

Resources for
THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
and throughout the year

2023

Do good; seek justice

(Isaiah 1:17)

Jointly prepared and published by
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TO THOSE ORGANIZING THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

The search for unity: throughout the year

The traditional period in the northern hemisphere for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is 18-25 January. Those dates were proposed in 1908 by Paul Wattson to cover the days between the feasts of St Peter and St Paul, and therefore have a symbolic significance. In the southern hemisphere where January is a vacation time churches often find other days to celebrate the Week of Prayer, for example around Pentecost (suggested by the Faith and Order movement in 1926), which is also a symbolic date for the unity of the Church.

Mindful of the need for flexibility, we invite you to use this material throughout the whole year to express the degree of communion which the churches have already reached, and to pray together for that full unity which is Christ's will.

Adapting the text

This material is offered with the understanding that, whenever possible, it will be adapted for use in local situations. Account should be taken of local liturgical and devotional practice, and of the whole social and cultural context. Such adaptation should ideally take place ecumenically. In some places ecumenical structures are already set up for adapting the material; in other places, we hope that the need to adapt it will be a stimulus to creating such structures.

Using the Week of Prayer material

- For churches and Christian communities which observe the Week of Prayer together through a single common service, an order for an ecumenical worship service is provided.
- Churches and Christian communities may also incorporate material from the Week of Prayer into their own services. Prayers from the ecumenical worship service, the "eight days", and the selection of additional prayers can be used as appropriate in their own setting.
- Communities which observe the Week of Prayer in their worship for each day during the week may draw material for these services from the "eight days".
- Those wishing to undertake bible studies on the Week of Prayer theme can use as a basis the biblical texts and reflections given in the eight days. Each day the discussions, which this year includes a challenge, can lead to a closing period of intercessory prayer.
- Those who wish to pray privately may find the material helpful for focusing their prayer intentions. They can be mindful that they are in communion with others praying all around the world for the greater visible unity of Christ's Church.

BIBLICAL TEXT FOR 2023

Isaiah 1:12-18

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

New Revised Standard Version

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME OF THE YEAR 2023

Do good; seek justice

(Isaiah 1:17)

Introduction

Isaiah lived and prophesied in Judah during the eighth century BCE and was a contemporary of Amos, Micah and Hosea. This was towards the end of a period of great economic success and political stability for both Israel and Judah, due to the weakness of the ‘superpowers’ of the time, Egypt and Assyria. However, it was also a period when injustice, inequity and inequalities were rampant in both kingdoms.

This period also saw religion thriving as a ritual and formal expression of belief in God, concentrated on Temple offerings and sacrifices. This formal and ritual religion was presided over by the priests, who were also the beneficiaries of the largesse of the rich and powerful. Due to the physical proximity and interconnectedness of the royal palace and the Temple, power and influence were centered almost entirely on the king and the priests, neither of whom, for much of this history, stood up for those who were enduring oppression and inequity. In the worldview of this time (one which recurs throughout history), the rich and those who made many offerings were understood to be good and blessed by God, while those who were poor and could not offer sacrifices were understood to be wicked and cursed by God. The poor were often denigrated for their economic inability to fully participate in Temple worship.

Isaiah spoke into this context, attempting to awaken the consciousness of the people of Judah to the reality of their situation. Instead of honouring the contemporary religiosity as a blessing, Isaiah saw it as a festering wound and a sacrilege before the Almighty. Injustice and inequality led to fragmentation and disunity. His prophecies denounce the political, social and religious structures and the hypocrisy of offering sacrifices while oppressing the poor. He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders and in favour of the disadvantaged, rooting righteousness and justice in God alone.

The working group appointed by the Minnesota Council of Churches chose this verse from the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah as the central text for the Week of Prayer: *“learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (1:17).*

Isaiah taught that God requires righteousness and justice from all of us, all the time and in all spheres of life. Our world today in many ways mirrors the challenges of division that Isaiah confronted in his preaching. Justice, righteousness and unity originate from God’s profound love for each of us, and are at the heart of who God is and how God expects us to be with one another. God’s commitment to create a new humanity *“from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev 7:9)* calls us to the peace and unity God has always wanted for creation.

The prophet’s language with regard to the religiosity of the time is ferocious – *“Bringing offerings is futile, incense is an abomination to me ... When you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you” (vv. 13, 15).* Once he has spoken these blistering condemnations, diagnosing what is wrong, Isaiah offers

the remedy for these iniquities. He instructs God's people to, *"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil"* (v. 16).

Today, separation and oppression continue to be manifest when any single group or class is given privileges above others. The sin of racism is evident in any beliefs or practices that distinguish or elevate one "race"¹ over another. When accompanied or sustained by imbalances in power, racial prejudice moves beyond individual relationships to the very structures of society – the systemic perpetuation of racism. Its existence has unfairly benefitted some, including churches, and burdened and excluded others, simply due to the colour of their skin and the cultural associations based upon perceptions of "race".

Like the religious people so fiercely denounced by the biblical prophets, some Christian believers have been or continue to be complicit in supporting or perpetuating prejudice and oppression and fostering division. History shows that, rather than recognising the dignity of every human being made in the image and likeness of God, Christians have too often involved themselves in structures of sin such as slavery, colonisation, segregation and apartheid which have stripped others of their dignity on the spurious grounds of race. So too within the churches, Christians have failed to recognise the dignity of all the baptised and have belittled the dignity of their brothers and sisters in Christ on the grounds of supposed racial difference.

Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr memorably said, *"It is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour in Christian America"*. This statement demonstrates the intersections between the disunity of Christians and the disunity of humanity. All division has its root in sin, that is, in attitudes and actions that run counter to the unity that God desires for the whole of his creation. Tragically racism is part of the sin that has divided Christians from one another, has caused Christians to worship at separate times; and in separate buildings, and in certain cases has led Christian communities to divide.

Unfortunately, not much has changed since the time of Martin Luther King's statement. The 11:00 am time slot – the most common time for Sunday worship – often does not manifest Christian unity, but rather, division, along racial and social as well as denominational lines. As Isaiah proclaimed, this hypocrisy among people of faith is an offence before God: *"even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood"* (v. 15).

Learn to do good

In the Scripture passage chosen for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023, the prophet Isaiah teaches us how we are to cure these ills.

Learning to do right requires the decision to engage in self-reflection. The Week of Prayer is the perfect time for Christians to recognize that the divisions between our churches and confessions cannot be separated from the divisions within the wider human family. Praying together for Christian unity allows us to reflect on what unites us and to commit ourselves to confront oppression and division amongst humanity.

The prophet Micah points out that God has told us what is good and what God requires of us: *"to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Mic 6:8). To act justly means that we have respect for all persons. Justice requires truly equitable treatment in order to address historic disadvantage based on "race", gender, religion and socio-economic status. To walk humbly with God requires repentance, reparations, and finally reconciliation. God expects us to unite in a shared

1. There is only one race, the human race. However, we must acknowledge that the myth of race has caused the reality of racism. Race is not biological; it is a social construct which separates humanity according to physical traits. It is important to acknowledge that while the term may not be used in various parts of the world, it has been used as a tool to effectively divide and oppress groups of humans.

responsibility for equity for all God's children. The unity of Christians should be a sign and foretaste of the reconciled unity of the entire creation. However, Christian division weakens the force of that sign, serving to reinforce division rather than bring healing to the world's brokenness which is the Church's mission.

Seek justice

Isaiah counsels Judah to seek justice (*v. 17*), which is an acknowledgment of the existence of injustice and oppression in their society. He implores the people of Judah to overturn this *status quo*. Seeking justice requires us to face up to those who inflict evil on others. This is not an easy task and will sometimes lead to conflict, but Jesus assures us that standing up for justice in the face of oppression leads to the kingdom of heaven. "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (*Mt 5:10*). Churches in many parts of the world must acknowledge how they have conformed to societal norms and been silent or actively complicit regarding racial injustice. Racial prejudice has been one of the causes of Christian division that has torn the Body of Christ. Toxic ideologies, such as White Supremacy and the doctrine of discovery², have caused much harm, particularly in North America and in lands throughout the world colonized by White European powers over the centuries. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and to advocate for justice.

