

# Imagine with Me: Liz Theoharris and the Poor People's Campaign

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Terri Hord Owens: Hello Disciples, this is your General Minister and President, Rev. Terri Hord Owens and welcome to another episode of Imagine with Me, an opportunity that I have to speak and discuss with leaders across our church and across our ecumenical world to talk about how the church of Jesus Christ is imagining who we must be in this new world as a new church today.



I am so excited to have with me. Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharris, who is the Co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival along with our own, Rev. Dr. William Barber II. She is also the director of the Kairos Center for Religious Rights and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary. She teaches at Union, and she is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church, USA. I am so excited to bring Dr. Liz as we call her in the movement, to Imagine with Me and to share with Disciples. I have had the honor of being on the road and at lots of different events with her online and in person, so she's truly a colleague in the work. So, Dr. Liz, welcome to Imagine with Me. Disciples are glad to have this opportunity to share with you.

Liz Theoharris: Thank you so much. It's wonderful to be here in community with you.

THO: Thanks so much. I have talked a little bit about briefly your introduction in the introduction about where you teach and work. But what should we know about you? And particularly about how you frame your work with the Poor People's Campaign?

LT: I love this question. Thank you so much. So I am a daughter of the church and I am also the daughter of a social justice movement that has been building and growing, you know, in this country and around the world for my whole life. I was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and, you know, from a very young age saw that my faith must be linked to doing the work of justice. In the words of Micah 6:8, What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? And I have been doing very grassroots and high poverty organizing for almost 30 years. I met up with a group of poor and homeless, folks, out of the welfare rights movement and the union of the homeless back in the mid-90s. And they introduced to me the Poor People's campaign of 1967 and 68 and really for my whole adult life. I have been trying to connect up with and lean into reigniting, such a movement again for our lives, too.

And so it was powerful and amazing to connect up with Rev. Dr. Barber back in 2013. But in 2016, when we said, well, there's no better way to kind of honor the work that Dr. King and the welfare rights leaders and others were doing back in '67, back in '68 then to take up the baton and carry it the next mile and, you know, out of the organizing work, the powerful.

The folk, you know, work and leaders all across the country in, in our, in our congregations, and in our ecumenical spaces, but also just poor and low-income folks, you know, from Aberdeen to Alabama from, you know, California to the Carolinas, you know, people are kind of crying out that they want to be free, and that we need a more moral Revival of our of, our And, and of our deepest values. And, so I have been pulled into this movement by other poor and low-income people by other Faith leaders and other activists. And I wouldn't want to be anywhere other than where I am today.

THO: Amen. Amen. It's always so inspiring for me to hear you speak at various events, whether online or in person and that's been, it's been one of the great joys of my ministry as General Minister and President, to stand on behalf of Disciples. We were the first denomination to officially endorse and sign up to be a supporter of this movement, and we're proud and excited to be involved on a regular basis, Disciples are part of the tri-chairs and almost all the states, and we're just all over the place.

But one of the things that I think is so important for people to understand is that the Poor People's Campaign makes a point of privilege in voices of impacted persons and not, you know, the movement isn't about the big-name celebrities or the big preachers having a say, but it's really about those voices. Can you talk about why that is, and why that's so important to the integrity of the Poor People's Campaign?

LT: Well, thanks so much for that and indeed, I just want to get in that plug and appreciation for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) because indeed, the way that folk have shown up and continue to show up is just inspiring and it's about bringing God's reign of justice here on Earth. And I think it is actually directly connected to this, to this point about those that are most impacted, most impacted by systemic, racism and poverty by ecologically, of a state of the denial of healthcare, most impacted by war and militarism. And, and this war economy and by this false narrative of religious and especially Christian nationalism and extremism and white supremacy. I mean that the, those are the very people who have the power to actually kind of change this whole society, right?

I mean, in the words of Frederick Douglass, You know, those who would be free must strike the first blow or from Dr. King, you know, he talked about the fact that organizing and uniting poor and low-income people across geography, across race, across religion, across gender and sexuality, all the issues and lines that divide us was actually the weak point, the Achilles heel of a system that was producing death and violence and war and racism and economic exploitation. And so, you know, we talked in the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival about you know, these two goals.

One is about shifting the narrative, getting our nation, getting our world, getting our religious institutions and churches talking about the reality of poverty. The solutions that exist to these injustices, and we can't see a better way to shift the narrative than shifting the narrators hearing from those that are directly impacted not just with their sad stories of the pain but also with the solutions and the power that people are building to, you know, as Bishop Barber says, you know, not just curse the darkness, but to shine a light on, on the solutions that are at hand, you know, to lift the load of poverty.

