

HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS ON THE RISE



COURTESY OF PATRICK HUGH O'CONNOR

In New York City, First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica's food pantry and soup kitchen (which serves takeout) have been essential for many of the city's residents.

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Pandemic heightens work of Matthew 25

BY TAMMY WARREN

It's the time of year when holiday celebrations often mean tables laden with food in homes that are warm and cozy. From Thanksgiving turkeys to Christmas puddings to New Year's black-eyed peas, more than just stomachs are filled. Souls are satiated with a peace that comes with a sense of security. For many, though, holiday tables will not be abundant, nor will there be a guarantee of a roof over one's head.

Poverty — and the hunger and homelessness it brings — has always been a crisis that many Presbyterians have tried to ease with food pantries or seasonal, make-shift homeless shelters. But as 2021 approaches, the work to eradicate poverty becomes more crucial, especially as the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic worsens living conditions worldwide. According to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020, an estimated 71 million people are expected to be pushed back into extreme poverty, the first rise in global poverty since 1998. In the United States, a report by the Center on Poverty and Social Policy at Columbia University projects poverty rates in the United States could reach their highest levels in 50 years due to COVID-19.

Now more than ever, Presbyterians are paying heed to the reports and are committing to the work of being Matthew 25 congregations, seeking solutions to reverse the rising numbers of those who are hungry and homeless in their communities.

In September, the Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett, president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, welcomed more than 230 attendees to a Matthew 25 online gathering that was focused on

eradicating systemic poverty in the United States. Eradicating systemic poverty is one of the areas of concentration — along with dismantling racism and building congregational vitality — that are part of the Matthew 25 invitation, which was first extended to Presbyterians in April 2019.

As recent reports confirm, Moffett said systemic poverty is becoming underscored in America and around the world with the wildfires on the West Coast, hurricanes, flooding, the COVID-19 pandemic and people losing their businesses and their way of life. The Rev. Rebecca Barnes, coordinator of the Presbyterian Hunger Program, also pointed out that addressing the issue of poverty, though, is about more than providing food for those who are hungry.

"Folks living in poverty do need food, but they also need access to jobs, transportation, fair wages, affordable housing, education, racial justice and more," she said.

Get out of the pews

In walking alongside churches and grant partners in this important Matthew 25 work, Barnes said we "encounter the living God" in those who are living with poverty. She sees it as an invitation for Presbyterians to change from being "problem solvers" with ideas to "fix things" to those who sit at the feet of people who live in poverty to listen.

"People living with poverty know their situations intimately and already have solutions they want to try," Barnes said.

The Rev. Phil Tom, director of the International Council of Community Churches, which provides leadership to ensure the church and the broader community work in tandem on issues such as hunger and homelessness, sees Jesus' Matthew 25 teaching about serving the "least of these" as a call to think long-term, "get out of the pews" and listen to people in the community.

For example, Tom's colleague, the Rev. Patrick Hugh O'Connor, lead pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens, New York, is working collaboratively within the community to help eradicate systemic



COURTESY OF OLD FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Rev. Dr. Betty Tom, transitional interim pastor of Old First Presbyterian Church of Newark, N.J., shown here with praise team leaders Melvinna Johnson (left) and Andrew Darling, said food insecurities in New Jersey alone have risen by 56% since the pandemic.



RENDERING COURTESY OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN-JAMAICA, QUEENS

Although COVID-19 has slowed the construction process, “The Tree of Life,” a 12-story, 174-unit apartment building next to First Presbyterian Church-Jamaica, Queens, is expected to open in 2021.

poverty through affordable housing.

First Presbyterian-Jamaica is building an apartment complex next door to the church — a much-needed blessing for the community. The National Low Income Housing Coalition publishes a report each year titled “Out of Reach” that examines how a family earning minimum wage can afford a one- or two-bedroom apartment. “Their conclusion for the last decade is that any worker, any person making minimum income, cannot afford a one-bedroom apartment in any city in the United States,” Tom said.

The new First Presbyterian-Jamaica complex, called “The Tree of Life,” will be a 12-story, mixed-use apartment building of 174 units. It is the first joint project of First Presbyterian-Jamaica and the nonprofit First Jamaica Community Development Corp., which is responsible for developing property and managing a variety of social services and programs for the church.

