

A Life's Calling

For Liz Theoharis, activism has been a way of life—from assisting her parents with their justice work, to community service as a Penn undergrad, to cochairing the recent revival of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Poor People’s Campaign of 1968. The Presbyterian minister, social justice leader, and biblical scholar is committed to reframing the narrative around poverty and the poor while pushing for lasting policy changes.

By **Samantha Drake**

Speaking at an interfaith vigil on the grounds of the US Capitol on the eve of the two-year anniversary of the January 6 attack there, Rev. Liz Theoharis C’98 cited the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, often known as the “Last Judgment,” when Christ divides the saved and the damned according to their treatment of those most in need. In it, she said, Jesus called on the nations to meet the needs of the people, instead of oppressing and subjugating

the people, denying them healthcare, ignoring the hungry, deporting immigrants, and denying them the rights to make decisions that impact their lives. She added with a slight smile: “And even though this is from thousands of years ago, doesn’t it sound familiar today?”

In her remarks, Theoharis—one of several speakers at the event, organized by the Franciscan Action Network (FAN), a faith-based public policy advocacy group in Washington, DC—also remind-



ed the approximately 70 attendees and 1,200 online viewers of Jesus's priorities according to the Bible: "Here's a spoiler alert—the issues that Jesus holds dear are not about gun rights or waving flags or determining who can marry who. They're not about having politicians pick their voters rather than voters electing their leaders. They're not about controlling women's bodies or harassing and threatening LGBTQ and trans youth. No, those issues are the work—the law—of empire," she said.

"Instead, Jesus's main concerns are food and sustenance and immigrant rights and healthcare and an adequate standard of living and decent housing and prison abolition. They're about peace among and between nations letting the light of justice and peace and truth shine, lifting from the bottom so that everybody—*everybody*—rises."

Theoharis is the cofounder and cochair with Rev. William J. Barber II of the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. The movement, launched in 2018, is modeled on the Poor People's Campaign organized 50 years earlier by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to focus attention on poverty and economic inequality through nonviolent direct action.

FAN Executive Director Michele Dunne calls the campaign "the most compelling movement in the United States addressing the interlocking issues of economic injustice, racial injustice, and environmental injustice." FAN invited Theoharis to speak at the vigil "because we knew she would speak with clarity, with conviction, and also with love," says Dunne. "She's an incredibly important and inspiring and challenging public speaker."

Though FAN had offered to put her up overnight in a hotel after her speech, Theoharis opted to ride the train back home to New York afterward, so she could take her son, Luke, 10, and her daughter, Sophia, 13, to school in the morning.

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The day after the vigil, she arrived around mid-afternoon at the Union Theological Seminary, where she directs the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice. She's been associated with the school for 20 years, having earned a master of divinity degree and doctorate in New Testament and Christian Origins there. These days, she works largely from her Upper Manhattan home but comes to the campus as necessary.

Her workspace is a meeting room in the basement level of the old building, located off a warren of corridors. King used one of the passageways in 1967 to safely leave the nearby Riverside Church where he gave his "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" speech. After King's assassination in April 1968, the SCLC moved forward with the Poor People's Campaign. The organization and thousands of demonstrators staged protests in Washington, DC, for more than a month calling for economic justice.

Under Theoharis and Barber's leadership, the revived Poor People's Campaign targets what it calls the "interlocking evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism." The group's stated fundamental principles are threefold: shift the narrative on poverty and the poor; build power; and help enact legislation and policies to address poverty and related injustices around immigration, labor rights, voting rights, climate change, gun violence, and the rights of women and marginalized populations including the LGBTQ+ community.

The Poor People's Campaign has coordinating committees in nearly 40 states,

a listserv of approximately 400,000 people engaged with the campaign, approximately 400 organizations that partner with or endorse the campaign, and it works with 20 national faith groups. Through these combined efforts, the movement has reached an estimated 50 million people, according to Theoharis.