The year during which the Minnesota writing group was preparing the texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was filled with the evil and devastation of oppression in its many forms all over the world. This suffering was greatly amplified in many regions, especially in the Global South, by the Covid-19 pandemic, where even basic subsistence was almost impossible for many, and practical assistance was largely absent. The author of Ecclesiastes seemed to be speaking to the current experience: "*I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them*" (*Eccles 4:1*).

Oppression is harmful to the entire human race. There can be no unity without justice. As we pray for Christian unity, we must acknowledge current and generational oppression and be resolute in our commitment to repent of these sins. We can make our own Isaiah's injunction to "*wash yourselves; make yourselves clean*" because "*your hands are full of blood*" (*vv. 15, 16*).

Rescue the oppressed

The Bible tells us that we cannot separate our relationship with Christ from our attitude towards all God's people, particularly those considered "*the least of these*" (*Mt 25:40*). Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in *mishpat*, the Hebrew word for restorative justice, advocating for those whose voices have not been heard, dismantling structures that create and sustain injustice, and building others that promote and ensure everyone receives fair treatment and the rights that are due to them. This work must extend beyond our friends, family and congregations to the whole of humanity. Christians are called to go out and listen to the cries of all who are suffering, in order to better understand and respond to their stories of suffering and their trauma. Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr. often stated that "*a riot is the language of the unheard.*" When protest and civil unrest arise, it is often because the protesters' voices are not being heard. If churches join their voices to

2. The Doctrine of Discovery resulted from a Papal Bull issued by Pope Alexander VI (May 4th, 1493), and was pervasive throughout the world benefitting the churches in every way in regards to the descendants of Indigenous and Enslaved people. It justified seizing the lands of Indigenous peoples on the grounds that the colonizing powers 'discovered' these lands.

those of the oppressed, their cry for justice and liberation will be amplified. We serve and love God and our neighbour by serving and loving one another in unity.

Defend the orphan, plead for the widow

Widows and orphans occupy a special place in the Hebrew Bible, alongside strangers, as representatives of the most vulnerable members of society. In the context of the economic success in Judah at the time of Isaiah, the situation of orphans and widows was a desperate one as they were deprived of protection and of the right to own land, and therefore the capacity to provide for themselves. The prophet called on the community, as it rejoiced in its prosperity, not to neglect to defend and nurture the poorest and most vulnerable among them. This prophetic call echoes in our time, as we consider: who are the most vulnerable people in our society?

Whose voices are not being heard in our communities? Who is not represented at the table? Why? Which churches and communities are missing from our dialogues, our common action and our prayer for Christian unity? As we pray together during this Week of Prayer, what are we willing to do about these absent voices?

Conclusion

Isaiah challenged God's people in his day to learn to do good *together*, to seek justice *together*, to rescue the oppressed *together*, to defend the orphan and plead for the widow *together*. The prophet's challenge applies equally to us today. How can we live our unity as Christians so as to confront the evils and injustices of our time? How can we engage in dialogue, increase awareness, understanding and insight about one another's lived experiences?

These prayers and encounters of the heart have the power to transform us – individually and collectively. Let us be open to God's presence in all our encounters with each other as we seek to be transformed, to dismantle the systems of oppression, and to heal the sins of racism. Together, let us engage in the struggle for justice in our society. We all belong to Christ.

THE PREPARATION OF THE MATERIAL FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2023

The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 was chosen, and the materials prepared, by a group of Christians in the United States of America (USA) convened by the Minnesota Council of Churches. In December 2020, the group first met online, many knowing each other and all knowing the work of the Minnesota Council of Churches, some of them leaders in that organization as well as being activists and/or pastors in their own congregations and communities. The international group jointly sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches to finalize materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 met with delegates from the Minnesota Council of Churches in the Château de Bossey, Switzerland, 19-23 September 2021.

For years, Minnesota has had some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. Minnesota saw the largest mass execution in the history of the USA in 1862, when 38 members of the Dakota Indigenous people were hanged in Mankato, the day after Christmas Day, following the US-Dakota War. As they prepared to die, the 38 sang the hymn *Wakantanka taku nitawa* (Many and Great) a version of which is included in the worship service. More recently, Minnesota has been at the epicenter of racial reckoning. When Covid-19 shut down the world in March 2020, the murder of a young African American man, George Floyd, at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin drew people from all over the world out onto the streets in unity and righteous anger, to protest the injustice they witnessed on their television screens. Chauvin, who was dismissed immediately after the assault,³ would become the first police officer in modern history convicted for murdering a Black person in Minnesota.

The history of mistreatment of communities of colour in the United States has created longstanding inequities and relational rifts between communities. Consequently, the history of the churches in the United States includes racial issues as a major factor of ecclesial division. In other parts of the world, other non-doctrinal issues play a similar role. That is why the theological work on unity done by the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order has traditionally sought to hold together the search for the churches' unity and the search for overcoming walls of separation within the human family such as racism. That is why prayer, especially prayer for Christian unity, takes an even more important meaning when it takes place in the heart of the struggles against what separates us as humans created with equal dignity in the image and likeness of God.⁴ The Minnesota Council of Churches, already engaged in addressing these historic racial patterns, convened a working group that articulated the scripture readings, themes, music, and worship service for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The working group consisted of intergenerational Minnesota clergy and lay leaders who have been working on the front lines of the unrest. They have been responsible for both spiritual and community care in the region and have borne witness to the frustrations and cries of God's people. Members of this working group represented many different cultural and spiritual communities and were inclusive of Indigenous and African American communities who have been at the center of the recent reckoning. While writing these materials, these communities continued to experience

3. Chauvin was dismissed by the first African American Minneapolis Police Chief, Medaria Arradondo.

4. See for instance: *Unity in Today's World – The Faith and Order Study on the Unity of the Church and the Unity of Humankind*, Geneva, WCC, 1978; *Church and World – The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, Geneva, WCC, 1990.

extrajudicial killings⁵, the death of children due to rising violence, and continued hardships as a result of the pandemic.

The online writing meetings became a sacred and safe space of energy and support and prayer as the group moved through the attack on the United States Capitol, the trial of former officer Derek Chauvin and the anniversary of the murder of George Floyd.

The members of the writing group were men, women, mothers, fathers, storytellers and healers. They represented diverse worship experiences and spiritual expressions, both from the Indigenous peoples of the United States and communities who have immigrated – both forced and voluntary – with varying levels of access to their individual linguistic and cultural histories, who now call this region home. Members represented urban and suburban regions and many Christian communities. This diversity allowed for deep reflection and solidarity across the many perspectives.

The members of the Minnesota writing group are hopeful that their personal experiences of racism and devaluation as human beings will serve as witness to the inhumanity of God’s children toward one another. It is also from deep longing within that as Christians they embody God’s gift of unity to address and eradicate the divisions that keep us from understanding and experiencing the reality that we all belong to Christ.

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5. This term refers to killings carried out by state authorities without any legal or judicial process. An example is the shooting of Daunte Wright in April 2021.

ECUMENICAL WORSHIP SERVICE

Instructions for those preparing the worship

The river/water motif has strong cultural relevance for the local committee designing these worship resources. For the Minnesotan context the river and water have meant both cultural genesis and genocide at points in the history of this region.

This motif also has theological and liturgical significance. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (WPCU) in the Northern Hemisphere is observed in January, not long after many traditions commemorate the Baptism of the Lord. This belief that all belong and are members of this beloved community that both is and is becoming, fuels the work of social justice, and racial justice in particular, calling us to public witness and advocacy as co-creators with God in bringing into existence peace with justice in all creation.

In other parts of the world, the WPCU is observed around Pentecost, when we celebrate the genesis of the Church and we are built up in the Body of Christ as living stones. The Church is instituted by the Spirit in the midst of diversity and with the unifying and prophesying power of the Holy Spirit. Unity in the midst of diversity and this unifying and prophesying power fuels the work of justice, making plain our common humanity and giving us the ability to communicate, despite differences as well as the ability to bear witness to and through the power of God.

The connection between stone and water in the Native Minnesota context is about understanding the value and importance of life. In most Native American wisdom, water and stone occupy sacred positions. Water is life and stones represent the sacredness of the ground upon which many generations have stood. All of creation is endowed with the Spirit of God, therefore we are all related. Two symbols will be used in the worship service: **water**, representing our baptism into new life and **stone** representing our personal and ancestral history.