The Tree of Life project, expected to open in early to mid-2021, will

include a feeding program, literacy program and job training program to enrich and empower the lives of the residents in Jamaica, Queens. Phase Two of the project will launch an on-site health center partnership with Cornell University.

Turning a parking lot next door to the church into an apartment building has been nearly a decade in the making. First Presbyterian-Jamaica, which has about 150 congregants from more than 35 birth nations, has taken time to learn firsthand what residents of Southeast Queens believe to be their most urgent community needs: housing, health care and child care.

The plight of migrant farmworkers

The COVID-19 crisis has also added to the plight of homelessness among farmworkers, especially those in Immokalee, Florida.

“Although a hot spot for COVID, workers in Florida did not receive testing until Doctors Without Borders showed up,” said the Rev. Miguel Estrada, a presbytery evangelist with

Misión Peniel (which means “face of God”), a farmworker ministry among the migrant workers in Immokalee, part of the Peace River Presbytery. “Once you become a certain age in the farmworker community, or too sick to be picked by the contractors, you are basically living on the streets. We have a good number of workers who are homeless or under really difficult conditions because they are not able to work anymore, but obviously still have basic needs.”

Through its Pan de Vida (Bread of Life) program, Misión Peniel is providing meals for homebound farmworkers. The ministry is also providing laundry assistance and other basic needs for those who are COVID-19-positive and in quarantine. This emergency work is built on long-term, poverty-alleviation strategies that include working for fair housing alongside the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a human rights group, in collaboration with the national church and two bordering presbyteries, Tampa Bay and Peace River.

The Rev. Melana Scruggs, general presbyter of Peace River Presbytery, said, “What we’re excited about is the opportunity to be in mission with the farmworkers, guided by them and the needs they show us they have. And we’re really excited about the fair housing project that just got approved by Collier County, so that we can provide 128 units for people to live in safe, hurricane-resistant housing, where children can be educated and families can be safe.”

Food insecurity rises

For the Rev. Dr. Betty Tom, transitional interim pastor of Old Presbyterian Church of Newark, New Jersey, poverty is not a new issue, particularly for “those of us who are in parish ministry.” Tom, who has devoted nearly a decade to parish ministry in urban communities, said that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed to the forefront many of the inequities that exist in America, particularly socioeconomic and racial justice inequities, as well as inequities in accessing good, healthy food.

“Not that other people don’t see and experience that, but we are sort of like the first responders, the ‘boots on the ground’ people. We know all too well the names, faces and circumstances of the people who live in poverty. The families are not just numbers to us. We see them. We know them. We go to court with them. We minister to them. We feed them. We clothe them. They sleep on our doorsteps, and they sleep in our church halls,” she said. “I know the single working mother whose money runs out before the month runs out, or who comes to the church on Sunday afternoons, to the fellowship hour, and brings her small children so that they can eat for that day.”

Recent statistics from the Community Food Bank of New Jersey show that the food insecurities in New Jersey alone have risen by 56% since the pandemic hit.



MIGUEL ESTRADA

Marifrans Estrada, coordinator of Pan de Vida in the Misión Peniel farmworker ministry in Immokalee, Fla., makes dough for tortillas with help from her daughter, Mariela.

“We here at Old First Church and other faith leaders in the Newark community are seeing many more families where one or both of the parents or the adults are working; however, they are not earning enough money to even take care of their basic needs: food and shelter, clothing and medicine,” said Tom.

Since the pandemic, one of the things Tom and her congregation have focused on is not trying to solve the problems of poverty on their own.

“No one church and no one agency can eradicate systemic poverty alone. We can’t do it by ourselves. It takes a multidisciplinary approach, where

schools and churches, legal services and law enforcement, local businesses and government agencies are all working together to do our individual pieces,” she said.

The Rev. Dr. Alonzo Johnson, coordinator of the Presbyterian Committee on Self-Development of People, agrees. “One thing I think Matthew 25 does for us is remind us that we are a connectional church,” he said. “We do this work in partnership. We listen, not just to our communities, but we listen to each other.”

Tammy Warren is a communications associate with the Presbyterian Mission Agency.