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Matthew 25 invites the PC(USA) to boldly live out Christ's call

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Vision unites all Presbyterians and makes us relevant

By Donna Frischknecht Jackson | Presbyterians Today

A wondrous change is taking place — a movement of the Spirit. Presbyterian congregations are reprioritizing the work of the Church, taking it from an institution of survival to a way of getting actively engaged in the community and making the world a better place.

These are congregations that take to heart the words of Matthew 25. They not only feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit the sick and imprisoned. They are also getting to the root causes that create an unjust world. These congregations see that “the love of God has skin on it,” as the Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett, president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency in Louisville, says. Moffett, a pastor herself, knows all too well that Presbyterians can make some of the best mission statements. The challenge, though, is to live them out.

“What we do matters to God,” she said. “It’s time to change our perspective.”

In April, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) invited congregations to be part of that change by becoming Matthew 25 churches. Matthew 25, however, is not an initiative or program to spur numerical growth. It is simply an invitation to churches, big and small, to bring focus to and frame the work they’re called to do. And, in the process, Matthew 25 invites Presbyterians of various theological and political views to stand on common ground together, strengthening the denomination to become “a more relevant presence in the world,” Moffett says.

Churches are invited to sign up to become Matthew 25 congregations at

What is Matthew 25?

Matthew 25 is an invitation from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that calls us to actively engage in the world around us. We are called to act boldly and compassionately to serve the people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks to become a Matthew 25 denomination and invites congregations and mid councils to join in this journey.

Accepting the Matthew 25 invitation means churches will embrace one or more of three areas of focus in their communities:

- Building congregational vitality
- Dismantling structural racism
- Eradicating systemic poverty

its capacity for purposeful mission.

“You judge vitality by how many people will miss the church if it is no longer there,” Moffett said.

Liberty Community Church is one congregation that would be missed by many. The Rev. Dr. Alika Galloway, who co-pastors with her husband, the Rev. Dr. Ralph Galloway, has long practiced what she says is a “ministry of liberation for the poor and oppressed” in Minneapolis.

“We model and teach that community engagement is the call of the church of Jesus Christ,” said Galloway.

A little over a decade ago, Galloway began offering a “drop-in” space for women who worked as prostitutes near the church. Galloway’s husband gave up office space to create a place for the women to sit, talk to other women, receive a glass of water and even get condoms. That was the start of a ministry that would be known as the Northside Women’s Space (NWS), which is not a stand-alone mission apart from the congregation.

“The people that we serve are the people we worship with and vice versa,” said Galloway. “The session and pastors made a difficult decision to not form a separate 501(c)(3) so that there would never be a distinction between the church and the work of Northside.”

Today, that work continues as Liberty Community is raising



Matthew 25 is an invitation to all PC(USA) churches to serve boldly and to make the world a just one for generations to come. Courtesy of PC(USA)

[pcusa.org/matthew25 \(/ministries/matthew-25/\)](https://pcusa.org/matthew25 (/ministries/matthew-25/)). There, congregations can embrace one or more of the three focuses of discipleship: building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty. Congregations are also asked to share their stories of how they’re using the gifts God has given them to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor. The best part of this invitation, Moffett recognizes, is that many Presbyterians are already doing Matthew 25 work. By sharing the work of Matthew 25 with one another, though, Moffett hopes to “awaken our church to be faithful to Scripture” and increase the “spirit and energy of our congregations and mid councils.”

Here, *Presbyterians Today* shares what Matthew 25 looks like when it’s lived out. These churches are already actively and boldly engaged in their communities. They are examples of what the Church is being invited to be.

Building congregational vitality

You might think that the vitality of a congregation or worshiping community is based on the number of members, the scope of programs, the size of financial gifts or some other statistics. Not so — at least not entirely. Rather, a community’s vitality is primarily its spiritual strength and



Liberty Community Church practices "a ministry of liberation for the poor and oppressed," says the Rev. Dr. Alika Galloway, with community engagement being Christ's call to the church. Courtesy of Alika Galloway

\$4 million to expand NWS to include the Northside Healing Space, which will serve the needs of men and children. Galloway says it will be "a sacred space to heal from untreated and unrecognized trauma."

"Our sisters in NWS encouraged us to expand our vision of healing," Galloway said, recalling how a woman told her, "What's the use of us getting healed if we have to go back into a messed-up community? We want everyone healed, including our children and men."

Northside Healing Space's mission, Galloway says, will be the "healing of trauma through rest, remembering, resistance and revival."

Another indicator of congregational vitality is a church's focus on growing disciples who are actively engaged in the mission of God in their community. The Rev. Shelli Latham of Druid Hills Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, who says living out Matthew 25 is about "constantly growing" and keeping eyes open "for you will encounter people in need every day," is beginning to see that growth in her congregation.