After greeting the assembly, we pause for a moment of confession and forgiveness which incorporates the principal text for the Week of Prayer (*Is* 1:12-18). During the ritual action, as part of the penitential act, the presider pours a pitcher of water into the baptismal font (or a basin) during the reading of verses 16 and 17. It is important that this is done slowly and audibly so the congregation may meditate on the meaning of what is being said and what is being symbolically recalled. After the act of confession and pardon, there follows an opening prayer, hymn and liturgy of the Word.

Grounded in the text from Isaiah, the homily or sermon needs to link the issues of Christian unity and racial injustice which is both individual and systemic or institutional. The marginalization of people because of their “race”, culture or language tears apart the fabric of the human community and is the cause of disunity in our Christian community. Christian unity needs to be strong and visible so as to speak to how the same Spirit received in our baptism creates unity out of the rich diversity of God’s creation and is the plan of God for the unity of humanity.

The homily should also lead into the symbolic act which follows. All present should be given a stone as they arrive. The communities that plan the worship together could identify and invite two or three persons to tell stories about racial injustice and about how Christian unity can serve the overcoming of injustice. After each story, the speaker places his or her stone around a cross or lit candle, the symbol of Christ the corner stone. This ritual action should be planned to be about 15 minutes in duration. At the conclusion of this symbolic act, the presider can invite the congregation to continue the telling of their stories after the worship.

The liturgy concludes with the prayers of the people, the praying together of the Lord's Prayer, the benediction and dismissal. There are indications for music at different points of the service and some suggested texts or hymns are found in the appendix.

This ecumenical worship service has a simple order that can be adapted for local situations and traditions to allow for diversity of expression and expansion of the celebration to include other elements of practice, such as local rituals and prayers. Through the written words of this liturgy, it is meant to convey the emotions, struggles, and hope of the current day descendants of enslaved African American and Indigenous people residing in Minnesota. This will be accentuated in particular in the hymns and songs chosen for the worship.

Order of Worship

L Leader
R Reader
C Congregation

Prelude

Call to Gather

Sisters and brothers, we gather here in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

By the waters of baptism, we have become members of the Body of Christ, yet our sins have caused pain and trauma to each other.

We have failed to do good.

We have not sought justice in the face of grave oppression, nor heeded God's command to care for the widow and orphan (*Is 1:17*).

As we gather, let us reflect on our actions and inactions and learn to do good and seek justice.

We need God's grace to overcome our divisions and to uproot systems and structures that have contributed to the fracturing of our communities.

We gather to pray to reinforce the unity that we have as Christians to "open our hearts, that we may be bold in finding the riches of inclusion and the treasures of diversity among us. We pray in faith."⁶

Hymn

Many and great, O God (*Dakota Hymn*) (p. 15-16)

6. Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Words of Welcome

Invitation to Confession and Forgiveness

Confession and Forgiveness through the Reading of Isaiah 1:12-18

L We are invited to confess our sins with the words of the prophet Isaiah.

R 1 When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me (12 – 13a).

C **Forgive us Lord when we come to worship without walking humbly before you.**

Silence

R 2 New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation – I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them (13b – 14).

C **We ask forgiveness for the complicity of churches in the evils of colonialism felt around the world.**

Silence

R 3 When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. (15)

C **We ask forgiveness for our sins of injustice and oppression that suppress the diverse harmony of your creation.**

Silence

(At the font, the presider slowly pours a pitcher of water into the font or a basin during the reading.)

R 4 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (16, 17)

C **As we have been washed clean in the living waters of baptism, forgive us anew and reconcile us to one another and to creation.**

Silence

R 5 Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. (18)

L May God in his mercy, free you from your sins so that you can do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

Silence

L Almighty God hears our prayers, has mercy on us and forgives our sins.

C **Thanks be to God.**

Prayer

L God of all, our hearts and bodies are thankful for this opportunity to come before you to confess our sins of injustice and divisiveness.

Together we come before you, a holy family, united in the beautiful diversity of your creation: some of us are Indigenous peoples, some of us are descendants of the enslaved,

some of us are descendants of the enslavers, some of us are migrants, some of us are refugees, but all of us are part of the one Body of Christ.

We praise you that through the living waters of baptism our sins, red as scarlet, were washed away and we were healed, as we became part of the beloved community, the family of God. We offer our thanksgiving and praise to you, Creator God.

Together on this journey, we celebrate with our hearts and eyes open to understanding and growing in the sacred wisdom that is shared and passed amongst all people. Help us to embrace unity with each other, and remind us that we are of one family gathered by your Holy Spirit, in the midst of your creation.

C Amen

Hymn

Wade into the water (p. 17)

Epistle Reading Ephesians 2:13-22

Psalm 42 (responsively)

R As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When shall I come and behold the face of God?

C Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.

R My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember, as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

C Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.

R Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.
My soul is cast down within me;

C Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.

R By day the Lord commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.
I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?”

C Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.

R As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually, “Where is your God?”
Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

C Hope in God; for I shall again praise him.

Gospel Reading Matthew 25: 31-40

Hymn

Come thou fount of every blessing (p. 18)

Homily/Sermon

(Moment of silence or hymn)

Stones and Stories

The two or three identified story tellers are invited to come forward.

L Let us hear some stories. As living stones, we are bearing witness to the stories that will live on. With each story, the Body of Christ is being built up and edified. Our stories are intertwined with the story of Christ, the Corner Stone of our Christian unity. As God has created us to be in communion, so too our stories are connected. Let us reflect as we hear these stories, each holding our stone.

The story tellers give their testimonies. After each story, worshippers join in the response below:

C I commit myself to respond to the call of Isaiah to ‘do good and seek justice.’

Hymn

What a fellowship, what a joy divine (p. 19)

Prayers of Intercession

L With faith and confidence, we come in prayer, before God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

Creator God, today we live with the consequences of actions that have made life unsustainable for some and overabundant for others. Teach us to know how to use responsibly the resources you have given to us for the benefit of all and the respect of your creation. The groaning creation cries out to you.

C Teach us and show us the way.

L Compassionate God, help us repair the harm that we have inflicted upon each other and the divisions we have created among your people. Just as Christ Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit onto the disciples to birth the community of the new creation, send your grace to heal our divisions and gift us with the unity for which Jesus prayed.

C Teach us and show us the way.

L Christ, the way, the truth and the life, you embodied justice in your ministry on earth by the good that you did, breaking down the walls that divide and the prejudices that imprison. Open our hearts and minds to recognize that though we are many, we are one in you.

C Teach us and show us the way.

L Holy Spirit, you create anew the face of the earth. The summit of the mountains, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the lakes speak to us –

C Because we are connected.

L The faintness of the stars, the freshness of the morning, the dewdrops on the flower speak to us –

C **Because we are connected.**

L The voices of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized speak to us –

C **Because we are connected.**

L But above all, our hearts soar to you for we cry out ‘Abba, Father’ as we say:

C **Our Father....**

Closing Prayer

L Everlasting God, look upon these faces gathered together in holy community and send them anywhere you would have them go.

Encourage them by your Holy Spirit to continue to tell their stories, to do good, and to seek justice for the sake of your Creation through their actions.

Sustain them that they may be one, so the world may believe that you sent your only Son Jesus for the life of the world.

Sending Forth

L The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.
The Lord lift up his countenance upon you.
And give you peace.

C **Amen**

Hymn

Lift every voice and sing (p. 20)

APPENDIX*

Hymn **Many and great, O God (Dakota Hymn)**⁷

1 Wakantanka taku nitawa tankaya qa ota;
mahpiya kin eyahnake ça,
maka kin he duowanca;
mniowanca sbeya wanke cin, hena oyakihi.

2 Woehdaku nitawa kin he minagi kin qu wo;
mahpiya kin iwankam yati,
wicowašte yuha nanka,
wiconi kin he mayaqu nun, owihanke wanin.

1 Many and great, O God, are your works, maker of earth and sky.
Your hands have set the heavens with stars;
your fingers spread the mountains and plains.
Lo, at your word the waters were formed; deep seas obey your voice.

