

A Lenten Invitation: Joining Hands in Prayer



A Dalit woman holds her child at a Chethana gathering.

THE JOINING HANDS INITIATIVE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN HUNGER PROGRAM CONNECTS U.S. PRESBYTERIES AND CONGREGATIONS WITH NETWORKS IN NINE COUNTRIES AROUND THE WORLD, WORKING TOGETHER TO END HUNGER AND TO CHANGE THE ROOT PROBLEMS THAT KEEP PEOPLE POOR. GROUPS OF CHURCHES IN 11 U.S. PRESBYTERIES ARE LINKED TO NETWORKS IN NINE COUNTRIES. SACRAMENTO PRESBYTERY IS LINKED TO THE JOINING HANDS FOR JUSTICE NETWORK OF INDIA.

Recycling Lives in India

All of her life, Rukumni has known she is considered to be disposable in Indian society. A mother of two daughters, she was abandoned by her husband. A Dalit, she is treated as an outcast, as untouchable. In India's caste system, Dalit's aren't even a part of the strict Hindu social ladder. She is triply oppressed. She is poor, female and Dalit. And therefore, disposable. Rukumni's only employable skill is that of a farm laborer and those jobs are in short supply since big agri-businesses are putting small farmers out of production.

Desperate to earn money to feed her family, Rukumni found her way to Chethana, a network of organizations and people's movements in southern India that is linked with the Joining Hands Initiative of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Chethana came into existence as a collective in 2000. It organized to find ways for India's marginalized poor to break into the market and out of centuries of poverty. One of those ways is economic development for Dalit women: Small collectives of women are organizing to create alternate ways to support themselves and their children. One such program is to collect garbage and recycle the bio-degradable items for alternative uses, like compost for organic cultivation of land or gas for cooking. It is a salvage effort that not only cares for the earth, but for the lives of women who have no access to other jobs. The women recycle newspapers to produce environmentally friendly bags for use by companies, hotels and other businesses to reduce reliance on non-degradable plastics. They are also weighing other opportunities, such as leasing land and cultivating organic crops.

This program began in 2007, with its focus on empowering women, alternative markets and preserving the earth. Each member of a group receives a \$22 loan to generate income. By 2010, the organization hopes to expand its work in four states and to create an alternative marketing chain.

For women like Rukumni, the campaign not only puts food on the table, but resists a centuries-old notion that some people are disposable, that their lives do not matter. Rukumni wants her daughters to know that dignity is possible. Mothers like Rukumni - and their children - are asking that you pray with them on Palm Sunday as they raise their voices in hosannas of hope:

God of power and mercy,

We continue to worship you and thank you for the gift of this day, the day when we are reminded of the little children greeting your Son with shouts of Hosanna in Jerusalem. The simple laughter and spontaneous jubilation of these children and other children in our midst make us aware of your gift of life itself. Help us to be good stewards of the world you have created so that these and all other children may grow in a world where peace and harmony and justice reign ...

Our thoughts and prayers are for all the people here and everywhere who struggle for the values of your kingdom ... There are Dalits who are crushed by the system of caste discrimination and violence. There are women who are deprived of their humanity by age-old patriarchy. We continue to ask how long do they have to suffer?

Yet we remember with gratitude all those who fight with great determination to preserve their dignity and rights. We marvel at their courage and our hearts go out to them. In solidarity with all who suffer, they derive new life and power. You are a God who makes all things new. The Church universal is your creation. And you do raise up men and women in every religion and in social movements to be the sign and instrument of your kingdom. Tomorrow is in your hands. You have given us today to work and to celebrate. Let there be greater peace and justice in this world of yours.

Amen.

(Prayer by the Rev. Dr. K.C. Abraham, a presbyter of the Church of South India and a leading Third World theologian; Photo by Lionel Derenoncourt, coordinator of the Joining Hands Initiative; Material supplied by the Rev. Thomas John, PC(USA) Mission Personnel and Joining Hands facilitator in India)

TO DONATE TO THE WORK OF THE JOINING HAND INITIATIVE, ACCESS THE WEBSITE AT WWW.PCUSA.ORG/JOININGHAND/SUPPORT.HTM. DONATIONS MAY ALSO BE MAILED TO THE PRESBYTERIAN HUNGER PROGRAM, 100 WITHERSPOON ST., LOUISVILLE, KY 40202, ACCOUNT NUMBER E051608; OR TO THE ACCOUNT FOR CHETHANA, H000103.