

A Moral Agenda Based on Fundamental Rights (*Release Date April 2018*)

Over the past few years, the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival has connected with communities across this nation to learn from the struggles being waged. We have met with tens of thousands of people, witnessing the strength of their moral courage in trying times. We have gathered testimonies from hundreds of poor people and we have chronicled their demands for a better society. The following moral agenda is drawn from this deep engagement and commitment to these struggles of the poor and dispossessed. It is also grounded in an empirical assessment of how we have come to this point today. The Souls of Poor Folk: Auditing America report reveals how the evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, and the war economy and militarism are persistent, pervasive, and perpetuated by a distorted moral narrative that must be challenged.

We must stop the attention violence that refuses to see these injustices and acknowledge the human and economic costs of inequality. We believe that when decent people see the faces and facts that the Souls of Poor Folk Audit presents, they will be moved deeply in their conscience to change things. When confronted with the undeniable truth of unconscionable cruelty to our fellow human beings, we must join the ranks of those who are determined not to rest until justice and equality are a reality for all.

This document is organized in two parts:

- Declaration of Fundamental Rights and Poor People's Moral Agenda*
- The history behind and moral justification for this Moral Agenda*

I. Declaration of Fundamental Rights and Poor People's Moral Agenda

Systemic Racism

Did you know that there are fewer voting rights in 2018 than there were 50 years ago when the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act were passed?

Since 2010, 23 states have passed racist voter suppression laws, including racist gerrymandering and redistricting, laws that make it harder to register, reduced early voting days and hours, purging voter rolls, and more restrictive voter ID

laws. Following the Shelby County v. Holder Supreme Court case, which gutted key provisions of the Voting Rights Act, 14 states had new voting restrictions in place before the 2016 Presidential election and there were 868 fewer polling places across the country.

While these laws have disproportionately targeted Black people at least 17 states saw voter suppression cases targeting American Indian and Alaskan Native voters in 2016. Thirteen states that passed voter suppression laws also opted not to accept expanded Medicaid benefits offered under the Affordable Care Act.

These attacks follow a broader pattern of restricting and curtailing democratic processes by drawing on legacies of racism to undermine local efforts to organize for better conditions. As of July 2017, 25 states have passed laws that preempt cities from adopting their own local minimum wage laws. Most of these have been passed in response to city councils passing or wanting to pass minimum wage increases.

Emergency Financial Management has become a mechanism that effectively nullifies the right to vote to prioritize balanced budgets and repayments to Wall Street lenders over human lives. Non-elected managers are appointed and granted sweeping powers, including the authority to dismiss elected officials, scrap labor contracts, sell public assets and impose new taxes, without any accountability to voters. The City of Flint was under emergency management when it made the decision to switch its water source from the Detroit Water System to the Flint River, poisoning a community of almost 99,000, with a 42 percent poverty rate and in which 56 percent of residents are Black and 37 percent are White.

In addition, 6.1 million people who have been disenfranchised due to felony convictions, including one in 13 Black adults.

These continued attacks on democracy are connected to a growing anti-immigrant backlash in the form of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the scapegoating and assaults on undocumented immigrants. In the years following the attacks of 9/11 and amid fears of economic insecurity, we have been led to believe that immigrants make our society and communities less safe, threaten our culture and democracy, and compete for our jobs and resources. However, undocumented immigrants contributed \$5 trillion to the U.S. economy over the last 10 years. They paid \$13 billion in Social Security in 2010, but only received \$1 billion in benefits. They also pay eight percent of their income in state and local taxes, while the wealthiest one percent pay just 5.4 percent. Yet undocumented immigrants and most lawfully residing immigrants are barred from receiving assistance under the major public welfare programs, causing hardship

for many poor immigrant families. In fact, among the 43.7 million immigrants in the U.S., there are 19.7 million – undocumented and lawfully residing – who cannot vote.

These millions of hardworking Americans who strengthen our economy and communities must be treated with the dignity and respect due to all human beings. They should not be used as cover for attacks on democracy.

