

## Faithful Citizenship Forums 2014



In 2014, the Faithful Citizenship initiative held a series of regional forums around the state, “Combating Poverty: Elevating the Debate.”

These events collectively gathered over 750 local religious leaders to look at the current state of poverty in Wisconsin and to participate in the public conversation on poverty reduction during the fall election cycle.

A sign-on letter with over 1,000 signatures from the religious community was shared with state and federal candidates running for office.

### Faithful Citizenship: A Response to the Scandal of Poverty in Wisconsin

**“We who have signed on to this letter are people of faith,** faiths which inform our view of the world and the very meaning of our individual and collective lives....”

**“We are shocked and scandalized by the depth of poverty in Wisconsin:** One in ten of us lives in poverty; in the best-off counties the rate is only half that — one in twenty lives poverty. Poverty is more visible in our cities, but it is everywhere in Wisconsin. Poverty is closely related to racial disparities. It is closely related to our unacceptably high rate of incarceration. Poverty’s greatest cruelty is that the poor live in the midst of plenty, and in a time when the wealthiest have more than ever before....”

[Download the statement \(PDF\)](#)

### Media Reports on the Forums and Statement

[“Milwaukee faith communities begin charting changes in fighting poverty,”](#) Annysa Johnson, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

- Includes a link to the PowerPoint presentation by Citizen Action and Wisconsin Council on Children and Families.

[“Should Poverty be a Priority Issue in the November Elections?”](#) *Wisconsin Public Radio* September 18, 2014

[“Local Event Targets Poverty,”](#) Eau Claire *Leader-Telegram*, September 27, 2014

[“Religious community concerned about roadblocks people in poverty,”](#) *WKOW* September 30, 2014

[“Local Organizations to Look at Issue of Poverty,”](#) *Stevens Point Journal*, September 28, 2014

[“Summit Focuses on Better Ways to Serve Poor,”](#) *Stevens Point Journal*, October 1, 2014

[“Faith Community Leaders fight Against Poverty,”](#) Appleton *Post Crescent*, October 5, 2014

[“Matter of Faith: Who sits at the welcome table?”](#) Eau Claire *Leader Telegram*, October 11, 2014

[“Letter urges people of faith to make poverty a voting issue,”](#) *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, October 26, 2014



## ***Faithful Citizenship:*** **A Response to the Scandal of Poverty in Wisconsin**

**We who have signed on to this letter are people of faith,** faiths which inform our view of the world and the very meaning of our individual and collective lives.

We are not a stereotype. We come from different faith traditions and different cultures. We are urban, suburban and rural, from across Wisconsin. We are different races, ages, genders, political views and lifestyles. This letter transcends difference and identifies key matters of agreement.

**We are shocked and scandalized by the depth of poverty in Wisconsin:** One in ten of us lives in poverty; in the best-off counties the rate is only half that -- one in twenty lives poverty.\* Poverty is more visible in our cities, but it is everywhere in Wisconsin. Poverty is closely related to racial disparities. It is closely related to our unacceptably high rate of incarceration. Poverty's greatest cruelty is that the poor live in the midst of plenty, and in a time when the wealthiest have more than ever before.

We are saddened and angered to learn that the fastest-growing group of poor people are children, increasing 12% between 2010 and 2011.\* No society that hopes to have a prosperous and civilized future can give up on so much of its next generation.

***Our many faith traditions teach us that we cannot place all the blame for poverty on the poor.*** All of us are responsible for each other, and the primary obligation of those with power and resources is to look out for the well-being of the most vulnerable.

But we are not just shocked and saddened: We are motivated, motivated to speak and act for change. And that change should come from individuals, from our communities, and from the institutions of our democracy.

**We believe that faith communities have the responsibility to care for the poor and the marginalized,** a responsibility with many dimensions. Many of our individual members, congregations and denominations dedicate great effort and resources to feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, teaching and guiding children and youth, helping to connect people with employment, and more. Some of our communities are even involved in community development efforts, to create opportunities for people to succeed. All of these efforts are important and should be increased to meet the growing need.

