

Open Your Hand Wide

BY DR. SARAH LEER

For use with Lesson Seven of the 2023–2024 PW/Horizons Bible study, *Let Justice Roll Down: God's Call to Care for Neighbors and All Creation*, by Patricia K. Tull



Throughout my youth ministry career, one of my go-to service activities with middle school youth has been volunteer work in a food bank or in some way serving meals to people with low-incomes and/or who are unhoused. Most of the youth I have worked with come from families who were certainly budget-conscious, but not food insecure. And I have noticed—throughout the many times I have led youth in serving meals or sorting food—a consistent pattern.

They grumble a bit about getting up early. They make comments about moving large pallets of food or touching sticky breakfast serving surfaces. But little by little, they start to get into the rhythm of service. They start enjoying their work of making batches of pancakes or helping guests haul cans and produce to their cars. They quickly get into the zone. As the hours pass, they generally make comments about the food options, either negative or positive. And each and every time, I have youth quietly start to ask the adult leaders about poverty and food insecurity. Light bulb moments of realization start to occur and their expressions change.

I have seen youth recognize people they know from school at the food pantry. To see students from their classes who are food insecure—when the youth are volunteering—that moment of recognition sticks with them. The conversations, the moments of recognition are important, and our job as educators and leaders is to ask questions that go deeper: Why are some families food insecure and others have abundant resources? What are the political, social, environmental and economic factors in that community that lead to poverty and hunger? We are to do our homework and help those moments of recognition happen again and again. We should encourage our youth (and our wider congregations) to ask questions about what we

notice, and discuss systemic injustice and poverty in their communities both now and in the future. We must ask what solutions they see and how we can all engage in meaningful action to be in solidarity with those living on the margins and organizations engaging in mutual aid.

What are those moments of recognition for you in your community? What are the policies and systematic barriers that keep people in poverty and hunger?

Until the U.S. enshrines jubilee years and debt forgiveness into law, what can we do to follow these instructions? “Give generously to needy persons. Don’t resent giving to them because it is this very thing that will lead to the LORD your God’s blessing you in all you do and work at. Poor persons will never disappear from the earth. That’s why I’m giving you this command: you must open your hand generously to your fellow Israelites, to the needy among you, and to the poor who live with you in your land” (Deut. 15:10–11 CEB).

One way we can have this discussion, in congregations and faith communities all over the U.S., is to consider the words of Jesus through the lens of those who are struggling. Poverty exists throughout our country. Like those little light bulb moments with the youth, adults must have those moments of recognition as well. People are living in hunger and poverty in your community, right now.

Patricia K. Tull mentions the Presbyterian Hunger Program (PHP), a PC(USA) organization that actively works to address the root causes of poverty and hunger (*Let Justice Roll Down*, 82). Recently, PHP awarded almost \$1.2 million in grant funding to organizations who are not only distributing food, but also tackling the systemic injustices that lead to hunger and poverty. In a recent article, Rebecca Barnes, PHP's coordinator, said:

"Because our denomination's hunger grants address root causes of hunger, we are able to impact people struggling with displacement, violence, housing insecurity, unsafe labor standards, low wages, hazardous environmental conditions, structural racism, gender inequality and more. In this way, we show that the church is a true partner in struggling communities. It is one way we can answer Jesus' call to feed the hungry, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to work so that all may have life and have it abundantly."¹

One of these grant recipients is BeLoved Asheville, an organization engaging in on-the-ground projects such as building accessible housing, racial healing, community organizing, as well as medical care and food distribution for the local homeless population.² The flooding and horrific damage from Hurricane Helene in a mountainous region amplifies the sobering reality named by the headline of an article by *Scientific American*: "Hurricane Helene's Devastation Shows No Region Is Safe from Climate-Fueled Disaster."³ In the aftermath of the catastrophic damage across Western North Carolina from this storm, BeLoved Asheville has been on list after list as a "verified organization" that gets much needed supplies and volunteers out into the community.⁴

What are the organizations in your midst working to find the root causes of injustice and raising our voices to advocate in solidarity with those in need?

Taking a page out of BeLoved Asheville's book: is your faith community working alongside people who are in the midst of crisis, who are facing housing insecurity, or those who are hungry? How can you and your faith community support those organizations? May we continually seek out those who are suffering and oppressed in our midst and work toward the liberation of all with intentionality, patience and care.

Dr. Sarah Leer (she/her) is a native Arkansan, lifelong Presbyterian, and practical theologian who is living into her call to seek liberation, justice and belonging in solidarity with those living on the margins.