The history of First Nations, Native Americans, and Alaskan Natives in the U.S. reveals that these attacks on democracy follow a long legacy of subjugation. From the Doctrine of Discovery that was used to justify the takeover of indigenous lands to the ongoing attempt to undermine and constrain tribal sovereignty and authority as independent nations, the U.S. has been waging a full-scale war on the very right of indigenous people to exist. This begins with the belief that these people do not matter; therefore, taking away their political independence becomes possible, and, with that, their resources, wealth, and culture.

The truth is that when the democratic process and the right to vote are restricted, preempted and nullified, our democracy is under attack. These attacks target people of color, especially the poor, youth, and elderly, but in doing so, they strip us all of our constitutional protections; they allow extremists to get elected through voter suppression and racial gerrymandering and then use their power to hurt people of all races.

The truth is that this power has taken the form of xenophobia, Islamophobia, a fear of undocumented immigrants, and the continued oppression of First Nations, Native Americans and Alaskan Natives.

We have the right to vote and the right to accountable political representation.

Immigrants of all backgrounds have the right to citizenship that will afford them a full right to vote and participate in our democracy.

First Nations, Native Americans, and Alaskan Natives have a right to their political and cultural institutions, lands and resources.

- We demand the immediate full restoration and expansion of the Voting Rights Act, an end to racist gerrymandering and redistricting, early registration of 17 year olds, automatic voting registration at the age of 18, early voting in every state, same-day registration, the enactment of

Election Day as a holiday, and a verifiable paper record. We demand the right to vote for the currently and formerly incarcerated.

- We demand adequate funding for polling places to accommodate the full participation of the electorate.
- We demand an end to placing persons on the federal bench who have a record of standing against voting rights.
- We demand statehood, voting rights and representation for the more than 700,000 people in Washington D.C.
- We demand the reversal of state laws preempting local governments from passing minimum wage increases, and the removal of Emergency Financial Management positions that are unaccountable to the democratic process.
- We demand a clear and just immigration system that strengthens our democracy through the broad participation of everyone in this country. This includes providing a timely citizenship process that guarantees the right to vote. It also requires protecting immigrants' abilities to organize for their rights in the workplace and in their communities without fear of retribution, detention and deportation.
- We demand that First Nations, Native Americans and Alaskan Native people retain their tribal recognition as nations, not races, to make substantive claims to their sovereignty.

Poverty and Inequality

Did you know that while the U.S. economy has grown 18-fold in the past 50 years, wealth inequality has expanded, the costs of living have increased, and social programs have been restructured and cut dramatically?

We challenge the idea that our economy rewards hard-working individuals and, therefore, if only the millions of people in poverty acted better, worked harder, complained less and prayed more, they would be lifted up and out of their miserable conditions.

Beginning in the 1970s, wages for the bottom 80 percent of workers have remained largely stagnant and today there are 64 million people working for less than \$15 an hour.

Meanwhile, the top 1 percent's share of the economy has nearly doubled to more than 20 percent of our national income. In 2017, the 400 wealthiest Americans owned more wealth than the bottom 64 percent of the entire U.S. population, or 204 million people. Just three individuals possessed a combined wealth of \$248.5 billion, an equal amount of wealth as the bottom 50 percent of the country.

At the same time, the costs of basic needs like housing, health care and education have risen dramatically. Over the past 30 years, rents have gone up faster than income in nearly every urban area of the country. In 2016, there was no state or county in the nation where someone earning the federal minimum wage could afford a 2-bedroom apartment at market rent. Only one in four of those eligible to receive federal housing assistance actually do so. This has precipitated a structural housing crisis with 2.5 to 3.5 million people who are living in shelters, transitional housing centers and tent cities. This population includes a significant number of women, children, LGBTQIA youth, veterans and the elderly. And there are another estimated 7.4 million people who are on the brink of being homeless.