2 Grant unto us communion with you, O star-abiding One.
Come unto us and dwell with us;
with you are found the gifts of life.
Bless us with life that has no end, eternal life with you

Paraphraser: Philip Frazier; Author: Joseph Renville (1842)

* These hymns have been suggested by the writing group from the Minnesota Council of Churches, which prepared the first project of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023, and are published under its responsibility.

7. This hymn was sung by thirty-eight Dakota prisoners of war as they were led to execution at Mankato, Minnesota, on December 26, 1862. This song was first published in the Dakota Indian Hymnal (1916) and is perhaps the only Native American hymn to be sung broadly in North America beyond its original Dakota culture. The author, Joseph Renville, was indigenous Dakota and the translator of this hymn is Francis Philip Frazier.

Joseph R. Renville

Native American

$\bullet = 124$

Man - y and great, O God, are your things, Mak - er of earth and sky.
 Zahl-reich und groß ist, Gott, was du schufst, Er - de und Him-mels - welt!
 Mu - chas y gran - des tus o - bras son. Crea-dor de cie - lo y tierra.

Your hands have set the heav - ens with stars; your fin - gers spread the moun-tains and plains.
 Dei - ne Hand weist den Ster - nen die Bahn, du gabst Ge - stalt den Ber - gen, dem Tal.
 Tu ma - no pu - so es - tre - llas al cie - lo mon - tes y lla - nos has es - par - ci - do,

Lo, at your word the wa - ters were formed; deep seas o - bey your voice.
 Ja, auf dein Wort das Was - ser sich teilt, Mee - re ge - hor - chen dir.
 por tu pa - la - bra el a - gua bro - tó, tu voz es - cu - cha el mar.

hand drum or tom-tom 

2. Grant unto us communion with you,
 you star abiding one;
 come unto us and dwell with us;
 with you are found the gifts of life.
 Bless us with life that has no end,
 eternal life with you.

2. Wir bitten, gib' Gemeinschaft mit dir,
 du bist das Licht, das bleibt.
 Komm zu uns und wohne bei uns,
 du hältst des Lebens Gaben bereit.
 Segne mit Leben, das nie vergeht,
 das ewig lebt bei dir.

2. Que entre nosotros tu siempre estés
 Sé tú el principal
 En medio nuestro ven a morar
 contigo esté el don de la vida
 Bendícenos con vida sin fin
 Vida eterna en ti.

English, paraphrased by Philip Frazier. German, Dieter Trautwein, © Strube-Verlag GmbH, Pettenkoferstr. 24, D-80336 München, Germany. Spanish, Juan A. Gattinoni, CLAI, 1406 Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Hymn Wade into the water⁸

African American Spiritual
arr. Jimmie Abbington

Traditional

Wade in the wa - ter, wade in the wa - ter chil - dren, wade in the wa - ter,

God's gon na trou - ble the wa - ter. See that host all dressed in white,
See that band all dressed in red,
If you don't be - lieve I've been re - deemed,

God's gon - na trou - ble the wa - ter. The lead - er must be the
Looks like the band that
Just fol - low me down to

Is - rael - ite, God's gon - na trou - ble the wa - ter.
Mo - ses led,
Jor - dan's stream,

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8. This is an African American Jubilee Spiritual by Frederick J. Work and John Wesley Work Jr. (1901), based upon the narrative of John 5:2-9. For the enslaved, this song represented the struggles of life and the empowerment of freedom. Within the context of the 'troubled' waters of life there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil.

Hymn Come thou fount of every blessing

Robert Robinson

J. Wyeth Repository of Sacred Music 1813: USA

1. Come, thou Fount of ev - ery bless - ing tune my heart to sing thy
 2. Here I raise my E - be - ne - zer: "Hi - ther to thy help I've
 3. O to grace how great a deb - tor dai - ly I'm con - strained to

grace: streams of mer - cy, nev - er ceas - ing call for
 come;" And I hope, by thy good pleas - ure safe - ly
 be. Let that grace now, like a fet - ter bind my

songs of loud - est praise. Teach me some me - lo - dious
 to ar - rive at home. Je - sus sought me when a
 wan - dering heart to thee. Prone to wan - der, Lord, I

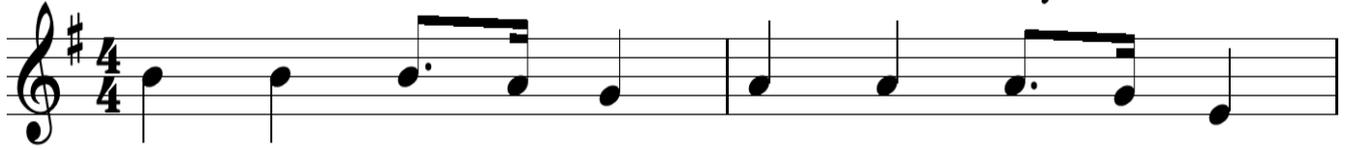
son - net sung by flam - ing tongues a - bove. Praise the
 stran - ger wan - dering from the fold of God. He, to
 feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my

mount, I'm fixed up - on it, mount of thy un - chang - ing love
 re - scue me from dan - ger in - ter - posed his pre - cious blood.
 heart, O take and seal it. Seal it for Thy courts a - bove.

Hymn What a fellowship, what a joy divine⁹

Elisha Hoffman

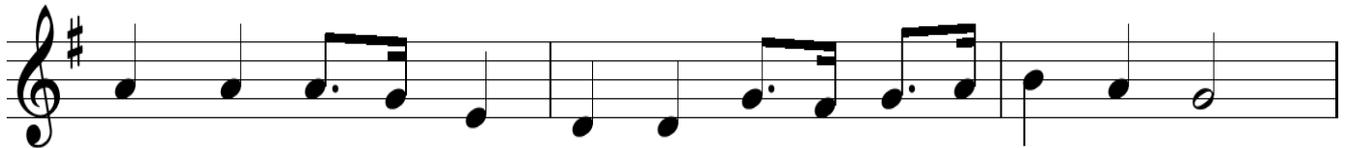
Anthony J. Showalter: USA



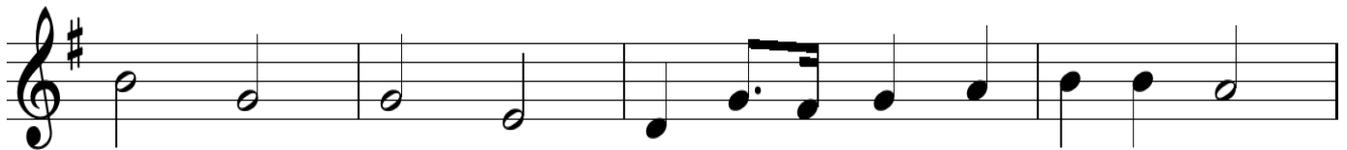
1. What a fel - low - ship, what a joy di - vine,
2. Oh, how sweet to walk in this pil - grim way,
3. What have I to dread, what have I to fear,



lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms; what a bless - ed - ness,
lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms; oh, how bright the path
lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms I have bless - ed peace



what a peace is mine, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.
grows from day to day, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.
with my Lord so near, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.



Lean - ing lean - ing, safe and se - cure from all a - larms;



lean - ing lean - ing, lean - ing on the ev - er - last - ing arms.

9. This hymn, authored in 1887 by E. A. Hoffman, was inspired by Deuteronomy 33:27. It is meant to help contemplate what it means to find refuge in our heavenly Father's arms in times of fear and trial, and to allow God's joy and peace to replace our loneliness and anxiety.

Closing Hymn

Lift every voice and sing¹⁰

James Weldon Johnson

J. Rosamond Johnson: African-American

1. Lift ev - ery voice and sing till earth and heav - en
 2. Ston - y the road we trod, bit - ter the chas - tening
 3. God of the wea - ry years, God of our si - lent

ring, ring with the har - mo - nies of lib - er -
 rod, felt in the days when hope un - born had the
 tears, Thou who hast brought us thus far on the

ty. Let our re - joic - ing rise high as the lis - tening
 died; yet, with a stead - y beat, have not our wea - ry
 way; Thou who hast by thy might led us in - to the

skies; let it re - sound loud as the roll - ing sea.
 feet come to the place for which our par - ents sighed?
 light: keep us for - ev - er in the path, we pray.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
 We have come o - ver a way that with tears has been wa - tered;
 Lest our feet stray from the plac - es, our God, where we met thee;

10. This is an African American Jubilee Spiritual which was written by James Weldon Johnson (1900). It is often referred to as the Black national anthem in the United States. The song is a prayer of thanksgiving for faithfulness and freedom for the enslaved voicing a cry for liberation and affirmation for African American people.