On the Druid Hills Presbyterian campus is a ministry known as Mercy Community Church — a community started in 2005 for those in poverty or who are homeless. The ministry is led by the Rev. Chad Hyatt, co-pastor and an associate of the Missionaries of the Poor, a Catholic religious order that embodies a daily commitment to the spirituality of Matthew 25; the Rev. Maggie Leonard, a Presbyterian and co-pastor; and the Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum, also a Presbyterian minister and Mercy's associate pastor. Mercy's mission is to serve meals, provide clothes and welcome strangers, five days a week.

Mercy's website says it best: ... *seeking to create space in our lives where God might help us to grow in new ways.*

That growth has filtered to the Druid Hills congregation, Latham says, as she now gets Druid Hills members saying to her on a Sunday, "We are going to worship with Mercy."

"They tell me as if they are 'cheating' on me, but it is wonderful to see," Latham laughs, adding that serving is about more than just making sandwiches, as Druid Hills does every third Sunday for its Sandwich Ministry to feed the hungry. To make a difference in one's community, one has to hear the stories of those who are homeless and who are struggling.

"We do *for* others well, but *with*? Not so well," Latham said. "We should be sitting together with those we want to serve."

Sitting together at the table is now happening every month at First United Presbyterian Church in De Pere, Wisconsin.

In late 2018, the church started a free monthly meal where church members don't just serve food to those in the community. They break bread — together.

According to Tori England, a member of First United Presbyterian, over the past six months, monthly attendance has gone from 50 diners to 120. While the meal is a success on paper, the real success is that the congregation is reaching what Amy Cassidy, a member of session, calls "the best hidden group of people in poverty."

Like many churches, First United has wondered how to reach those in need who are struggling silently, whether due to pride or not being aware of the resources available. First United's dinner, which is called "Agape," capturing the expansive love of God, has started to break that silence, as neighbors begin to know each other better, sharing and listening to one another's stories. And as First United Presbyterian engages with those in the community, those in the community are engaging with the church.

"Many people who come to the dinner are staying afterwards to help clean up. They want to be part of the ministry," Cassidy said.

Dismantling structural racism

Racism is not primarily about individual prejudice or an individual's beliefs and attitudes. Rather, racism in the U.S. is a socially constructed system. Some people are advantaged, and others are disadvantaged, merely because of their skin color, ethnic identity or their ancestral background. Social power and prejudice have combined to treat people differently, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Some people are privileged while others are oppressed. As a consequence, there is unequal and inequitable access to resources such as money, education, information and decision-making power.

Confronting deeply ingrained racist systems and structures in our communities and country takes sensitivity and stamina. Before congregations and worshiping communities can confront the harsh realities of racism, it is helpful to have a good foundation.

A group from Druid Hills Presbyterian Church in Atlanta is building that foundation with an important conversation. In the winter, about six to eight folks opened their laptops for a Zoom online video meeting on Robin DiAngelo's book "White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism."

The discussion "provided the space for us to be honest with one another and practice being comfortable in talking about this," said Latham.

The "White Fragility" Zoom meeting wasn't the first time that technology was used as a way to bring Druid Hills' worshipers together to learn.

"Atlanta traffic is terrible and many of our young people were not coming back to the church for classes," Latham said. "Using Zoom is providing us with the time to engage with one another. Zoom time provides the space for us to get into the gritty topics we need to get into."

"White Fragility" was also recently studied at New Hempstead Presbyterian Church in New City, New York. However, this wasn't the first book about race the congregation has tackled, says the Rev. Dr. Lori Knight-Whitehouse. New Hempstead Presbyterian has been reading books on race for the past three years, and the results have been positive. The book discussions have inspired those in the congregation to take action and attend rallies, Knight-Whitehouse says. The discussions have also welcomed those from outside the church community.

"The book studies have been a good way to witness to the community," she said.

Eradicating systemic poverty

It is startling to learn that 25 percent of children under 6 now live in poverty in the U.S. What is even worse is the fact that poverty is the greatest threat to the healthy development of children because of its long-lasting, negative consequences: inadequate quality and quantity of food, exposure to violence, underfunded schools and lack of early childhood educational opportunities, frequent housing mobility, and exposure to pollution and other health risks.

And while many congregations excel at putting together Thanksgiving food baskets and providing backpacks filled with school supplies for those in need, the Band-Aid approach, while helpful, is only a temporary solution.

“Such services are needed, yes. But we also need to be getting to the heart of the ‘why,’” said the Rev. Paul H. Moore.

Moore has been the pastor of Chain of Lakes Church in Blaine, Minnesota, since 2009. The church plant, which began with seven families, now averages 80 in worship. Plans are currently underway for the congregation to break ground for a new building in the spring of 2020. Chain of Lakes, though, isn’t your average church startup. At the very beginning, the congregation sought to answer what its “heart-first” was. “Heart-first,” Moore explains, is ministry that most touches the heart of a congregation.