There are 32 million people who lack health insurance. Further, an estimated 40 percent of Americans have taken on debt because of medical issues, making medical debt the number one cause of personal bankruptcy filings. In fact, the bottom 90 percent of Americans hold more than 70 percent of debt in the country. Student debt has grown to \$1.34 trillion and affects 44 million Americans. Excluding the value of the family car, 19 percent of all U.S. households have zero wealth or negative net worth. They owe more than they own.

Despite the growing need for federal assistance, social service programs have been restructured to shift critical resources away from the poor. The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program only assists 23 percent of poor families with children. The current administration has proposed a 30 percent cut to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and a restructuring that would impose onerous work requirements that threaten to destabilize this highly effective program. In 2017, 4 out of 5 SNAP recipients were children, elderly, infirm or people with disabilities, or adults who were working regularly but not earning enough to meet their needs.

Our public resources are not reaching the people who need them. Given the absence of good jobs and a strong social safety net, millions of people are left to fend for themselves.

The truth is that the millions of poor people in the United States today are poor because the wealth and resources of our country have been flowing to a small number of people and federal programs are not meeting the growing needs of the poor.

Everybody has the right to live. The U.S. Constitution was established to “promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity.” Given the abundance that exists in this

country and the fundamental dignity inherent to all humanity, every person in the United States has the right to dignified jobs and living wages, housing, education, health care, welfare, and the right to organize for the realization of these rights.

- We demand the immediate implementation of federal and state living wage laws that are commensurate for the 21st century economy, guaranteed annual incomes, full employment and the right for all workers to form and join unions.
- We demand an end to anti-union and anti-workers' rights laws in the states.
- We demand equal pay for equal work.
- We demand fully-funded social welfare programs that provide cash and in-kind assistance directly to the poor, including poor families. We demand an end to the attacks on SNAP, CHIP, HEAP, and other vital programs for the poor.
- We demand equity in education, ensuring every child receives a high-quality, well-funded, diverse public education. We demand an end to the re-segregation of schools. We demand free tuition at public colleges and universities and an end to profiteering on student debt. We demand equitable funding for historically black colleges and universities and for Native, Tribal and Indigenous educational institutions, whose missions have not outlived their purpose.
- We demand the expansion of Medicaid in every state and the protection of Medicare and single-payer universal health care for all.
- We demand fully funded public resources and access to mental health professionals and addiction and recovery programs.
- We demand reinvestment in and the expansion of public housing, ensuring that all have a decent house to live in.
- We demand equal treatment and accessible housing, health care, public transportation, adequate income and services for people with disabilities.
- We demand public infrastructure projects and sustainable, community-based and controlled economic initiatives that target poor urban and rural communities.
- We demand fair and decent housing for all and the end to the rolling back of fair housing protections at HUD.
- We demand relief from crushing household, student, and consumer debt. We declare Jubilee.
- We demand relief from wealth inequality.
- We demand that the wealthy and corporations pay their fair share of our country's urgent needs around decent and affordable housing, free public education, a robust social safety net and social security. We demand the repeal of the 2017 tax breaks for the wealthy and big corporations and the

reinvestment of those funds into public programs for housing, health care, education, jobs, infrastructure and welfare for the poor.

- We demand that the nation and our lawmakers turn their immediate attention to passing policies and budget allocations that would end child poverty. This includes a public hearing on the federal and state institutions charged with child safety and protection, including on how their resources are used to take children away rather than strengthening families.

Did you know there are 140 million people who are poor or low-income in the United States today?

We challenge the Official Poverty Measure (OPM) as too narrow a definition of poverty today. The OPM is an income-based measure developed in the 1960s that uses the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) to define poverty. In 2017, the FPL was \$12,060 for a single person under the age of 65 and was \$24,600 for a household of four.

According to the OPM, in 2017, 12.3 percent of the U.S. population – or 39.7 million people – were poor and nearly 30 percent – or 95.7 million people – were poor or low income, which is defined as living at less than twice the poverty line.

