

Imagine With Me: Poor People's Campaign

with Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II

Transcript



Terri Hord Owens: Hello, Disciples, and welcome to another episode of *Imagine With Me*, the opportunity that I have to talk with so many exciting Disciples across our church sharing ideas and helping to imagine with me how we can be the new church that God is calling for in this ever-changing new world. Today I'm so excited because I have one of my friends, one of my colleagues in ministry, a minister who was giving leadership not only across the Disciples of Christ, but indeed to our nation, the U.S., and the world, none other than Bishop William J. Barber II. Bishop Barber is the senior pastor of the [Greenleaf Christian Church](#) in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He's doing great work there and most of you know him as the architect of the Moral Monday movement, which began in North Carolina when he chaired the NAACP there. And he is also the founder of the [Repairers of the Breach](#) organization, and co-chair of the [Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival](#).

Bishop Barber, I'm just so delighted to have you here you. And I engage in so many ways and I thought it would be important as we're moving particularly towards the big day in June of 2022, and all the work that Poor People's Campaign has been doing to allow the church to hear from you - not only about your ministry at Goldsboro, but how you see Disciples continuing to be co-laborers in the Poor People's Campaign. So welcome, and thanks for your time. Maybe you can start by helping people understand what your local pastorate is about, as well as the Poor People's Campaign.

William Barber: Well, first of all, thank you so much. We so thank God for you as our general minister and president. We love you. We pray for you, and the entire church. I'm so moved by this title, "Imagine With Me."

THO: You know, Walter Bruggeman says that the prophetic vision never starts with implementation. It always starts with the imagination: imagining a new possibility, a new world, new transformation. And I'm so glad to be in a church that gets it.

WB: Yeah, I pastor the Greenleaf Christian Church, one of the oldest congregations in the Disciples of Christ movement - nearly 140 some odd years old. We are a church today that we like to say may not be a mega congregation in terms of numbers, but we have mega ministry, and we're determined to show the love of God. We reach tens of thousands of people on the social media. We are congregation that not only believes in saving the soul, but dealing with the body.

And so, you know, we've done drug dealer redemption conferences. We've built a senior citizen complex with low-income seniors. We have a preschool academy for low-income children. We've built nearly 60 homes for a low-wealth and a medium-wealth community - actually single-family homes. We have a community garden where people can get free fresh vegetables. We have a restaurant now that we're working on developing a culinary arts program for persons who are recently formerly incarcerated. And just recently, we paid off our entire debt, where up to 20 years ago - 22 years ago, we borrowed 1.5 million dollars to invest in community - not to build a new sanctuary, a new pew - and that investment has turned into now to almost 12 million dollars of community economic development within a two- to three-mile radius of our congregation.

God is extraordinarily good, and we say we are determined to show the love of Jesus Christ to every human being. And in the South, we are an open and affirming congregation, in the deep South. And so, we thank God for all that God is doing.

THO: Amen. I've had the opportunity just to see right there where your church is - the community building that you're doing - and I know how you focus that church on, again, investing in the community, not investing in a larger sanctuary or things that physically manifest as traditional church, but really are reaching out. So that's exciting to know that you've paid off that debt.

WB: And yeah, and the membership has grown over these years. When we came here, you know, we had a lower membership. We now have some four or five hundred people that are identified, but the ministry is so much broader. Yeah. We decided to be a little bit Catholic. We said we didn't just want - we talk about us being a parish in the community, not just a church or a few people.

THO: Yes, yes. And I know many Disciples who are listening to this join your broadcast from your church. It's rebroadcast. I've been privileged to preach at Greenleaf via that virtual gathering. So, yeah, tens of thousands of people are being blessed visibly right there in the community, and then what you pour into our spirits every Sunday. So thank you for that. You always mentioned that the Disciples, your denomination, supported you in this movement, and contrasting that to the struggle that Dr. King even had with his own denomination. Would you say some more about why you think that the support of the Disciples of Christ is important, not just to you personally but to this movement? Why should Disciples engage and be committed to this kind of moral movement, this moral call for action?