**We challenge ourselves, and all members of the larger faith community, to reach out to build respectful relationships with people who live in poverty.** Caring about and donating to the poor are just the necessary beginnings -- we each need to get to know the *people*. Our congregations need to build real relationships with congregations

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\* <http://www.irp.wisc.edu/faqs/faq4.htm>

populated by people whose lives are so different from ours. We must recover the sense that we all share a common humanity.

Our responsibility as people of faith goes beyond providing social services, however. We have an obligation to “speak truth to power.” **In the tradition of the prophets, we have the duty to challenge systems that create, sustain or ignore human suffering.** We are called to speak out against policies and practices that create poverty, or that do less than possible to alleviate it. While faith communities are not called to partisan politics, we must bring our values to the public debate about decisions that affect the poor. Those with the power to act must be called to account.

**We believe that one of government’s fundamental responsibilities is to play its important role in combating the evil of poverty.** Government, in a democracy, is a way we put our values into practice. Only government can ensure that the rules are fair and can protect the vulnerable from the greedy who would prey on them. For example, governments across the country are setting the minimum wage at a level that allows families to live in dignity.

Government creates the structures that allow poverty, and government can marshal the resources necessary for the infrastructure needed to create opportunities for people to escape poverty. We reject claims that our prosperous society cannot afford to provide pathways out of poverty. We have plenty of resources; the issue is one of priorities. Investment in education, transitional jobs, health care, and alternatives to incarceration can create pathways for many people. So the conversation about poverty cannot be held in purely theoretical terms. It must include very concrete discussion of the minimum wage, eligibility for BadgerCare and other health care, school nutrition programs, transitional jobs, tax policy, transit and criminal justice policy. We cannot let these conversations be polarized to “liberal vs conservative” but instead to “just vs. unjust.”

We believe that our faith has meaning when it is expressed in real actions that can reduce human suffering and promote the dignity of every person. So we must challenge our elected officials and community and business leaders to build real, mutually respectful, relationships with people in poverty. We encourage those in power to visit prisoners, central city youth and others – not just for public relations purposes, but to listen attentively to the stories of those who are struggling to get by in our society.

**In this election year, we encourage all people of faith to make poverty a priority issue when they vote.** We encourage faith communities to question those who would lead us about their plans to provide real, concrete help and opportunity for the poor – especially the children. We cannot consider only our own narrow self-interest when we engage in politics or business. Every decision must be evaluated according to the effect it will have on those in poverty, today and in the future.



## RELIGION

# Milwaukee faith communities begin charting changes in fighting poverty

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By *Annyssa Johnson* of the *Journal Sentinel*

June 04, 2014



Wisconsin's faith communities are at the forefront of addressing the symptoms of poverty in the state.

Food pantries, health clinics, housing initiatives — there is no shortage of faith-based programs aimed at serving what the Gospel of Matthew calls "the least of these."

But people of faith have a moral obligation to change the social and political structures that are widening the gulf between the rich and poor and leaving large numbers of Wisconsinites — especially children — behind, faith leaders said Wednesday at a Milwaukee symposium on poverty.

They began charting that change Wednesday, discussing ways they are laying the groundwork for a letter to political candidates — and possibly business leaders — that will spell out what they would like to see as priorities in the next election cycle.

"We are called to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God," the Rev. Willie Brisco, president of [the Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope](#), told the gathering of about 120 people of faith — bishops, clergy, lay leaders, volunteers and others — at [Marquette University](#).

"We must make sure that every citizen on this planet has a fair shake at this thing called life."