“We sometimes work on so many different ministries that they get diffused. The ‘heart-first’ ministry helps a church to focus on one thing and do that one thing right,” he said.

It was during the many interviews in the community to discover Chain of Lakes’ heart-first ministry that the Chain of Lakes congregation heard of the growing homelessness problem in the area, specifically the growing number of homeless youth.

“That started us on our journey,” Moore said.

Today, Chain of Lakes Church is part of a movement to end homelessness in Minnesota’s MetroNorth area. The congregation, Moore says, has gone “to extraordinary lengths to partner with organizations to help end homelessness.”

Those great lengths include running three food shelves at local high schools; partnering in raising money for HOPE Place, the only residence for homeless youth in Anoka County; serving at Stepping Stone, a local emergency housing shelter; and providing spring break bags and Christmas bags filled with food and necessities for vulnerable youth at Anoka Regional High School.

But as Moore and his congregation do this work, they keep hearing the same question from others. It’s a question they themselves have asked: What leads a person to be homeless?

That question led Chain of Lakes to team with the local Rotary in March to host a forum, “Root Causes of Homelessness.” About 70 people attended and listened to the four speakers who shared the startling statistics of homelessness, especially among youth.

The evening opened with the latest homelessness statistics from the Wilder Foundation’s triennial homeless report. The Wilder Foundation is a Minnesota nonprofit that has been committed to those in need since the early 1900s. Its report revealed that 10,233 people experienced homelessness in 2018 in Minnesota, a 10 percent increase from 2015. It also found that on any given night, an estimated 6,000 Minnesota youth experience homelessness.

And while there was no easy answer on to how to eradicate homelessness, participants in the forum, which included high school counselors and representatives from local housing shelters, offered starting points:

- Create more connections with vulnerable adults and youth. “Often when an adult or youth experiences an incident that could lead to homelessness, they don’t have the connections that can help them overcome that incident,” Moore said.
- Provide more shelters. According to Moore, one local organization has a waiting list of more than 300 people for its shelter.
- Increase the minimum wage and lower costs of entry-level apartments. “There’s no doubt in my mind that if Jesus were here right now, he would be encouraging his followers to advocate for a higher minimum wage and lower rents. He would be encouraging all people to share an attitude of grace towards a person who is homeless,” Moore said.

Moore and his congregation are extending that grace now, and are thinking about that grace long-term. When Chain of Lakes Church breaks ground next spring for its new church, there are plans to include a gym for local teens to gather. But there are bigger dreams as well.

“We would love to build a shelter on the church property,” Moore said, recognizing there probably will be some pushback from the community. Still, any pushback will be worth it, for the work in reaching out to the homeless has brought with it many blessings.

“We didn’t start this with the intent of the youth coming to worship,” Moore said. “But now three homeless teens have come to worship and have enriched the congregation. They have made us embrace the messiness of life.”

Val Owens, a member of Chain of Lakes Church, agrees. Speaking at the “Root Causes of Homelessness” event, she admits that working with the youth “has changed my life” and that those in the church as well as the teens “have grown so much together.”

For Moore, this is a call that he was made for. Moore’s passion for getting to the heart of the systems that create poverty was instilled in him at a young age. When he was in the fourth grade, his parents intentionally moved their family from the comforts of their suburban home and into the inner city. It was then that Moore, having seen those with and those without, came up with a solution to poverty — “we should just abolish money,” Moore recalls with a chuckle. The young Moore was so convinced that would work that he wrote letters to government representatives asking them to pursue this.



Members of Druid Hills Presbyterian Church in Atlanta recently visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama — a sacred space for truth-telling about slavery in America. Druid Hills has been studying the book “White Fragility” and tackling conversations on race. Courtesy of Druid Hills Presbyterian Church



The members of Chain of Lakes Church in Blaine, Minnesota, would describe their church as being passionate about eradicating homelessness in their community. The church partners with nonprofits and helps with various activities to raise awareness and money, such as bagging groceries for Hope 4 Youth. Courtesy of Chain of Lakes Church

"I wasn't successful," he said. "But that was the start of my passion for helping low-income people. That was the start of my call into ministry."

Lord, when did we see you . . . ? What is your Matthew 25 call? The invitation has been given. How will your congregation answer?

Donna Frischknecht Jackson is editor of Presbyterians Today. She is excited to have her rural congregation sign up to be a Matthew 25 church.

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Feeding the hungry takes many hands. Luckily, the Rev. Paul H. Moore of Chain of Lakes Church has many in the congregation — young and old — who rise up to help others. Courtesy of Chain of Lakes Church

Learn more

You can learn more and sign up to become a Matthew 25 church at pcusa.org/matthew25 ([/ministries/matthew25/](https://www.pcusa.org/ministries/matthew25/))



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