And then, we also talked in the Poor People's Campaign and really aim to build the power of the 140 million people in the richest country in human history who are poor or one small emergency from absolute economic ruin. And again, you know, we have to, we have to put those voices, those faces out in front of our society, both for people to see that this is about all of us that so many people are being impacted by this, and it just should not be, does not have to be. But then also to hear about a movement that's growing and movements, when we look at history are most effective when they're led by those that are most impacted by injustice. And also involve faith leaders and faith communities, and all people of conscience and goodwill as moral standard, bearers right to the world. That must be not the world that is.

THO: Yeah. I think that's energy or that collaboration between impact of persons leaders of faith and other folks that has proved to be so effective in the, in the state campaign strategy, and you seen it play out anytime there's an event. I have seen Dr. Barber just really it's be insistent, right? That more time is given to the voices of those who are impacted, and it's something that you always lift up in your own work. We know that there's a big Mass People's Moral Assembly, always get the words mixed up Moral Assembly and March on Washington on June 18<sup>th</sup> and when this airs, it will be the day before. How can people still participate in that event? And maybe you can tell us a little bit about what we're trying to do on that day and how people could still participate virtually? Lots of Disciples, we know are going to be in DC, and I am really excited about that. But if somebody hasn't been able to make that trip, can they participate virtually and what should we expect to happen on June 18th?

LT: Yes indeed. So we're excited and prepared for a June 18th. This Mass Poor People and Low-wage Workers Assembly this Moral March on Washington and to the polls. And for sure I am hoping folks will tune in online, will be live streaming it from the Poor People's Campaign site. Probably cross-posting it, you know, on the those site and so please, you know, tune in and turn out, but this isn't just a day, right? This is a kind of declaration of the fundamental around housing and living wages action around voting rights and access to water and expanding health care and immigrant rights, and protecting our native and Indigenous peoples and lands. And so, you know, what we will hear on June 18th will be the voices of and see the faces of those that are most impacted who are organizing representing all 50 states.

What will see? And here are our other organizations and denominations, that have come in relationship to this campaign and, and to poor and low-income people. Are, you know, organizing their steps towards how do we build a moral movement from below? And what you will see in here is, you know, the very cries of justice and the kind of demands for a third

reconstruction, to fully address, low wages, to fully address poverty, to fully address all of the issues that are plaguing our society that have only been deepened and further exposed because of Did because of mass violence, because of, you know, the lack of healthier because of war. I mean, all of the issues that are really impacting, our society, you know, have another way about them. And, and that's, and that's to build a movement to lift from the bottom so that everybody can rise. And so people will also, you know, have calls to action.

That day will be registering, people both for the movement and for a movement that vote. We will be pushing out that it's actually costing our society, more to have the levels and poverty and inequality, and it would be for us to actually pass policies that, you know, raise our kids out of poverty that, you know, raise the wages of the workers that we now call essential that, you know, protect the Earth and everything living in and on it. And, and again, this is all possible.

And so then we have to get together for as Bishop Barber's talking about a meeting on June 18th, whether it's online or in person is because, you know, when we look at history, there has never been a significant change a significant movement, that's been able to grow and, and, and make people's lives better when we haven't had this kind of declaration, this kind of meeting this generationally transformative coming together that puts on notice both other folks that are hurting out there and saying, we're not going to be silent anymore. And also puts on notice our Congress, our White House, those who have been elected to make society better for everybody and says we are here, we're not going anywhere, and we're going to make sure that we can kind of rise together to establish justice and promote the general welfare and really make our society allow for people to thrive and not just kind of barely survived like we're doing right now.

THO: Amen. And in recent weeks, we know that we have had these gun massacres and where our hearts are not only broken, but we're enraged, right? It took me a minute to formulate words that I could speak with, with the temperament of a Christian minister, right? That filled with other things and so there's a lot of anger, there's a lot of anxiety, not only about guns, but about poverty and just the continued laying bare right of these social inequities. And I think it's important that people recognize that what the Poor People's Campaign is—it's indeed a national call for moral revival to ensure we say, let us be the church that we say. We are we don't need more platitudes. We don't need more slogans what we need is a church that's willing to stand and act in to engage and to insists that the nation live into its own, its own promises, its own sense of who we want to be both as a nation, but certainly, the people who call themselves followers of Christ, many other religious traditions, who also value human life and flourishing are part of this is multi-faith movement, it's a multi-generational movement.

I want to remind people that the policy proposals can be found online. There are several studies, lots of data. I have heard Dr. Barber say, often, if we're going to be loud, we're going to be loud and right, not loud and wrong. So there's data there are solid policy proposals on which the, the declaration and the demands of the movement are based. So this isn't just

screaming and raising our fist. This is thoughtful consideration of the policies that we believe will make this a better nation. So, so we have been talking a lot as a church about Imagine with Me. And Walter Brueggemann's prophetic imagination. That it's not just enough to critique the empire, but that's the prophet's job to offer that alternate vision of what should look like. What's the new world that you lead, the Poor People's Campaign is leading us toward and how can we all be a part of the work that God is doing through this movement?