## Children and Families and Citizen Action of Wisconsin Education Fund.

Participants got a crash course on state and national statistics on poverty, income inequality, racial and gender disparities, and the social and moral implications for the broader society. [Among the findings presented by Citizen Action and the Council on Children and Families:](#)

- Since the 1970s, income levels have increased for the top 1% of earners, while flat-lining for middle- and low-income earners. The 400 of the wealthiest Americans now hold half the nation's wealth.
- Children 5 and younger represent the largest group of people in poverty, at 25%, up from 14% in 1969. Sixteen million children — more than the populations of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago combined — live in poverty.
- In Wisconsin, 100,000 children live in what is considered deep poverty. And the racial disparity — 50% of those children are African-American, 12% are white — is the largest nationally.
- In Wisconsin, 587,000 people are paid less than the \$10.10 minimum wage that has been proposed by the Obama administration. Adjusted for inflation, the minimum wage is \$2 less than it was in 1968. And a full-time minimum-wage job in Wisconsin grosses about \$15,000.
- Poverty is not unique to Milwaukee. There are poor people in its suburbs as well — one pastor spoke of the lack of food and transportation in some sections of Franklin — and deep pockets of poverty in the rural far northern part of the state.
- Poor people have less access to health care; are at greater risk for heart attacks, strokes and other life-threatening conditions; and have shorter life expectancies.

Those statistics were hammered home by the personal stories of two women. One told of her torturous journey through BadgerCare and a hospital's charity care system after she lost her health insurance and was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

"I was told it was people like me who were forcing the hospital to lay off employees," Ruthann Bowen said.



her daughter and grandchildren.

"I can't afford to put teeth in my mouth, as you can see," said Coleman, who supports an increase in the minimum wage. "We work. We should not have to depend on the public to take care of us."

Scott Anderson and Peter Bakken of the Wisconsin Council of Churches urged participants to educate their members about the issues in the fall election, but to keep the focus on policies rather than candidates, saying churches can offer a "model for civil discourse."

Participants broke off into small groups to brainstorm about the priorities they'd like to see in the letter to candidates. One group suggested that the letter also be sent to the chief operating officer of every Wisconsin corporation. Among the priorities: jobs, a living wage, job training and money for education.

They looked inward as well, and at the divisiveness that has polarized society at large. Faith communities, they said, need to set aside petty differences to work together; broaden their focus from charity to addressing the systemic causes of poverty; and speak out against a culture that vilifies the poor.

"The ideologies of division and demonizing the poor are contrary to all of our traditions, and we reject them," said Bob Beezat, of [St. Edward Catholic Parish in Racine](#).

Fighting poverty begins with the acknowledgment of human dignity, the Rev. Jeff Barrow, bishop of the [Greater Milwaukee Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#), said in his closing remarks.

"If you can begin to put a name and face on someone who's poor, you begin to look through different eyes," Barrow said. "If the poor are always anonymous, and simply the object of my own benevolence, then I've probably already lost the battle."

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# Sept. 18, 2014: Should Poverty be a Priority Issue in the November Elections?

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**ROUTE 51**

Thursday, September 18, 2014, 10:00am

By Jane Ritger

This Thursday, September 18th, **Route 51** examines an effort by the faith-based social justice group NAOMI to make the issue of poverty a priority in the November 4th elections. The group has released a letter which reads in part, “In this election year,...

# Local organizations to look at issue of poverty

Wisconsin Published 5:47 p.m. CT Sept. 28, 2014



(Photo: Contributed photo )

STEVENS POINT – Representatives from several faith and community response organizations will look at the issue of poverty and its effects throughout central Wisconsin on Wednesday in Stevens Point.

The Central Wisconsin Poverty Summit will be held from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church, 1300 Main St. in Stevens Point. Co-hosted by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, Citizen Action of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Council on Children & Families, and WISDOM, the summit is one of several being held across the state this week, including ones in Appleton, Eau Claire and Madison. A summit in Milwaukee was held June 4.

The Rev. Tom Lindner, dean of the Stevens Point Deanery and pastor of Newman University and St. Stanislaus Kostka parishes, said the focus of Wednesday's summit is to raise awareness about poverty in the region, to call awareness to organizations that serve that population, and make the issue of poverty a focal point of the fall election season.

According to a 2013 report from the Wisconsin Council on Children & Families, more than 250,000 children statewide are growing up in poverty. Children who grow up in "extreme poverty" — defined as families with incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line or \$9,765 per year for a family of three — number 100,000 in the state. According to a U.S. Census Bureau report from 2008-2012, 13.5 percent of people in Portage County lived below the poverty level, slightly higher than the 12.5 percent rate for the entire state.