WB: Well, you know, the same year that you were by the Spirit and the people elected, Madame President, was the same year we launched the Poor People's Campaign. And we came before the general conference and said would the con - would the denomination support? And it was without hesitation. I was literally in tears, because I knew the great history when Dr. King launched - even before the Poor People's

Campaign - to push for civil rights, the church - his own denomination - put him out. They literally put him out. They said this is the wrong direction. But the reality is, if you start with Jesus's first sermon in Nazareth when he launches his public ministry, of all of the ancient texts he could have pulled from he pulled from the one that made the poor - the ftochós - those who've been exploited, the focal point of God's work and God's Spirit. And then all of the connecting injustices of oppression, and imprisonment, and the sick, and the blind, and people not being welcomed.

And our church specifically says that we, in our, you know, documents that we are a movement, a movement, not just a place to bring people in to go to heaven. And it has meant the world, because the commitment of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has actually helped us as we minister. You've helped us talking to other major denominational leaders and for them to understand that this work around poverty, and addressing the moral crisis, the crisis of civilization that we have in this nation.

You know, 140 million people poor and low wealth - 140 million - and 700 people dying a day from poverty, even before COVID. Another 8 million people falling into poverty during COVID, and we know that poverty is a policy choice. It's a mor - it's not the immorality of the poor.

By the time you people hear this video, I will be coming back from the Vatican, where the Holy Father has invited clergy and economists to come together at the Vatican to deal with this issue of poverty, and to suggest that the church must raise a clarion critique against, what he calls, the magical devices of neo-liberalism and trickle-down economics that is literally taking the world backwards when it comes to the issues of poverty and causing death throughout our world. So, we are in a time where the church needs to take seriously that the number two sin of all the sins, and about number one sin in the Bible, is idolatry. The number two sin, and areas that have the most amount of attention in the Bible, is the mistreatment of the poor and the marginalized. If you cut all of those Scriptures out of the Bible, there is no Bible. It literally falls apart.

And so, it was so important for people to know when I'm out here, I'm not some kind of renegade leader off to the side. That this work is not some kind of something outside of basic Christian orthodoxy, that to care for the poor, to preach good news to the poor, and challenge the systems of exploitation is in fact at the heart of what it means to be Christian.

THO: Yes, Jesus claims that ministry for himself, right, when he stands in the synagogue and reads from Isaiah 61, that the Spirit is upon him to preach the Good News to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to set at liberty those that are captive. As you know, as we've been talking about what we call these reimaginings, right, that we need to understand ourselves as a covenant church; that we need to shift the narrative of our church to include all of our stories; that we need to look at the tools and methods that we have to do this work; and then also we need to ground ourselves in spiritual practice. I've always appreciated the fact that the Poor People's Campaign is

grounded in Scripture. It's theologically grounded, and from there the policy development has happened. Could you say more about the 14 policy points? There's so much data and so - such good analysis that the Poor People's Campaign has engaged with. Tell us a little bit more about that part of the work that this isn't just marching in the streets. This is real data, real analysis, theological grounding, to develop just policies. Tell us more about that.

WB: You know, I was thinking as you were talking just recently as a Disciple of Christ minister, I was invited to the syna- the temple, the synagogue in Hollywood to preach on Yom Kippur. And the great text of Yom Kippur is Isaiah 58, which is really a policy announcement to the nation. It says cry loud and spare not, and then in there it lists the kinds of things a nation must do policy-wise if it's going to be called the repairers of the breach. One of those things is to loose the bands of wickedness which means that, in Hebrew, to pay people a living wage. And Isaiah 58 is rooted in Isaiah 10, which says, "Woe unto those who legislate evil and rob the poor of their rights, and make women and children their prey." And all of those Scriptures are attached to Isaiah 61 about the Spirit of the Lord's upon me, where it's first found in the Scriptures.

You know, Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharris is also my co-chair, and she's a powerful sister - New Testament scholar - so you have a movement led by two preachers, both trained theologically in policy and in Scripture. And there are several ways we do that. First of all, because of that we say, we're working with the poor, low wealth, not for me, because biblically, if you look, Jesus always brought forth the people who were impacted. He didn't leave them in the march. And secondly, I'd like for your listeners to go to the website. You can go to www.breachrepairs.org and then click over to Poor People's Campaign. And there are two documents: one is "[The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America 50 years after the original Poor People's Campaign](#)." We didn't just start something. We actually did an audit, a forensic audit, on where we were in five of what we call interlocking issues: systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological devastation, the denial of health care, the war economy, and the false moral narrative of religious nationalism.