The campaign's events have mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in person and millions more online, she says. Many events, like FAN's vigil at the Capitol, are intended to peacefully raise awareness and educate. Other efforts involve nonviolent civil disobedience. The Poor People's Campaign has protested at the Capitol and the US Supreme Court, blocked traffic, and taken over other spaces to draw attention to its cause. Theoharis estimates she's been arrested 20 times.

Her first arrest occurred during her time at Penn. She and other activists for the poor and homeless were charged with obstructing traffic in front of City Hall as they stood in the street to protest Philadelphia's cuts in funding for housing programs. Theoharis says she spent the night in jail reflecting on how much more effort society invests in criminalizing the poor instead of investing in the community's needs.

She's also been arrested while protesting with Walmart employees for better wages and benefits in front of Walmart heiress Alice Walton's Park Avenue apartment in New York just before Black Friday, and at the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy to call attention to the plight of families with contaminated drinking water.

The campaign's civil disobedience actions get results, Theoharis says. Upon the Poor People's Campaign launch in 2018, the group staged nonviolent direct actions simultaneously at the US Capitol and approximately 35 state capitals every Monday for six weeks. "It was the largest and most expansive wave of nonviolent civil disobedience in the 21st century and brought poverty and its interlocking in-

Martin Luther King Jr. used this passageway near Theoharis's basement work space at Union Theological Seminary to safely leave nearby Riverside Church after a 1967 speech on the Vietnam War.



justices into the nation's attention and political discourse," she notes. "Some policy changes were won around living wages in California, and healthcare expansion in Kansas, and pushing back work requirements for dental care in Kentucky. But perhaps even more importantly, poverty was on the national agenda for the first time in decades."

Yet making progress doesn't keep Theoharis from getting nervous about the prospect of being arrested or harassed. "You're taking a stance, not just to take a stance, but to say you feel so deeply and you think society or your adversary is doing something so wrong that you're willing to step in the way of that," she explains. "But you can't do that and then not be willing to go to jail or face some level of harassment or have people say or do mean things."

Theoharis first met Barber when she invited him to be a keynote speaker at the Kairos Center's founding symposium,

during which relaunching King's Poor People's Campaign was discussed. Barber is the president of Repairers of the Breach, a Goldsboro, North Carolina-based organization he founded in 2015 to combat policies that negatively affect poor and marginalized communities. In addition, Barber recently became the founding director of the new Center for Public Theology and Public Policy at Yale Divinity School.

Theoharis says the two "really liked each other when we met," and they remained in touch. When Barber came to Union Theological Seminary on sabbatical in 2016, he conceived the idea to travel to five or six cities on a tour calling for the "moral revival" of the nation's constitutional and religious values. Barber and Theoharis ended up visiting more than 20 cities and towns across the country, culminating with a service at the Riverside Church. Together, they relaunched the Poor People's Campaign, drawing on

their respective visions and networks, so that "I'll take the lead on some things, and he'll take the lead on other things, and we're both still directing and leading our own organizations," Theoharis notes.

This year, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the Poor People's Campaign sent a video message to the White House and members of Congress, in which Barber, Theoharis, and others demanded that the president and Congressional leaders meet with poor and low-income people, religious leaders, economists, and others to address policies that "threaten the soul of our nation."

Leading off, Barber spoke of "one America that has everything it needs [and] another America that suffers day in and day out." He took Republicans and Democrats alike to task for their failures over the last two years. "We've seen far too many Republicans gleefully glad to get power so they can support autocratic leadership and greed

and lust of for-profit mechanisms and so they can engage in retrogression to roll back rights that have already been won,” he said. “And too many Democrats [are] too gleeful over compromised successes that yes, have done some things, things that we’ve supported, but have not finished the job.”

Later in the video, Theoharis focused on the realities of people living in poverty in her own home state of New York, where “more than half of all kids are poor and low-income,” she said. “More than one in four workers—2.3 million people—make less than \$15 an hour. Health insurance gaps are associated with nearly 10,000 COVID deaths. And New York state public schools, the same schools my kids go to, are some of the most segregated in the country.”