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

DAY 1

Learning to do the right thing

Readings

- Is 1:12-18 Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan; plead for the widow
- Lk 10:25-36 He asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

Reflection

According to Isaiah, God wants Judah not only to practice justice but to embrace the principle of always doing the right thing. God wants us not only to care for orphans and widows but to do what is right and good for them and anyone marginalised by society. The Hebrew word for good is *yaw-tab'* and it means to be glad, joyful, pleasing, to do well, to make something beautiful.

To be Christian means to be a disciple. All Christians sit under the Word of God, learning together what it is to do good, and who it is that stands in need of this solidarity. As society becomes more indifferent to the needs of others, we, as the children of God, must learn to take up the cause of our oppressed brothers and sisters by speaking truth to power and if necessary, plead their case so that they may live in peace with justice. In doing this we will always do the right thing!

Our commitment to eradicate and to be healed of the sin of racism requires us to be prepared and willing to be in relationship with our Christian sisters and brothers.

Christian Unity

A lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus’ response asks us to see beyond the divisions of religion, tribe and nationality to recognise our neighbour in need. Christians likewise must see beyond these divides and the divisions within the Christian family to recognise and love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Challenge

Who are the marginalised or oppressed in your society? How might churches together walk with these brothers and sisters, respond to their need and speak up on their behalf?

Prayer

Lord, you called your people from slavery into freedom,

Give us strength and courage to seek out those who are standing in need of justice. Allow us to see this need and provide help, and through your Holy Spirit gather us into the one fold of Jesus Christ, our Shepherd. Amen.

DAY 2

When justice is done...

Readings

Prov 21:13-15 When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers
Mt 23:23-25 Justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done

Reflection

From the beginning the Book of Proverbs sets out to provide wisdom and instruction in “wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity” (1:2). Throughout its oracles of wisdom, the call to act justly and to pursue righteousness is a constant refrain, relentlessly shared and affirmed as more acceptable to God than sacrifice. In a one-sentence pearl of wisdom, the speaker testifies that the righteous rejoice when justice is done. But justice upsets the workers of iniquity. Christians, across their separations, should be united in joy when justice is done, and prepared to stand together when this justice brings opposition. When we do what the Lord requires and dare to pursue justice, we may find ourselves in a whirlwind of resistance and opposition to any attempt to make things right for the most vulnerable among us.

Those who benefit from the systems and structures buttressed by White supremacy and other oppressive ideologies such as “casteism” and patriarchy will seek to delay and deny justice, often violently. But to seek justice is to strike at the heart of the powers, making space for God’s just ordering and enduring wisdom in a world all too often unmoved by suffering. And yet, there is joy in doing what is right. There is joy in affirming that “Black Lives Matter” in the pursuit of justice for God’s oppressed, dominated, and exploited beloved.

There is joy in seeking reconciliation with other Christians so that we may better serve the proclamation of the kingdom. Let that joy manifest itself through our shared experiences of God’s presence in community in the known and unknown spaces where God journeys with us toward healing, reconciliation and unity in Christ.

Christian Unity

The religious leaders Jesus addresses in the Gospel passage have grown accustomed and comfortable with the injustices of the world. They are happy to perform religious duties such as tithing mint, dill and cumin, but neglect the weightier and more disruptive demands of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Similarly Christians have grown accustomed and comfortable with the divisions that exist between us. We are faithful in much of our religious observance, but often we neglect the Lord’s challenging desire that all his disciples be one.

Challenge

How can local congregations support one another to withstand the opposition that may follow from doing justice?

Prayer

God, you are the source of our wisdom. We pray for wisdom and courage to do justice, to respond to what is wrong in the world by acting to make it right;

We pray for wisdom and courage to grow in the unity of your Son, Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit, reigns forever and ever. Amen.

DAY 3

Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly

Readings

- Mic 6: 6 – 8 And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
- Mk 10: 17-31 Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Reflection

We – not me. The prophet warns the people what faithfulness to God’s covenant means: “...and what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” In Biblical Hebrew justice and kindness (mercy) are not different or opposite from each other. They are in fact bonded together in a single word, *mishpat*. God has shown us what is good, asking us to do justice by loving kindness and walking humbly with God. Walking humbly with God means walking alongside others and therefore it is not just about the individual: my walk, my love.

The love that God invites us into is always a love which gathers us into communion: we – not me. This insight makes all the difference in how we “do justice”. As Christians we act justly to manifest something of God’s kingdom in the world, and therefore to invite others into this place of God’s loving kindness. Within God’s kingdom we are all loved equally as God’s children, and as God’s Church we are called to love one another as brothers and sisters and to invite others into that love.

To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God, calls Christians to act together in bearing a united witness to God’s kingdom within our communities: we – not me.

Christian Unity

“Walking humbly” was challenging for the rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. He had obeyed all the commandments from his youth, but he could not take the further step to join Jesus’ disciples because of his wealth; he was beholden to his possessions. How difficult it is for Christians to let go of that which we perceive as riches, but which keep us from the greater wealth on joining Jesus’s disciples in Christian unity.

Challenge

How can our churches better respond to the needs of our most vulnerable neighbours? How can we honour every voice in our communities?

Prayer

Gracious and loving God,
Expand our vision that we might see the mission we share with all of our Christian brothers and sisters, to show forth the justice and loving kindness of your kingdom.
Help us to welcome our neighbours as your Son welcomed us.
Help us to be more generous as we witness to the grace that you freely give us.
Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

DAY 4

Look, the tears of the oppressed

Readings

- Eccles 4:1-5 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power with no one to comfort them
- Mt 5:1-8 ...Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...

Reflection

“Look, the tears of the oppressed.” One can imagine that the writer has witnessed atrocities like this before with sickening regularity. And yet perhaps this is the first time the writer has truly seen the tears of the oppressed, has fully taken in their pain and their subjugation. While there is much to lament, in a new looking and a new seeing there is also a seed of hope: maybe this time this witnessing will lead to change, will make a difference.

A young woman looked and saw the tears of the oppressed. The video she shot on her phone of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 was seen all around the world and unleashed a holy rage as people witnessed, and finally acknowledged, what African Americans have experienced for centuries: undue subjugation by oppressive systems in the midst of privileged blind bystanders. Acknowledging this painful reality has led to a global outpouring of overdue compassion both in the form of prayer and protest for justice.

The progression from simply looking to seeing and understanding gives encouragement for us as actors in this earthly reality: God can remove scales from our eyes to witness things in new and liberating ways. As those scales fall, the Holy Spirit provides insight, and also, conviction to respond in new and unfettered ways. One response the churches and communities made was to establish a prayer tent at George Floyd Square, the place of his murder. In this way, these churches and communities were united in offering comfort to those who mourned and were oppressed.

Christian Unity

Matthew’s account of the Beatitudes begins with Jesus seeing the crowds. In that crowd he must have seen those who were peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, men and women who mourned, and those who hungered for justice. In the beatitudes Jesus not only names people’s struggles, he names what they will be: the children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. As Christians we are called to see the holy struggles of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Challenge

How have you engaged with Christian groups addressing oppression in your neighbourhood? How can the churches in your locality come together to better show solidarity with those suffering oppression?

Prayer

God of justice and grace, remove the scales from our eyes so we can truly see the oppression around us.

We pray in the name of Jesus who saw the crowds and had compassion for them. Amen.

DAY 5

Singing the Lord's song as strangers in the land

Readings

- Ps 137:1-4 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- Lk 23:27-31 Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children

Reflection

The lament of the psalmist originates in the exile of Judah in Babylon, however, the pain of exile is one that reverberates across time and culture. Perhaps the psalmist shouted this refrain towards the heavens. Perhaps each verse was given voice between deep sobs of grief. Perhaps this poem emerged with a shrug of indifference that can only come from living within injustice and feeling powerless to effect any meaningful change. However the words were brought forth, the heartache of this passage finds resonance in the hearts of those who are treated as strangers in other lands or in their own lands.