An alternative measure developed in 2009, the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), takes into account income as well as the costs of food, clothing, housing and utilities, and government programs that have assisted low-income families and individuals who are not otherwise designated as poor.

Using the more thorough SPM, 43.3 percent of the U.S. population — or 140 million people — were poor or low-income in 2017. Our government does not provide information under the SPM on poverty and low-income status for all races, gender identities, or sexual identities. However, according to existing data from the SPM for 2017, the 140 million people who were poor or low-income include:

- 52.1 percent of children under the age of 18 (38.5 million children)
- 40.4 percent of adults between the ages of 18-64 (81 million adults)
- 42.0 percent of our elders over the age of 64 (21.4 million elders)
- 41.6 percent or 65.8 million men
- 45 percent or 74.2 million women
- 33.5 percent of White, non-Hispanic people (65.6 million people)
- 59.7 percent of Black, non-Hispanic people (23.7 million people)
- 64.1 percent of Latinx people (38 million people)
- 40.8 percent of Asian people (8 million people)
- 58.9 percent of Native and Indigenous people (2.14 million people)

There is grossly inadequate information on the poverty and low-income status of First Nations, Native Americans, Alaskan Native, LGBTQIA and disabled people in this country, especially under the SPM. According to existing information under the OPM:

- 26.2 percent of Native Americans were living below the FPL in 2016 (1.7 million people)
- 26.6 percent of people with disabilities were living below the FPL in 2016 (5.3 million people)
- Transgender people are likely to experience poverty at a rate double that of the general population, with transgender people of color experiencing even higher poverty rates

We know that, because the OPM is a very limited measure of poverty, these numbers do not reflect the full scale of poverty among these communities.

The truth is that economic insecurity, poverty and misery are affecting more of us in 2018 than we are made aware.

We remain in the dark about who is poor and this ignorance prevents us from being able to address the broad and deep poverty in our midst. We have the right to know the true state of our Union.

- We demand a change in the current poverty standards. We demand an accurate assessment of who is poor — based on access to decent and adequate housing, education, health care, water, sanitation and public utilities, childcare, as well as income, savings and debt, and social welfare — and that is made widely available to all.
- We demand particular attention be paid to data concerning First Nations, Native Americans, Alaskan Native, LGBTQIA and disabled people regarding poverty. This means working with these communities to ensure the safekeeping of sensitive information and that all data is collected with respect, dignity and security.

Did you know that we imprison and detain more people, especially poor people, than any country in the world?

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate in the world, almost five times the average for other wealthy countries. The mass incarceration system costs at least \$182 billion every year, including \$80.7 billion for public corrections agencies and \$63.2 billion for policing. Since 1976, federal spending on prisons increased tenfold to \$7.5 billion a year. The number of sentenced state and federal inmates grew from 188,000 in 1968 to nearly 1.5 million in 2016. Two

thirds of these inmates are people of color, while Native Americans are incarcerated at a 38 percent higher rate than the national average.

Since 1970, counties with fewer than 250,000 people have driven jail growth, reflecting a shift in rural and urban incarceration trends. Women held in local jails are the fastest-growing segment of incarcerated people in the United States; most are Black or Latinx. From 1970 to 2014, the total female jail population increased 14-fold from under 8,000 to nearly 110,000. More than 80 percent of these women were imprisoned for non-violent offenses.

This coincides with the broader criminalization of poverty and the poor. By the Department of Justice's own admission, 95 percent of the growth in the incarcerated population since 2000 is the result of an increase in the number of un-convicted defendants, many of whom are unable to make bail.

The truth is that poor communities, especially poor communities of color, are being locked up, sent away and killed by law enforcement. Equal protection under the law is non-negotiable and we have the right to move freely without the fear of intimidation, detention, deportation or death by public institutions charged with our safety.

- We demand an end to mass incarceration and the continuing inequalities for black, brown and poor white people within the criminal justice system.
- We demand equality and the safety of all persons regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Ecological Devastation

Did you know 13.8 million U.S. households cannot afford water?