The second document I would ask people to go to is the one entitled, "[The Third Reconstruction: Ending poverty and low wealth from the bottom up](#)." It's a detailed policy analysis. It's actually in Congress now as a resolution - has 50 some odd signatures - that lays out, here are the results that the nation must have if we're serious about what we say in our deepest religious faith, and what we say in our constitution about establishing justice, promoting the general welfare. If we're serious, when we put our hands on Bibles and swear to uphold the constitution, then we have to change how we've measured poverty, because for too long, we've not measured it properly. Therefore, we act as though it is lower than it actually is. We have to have living wages. We have to have more housing. We have to have a commitment to public education. We have to treat our indigenous brothers and sisters right and make sure that they're not continuing to be oppressed, our native brothers and sisters. We have to

make sure that we have full and free and diverse public education for everyone. We literally have to protect voting rights. And voting rights suppression, oppression of, suppression of our voting right is a theological issue because we only give the right to vote to people. We don't give it to puppies, parrots, and pets. So, if I suppress your vote, I'm suggesting you're not a person, which then means I'm suggesting you don't have the Imago Dei, which really means you have really overstepped a boundary from a political standpoint.

So, and lastly, I would ask the folk to go look at the [moral budget](#). We work with the [Economic Policy Institute](#) because we wanted to know, when people say, "Well, we would like to do this but it will cost too much." They actually proved empirically, Dr. Owens, that a moral budget is an economically sound budget. In fact, not to do these things, not to address poverty and low wealth, the cost is too high. Joseph Stickley, who has advised us, and Jeffrey Sachs, who is an economist, have actually said to us, the question we ought to be asking is, what is the cost if we don't do it, not what is the cost if we do.

And what we found empirically is that the cost is too high, that this nation cannot have, cannot survive with 43 percent, almost 50 percent of its people living in poverty and low wealth. And they don't have to. And so, lastly, once we did this analysis rooted in our deepest religious values, and our deepest constitutional values, and built policy from that place, the Economic Policy Institute and the [Institute for Policy Studies](#) concluded that it is moral, is morally indefensible, constitutionally inconsistent, and economically insane for this nation, or for the world, that is, not to address the issue of poverty and low wealth.

We have the money. That's not the issue. We have the ideas. That's not the issue. What we have not had is the moral commitment. And that's why we have to have a movement to make that come into existence.

THO: Yeah. I so appreciate that and I hope that those who are listening will visit [breachrepairers.org](#) and [poorpeoplescampaign.org](#) to read those documents. You know, in my prior career, I was a data management consultant in information technology, and I have appreciated the rigor with which Poor People's Campaign has worked with economists and the Institute for Policy Studies to really take a hard look at the data, but then to ground the position that you take deeply in Scripture, in Christian and moral values. And one of the things that that I'm always saying, particularly in ecumenical circles, is when we work together as Christians across the landscape, and people of all faiths in interfaith work - gone is the day when we can afford just to sit at tables, at conciliar tables and write documents and spend 20 years coming up with statements. We need to be leveraging the will and the action of all people of faith who believe in this moral agenda to ensure that not only our voices are heard but that we hold the nation to account based on that Christian agenda. Food pantries are great. Child care services are great in our church, but this is about shifting the structures and dismantling systems so –

WB: The entire - the shifting to that and building power and, I tell you, it is literally this moral fusion vision in our movement. We have folk from Appalachia who are white, and folk from Alabama who are black who never thought they would find synergy – (THO: Yeah). - who the society tells us - if you listen to the talking heads, for instance, they'll tell you that poor and low wealth people, particularly white, vote against their own interests. But if you look at the data, the data says that's not true. The poor, low wealth people vote for progressive ideas. However, many of them don't vote because they never hear their name mentioned in debates or in discussions or in policy. It's the middle class, the wealthy. And one of the special lobby, too, for poverty at the UN, when we met at the UN, he said to us, "I'm not necessarily a person of faith." Right? We've had a lot of economists say this, but they said, "But Reverend, let me tell you. We know that if we don't have a moral shift of consciousness, it's not good."

We don't have a scarcity of money. We've spent 21 trillion dollars in war since 9/11. We don't have a scarcity of money, and we do not have a scarcity of ideas. All of the things we see are actually fixable, doable right now.