The demand in the psalm comes from the oppressor to smile and make merry, to sing the songs of a "happy" past. That demand has come to marginalized people throughout history. Whether it was in minstrel shows,¹¹ or Geisha dances,¹² or Wild West cowboy and Indian shows,¹³ oppressors have often demanded that oppressed people perform happily to ensure their own survival. Their message is as simple as it is cruel; your songs, your ceremonies, your cultural identity, that which makes you sacredly unique, is only allowable so long as it serves us.

In this psalm generations of the oppressed are given their voice. How could we sing the Lord's song when we are strangers in our own land? We sing not for our captors but to praise God. We sing because we are not alone for God has never abandoned us. We sing because we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. The ancestors and saints inspire us. They encourage us to sing songs of hope, songs of freedom, songs of liberation, songs of a homeland where a people is restored.

Christian Unity

Luke's Gospel records that people, many of them women, follow Jesus even as he carries his cross to Calvary. This following is faithful discipleship. Furthermore, Jesus recognises their struggles and the suffering that they will have to endure in faithfully carrying their own crosses.

11. Thought to be the first original form of popular American entertainment, minstrel shows originated in the 1830s as a combination of blackface, a form of theatrical makeup employed by primarily White people, and theatrical productions depicting derogatory appearances and personas of African Americans. Yet, in the 1890s, African American artists "blackened up," sang, danced, and discussed provocative issues like sex in the "colored minstrel shows" while feeling the added responsibility to counter the stereotypes of black identity as laughable, primitive and overly sensual, leading them to develop a self-presentation on stage that balanced racist stereotypes and political commentary.

12. In the 17th century, the role of the geisha emerged in Japan as an "artist" who entertained with dance, music, conversation, and other acts in various tea ceremonies.

13. After the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn, Buffalo Bill Cody founded the Wild West Show, a touring pageant of all things western including a recreation of General Custard's Last Stand. The biggest draw was the real life Native Americans who appeared domesticated instead of savage, participating in the shows while the American government was still engaging in battle in Indian territory.

Thanks to the ecumenical movement, Christians today share hymns, prayers reflections and insights across traditions. We receive them from one another as gifts borne of the faith and loving discipleship, often enduring struggles, of Christians from different communities than our own. These shared gifts are riches to be treasured and give witness to the Christian faith we share.

Challenge

How do we raise up the stories of ancestors and saints who lived among us and have sung songs of faith, hope, and liberation from captivity?

Prayer

God of the oppressed,
Open our eyes to the harm that continues to be inflicted
On our sisters and brothers in Christ.
May your Spirit give us the courage to sing in unison,
And raise our voices with those whose suffering is unheard.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY 6

Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.

Readings

Ezek 34:15-20 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.

Mt 25:31-40 I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

Reflection

In the Gospel of Matthew, we are reminded that we cannot separate our love for God from our love for others. We love God when we feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner. When we care for and serve “one of the least of these,” we are caring for and serving Christ himself.

The years 2020 and 2021 made visible the immense suffering among God's family members. The world-wide Covid-19 pandemic, along with economic, educational and environmental disparities, impacted us in ways that will take decades to repair. It exposed individual and collective suffering throughout the world and brought Christians together in love, empathy and solidarity. Meanwhile, in Minnesota, the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin exposed continued racial injustice. Floyd's cry of “I can't breathe” was also the cry of many suffering under the weight of both the pandemic and oppression.

God calls us to honour the sacredness and dignity of each member of God's family. Caring for, serving and loving others reveals not who they are, but who we are. As Christians, we must be unified in our responsibility to love and care for others, as we are cared for and loved by God. In so doing, we live out our shared faith through our actions in service to the world.

Christian Unity

The prophet Ezekiel describes the Lord God as a shepherd who makes the flock whole by gathering in those who have strayed and binding up those who are injured. Unity is the Father's desire for his people and he continues to bring about this unity, to make the flock whole, through the action of his Holy Spirit. Through prayer we open ourselves to receive the Spirit which restores the unity of all the baptised.

Challenge

How are the "least of these" invisible to you or your church? How can our churches work together to care for and serve "the least of these?"

Prayer

God of Love,
We thank you for your unending care and love for us.
Help us to sing redemption songs.
Open wide our hearts to receive your love
and to extend your compassion
to the whole of the human family.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY 7

'What is now does not have to be'

Readings

Job 5:11-16 So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth
Lk 1:46-55 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly

Reflection

Job was living the good life and unexpectedly suffered the loss of his livestock and servants, and endured the devastation of the death of his children. He was suffering in his mind, body, and spirit. We all have suffering that is manifested in our minds, bodies, and spirits. We may pull away from God and others. We may lose hope. Yet, as Christians, we are unified in our belief that God is with us in the midst of our suffering.

On April 11, 2021 in Minnesota, Daunte Wright, a twenty-year old, unarmed African American man, was fatally shot by a White police officer during a routine traffic stop. This incident occurred during the Derek Chauvin trial for the killing of George Floyd.

It is easy to feel hopeless when we are once again reminded that we live in a fractured society that does not fully recognize, honour, and protect the human dignity and freedom of all human beings. According to Fr. Bryan Massingale, a leading Catholic social ethicist and scholar in racial justice, "Social life is made by human beings. The society we live in is the result of human choices and decisions. This means that human beings can change things. What human beings break, divide and

separate, we can with God's help, also heal, unite and restore. What is now does not have to be, therein lies the hope and the challenge."

In prayer, Christians align their hearts to the heart of God, to love what he loves and to love as he loves. Prayer with integrity therefore aligns the hearts of all Christians beyond their divisions, to love what, whom and how God loves, and to express this love in our actions.

Christian Unity

The Magnificat is Mary's song of joy for all that she sees God is doing: restoring balance by raising up the lowly; righting injustice by feeding the hungry; and remembering Israel, his servant. The Lord never forgets his promises or abandons his people. It is easy to overlook or undervalue the faith of those who belong to other Christian communities, particularly if those communities are small. But the Lord makes his people whole by raising up the lowly so that the value of each is recognised. We are called to see as He sees and to value each of our Christian brothers and sisters as He values them.

Challenge

How can we come together in Christ with hope and faith that God will "shut injustice's mouth?"

Prayer

God of Hope,

Help us to remember that you are with us in our suffering.

Help us to embody hope for one another when hopelessness is a frequent unwelcomed guest in our hearts.

Grant us the gift of being grounded in your loving Spirit as we work together to eradicate all forms of oppression and injustice.

Give us the courage to love what, whom and how you love, and to express this love in our actions. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

DAY 8

The justice that restores communion

Readings

Ps 82:1-4 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute

Lk 18:1-8 Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

Reflection

The Book of Psalms is a compilation of prayer, praise, lamentation, and instruction from God to us. In Psalm 82, God calls for a justice that upholds the basic human rights to which all people are entitled: freedom, safety, dignity, health, equality and love. The Psalm also calls for the overturning of systems of disparity and oppression, and fixing anything that is unfair, corrupt, or exploitative. This is the justice that we, as Christians, are called to promote. In Christian community we join our wills and actions to God's, as he works his salvation for creation. Division,

including that between Christians, always has sin at its root, and redemption always restores communion.

God calls us to embody our Christian faith to act out of the truth that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institutional structure in society is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of each person. Every person has a right and responsibility to participate in society, seeking together the common good and wellbeing of all, especially the lowly and the destitute.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Revd Dr Howard Thurman, who was spiritual adviser to the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr. states that: “We must proclaim the truth that all life is one and that we are all of us tied together. Therefore, it is mandatory that we work for a society in which the least person can find refuge and refreshment. You must lay your lives on the altar of social change so that wherever you are, there the Kingdom of God is at hand.”

Christian Unity

Jesus tells the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in order to teach the people “about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Lk 18:1). Jesus has won a decisive victory over injustice, sin and division, and as Christians our task is to receive this victory firstly in our own hearts through prayer and secondly in our lives through action. May we never lose heart, but rather continue to ask in prayer for God’s gift of unity and may we manifest this unity in our lives.

Challenge

As the people of God, how are our churches called to engage in justice that unites us in our actions to love and serve all of God’s family?