Federal assistance to local water systems is currently 74 percent below its peak in 1977. This has contributed to the inability of public water utilities to address failing and aging infrastructure. It has also prompted utilities to privatize their water systems, even though private water utilities charge 59 percent more per unit of water than publicly owned water systems.

As a result, nearly 12 percent of U.S. households face unaffordable water bills. Tens of thousands of households have had their water shut off due to non-payment, precipitating homelessness, child removal and a host of medical problems. It also means that at least 4 million families with children are being exposed to high levels of lead from drinking water and other sources. Poor rural communities face the additional problem of lacking access to piped water and sewage systems in the first place. In 2016, 540,000 households, including over

200,000 Native and Alaskan Native households, lacked access to complete plumbing. Of the 20 counties with the highest percentage of households lacking access to complete plumbing, all were rural and 13 had a majority Native American or Alaskan Native population.

While there is failing infrastructure in poor cities and rural counties across the country, there has been a boom in infrastructure to support fossil fuel production and transportation. Fracking has driven U.S. domestic oil and gas production since 2007, making the U.S. the world's largest producer of both oil and gas. It has also demanded an expanded pipeline infrastructure criss-crossing the country. These pipelines often pass through or are near poor communities, including First Nations, Native American and Alaskan Native communities, whose resources and lands continue to be exploited and turned over to private interests, including through the opening of public lands to extractive industries.

Since 1998, there have been 5,712 significant oil and gas leaks or ruptures on U.S. pipelines. And since 1964, there were more than 2,400 spills from offshore drilling in U.S. waters. The largest of these was the Deepwater Horizon "BP" oil spill in 2010, which accounted for 95 percent of oil spilled in the past 50 years.

There are also more than 1,100 coal ash sites throughout the country. Toxins from these sites gradually leach into water bodies and groundwater, or get released in catastrophic spills.

Scientists have known for decades that human activities, particularly the use of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas, are warming the planet. In spite of knowing the risks, political leaders have dragged their feet on implementing solutions. U.S. greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions peaked in 2007. This reveals how little priority our political leadership attaches to an existential threat that, for now, mostly impacts poor people. It also shows the political influence of the fossil fuel industry, which has effectively captured the U.S. political system and prevented the kind of drastic action the country should have taken long ago.

The truth is that our policies have not fundamentally valued human life or the ecological systems in which we live. Instead, it has prioritized private, corporate and financial interests over our precious natural resources.

The truth is that the poor live on the frontlines of climate change and bear the brunt of costs and impacts of climate volatility.

We have a fundamental right to clean water, air and a healthy environment and public resources to monitor, penalize and reverse the polluting impacts of fossil fuel industries.

- We demand 100 percent clean, renewable energy and a public jobs program to transition to a green economy that will put millions of people in sustainable living wage jobs.
- We demand a fully funded public water and sanitation infrastructure that keeps these utilities and services under public control and prioritize poor, rural and Native communities that have been harmed by polluting and extractive industries. This infrastructure must provide consistent, safe, reliable and affordable access to water and sanitation services such as refuse collection, containment and sewage systems, so as to prevent any leaks or leaching of lead or other toxins. This includes ending water shut offs.
- We demand a ban on fracking, mountaintop removal coal mining, coal ash ponds, and offshore drilling. We demand a ban on all new pipelines, refineries, and coal, oil, and gas export terminals. We demand that extractive industries be held accountable for the air, water and land they have polluted and poisoned and financially responsible for clean-up processes.
- We demand the protection of public lands and the immediate cessation of opening up public lands for polluting and extractive industries.

War Economy and Militarism

Did you know that currently 53 cents of every federal discretionary dollar goes to military spending and only 15 cents is spent on anti-poverty programs?

Military spending in 2017 was \$668 billion and out of federal discretionary spending only \$190 billion was for anti-poverty programs. Under the current administration's proposed budget, by 2023, 66 cents of every dollar of federal discretionary spending would go to the military and only 12 cents to anti-poverty programs.