LT: Amen. First, amen. Amen to everything. You were just saying and indeed, we are being called into a third reconstruction into, you know, a kairos moment where the old foundations of Injustice and wrong are crumbling and new movements are breaking through new possibility new life, resurrection is here. And that resurrection that new life that rebuilding is about everybody having a right to live and to thrive and to have quality education and housing and an ability to make the decisions that impact your lives and to put into positions of power folks that are going to you know, protect us and fight for us and nonviolent peaceful way and I think just again the whole kind of policy platform and agenda that we're putting forward is about that kind of jubilee, and that kind of vision that we see throughout our prophetic, text our sacred texts. And we see, you know, in the lives of people that are out there saying, it just does not have to be this way. The fact that this is often. We rely on that this is a good as it gets, that we just actually can't, we just have to get used to violence that racism, you know, we can maybe lessen it, but we can't eliminate it. That, that poverty is inevitable and willed by God sometimes said that this is those are lies that is just not true. It does not have to be, it's not the world that God created us for. It's not the world, the abundance that God created for us to say we can't end poverty would be to say that God didn't create enough and that's anathema.

And so this campaign is about us, you know, you know, envisioning and then building the kind of powerful movement that is going to make it where everybody has water and good jobs and clean air and just everything, everything. You know, it's our prophetic text, it's Isaiah. We're going to repair the breach. We're going to tear those broken places. Because, again, we can, and it's what God has called us to do.

THO: Yeah, that is the LIE of scarcity, right? That the myth of scarcity, that, that our nation tells the most prosperous nation on the earth. It's mind-boggling and it's sinful quite honestly, it's just sinful. And we are I think privileged in a way to be able to participate in the building up right of making alive the reign of God, our General Assembly 2023 theme is one of the text we are using is Luke 17:20-21 where the Disciple, the Pharisees are like, so what are the signs? Like, what are we looking for? Jesus is like, the kingdom is here. It's here. It's within you, it's among you. And we are the ones who God is calling to do this work and to build this world. It's not enough to simply imagine. It just like it's not enough to have thoughts and prayers but there is no imagination without the implementation right there. We can as long as we could think of what we need to do, we can find ways to build it. There are ways, and I am really excited and hope that people will take advantage of participating either in person or online, on June 18th, not just for that day of declaration, right? Not just for the meeting, but going forward in local communities and figuring out how you can take some very solid policy

proposals that have been based on really, strong data, economic and justice experts that have been engaged to do that work. That there is work that we can do. This is as you said, Dr. Barber says a meeting time for us to kind of rally just like we meet on Sunday and then go forth to work. And I think the nation needs to see and hear us, those of us who are serious about continuing this very important work. Dr. Liz, I can't thank you enough for taking time out of what I know is your very busy schedule as you have been touring, the country getting people ready for the big meeting on June 18th, but your continued work at Union and the Kairos Center and all of the good work that you do both as a minister and as a scholar. Let me express on behalf of so many people our gratitude for your ministry, for your personhood. Just the person that you are, I am grateful and honored to know you and be able to say that I know you and grateful to be one of the soldiers that is in the army alongside you. So, thank you so much for the time that you shared with us today and you can continue to count on the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) being a part of this movement because we are the Church of Jesus Christ, and we're all called to this work. Any final thoughts that you want to leave with us before we say goodbye?

LT: I just want to say a huge appreciation. I know that these are not easy times and I think sometimes we can start to despair and question, why does it have to be like this? And to know that there are just millions of people across this country in our congregations and our in our communities, who are rising up to say, we're going to build from the bottom. We're going to lift from the bottom. We're going to cry out for justice. And so thank you for being such a powerful and strong leader, and partner in this work because we so need it.

THO: Amen. Amen, activism, I think is really a spiritual practice because it's doing the work that Jesus has called us to do, and I hope that we all see that way. So Disciples, it's been an awesome time with Dr. Liz Theoharris co-chair, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. If you are able to join us on June 18th, virtually I hope that you will go to [poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://poorpeoplescampaign.org), you can check out the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) website and probably our Facebook site or social media. Our communicators will be on the ground on June 18th, as I will be, and so we're going to be sharing in participating in a big way. There will be a gathering of disciples at National City Christian Church on the morning of June 18th, and we're going to share together as we prepare to be a part of this Moral Assembly and March on Washington.

Remember, thoughts and prayers in these days and times are not enough. The people of God must act, we must educate, prepare ourselves to act. So visit [poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://poorpeoplescampaign.org) where you can learn more about all of the policy, proposals and important information that can help you advocate for these issues at every level of our society, I say vote. I don't care if the dog catcher is on the ballot, make sure that you're registered to vote and that you encourage everyone you know to vote and let our voices be heard and let's be sure that we're working to enact, the world that we imagine a world where all can flourish, a world where there is enough.

So thanks again for being with me today. I will see you on the next edition of Imagine with Me.  
And remember as always that God loves you and so do I. Take care.