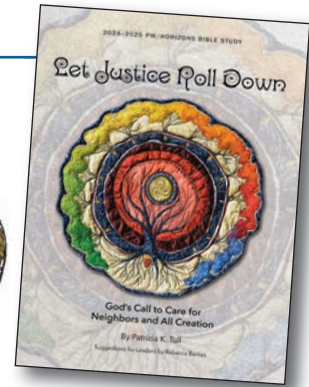
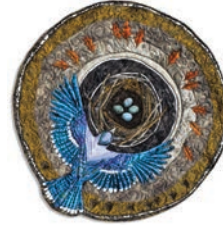
Notes

1. Darla Carter, "Nearly \$1.2 million in Presbyterian Hunger Program grants awarded to support 'amazing people doing amazing things,'" *Presbyterian News Service*, September 25, 2024; pcusa.org/news-story-telling/news/nearly-12-million-hunger-program-grants-awarded-support-amazing-people-doing-amazing-things.
2. belovedasheville.com
3. Chelsea Harvey, Thomas Frank, & E&E News, "Hurricane Helene's Devastation Shows No Region Is Safe from Climate-Fueled Disaster," *Scientific American*, September 30, 2024; scientificamerican.com/article/hurricane-helenes-devastation-shows-no-region-is-safe-from-climate-fueled-disaster.
4. Laura Lee, "List: Ways to donate and help flood victims in Western North Carolina after Hurricane Helene," *Blue Ridge Public Radio*, September 28, 2024; bpr.org/bpr-news/2024-09-28/list-ways-to-donate-and-help-flood-victims-in-western-north-carolina-after-hurricane-helene.

Intergenerational Solutions

BY DR. SARAH LEER

For use with Lesson Eight of the 2023–2024 PW/Horizons Bible study, *Let Justice Roll Down: God's Call to Care for Neighbors and All Creation*, by Patricia K. Tull



In the fall of 2018, I entered the doctoral program at Columbia Theological Seminary. The leaders of the program, Dr. Christine J. Hong and Dr. Kathy Dawson, are educators, leaders, scholars and writers; both are accomplished academics who are brilliant and pastoral. In the early days of our time as a cohort, I realized I would be changed by the course of study as well as by their leadership. My focus on justice became more finely honed throughout the program and I learned what it means to be both a practical and a public theologian. Dr. Hong would repeatedly draw our attention to the process of our work—the longevity and meaning it could have. She reminded us not to be focused solely on what we could produce in the short-term, but to ask ourselves what we were doing to be “good ancestors.”

Being a “good ancestor” is not a phrase I was familiar with. I felt once again grateful for the gift of being in a diverse cohort, with people from various backgrounds, races and ethnicities. Many people in the room were more tightly connected with their ancestral roots and cultural wisdom than I was. Dr. Hong would use the lens of being and becoming a good ancestor throughout our courses over the years we studied with her. The phrase, as well as the Doctor of Educational Ministry program itself, shaped me into a different scholar, theologian and an advocate focused on justice and liberation.

What does being a good ancestor mean to you?

Being a good ancestor means something specific to me—modeling what it means to leave the world better for my nieces. At ages eight and five, they are currently more concerned with how much time they have to play at the park than with carbon emissions. But the state of the world we are leaving them is always on my mind. Especially when I talk to them about what they want to do and where they want to live in the future. My nieces are not yet consumed with anxiety of the state of the rapidly changing climate, but older youth certainly are. CBS news shared findings from a global study in 2021, reporting nearly 62 percent of the youth surveyed said they were anxious about climate change.¹ Our youth are global citizens as well as digital natives, they have access to the horrors of climate change instantly. And this connection to the realities of climate change results in anxiety and worry, which is adversely affecting the mental health of youth globally.

Activism and advocacy, the opportunity for our youth to use their voices, is one way to stay hopeful. In a stirring, powerful speech at the United Nations during the Summit of the Future, Niria Alicia Garcia, “a Xicana human rights advocate from the United States, climate justice organizer, educator and storyteller” said, “my generation’s hearts are breaking as we survive the impacts of climate disaster that could have been prevented.” In the same speech, Niria calls out the need to listen to indigenous wisdom and follow the lead of indigenous people and to “keep fighting for a livable future.”² The youth are speaking loudly, they are raising their voices and raising their concerns, so what will we as adults do to respond?

Where can we channel this energy and determination from our younger members of the faith community while connecting with the passion and lived

experience from older generations? In the 2024–2025 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Let Justice Roll Down*, Patricia K. Tull mentions a few organizations who can help bridge the generational gap. Many additional helpful resources are available for faith communities to utilize as they engage in intergenerational earth care. The Presbyterian Hunger Program has published a resource called, “Moving Forward: A Guide to Climate Action for Your Congregation and Community.”³ The organization Presbyterians for Earth Care has an extensive list of resources as well as events one can attend in order to deepen their commitment to eco-justice.⁴

As you explore various resources, the question remains, what are you doing to leave this world a better place for those following after you?

The challenge before us to care for our world is significant. Our time, energy and patience may ebb and flow. But how can we be consistent in our commitment to God’s creation? May the Spirit continue to strengthen our hope for the future and our resolve for the work ahead. And may we see our care for the earth as an extension of our baptismal vows to care for the children and youth of our communities.

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Notes

1. David Schechter, Haley Rush and Chance Horner, “As climate changes, climate anxiety rises in youth,” CBS News, March 2, 2023; cbsnews.com/news/climate-change-anxiety.
2. “Call for Climate Justice and Indigenous Wisdom—Youth Representative at the Summit of the Future”; youtube.com/watch?v=sgie5rC8x7Y.
3. “Moving Forward: A Guide to Climate Action For Your Congregation and Community”; pcusa.org/resource/moving-forward-guide-climate-action-your-congregation-and-community.
4. presbyearthcare.org; see events and resources tabs.