Prayer

God, Creator and Redeemer of all things,
teach us to look inward to be grounded in your loving Spirit,
so that we may go outward in wisdom and courage
to always choose the path of love and justice.
This we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE MINNESOTA COUNCIL OF CHURCHES*

The Minnesota Council of Churches (MCC) is a denominational membership organization. The twenty-seven member communions with congregations in Minnesota come from Historic Black, Mainline Protestant, Pentecostal, Peace Church, and Greek Orthodox denominations, as well as the Dakota (Native American) Presbytery. The primary program focus presently is refugee resettlement and services, interfaith relations, and social and racial justice.

Formed in 1947, the Minnesota Council of Churches was a merger of several ecumenical organizations in the State of Minnesota. While representative of much of Protestantism, it was some years before the Lutherans joined. The ecumenical reach expanded further when the Greek Orthodox Church joined the Council. The Roman Catholic Church has never been a member of the MN Council of Churches, but MCC enjoys close relations with the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis and other dioceses throughout the State of Minnesota. MCC has also intentionally created relationships with progressive Evangelicals. Throughout its history, the Council of Churches has built strong ties among other faith communities including Muslim, Jewish, Unitarian, Buddhist, and Hindu.

At its beginning, MCC was representative of White Protestant Churches and its member denominations were all White led and predominately White in composition. Throughout the first fifty years, issues of racism and engagement with Black, Indigenous, and Person of Colour (BIPOC) communities occurred in the ministry and partnerships of MCC. “White racism,” civil rights, and racial relations were noted as issues to be addressed. Active programming occurred with Native American Christian communities. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. was hosted for an event in 1957 and the Executive Director of MCC attended King’s funeral in Atlanta in 1968.

In the mid-1990s, through a partnership with the St. Paul Area Council of Churches and the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches, an anti-racism strategy was launched called the Minnesota Churches Anti-Racism Initiative (MCARI). For more than 15 years this anti-racism training and evaluation effort served churches, and later educational institutions and non-profit agencies.

Throughout its history, MCC interacted with the historic Black denominations and various African American congregations. It was not until the twenty-first century that the four historic Black denominations with congregations in Minnesota became firm in their membership. By 2015, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Church of God in Christ, The National Baptist Convention USA, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World were all members of MCC. In 2020, the Dakota (Native American) Presbytery and the Black-led multiracial denomination The Communion of Holy Christian Churches also joined MCC, further expanding the diversity of its twenty-seven members.

Even with the historic Black denominations as members, the Council remained overwhelmingly White in its leadership and structures. The board of directors for MCC was comprised of the judicatory heads of the member denominations and a few at-large members. This guaranteed White dominance. This was cause for concern among Council leadership as they engaged more fully in racial justice work in society. It was decided that in order to have integrity in the work of racial justice, the governance structures needed to reflect the same commitment to racial equity.

In 2018, MCC intentionally moved to a structure where Black denomination judicatory heads would serve as the President and Vice President of the board for the foreseeable future. This

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centred the influence and decision-making of Black leadership in the governance of MCC. This was followed by ensuring that the ten members Executive Committee of MCC would be majority BIPOC.

In 2019, MCC formed a Vision and Program Commission of twenty leaders to envision the future work of the Council. This group had an equal representation of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinx, Asian Americans, and Whites. A significant majority of the group was under the age of forty years old. A majority were women. This visioning collective was tasked with proposing a multiracial future for MCC beyond the US denominational Black-White racial binary.

In 2020, the MCC board of directors approved a bylaws change adding enough at-large members to guarantee that the board would be majority BIPOC. In 2021, MCC seated a board of directors that was majority BIPOC and majority women for the first time in its history.

The changes in governance structure at the MN Council of Churches led to a greater focus on racial justice in programming, new staff selection, and networking with organizations similarly committed. The police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis caused MCC to increase its action on racial justice. Through networks and partnerships, MCC participated in protests and response to unrest. The Black denominational leaders led a protest and prayer march of over a thousand clergy.

A few weeks after Floyd's death, MCC judicatory heads began to contemplate what was required for a response that addressed the underlying conditions of racism in Minnesota. The goal was to transform the systems that caused Minnesota to be ranked with some of the highest racial disparities in the United States. In September 2020, the board of directors at the Minnesota Council of Churches approved a 3-Point Action Platform for Racial Justice that would focus on truth telling, education, and reparations. This platform for change set forth a role for MCC during the post George Floyd season to pursue greater racial equity in the State of Minnesota by initiating a process of truth telling about racism and investing in repairing the damage done by racism.

This truth and reparations process addresses the historic harm done to Native American and African American communities in Minnesota. As immigrants and refugees arrive from Latin American, African, Asian, Arab, and other countries, they are impacted by the pre-existing structures that create inequity. Focus on the structures that harm Black and Indigenous communities benefits others thus affected.

The truth and reparations work has a state-wide focus. The geographic reach of the Minnesota Council of Churches' member denominations is such that together they have congregations in nearly every community in the State. Through the heads of the twenty-seven member communions, MCC can initiate programs in rural, small town, medium size cities, suburbs, and Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The MCC 3-Point Action Platform promotes:

1. *Truth Telling*: MCC offers a strong moral voice to call for truth telling, welcome lament, advocate for reparations, and hold systems accountable for change. Truth telling also includes naming complicity by faith communities in racial injustice. This truth and reparations initiative uses truth telling to challenge dominant narratives that reinforce White supremacy in order to reveal grassroots stories that make inequities transparent so that transformation can occur. Truth telling will be launched in various contexts in the State, regionally, and in cities and towns. The narratives are shaped through building deeper relationships with Tribal Communities, and leaders in Black communities. Issues include: policing, land, health, education, wealth, employment, housing, etc.
2. *Education*: Denominations and congregations are equipped through anti-racism training, cultural competency, DEI-informed leadership development, and the like.

3. *Reparations* in Indigenous and Black Communities: The goal is to repair the harm done by racism. A process of reparations and equity will be pursued by MCC throughout the State of Minnesota in government, business, academic, and other entities. MCC will build coalitional and moral power to call for, legislate, and deliver reparations that address historic injustices and infuse equity into current structures affecting Black and Indigenous communities. The work of reparations requires strong relationships with Indigenous and Black leaders in order to be successful. Even how reparations are delivered must be determined by Black and Indigenous communities. This will be coordinated with the truth telling process.

In 2021, co-directors for racial justice at MCC were hired from within Minnesota Black and Indigenous communities and the truth telling process was launched. Conversations commenced and alliances were built in order to successfully initiate a community-led reparations process built on truth telling about the history of and the current realities of the harm of racism. The truth telling, education, and reparations process is expected to last for at least ten years.

WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Themes 1968 – 2023

*Materials jointly prepared by the WCC Faith and Order Commission
and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity were first used in 1968*

- 1968** To the praise of his glory (Ephesians 1:14)
- 1969** Called to freedom (Galatians 5:13)
(Preparatory meeting held in Rome, Italy)
- 1970** We are fellow workers for God (1 Corinthians 3:9)
(Preparatory meeting held at the Monastery of Niederaltaich, Federal Republic of Germany)
- 1971** ...and the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:13)
(Preparatory meeting in Bari, Italy)
- 1972** I give you a new commandment (John 13:34)
(Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)
- 1973** Lord, teach us to pray (Luke 11:1)
(Preparatory meeting held at the Abbey of Montserrat, Spain)
- 1974** That every tongue confess: Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:1-13)
(Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)
- 1975** God's purpose: all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-10)
(Material from an Australian group – Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)
- 1976** We shall be like him (1 John 3:2) or, Called to become what we are
(Material from Caribbean Conference of Churches – Preparatory meeting held in Rome, Italy)
- 1977** Enduring together in hope (Romans 5:1-5)
(Material from Lebanon, in the midst of a civil war – Preparatory meeting held in Geneva)
- 1978** No longer strangers (Ephesians 2:13-22)
(Material from an ecumenical team in Manchester, England)
- 1979** Serve one another to the glory of God (1 Peter 4:7-11)
(Material from Argentina – Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)
- 1980** Your kingdom come (Matthew 6:10)
(Material from an ecumenical group in Berlin, German Democratic Republic – Preparatory meeting held in Milan)
- 1981** One Spirit - many gifts - one body (1 Corinthians 12:3b-13)
(Material from Graymoor Fathers, USA – Preparatory meeting held in Geneva, Switzerland)
- 1982** May all find their home in you, O Lord (Psalm 84)
(Material from Kenya – Preparatory meeting held in Milan, Italy)
- 1983** Jesus Christ - the life of the world (1 John 1:1-4)
(Material from an ecumenical group in Ireland – Preparatory meeting held in Céligny (Bossey), Switzerland)