The Rev. Susan Zencka, pastor at Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church, said some people have a difficult time understanding the issue of poverty in central Wisconsin.

"You might be living next to someone who is struggling with poverty and not know it, because it's an issue like mental illness or domestic abuse that many people don't talk about, but it affects people every day," Zencka said. "It's important to continue to shine a light on how we can help, because the teaching of many religions is very clear that caring for the poor is a moral issue."

Nathan Vine can be reached at 715-345-2252. Find him on Twitter as @SPJNathanVine.

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# Summit focuses on ways to better serve poor

Nathan Vine, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin

Published 5:52 p.m. CT Oct. 1, 2014 | Updated 6:15 p.m. CT Oct. 1, 2014



(Photo: Nathan Vine/Stevens Point Journal Media )

STEVENS POINT – Lonnie Selje said the hardest part of her job is meeting people who have reached rock bottom, and she's seeing more and more of those people in her work every day.

Selje, director of Helping Hands Gospel Mission in Wisconsin Rapids, was among the representatives of regional faith and community-response organizations who attended Wednesday's Central Wisconsin Poverty Summit, held at Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church in Stevens Point.

The event was co-hosted by the Wisconsin Council of Churches, Citizen Action of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Council on Children & Families and WISDOM. The purpose of the summit was to highlight the issue of poverty in the region and organizations that combat it, and to encourage people to make poverty a priority when they

vote for a candidate in the fall elections.

Helping Hands is a nonprofit organization that works with the homeless in Wood County. Wisconsin Rapids has no homeless shelter, so Selje works with homeless people who contact her or are referred to her for assistance by finding them accommodations and other services. Selje also serves as an advocate, often going to doctor appointments or the courthouse with clients who say they often feel they are treated differently in those situations because they are poor.

Selje said it often takes between four to six months for her to help people become solvent and find housing, and her caseload is growing dramatically — the number of homeless people she works with has tripled in the last six months compared to her usual workload.

"We connect people with resources to help them be self-sufficient going forward," Selje said. "It's hard for people who are trying to just cover the basic necessities of life to think about things like that sometimes, and it's why we need to help them."

Robert Kraig, executive director of Citizen Action of Wisconsin, said 16.4 million, or 23 percent, of children in the United States live below the poverty line, more than the populations of Los Angeles, Chicago and New York combined. The federal poverty level is \$23,624 for a family of four.

In Wisconsin, more than 250,000 children statewide are growing up in poverty, according to a 2013 report from the Wisconsin Council on Children & Families. Of that number, 100,000 are living in "extreme poverty," defined as families with incomes below 50 percent of the poverty line.

Kraig said children from poor families find themselves disadvantaged academically compared to students who do not come from poverty, from their verbal abilities to the development of the parietal and frontal regions of the brain that affect behavior, learning and attention. Kraig called on those at the forum to gather support among their congregations and in their communities to support legislation, such as a minimum wage increase, and efforts to serve the poor.

"We have to reach people's heart and soul and move away from the pervasive cynicism that we can't afford to make large changes to help these people," Kraig said. "We can do it, and we need to do it for our future."

Nathan Vine can be reached at 715-345-2252. Find him on Twitter as @SPJNathanVine.

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# Faith leaders fight against poverty

Holly Meyer, Post-Crescent Media

Published 4:19 p.m. CT Oct. 4, 2014 | Updated 4:24 p.m. CT Oct. 4, 2014



(Photo: Getty Images)

Fox Valley religious leaders say the pervasiveness of poverty in Wisconsin and its underlying causes cannot be ignored.

