memory of that day has since held special meaning for many Black communities, as well as others seeking freedoms of various sorts. Some know it as Juneteenth. Others call it Jubilee Day.

## **The Biblical Vision of Jubilee**

In the Bible, “Jubilee” appears throughout, including the law codes of Deuteronomy, the most cited Old Testament book. Those codes established a covenant with God in which there was to be an unbroken cycle of Jubilee years when debts were cancelled (Deuteronomy 15), slaves freed, wages finally paid, the poor and hungry given provisions, and farmland allowed to lie fallow (an early form of ecological conservation). Together, those codes served as sacred law and the people were told that, if the codes were followed, “there need be no poor people among you.” (Deuteronomy 15:4)

None of these Jubilee laws were meant to be about charity, but about the responsibilities of a land and a people. They amounted, in fact, to a call for a radical reconstruction of society. It was no accident that the first mention of Jubilee came two books earlier in Leviticus 25:8–55 in a similar set of liberatory codes handed down by God after the Jewish people had been freed from Egypt. The codes were to provide a clean break with the hellish world those Jews had just escaped and the first building blocks of a new, more just one.

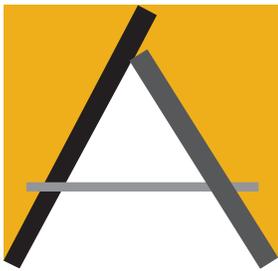
## **A Biblical Vision for Today**

The challenges of 2020 clearly demand a Jubilee vision for the nation, something that, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, feels more attainable now than it has for generations. Mass mobilizations in 2020 offer evidence that growing segments of society can imagine bold solutions to issues such as poverty and systemic racism, and are prepared to organize what could be a new reconstruction to make those imaginations a reality. Tens of thousands of Americans have been on rent strikes<sup>4</sup> and engaging in the struggles of low-wage workers and the unemployed demanding both immediate relief and permanent rights to housing and decent work at a living wage. Those in a revitalized labor movement are stepping up bold action, including the national Strike for Black Lives.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, summer 2020 racial justice uprisings have awakened one of the largest protest movements in American history.

3. Frederick Douglass Speech “The Day of Jubilee Comes” [afroamcivilwar.org/component/content/article/4-upcoming-events/190-watch-night.html](https://afroamcivilwar.org/component/content/article/4-upcoming-events/190-watch-night.html); accessed September 3, 2020.

4. “Tenant Leaders and Elected Officials Call National Rent Strike” [colorlines.com/articles/tenant-leaders-and-elected-officials-call-national-rent-strike](https://colorlines.com/articles/tenant-leaders-and-elected-officials-call-national-rent-strike); accessed September 13, 2020.

5. Strike for Black Lives [apnews.com/d33b36c415f5dde25f64e49ccc35ac43](https://apnews.com/d33b36c415f5dde25f64e49ccc35ac43); accessed September 3, 2020.



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The poor are always with us? (Mark 14.7) The irony of that line from the Bible is that Jesus was actually critiquing it (and the rich) by cleverly referencing the law codes of Deuteronomy. In his time, the Roman Empire had created a society rife with suffering and death, as well as its own predatory regime of wealth accumulation. Jesus references perhaps the most powerful prescription for justice in the Old Testament with the message that “there need be no poor people among us” and instructs nations to forgive debts, pay people what they deserve, abolish slavery and organize society around the needs of the poor. That Jubilee passage of Jesus was never actually saying that poverty was inevitable, but that the “poor will be always with us” as long as we serve the rich rather than build a society that cares for everyone. That’s no less true today.

Praise God, we are choosing another way!

### **What United Methodist Women Members Can Do**

- Use this Abundant Life issue as a Bible Study in your circle. What would a Jubilee reordering look like today? How does this vision of God’s Beloved Community link racial, environmental and economic justice?
- Get involved in the Poor People’s Campaign in your state or nationally. PPC is addressing voting rights, mass incarceration, racial justice, climate justice and environmental justice, and demilitarization. Led by poor people, it is engaged in mobilization and advocacy at both state and national levels: [poorpeoplescampaign.org/take-action/](http://poorpeoplescampaign.org/take-action/)
- Join a [Freedom Church of the Poor service online at the Kairos Center](#), Sundays, 6-7 p.m. ET

### **About the Authors:**

**The Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis** is the Director of the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary. She has spent over the past two decades organizing among the poor in the United States, working with and advising grassroots organizations with significant victories. She is the author of *Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor* (Eerdmans, 2017). Liz is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

**The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II** is the President & Senior Lecturer of Repairers of the Breach, Bishop with The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries; Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary; Pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church, Disciples of Christ in Goldsboro, N.C. Rev. Dr. Barber is also the architect of the Forward Together Moral Movement. He served as President of the North Carolina NAACP, the largest state conference in the South, from 2006 - 2017 and currently sits on the National NAACP Board of Directors.

*Abundant Life for All* is a series addressing aspects of the United Methodist Women Living Wage for All Campaign for use by members in programs for education and action. Edited by Elmira Nazombe.



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