- 1984** Called to be one through the cross of our Lord (1 Corinthians 2:2 and Colossians 1:20)
(Preparatory meeting held in Venice, Italy)
- 1985** From death to life with Christ (Ephesians 2:4-7)
(Material from Jamaica – Preparatory meeting held in Grandchamp, Switzerland)
- 1986** You shall be my witnesses (Acts 1:6-8)
(Material from Yugoslavia (Slovenia) – Preparatory meeting held in Yugoslavia)
- 1987** United in Christ - a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17-6:4a)
(Material from England – Preparatory meeting held in Taižé, France)
- 1988** The love of God casts out fear (1 John 4:18)
(Material from Italy – Preparatory meeting held in Pinerolo, Italy)
- 1989** Building community: one body in Christ (Romans 12:5-6a)
(Material from Canada – Preparatory meeting held in Whaley Bridge, England)
- 1990** That they all may be one...That the world may believe (John 17)
(Material from Spain – Preparatory meeting held in Madrid, Spain)
- 1991** Praise the Lord, all you nations! (Psalm 117 and Romans 15:5-13)
(Material from Germany – Preparatory meeting held in Rotenburg an der Fulda, Federal Republic of Germany)
- 1992** I am with you always... Go, therefore (Matthew 28:16-20)
(Material from Belgium – Preparatory meeting held in Bruges, Belgium)
- 1993** Bearing the fruit of the Spirit for Christian unity (Galatians 5:22-23)
(Material from Zaire – Preparatory meeting held near Zurich, Switzerland)
- 1994** The household of God: called to be one in heart and mind (Acts 4:23-37)
(Material from Ireland – Preparatory meeting held in Dublin, Republic of Ireland)
- 1995** Koinonia: communion in God and with one another (John 15:1-17)
(Material from Faith and Order – Preparatory meeting held in Bristol, England)
- 1996** Behold, I stand at the door and knock (Revelation 3:14-22)
(Material from Portugal – Preparatory meeting held in Lisbon, Portugal)
- 1997** We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20)
(Material from Nordic Ecumenical Council – Preparatory meeting held in Stockholm, Sweden)
- 1998** The Spirit helps us in our weakness (Romans 8:14-27)
(Material from France – Preparatory meeting held in Paris, France)
- 1999** He will dwell with them as their God, they will be his peoples (Revelation 21:1-7)
(Material from Malaysia – Preparatory meeting held in Monastery of Bose, Italy)
- 2000** Blessed be God who has blessed us in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14)
(Material from the Middle East Council of Churches – Preparatory meeting held La Verna, Italy)
- 2001** I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life (John 14:1-6)
(Material from Romania – Preparatory meeting held at Vulcan, Romania)
- 2002** For with you is the fountain of life (Psalm 36:5-9)
(Material CEEC and CEC – Preparatory meeting near Augsburg, Germany)
- 2003** We have this treasure in clay jars (2 Corinthians 4:4-18)
(Material churches in Argentina – Preparatory meeting at Los Rubios, Spain)

- 2004** My peace I give to you (John 14:23-31; John 14:27)
(Material from Aleppo, Syria – Preparatory meeting in Palermo, Sicily)
- 2005** Christ, the one foundation of the church (1 Corinthians 3:1-23)
(Material from Slovakia – Preparatory meeting in Piestaňy, Slovakia)
- 2006** Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them (Matthew 18:18-20)
(Material from Ireland – Preparatory meeting held in Prosperous, Co. Kildare, Ireland)
- 2007** He even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak (Mark 7:31-37)
(Material from South Africa – Preparatory meeting held in Faverges, France)
- 2008** Pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:(12a) 13b-18)
(Material from USA – Preparatory meeting held in Graymoor, Garrison, USA)
- 2009** That they may become one in your hand (Ezekiel 37:15-28)
(Material from Korea – Preparatory meeting held in Marseille, France)
- 2010** You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:48)
(Material from Scotland – Preparatory meeting held in Glasgow, Scotland)
- 2011** One in the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (cf. Acts 2:42)
(Material from Jerusalem – Preparatory meeting held in Saydnaya, Syria)
- 2012** We will all be changed by the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:51-58)
(Material from Poland – Preparatory meeting held in Warsaw, Poland)
- 2013** What does God require of us? (cf. Micah 6:6-8)
(Material from India – Preparatory meeting held in Bangalore, India)
- 2014** Has Christ been divided? (1 Corinthians 1:1-17)
(Material from Canada – Preparatory meeting held in Montréal, Canada)
- 2015** Jesus said to her: Give me to drink (John 4:7)
(Material from Brazil – Preparatory meeting held in São Paulo, Brazil)
- 2016** Called to proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord (cf. 1 Peter 2:9)
(Material from Latvia – Preparatory meeting held in Rīga, Latvia)
- 2017** Reconciliation - The love of Christ compels us (2 Cor 5:14-20)
(Material from Germany – Preparatory meeting held in Wittenberg, Germany)
- 2018** Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power (Ex 15:6)
(Material from the Caribbean – Preparatory meeting held in Nassau, Bahamas)
- 2019** Justice and only justice you shall pursue (Deut 16:18-20)
(Material from Indonesia – Preparatory meeting held in Jakarta, Indonesia)
- 2020** They showed us unusual kindness (Acts 28:2)
(Material from Malta – Preparatory meeting held in Rabat, Malta)
- 2021** Abide in my love and you shall bear much fruit (cf. John 15:5-9)
(Material from Community of Grandchamp – Preparatory meeting held at Areuse, Switzerland)
- 2022** We saw the star in the East, and we came to worship him (Mt 2:2)
(Material from the Middle East Council of Churches, Lebanon – Preparatory meeting held online)
- 2023** Do good; seek justice (Isaiah 1:17)
(Material from the Minnesota Council of Churches, USA – Preparatory meeting held at Bossey, Switzerland)

KEY DATES IN THE HISTORY OF THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

- c. 1740** In Scotland a Pentecostal movement arose, with North American links, whose revivalist message included prayers for and with all churches.
- 1820** The Rev. James Haldane Stewart publishes “Hints for the General Union of Christians for the Outpouring of the Spirit”.
- 1840** The Rev. Ignatius Spencer, a convert to Roman Catholicism, suggests a “Union of Prayer for Unity”.
- 1867** The First Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops emphasizes prayer for unity in the Preamble to its Resolutions.
- 1894** Pope Leo XIII encourages the practice of a Prayer Octave for Unity in the context of Pentecost.
- 1908** First observance of the “Church Unity Octave” initiated by the Rev. Paul Wattson.
- 1926** The Faith and Order movement begins publishing “Suggestions for an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity”.
- 1935** Abbé Paul Couturier of France advocates the “Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” on the inclusive basis of prayer for “the unity Christ wills by the means he wills”.
- 1958** Unité Chrétienne (Lyon, France) and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches begin co-operative preparation of materials for the Week of Prayer.
- 1964** In Jerusalem, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I prayed together Jesus’ prayer “that they all may be one” (John 17).
- 1964** The Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II emphasizes that prayer is the soul of the ecumenical movement and encourages observance of the Week of Prayer.
- 1966** The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity [now known as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity] begin official joint preparation of the Week of Prayer material.
- 1968** First official use of Week of Prayer material prepared jointly by Faith and Order and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.
- 1975** First use of Week of Prayer material based on a draft text prepared by a local ecumenical group. An Australian group was the first to take up this plan in preparing the 1975 initial draft.
- 1988** Week of Prayer materials were used in the inaugural worship for The Christian Federation of Malaysia, which links the major Christian groupings in that country.
- 1994** International group preparing text for 1996 included representatives from YMCA and YWCA.
- 2004** Agreement reached that resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity be jointly published and produced in the same format by Faith and Order (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Catholic Church).

- 2008** Commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. (Its predecessor, the Church Unity Octave, was first observed in 1908).
- 2017** Marking the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the materials for the Week of Prayer in 2017 were prepared by Christians in Germany.