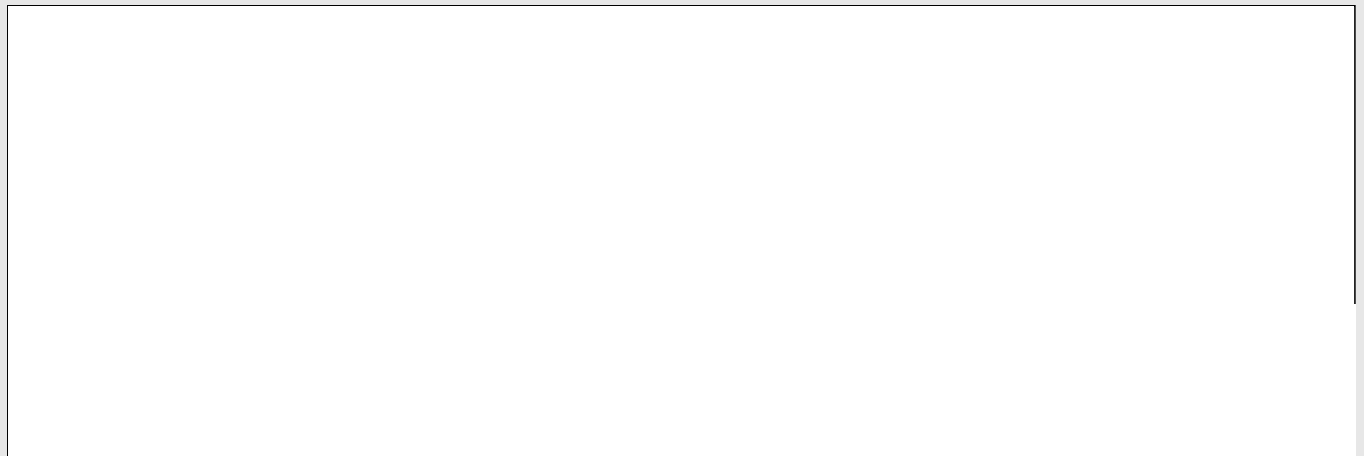
Members of the faith community recently came together for a Poverty Summit to learn more about what poverty looks like in the state and why it's their moral duty to step up.

"It's time to move and it's time to do something," said the Rev. Joseph Mattern to a packed room last week at St. John United Church of Christ in Appleton.

Mattern, a retired priest with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Green Bay, encouraged those who attended the symposium — hosted by interfaith social justice group Esther — to do something everyday on behalf of the poor. He is also the director of Casa Esther, a Catholic Worker house.

But charity alone is not enough to alleviate poverty in Wisconsin and systematic change is needed, according to the program's sponsors: Wisdom (Esther's parent organization), Wisconsin Council of Churches, Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, and Citizen Action of Wisconsin Education Fund.

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The organizations have hosted poverty summits across the state to equip the faith community with the information to make it a priority issue in the fall election.

Robert Kraig, of Citizen Action of Wisconsin, said it is possible to solve big social issues, but people must be inspired to find the passion to tackle the problems.

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Poverty is a faith issue, said Bishop Gerald Mansholt, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's East Central Synod of Wisconsin. Some of the harshest words of the Scriptures are reserved for those who trample on the backs of the poor, he said.

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"It is important that we be about this work," Mansholt said during the Poverty Summit. "It's incumbent upon us to give voice to the voiceless — to those who have no one advocating for them."

Kraig and Ken Taylor, of Wisconsin Council on Children and Families, shared compelling poverty statistics with those gathered at the Appleton church:

- More than 16 million children live below the federal poverty line in the U.S., making them the most impoverished group in the country. Wisconsin's child poverty is lower than the national average but it is growing fast.
- The growing free and reduced school lunch program numbers show that poverty is not just an urban issue in Wisconsin. One of 10 children in Outagamie County and one of 9 children in Winnebago County lives in poverty.
- Income inequality has grown dramatically in the U.S. since the 1960s, and social mobility is difficult. In Wisconsin, 587,000 workers make less than \$10.10 an hour.

Behind the numbers are real people who are struggling to get by, which is why GinaMaria Opalescent shared her story at the Poverty Summit.

Opalescent said her disability and food share checks don't cover her basic needs — even with her recent move into a wheelchair accessible, subsidized apartment in Appleton. Her budget is stretched too far to buy laundry detergent and toothpaste regularly.

"I'm constantly operating in the red. ... I kind of try to get one thing a month," said Opalescent, who is working on prison reform through Esther.