Most of these resources allocated to war are not benefitting our troops. In 2015, the Department of Defense obligated more money on federal contracts, \$274 billion, than all other federal agencies combined. In 2016, CEOs of the top five military contractors earned on average \$19.2 million each — more than 90 times the \$214,000 earned by a U.S. general with 20 years of experience and 640 times the \$30,000 earned by Army privates in combat.

This expanded military budget ends up claiming more lives abroad while making us less safe and inflicting harm here at home. More than 68 percent of the civilian casualties in 2017 from aerial attacks were women and children. Nearly half of female military personnel sent to Iraq or Afghanistan reported being sexually harassed and nearly 25 percent said they had been sexually assaulted. In 2012,

suicide claimed more military deaths than military action and as of September 2017, an average of 20 veterans died by suicide every day.

On the environmental side, the Department of Defense was responsible for 72 percent of the U.S. Government's total greenhouse gas emissions in 2016.

Further, city police departments are getting military weapons and equipment — from grenade launchers to armored tanks – left over from the Pentagon's wars, escalating the criminalization of and violence against poor communities. The War on Drugs and drug policing became the excuse to bring military grade weapons and equipment to local communities and arm local police to look like soldiers in combat. Today, young Black males and Native Americans are more likely to be killed by police than other racial groups.

This militarization has also contributed to the mass proliferation of guns. From 1968 to 2016, there were about 1.6 million gun deaths in the United States. U.S. homicide rates were 7.0 times higher than in other high-income countries, driven by a gun homicide rate that was 25.2 times higher.

Finally, federal spending on immigration, deportations and the border has increased from \$2 billion in 1976 to \$17 billion in 2015, with ten times as many deportations. From 1993 to 2013, immigration detentions increased from 85,000 to 441,000 per year.

More complaints of abuse have been filed against Immigration and Customs Enforcement than any other Department of Homeland Security agency. LGBTQIA immigrants are 15 times more likely to experience sexual assault in confinement than other immigrants held in detention. And 21.6 percent of immigrant children are impoverished.

The truth is that instead of waging a War on Poverty, we have been waging a War on the Poor, at home and abroad, for the financial benefit of a few. It is morally indefensible to profit from perpetual war.

We have the right to protect our communities from the ravages and weapons of war.

- We demand an end to military aggression and war-mongering.
- We demand a stop to the privatization of the military budget and any increase in military spending. We demand a reallocation of resources from the military budget towards our human security, including towards education, health care, jobs and green infrastructure needs, and strengthening a Veterans Administration system that must remain public.

- We demand a ban on assault rifles and a ban on the easy access to firearms that has led to the increased militarization and weaponization of our communities.
- We demand the demilitarization of our communities on the border and the interior. This includes ending federal programs that send military equipment into local and state communities and ceasing the call to build a wall at the U.S.-Mexico border.
- We demand an immigration system that, instead of criminalizing people for trying to raise their families, prioritizes family reunification, keeps families together and allows us all to build thriving communities in the country we call home.

National Morality

Did you know that thousands of people die every year from anti-poor policies, while an extremist religious and Christian nationalist agenda deliberately diverts attention from the key issues and challenges facing the majority of Americans?

In the history of this country, moral justifications have been offered for the genocide and forced removal of indigenous people from their lands, slavery, resisting the *Brown v. Board of Education* school segregation case and opposing the *Roe v. Wade* abortion case. Today, religious extremists focus on issues like prayer in school, abortion, and gun rights that distort the national moral narrative.

This distorted narrative became integral to the well-funded libertarian movement to redefine “liberty” as freedom from government. In 2016, Franklin Graham invested \$10 million of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s money in his 2016 Decision America Tour to each state house in the country. Billed as “nonpartisan” prayer rallies, these gatherings framed the “moral crisis” as a decision between progressive atheist values and God. After the election, Graham called Trump’s victory an answer to prayer.

