

## A Lenten Invitation: Joining Hands in Prayer



Women celebrate at the worship where seeds are blessed.

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.

The Presbytery of Western Reserve is linked to Sisonke Masilwe Indlala.

## Planting Blessings

In Soto, South Africa, the women and children are dancing and clapping. It is planting time, and they have land and seeds. Sometime in May, there will be cabbage, spinach, beets, onions, broccoli and corn to put on the table, with leftovers to sell.

It is a blessing: Which is why there is dancing and clapping and prayer.

The annual service, known as the Blessing of Seeds, comes at the end of a village-wide training in permaculture, during which men and women who've learned methods of sustainable agriculture free from dependence on materials or technology imported from outside their town. Spoonfuls of seeds – poured into paper cones – are celebrated, and then sown in family gardens.

“Many people are not working,” says the Rev. Welile Sigabi, a Methodist pastor in the Xhosa-speaking village of Soto, in the rural Eastern Cape of South Africa, and one of the leaders of the Joining Hands Network there, known as Sisonke Masilwe Indlala (SMI) or Together Let Us Fight Hunger. “So, we try to encourage people to plant vegetables and feed themselves ... to have enthusiasm to plow.”

The land here isn't the best. In fact, most of Soto's residents are squatting here. They were pushed off land elsewhere to make way for white farmers in the apartheid-era. In the negotiations that closed that era, the South African government committed to securing land for millions of the nation's landless black population, either by restoring stolen farmland or obtaining new acreage. But it is a slow process with only mixed success.

In Soto, people will likely stay put working their 50x50 plots of earth.

The Joining Hands Network in South Africa is working on behalf of South Africa's landless people in other provinces. Sigabi is often called to teach: How to irrigate dry land. How to create cisterns to hold water. How to build fences to protect fledgling crops. How to raise nutritious crops in order to feed not only a child, but a whole village. The organizations in the SMI are lobbying national officials to pay attention to smaller scale planting efforts, like these in Soto, which are often neglected in favor of large-scale, export-oriented commercial agriculture. What people want in Soto is food on the table.

“When the harvest comes, the village will gather at the church for another event. This time, a thanksgiving,” says Sigabi.

In this Lenten season, the children of Soto are asking that you pray for South Africa and for its coming harvest, for its landless people and for the bread of life ... which saves us all:

*Our Heavenly Father, Creator of us all on earth ...*

*My Lord, here is my garden that I love so much. I ask, Lord, to give strength to plow it with success. I want this garden to give me and my children food fertilized by your Holy Spirit. This garden must keep us safe from starvation when I plant it. I ask you, Lord, to give rain to water it. I pray that this garden must be humid all the time. I also ask you, Lord, to stop insects that are destroying leaves of my plants. They can eat, but they must leave some for us.*

*It is my wish to help those who cannot plow their gardens due to old age and illnesses. I so wish that, with food harvested from this garden, our bodies shall be able to fight diseases.*

*With hope and faith in your Son Jesus Christ, this shall happen.*

*(Prayer by Mrs. Nomisile Bensengile of the Together Let Us Fight Hunger Network; Material by Ken Jones and Susanne Carter, former PC(USA) mission personnel and Joining facilitators in South Africa; Photo by the Rev. Susanne Carter)*

TO DONATE TO THE WORK OF THE JOINING HANDS INITIATIVE,  
VISIT THE WEBSITE AT [WWW.PCUSA.ORG/JOININGHANDS/SUPPORT.HTM](http://WWW.PCUSA.ORG/JOININGHANDS/SUPPORT.HTM).  
DONATIONS MAY ALSO BE MAILED TO **THE PRESBYTERIAN HUNGER PROGRAM**,  
100 WITHERSPON ST., LOUISVILLE, KY 40202, ACCOUNT NUMBER **E051608**; OR  
TO THE ACCOUNT FOR JOINING HANDS-SOUTH AFRICA, H000109.