Opalescent said she doesn't want pity, she wants a job. She's constantly looking for work after losing her job helping parents navigate the state's special education system in 2012 when funding for her position was cut.

She also deals with debilitating pain in her hands and feet after a flu virus wreaked havoc on her nervous system in 2001.

"I am not ever wanting to be a victim. I chose victorious. I want to be victorious. I want to win this battle," Opalescent said. "Something's got to give and I think it's going to be soon and that's kind of the attitude that I keep having."

— Holly Meyer: 920-993-1000, ext. 426, or [hmeyer@postcrescent.com](mailto:hmeyer@postcrescent.com); on Twitter [@HollyAMeyer](https://twitter.com/HollyAMeyer)

### Faith and values

Reporter Holly Meyer explores trends in the Fox Valley's faith community. If you have a story idea, contact her at 920-993-1000, ext. 426, or [hmeyer@postcrescent.com](mailto:hmeyer@postcrescent.com). Follow her on Twitter [@HollyAMeyer](https://twitter.com/HollyAMeyer).

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## MILWAUKEE NEWS

# Letter urges people of faith to make poverty a voting issue

By *Annysa Johnson* of the *Journal Sentinel*

Oct. 26, 2014



Hundreds of individuals representing more than 20 religious traditions [have signed on to a public letter](#) calling on people of faith to make poverty a priority issue when they cast their ballots in the Nov. 4 elections.

"We believe that one of government's fundamental responsibilities is to play its important role in combating the evil of poverty," says the letter, titled "Faithful Citizenship: A response to the Scandal of Poverty in Wisconsin."

"We encourage faith communities to question those who would lead us about their plans to provide real, concrete help and opportunity for the poor — especially children," it goes on to say.

The letter, posted on the website <http://www.prayforjusticeinwi.org>, is a joint effort of the [Wisconsin Council of Churches](#), the faith-based social justice coalition WISDOM, the [Wisconsin Council on Children and Families](#), and [Citizen Action of Wisconsin Education Fund](#) to elevate issues of poverty in the November election.

It has been circulating in faith communities for about two months and has drawn more than 1,100 signatures to date.

Organizers said Thursday that they would be delivering it to Wisconsin candidates for governor and Congress, as well as leaders of Wisconsin's state Legislature.



national rate of 14.5%. But that belies the extreme pockets of poverty in parts of the state and among some groups, including children, seniors and minorities.

In Wisconsin, about half of all African-American children live in poverty. One in five people in Milwaukee County lived below the poverty line in 2012, according to studies.

The Faithful Citizenship letter grew out of a series of meetings around the state, launched by a poverty summit at Marquette University that drew about 200 participants in June.

"The religious community has a unique perspective on the issues of poverty not only out of our faith commitments but also because in many respects we are the largest provider of services to low-income people in Wisconsin, particularly emergency food and shelter," Scott Anderson, director of the Wisconsin Council of Churches, said in a conference call Thursday.

"Because of that, those of us in the religious community have felt strongly that we need to raise our voices, particularly in this election when poverty is being addressed by both political parties with various proposals that they have put on the table."

Issues of poverty "go right to the heart of what our traditions stand for," said David Liners, executive director of WISDOM.

While faith leaders are proud of the work they do in meeting the needs of the poor, he said they must do more to address the systemic causes.

"The faith community needs to ... engage in the very specific issues that affect poverty," he said. "It needs to get involved in questions like access to medical care, minimum wage and access to opportunities."

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## Matter of Faith: Who sits at the welcome table?

By The Rev. Julianne Lepp Oct 11, 2014

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. No one will say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you."

This recognizes that every person has worth and deserves to be recognized with love and respect.

You might have seen the bumper sticker around town that is an adapted quote from Gandhi, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

This is a compelling call. It doesn't say sit back and watch television while other people make a difference. It can seem daunting, but small efforts tip the scale in the right direction.

Due to citizens being concerned that there was too much waste at public events, we now have containers for recycling and composting. Growing up in South Carolina, I remember when it wasn't common to have curbside recycling, and it was a huge effort to get things recycled.