Theoharis has been a social justice advocate for as long as she can remember. She grew up in Milwaukee with her parents, Nancy and Athan Theoharis, and older siblings Jeanne and George. “I am very much a product of the Midwest, and I grew up in a family that was very dedicated to doing the work of social justice,” she says. “From a very young age, I was going to protests and demonstrations and educational events, both around racism and poverty and how they manifested in Milwaukee and across the state of Wisconsin.”

Nancy devoted her time to a variety of faith-based organizations, including the National Council of Churches of Christ and the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, and helped establish the Milwaukee Committee for UNICEF. A history professor at Marquette University, Athan pioneered the use of Freedom of Information Act document requests in research to uncover civil liberties abuses by the FBI, particularly under longtime agency director J. Edgar Hoover, and wrote several books on the subject. (Nancy died in 2020 and Athan in 2021.)

Theoharis recalls helping her parents when she was as young as seven or

eight years old, setting up her mother’s slide projector for a presentation or organizing index cards on the living room floor that her father compiled for the books he was writing. By middle school, family activities often centered on grassroots political campaigns, educating the public about global poverty, and helping bring international faith leaders, such as South African anti-apartheid activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to Milwaukee.

As a teenager, Theoharis helped organize a day camp focused on overcoming systemic racism. “Milwaukee’s a very segregated city, it’s a very impoverished city,” she says. “We were always connecting the local to the global around issues of racial justice, anti-poverty work and democracy—so, many of the things that I’m still really interested in today.”

Theoharis brought her activist outlook to Penn, where she pursued a degree in urban studies with a minor in anthropology. She says she worked “close to full-time the whole time I was going to college,” including for a University program that coordinated student involvement in grassroots organizations in Philadelphia, and studied abroad in Oaxaca, Mexico. In the process, she found a community of students and faculty drawn to issues of inequality and committed to making a difference.

She also used activities she had enjoyed in high school, including dance, theater, and soccer, to create opportunities for public school students in West Philadelphia. “I coached soccer and recruited other soccer players to come and help lead sports. I started a choir at a middle school because it didn’t have much of a program,” she recalls. “I did have other interests, but I mostly turned them into things to do in the community across divides in differences, with special attention to issues of inequality.”

Theoharis also met her future husband, Christopher Caruso C’94, at Penn. Caruso, a philosophy major, is the operations director at the Kairos Center.

Faith played a huge role in Theoharis’s upbringing. Her mother was very active in faith-based communities, and even though her father was an atheist, he supported his family by attending church with them every week.

At 13, she was teaching Sunday school and by 16 she served as a deacon, visiting church members unable to attend church in person. However, Theoharis says, the idea of becoming a Presbyterian minister didn’t take root in her mind until later.

At Penn, she became involved in organizations focused on ending poverty, such as the National Union of the Homeless and National Welfare Rights Union, and she found herself increasingly questioning how the church handled issues surrounding the poor.

“I was really disappointed in the church-at-large’s response—not individual churches, necessarily—to the problems of racism and poverty. So many of our congregations and the church-at-large blamed poor people for their poverty and put out a message that if God wanted to address these issues, then they would be addressed,” she says. “It was more or less the idea that poor people are sinners, not that poverty is a sin.”

After graduation, Theoharis worked for the National Council of Churches to evaluate some of its social justice programs and train congregations across the country in effective anti-poverty organizing. She realized then that her organizing work around poverty and inequality needed to be done from a religious perspective.

Theoharis enrolled at the Union Theological Seminary in 2001, where she was named the first William Sloane Coffin Scholar. (She had known Coffin, a senior pastor at Riverside Church and a father of the peace and justice movement in the Presbyterian church, as a child.) But 12 years passed before Theoharis was ordained—due to an epiphany that set her on a new path. “I realized that part of the work I was called to do was to challenge the church’s re-

sponses to poverty and to poor people in particular,” she says.

Theoharis also realized that biblical and theological justifications for inequality and poverty posed an obstacle to her work, particularly Jesus’s words in Matthew 26:11: “The poor you will always have with you.” Many people have misinterpreted this passage to justify abdicating the responsibility to end poverty, she says.

