News

The Rev. William Barber speaks at the “National Poor People’s Assembly and Moral March on Washington Digital Gathering" on June 20, 2020. (AP/RNS/Video screengrab)

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With COVID-19 restrictions preventing an intended in-person rally in Washington D.C., at least a million supporters of the Poor People's Campaign reportedly tuned in June 20 to watch a mix of live speeches and pre-recorded clips of liberal religious leaders calling for a "moral revolution" and the enactment of a sweeping policy agenda focused on the poor.

"We are gathered today to call for a radical redistribution of political and economic power, a revolution of moral values to demonstrate the power of poor and impacted people banding together, demanding that this country change for the better," said Rev. Liz Theoharis, a Presbyterian minister who co-chairs the campaign with Rev. William Barber, a Disciples of Christ minister and pastor in Goldsboro, North Carolina.

Her remarks to the "National Poor People's Assembly and Moral March on Washington Digital Gathering" were introduced by Bernice King, the daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., who planned the original Poor People's Campaign in 1968. The rally invoked the Poor People's March on Washington of that year, the last major event called by Martin Luther King before his assassination in April 1968.

Bernice King, who runs the King Center in Atlanta, said she was joining the modern iteration of the campaign to "stand with the 140 million poor people and low wealth people urging America to address with the fierce urgency of now the big issue of poverty and race."

Representatives for the Poor People's Campaign claimed that more than 1.2 million people viewed the gathering via Facebook June 20 morning, and nearly 200 different groups — including houses of worship — hosted the stream on their Facebook pages. The event was also broadcast on MSNBC and various radio stations. Organizers plan to broadcast the event three times over the weekend, hoping to accommodate religious participants who are observing different sabbaths on different days.

The Rev. Alvin O'Neal Jackson, executive director of the event, said the campaign was dedicated to addressing five "interlocking evils and injustices" plaguing the United States: "systemic racism, systemic poverty, ecological devastation, the war-based economy and the false moral narrative of religious nationalism."

Viewers also heard from low-income Americans who discussed their struggles with health care access, wage inequality, labor rights, voter suppression, racism, police

brutality, homophobia, climate change, militarism, Indigenous rights and immigrant rights, among other issues.

"At one time, poverty was a temporary condition," said Claire, a woman from Flint, Michigan, who didn't share her last name. "You were on a down slope for a minute, but you could bounce back up. We can't bounce back up today. It's permanent. We're not going back to the factory and building cars and trucks like we once did."

A man named Curtis, who described himself as a "poor, white, gay Christian," said the "war on the poor in this country seeks to blame the poor people for their circumstances."

Their accounts were bolstered by short pre-filmed talks from faith leaders such as the Rt. Rev. Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church; Sr. Simone Campbell, head of the Catholic social justice lobby Network; Valarie Kaur, a prominent Sikh activist and author; Linda Sarsour, Muslim activist and co-chair of the original 2017 Women's March; Rabbi Sharon Brous, head of the IKAR Jewish community in California; and Wendsler Nosie, former chairman of the San Carlos Apache Tribe.

"I come here as a Muslim because my faith teaches me that I must stand with the most vulnerable people in my society," Sarsour said in a clip taken from a past Poor People's Campaign rally. "My God doesn't just tell me to go pray in the mosque. This that we're doing today is an act of worship, because my God is a practical God."

Brous echoed Sarsour in her own talk, citing Judaism's approach to debt forgiveness.

"The oldest and the boldest formula for economic justice comes straight out of the Hebrew Bible," she said. "In the 50th year, the jubilee year, the great shofar is sounded and two things happen: all of the slaves are freed and all property reverts back to its original owners. This is a Holy reset button … Fifty years after the assassination of Dr. King, we declare a jubilee."

The stream also featured short talks from celebrities such as entertainers David Oyelowo, Wanda Sykes, Danny Glover and Jane Fonda, as well as vice president-turned-climate-activist Al Gore.

"We already know that poverty and systemic racism are completely and tightly linked with the climate crisis," said Gore. "The climate crisis is already causing

massive human suffering around the world and … it disproportionately affects the vulnerable — that's particularly true for low income families, communities of color, the elderly, children, the mentally ill, the homeless and those with preexisting conditions."

Barber and Theoharis, calling their campaign a "fusion movement" that has drawn unions and low-wage workers in addition to activists and faith leaders, were apparently emboldened by recent protests against the killing of George Floyd, the black Minnesota man killed by a Minneapolis police officer.

"The worst mistake we could make now, with all of this marching and protesting in the street, would be to demand too little," Barber said.

Among the policy demands the Poor People's Campaign unveiled on June 20 morning were a single-payer universal health care system, free tuition at public colleges, an assault weapons ban, ending inequalities in the criminal justice system and granting Washington, D.C. statehood.

While their goals were overtly political and echoed the policies put forth by liberal Democrats, organizers insisted that their organization was nonpartisan. President Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic was repeatedly criticized, but he was rarely mentioned by name, with speakers focusing instead on what they framed as systemic issues.

Barber said his passion for eradicating poverty, including policy proposals, was rooted in his faith.

"Now I know somebody's out there saying, 'Well, did you get that from the Democrats? Did you get that from the progressives?' No, I got it from the Bible," Barber said. "Jesus said that every nation is going to be judged by how it treats the poor, how it treats the least of these, how it treats the sick and the hungry and in prisons. I got it from the prophets that Jews, Muslims and Christians honor. Isaiah 10 said: Woe unto those who legislate evil and rob the poor of their rights and make women and children their prey."

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