What we have is a scarcity of moral persistence and consistency. And I went back and did some research, Madame President, and I looked at, and found out, that economics used to not even be a study unto itself. It was considered a part of moral philosophy. But you can't have slavery and consider something to be moral, so economics was separated out and it was claimed to have not - to really be moral or anything, just to be about numbers.

The fact is a nation's budget tells where her heart is. A nation's budget tells where her heart is. And our movement is not Democrat or Republican. We're very political, but non-partisan, because the question before us now with the 140 million people in poverty in this country and growing - even though we bring it down a little bit during COVID because we make investments, but those investments are temporary - is whether or not this democracy can survive. Over a billion people in the world living in extreme poverty. It's not just about, you know, can this country survive? Can the world sustain this kind of disruption at its very foundation? And we can't. And that's why we have to have a movement.

THO: That's fine. And as you say, Dr. Barber, we say in our documents that we are - our identity statement - we are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. We welcome all to the Lord's table as God has welcomed us. So, I want to thank you for your time today. You have so much going on, and just know that I am certainly standing with you and available whenever I can be to support this important work. As the church has called for us in that [2017 resolution](#) to encourage every expression of our church, general, regional, and congregational, to support this work. We love you because you're one of our own, but we also understand how God is moving in this movement, and through all the people who are involved.

WB: Disciples, thank you so much for one quick video.

THO: Yes, yes, yes.

WB: Regardless, I know when this will be seen is probably after all of the discussions in Congress about this bill, and that bill. The Economic Policy Institute said, though, no matter what steps we take, we really need 10 trillion dollars, trillion dollars a year, to shore up this country in the places where there's been so much non-investment for so many years. We haven't raised the minimum wage in 12 years - 12 years - and people that work in restaurants only make 2 dollars 15 cents an hour. That is sinful. So regardless of what happens on June 18, 2022, we are calling for a mass Poor People's low-wage workers assembly and moral march on Washington. We must do more to mobilize, organize, register, educate, and empower. To put the face on these issues, we got to show America herself.

And we're asking the entire church to show up, and everybody to show up. And that day you won't hear people speaking on behalf of the poor per se, but you will hear Terri Owens introduce, say, a Disciple who faces poverty and low wealth, or one of these interlocking injustices. And they will speak to the nation, not only their story, their pain, but the vision for transformation. They will give America a new imagination.

Yeah, and it won't be a day of fellowship. It's gonna be a declaration that poor people and low wealth people and their allies are saying, "Somebody's been hurting our brothers and sisters. It's gone on far too long and we won't be silent anymore." So, Disciples, I want to see all of you on June 18, 2022, in Washington DC.

THO: Amen, amen. And this won't be the last time that we hear this invitation. We'll we're going to be on that. We have Disciples leading in all of the state campaigns across the U.S. and we have so much energy, and I'm just so grateful for the perspective that leads us to honor the voices of those impacted persons. Every event that I've been a part of, it's always been those people taking the front seat, and you, I have seen, get upset when there are other voices trying to crowd out those voices, because those are the voices - that we're with them. We're not speaking for them. We're lifting and elevating their voices, so that we can all hear. So, thank you, Bishop Barber. We could talk all day, but thank you so much for your collegiality, for your prophetic vision, and imagination. And I have to say, for your friendship and all that you mean to so many of us who are just in lockstep with you as you lead a - co-lead this movement with Dr. Liz Theoharris and so many other faithful people. I have made friends with imams and rabbis, women, men - so many people who, as you say, in this moral fusion movement. And my own circle has been expanded because I've been a part of this. So, Disciples, I'm always saying, "Let's be the church we say we are," and I think Dr. Barber has helped us to understand how this moral action is grounded in the scriptural understanding from the prophets to Jesus, how God's limitless love and God's limitless imagination help us to see endless possibilities the reign of God can be. Now

we're called to bring that moral vision to our society today, and it is possible, if we work together and have that moral will, that moral intentionality, to make justice happen.

I hope that you will join me next time on another episode of *Imagine With Me*. I hope that you'll share these episodes with your friends and family and networks so that we can get the good news out about how Disciples are imagining who we must be as a new church for this new world.

Thanks again to our guest, Bishop William J. Barber II. And remember, Disciples, God loves you and so do I.