Today these influences — the Christian and religious nationalist organizations, religious capitalist and prosperity gospel movements, and independent charismatics — have access to the current administration in the form of its “court evangelicals.” The Values Voter Summit has become an important focus point for this coalition and its narrative. Through federal contracts and student aid, Liberty University has become the largest private Christian university in the country.

These influences have also ignored the moral commitments enshrined in the U.S. Constitution to “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and Posterity.” These commitments should help ensure that

this country moves toward the more perfect Union aspired to in our founding documents.

Indeed, there are profound consequences to a moral narrative that ignores poverty, healthcare, decent jobs, and other crises facing the poor today. An estimated 10,000 people will die every year from the provision in the new federal tax bill that will take away the healthcare of 13 million people. Thousands have died every year because of some states' decision to deny Medicaid expansion benefits. Overall, more than 250,000 people die in the United States from poverty and related issues every year.

The truth is that a morality that claims to care for the souls of people while destroying their bodies and communities is deeply immoral.

We have the right to ground our public policies and budget allocations in a moral narrative that prioritizes and follows our deepest religious and Constitutional moral commitments to justice.

- We demand that all policies and budgets are based on the five key principles of the U.S. Constitution: Establishing Justice, Ensuring Domestic Tranquility, Providing for the Common Defense, Promoting the General Welfare and Securing the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

II. History and Moral Justification

Fifty years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others called for a “revolution of values” in America. They invited people who had been divided to stand together against the “triplets of evil”—militarism, racism, and economic injustice—to insist that people need not die from poverty in the richest nation ever to exist. They sought to build a broad, fusion coalition that would audit America. Together, they would demand an accounting of promissory notes that had been returned marked “insufficient funds.” Today that effort is still incomplete.

The Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival has developed out of years of organizing across the United States. In communities across this land, people impacted by systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy and our distorted moral narrative have said the same thing: “We want to be free! We need a Poor People’s Campaign! We need a Moral Revival to make this country great for so many for whom it has not yet been.” This call

echoes the cries of the prophets throughout the ages to stand up for justice, righteousness and the dignity of all:

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruin shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in. (Isaiah 58)

The believers, both men and women, are in charge of and responsible for one another; they all enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong. (Qu'ran 9:71)

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

These moral values are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution and deeply rooted in the struggles that have labored to lift those founding documents to their full meaning:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these

rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (Declaration of Independence)

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the General Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America. (Preamble of the Constitution of the United States)

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (Constitution of the United States, 14th Amendment, Section 1)

These principles have found expression in documents recognizing the common dignity of the human family, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As poor people's struggles around the world have continued to battle against ongoing injustices, the global community has come together to affirm, for instance, the United Nations' Declaration on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People.

And in American history, as throughout the rest of the world, — from abolition, to women’s suffrage, to labor and civil rights — real social change has come when those most impacted by social injustice have joined hands with allies of good will to stand together to transform and better society. These movements did not simply stand against partisan foes. They stood for the deep moral center of our Constitutional values and faith traditions. Those deep wells sustained those who knew in their bones both that power concedes nothing without a fight and that, in the end, love is the greatest power to sustain a fight for what is right.

Today, 50 years after Rev. Dr. King and the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign declared that “silence was betrayal,” we are coming together to break the silence and tell the truth about the interlocking evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, the war economy and our distorted moral narrative.

The truth is that systemic racism allows us to deny the humanity of others; by denying the humanity of others, we are given permission to exploit or exclude people economically; by exploiting and excluding people economically, we are emboldened to abuse our military powers and, through violence and war, control resources; this quest for the control of resources leads to the potential destruction of our entire ecosystem and everything living in it. And the current moral narrative of our nation both justifies this cycle and distracts us from it.

We declare that if silence was betrayal in 1968, revival is necessary today.

We come to remind our nation what truths we hold to be self-evident and what values we hold dear.

We draw on the histories of resistance that echo their truth down through the centuries and the power of the blood that has been shed through generations of struggle.

We loudly proclaim that we will move forward together, not one step back!