She enrolled in a PhD program at Union Theological Seminary “because I couldn’t go through a week of my life organizing out in the world around poverty and racism issues without people from all walks of life—religious and non-religious—throwing the Bible and theology back at me to say, ‘Well, aren’t the poor going to be with you always?’”

Theoharis decided to challenge this and other theological justifications for injustice. In the process, she founded the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice in 2013, an expansion of the existing Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary. Theoharis also wrote the book *Always With Us? What Jesus Really Said About the Poor*, published in 2017. By examining biblical texts, how the poor lived during Jesus’s time, and Jesus’s social, economic, and political status as a poor man, she contended that the phrase “the poor you will always have with you” actually means the opposite of how it has been generally understood.

In addition, Theoharis coauthored *Revive Us Again: Vision and Action in Moral Organizing* (2018) and edited *We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with the Poor People’s Campaign* (2021). She’s written or cowritten numerous opinion pieces as well, for outlets including the *New York Times* and *Politico*. Along the way, Theoharis’s work has been frequently recognized. She received the 30th Annual Freedom Award from the National Civil Rights Museum in 2021 and was named one of 15 Faith Leaders to Watch by the Center for American Progress in 2020, among other honors.

Ministers around the country look to Theoharis as an example, according to University Chaplain and Vice President for Social Equity and Community Charles L. “Chaz” Howard C’00. “If you polled 10,000 clergy people in the country about who the most impactful ministers are across a range of denominations, I think Liz would be on just about everybody’s list,” he says.

Howard knew about Theoharis through her writings and work with Barber. “I knew *of* her before I knew her. As a minister, she’s very well known to other ministers,” he notes. “Bizarrely, I didn’t know she was a Penn grad until much later.” He met Theoharis while participating in Poor People’s Campaign activities, and the two have since become friends.

Theoharis’s work is changing lives and helping shape policy, Howard adds.

“The relaunch of the Poor People’s Campaign, which is in a lot of ways a continuation of Dr. King’s work, is a big deal, really a big deal,” he says. “The mass organizing and creation of a pretty robust network of both clergy and people who aren’t ordained is a big deal.”

At the same time, “the advocacy work that she and Barber have done has affected policies, particularly some of the things that President Biden and Vice President Harris have leaned into,” he notes. “They’ve helped push the [Democratic] party to take more seriously challenges that poor people are navigating.”

Theoharis and Barber’s partnership as a white woman and a Black man working together on social justice issues is also noteworthy, Howard adds, with some caveats. “It’s important to see her and Reverend Barber as a team. I think there’s something inherently dangerously sexist about that—hitching her journey to the journey of a man. I don’t mean to articulate that, and I don’t think that’s true,” he says. “At the same time, one could say the inverse about hitching the journey of a Black man to a white woman. I think it’s something that needs to be named but not overstated.”

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In 2023, the Poor People’s Campaign will continue to organize communities and build power, as well as prepare for the 2024 elections, Theoharis says. To have the biggest impact, the campaign is focused on “enlivening and enlarging” poor and low-income voters. A third of the US electorate that votes, not just those who are eligible or registered, are poor and low-income people. “That’s a huge power block,” she says.

In the five years since the relaunch of the Poor People’s Campaign, Theoharis believes the narrative on poverty has indeed started to shift. Policymakers and think tanks credit the campaign with both raising awareness of the issues and putting forward solutions, such as raising the wages of the lowest-paid workers, that can make a real difference in people’s lives, she says.

Clearly, the changes the Poor People’s Campaign seek to bring about won’t happen overnight. Theoharis’s lifetime of activism has prepared her for the realities of the long road ahead—while her faith keeps her on that road.

“Faith is that, even when there’s mostly death and destruction and pain and suffering and violence around, something else is possible,” she says. “One of the things that keeps me really positive and committed to this work is that I truly believe that this is what is required of me if I’m going to call myself a Christian.”

Theoharis readily acknowledges that she gets discouraged at times but says she finds inspiration in words from King’s final speech in 1968: “Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.”

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