In our country and state there have been movements for community gardens and fresher foods in schools. All these efforts add up to actions that make change.

Two weeks ago, I attended a poverty summit held at First Presbyterian Church in Eau Claire. There were 150 clergy, students, local officials and citizens of Eau Claire who gathered to speak about poverty and, most importantly, figure out ways to affect change.

When talking about a large subject like poverty and homelessness, it is easy to become overwhelmed and feel helpless to change anything. It also is easy to make this about "them" rather than "us."

Poverty hurts all of us. A person that uses the emergency room for regular health care drives up the costs of health care for everyone. A child that is hungry cannot learn as well and might be more prone to behavior problems

A speaker from the Wisconsin Council of Churches called us to think about the stereotypes that we have about people in poverty. These are some of the stereotypes: People in poverty are lazy. People in poverty make bad choices. People in poverty exploit the system. People in poverty don't work hard enough. These are myths.

At the summit, we heard from a man who had moved from homelessness to employment and housing, and he related that many people don't look at "homeless people" as people.

We heard from Mike Henry (of Plymouth Homeless ministry), who quoted Gandhi as saying, "Poverty is the worst form of violence." Mike went on to say that people need a hand to get upright, just to get on their feet. He talked about the importance of dignity and connecting people to resources.

As I heard these speakers I kept hearing an old spiritual refrain in my head - the hymn "We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table."

Who sits at the welcome table?

I moved to Wisconsin from Georgia and grew up in South Carolina, where I have seen many battles against racial divides and poverty. Yet here in Wisconsin, the state ranks last in the country in the overall well-being of African-American children. Eight out of every 10 African-American children in Wisconsin live in poverty, compared with fewer than 4 of 10 Latino children and roughly 2 of 10 white children.

Who sits at the welcome table?

One in 9 households in Wisconsin has difficulty providing food for all its members due to a lack of resources, according to a new report from the U.S Department of Agriculture. That rate is sharply up from a decade ago, when only 1 in 12 Wisconsin households faced food insecurity.

Who sits at the welcome table?

Advancing Hope is a program that emerged from the interfaith JONAH Economic Taskforce ([jonahjustice.org](http://jonahjustice.org)). This micro-lending program assists people in obtaining a zero-interest loan to help make a difference, like a first month's rent or a car repair that will help them keep their job.

Many of us are one paycheck away from being poor, at risk of losing our housing and inability to pay bills. It is artificial to separate ourselves from "them" the poor when we are in this community together. We all breathe the same air and use the same water.

I remember the first time I had to explain to my son Kiernan why so many kids at his elementary school would come home on Fridays with plastic bags. (Feed My People Food bank provides food, so families don't go hungry on weekends.)

We are the breadbasket of the country, and kids are going to bed hungry at night in our community. This should fire us up to make a change.

"We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table ... gonna sit at the table one of these days."

If we work together in interfaith groups like JONAH, if we persuade our lawmakers to have civil discourse rather than rhetoric, if we support programs that keep people upright, and if we can find small ways to live out our faith, we will see the kingdom in each and every person.

Lepp is lifespan minister at Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Eau Claire.

n Matter of Faith, a column on faith and ethics, runs periodically.

If You Go

What: JONAH - Joining Our Neighbors in Advancing Hope - is hosting the Communi-tea Celebration from 4 to 6:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 18, at The Community Table, 320 Putnam St.

Why: The aim of the event is to work together to build healthier communities.

Keynote speaker: Paula Tran Inzeo, assistant director of the Center for Nonprofits. In her job, she manages the center's action research and evaluation portfolio of projects and initiatives. Her role also includes serving as health equity coordinator for the Transform Wisconsin statewide Community Transformation Grant, managing the Thrive WI health equity alliance and developing a health impact assessment collaborative.

Other: The event also will include classical music, a fancy hat contest, food, motivational speakers and a silent auction, which will begin at 4 p.m.

Tickets: \$25. Ticket reservations are available through member congregations and by calling 715-864-2982.