

# Session Five: Leader's Guide

## Preparation

- Collect the following materials: newsprint diagram from previous sessions, pencils, copies of "Session Five: Participant Material," Bibles, *United Methodist Hymnals*, and worship center from previous sessions.

- Check out the web site [www.hopeandaction.org](http://www.hopeandaction.org) for additional stories and information that you may want to incorporate into the session.

## 1. Introduce the Theme

Encourage people to report any experiences they have had since the previous session of engaging in dialogue with those whose life experience is dramatically different from their own.

Light the candle as you recall the symbolism of the Bible, the globe, and the candle on the worship center: to orient our lives toward God's holy vision, to practice social and environmental holiness, and to live and act in hope.

Explain that this session particularly emphasizes living and acting in hope. Ask the participants to focus on the lighted candle as they listen to you read Isaiah 43:18-21 twice, pausing between readings for silent reflection.

Then in small groups ask them to discuss the following questions:

- What images emerged as you listened to the scripture?
- Where have you experienced God doing a "new thing" in your own life?
- What "new thing" do you think God is about to do in your congregation?
- What word of hope did you hear?

Then sing together the first five stanzas of "We Utter Our Cry," page 439 in *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

## 2. Read Segments of the Documents

Distribute copies of "Session Five: Participant Material" and ask the group to silently read the sections titled "From the Letter" and "From the Foundation Document." As they read, ask them to underline what they believe are the five most important words or phrases. Then have them report what they have underlined, recording the words or phrases on newsprint. When all the responses have been recorded,

look for common themes that have emerged. Encourage honest discussion about why people selected what they did.

Divide into small groups and challenge each group to select one sentence either from the Pastoral Letter or the Foundation Document that speaks most forcefully of hope in relationship to the three interrelated threats, or to write a sentence of their own.

As the groups report, record the sentences around the edges of the newsprint diagram you have used in previous sessions, so that the three interrelated threat circles are surrounded by the statements of hope.

## 3. Reflect on the Pledges

Ask participants to read "Pledges" in the participant material. Discuss the following questions:

- What would make our community a "greener" place?
- What resources (people, facilities, money, information, and so forth) could our congregation contribute to the effort?
- Where do we need assistance? From whom?
- How can we share what we have learned with our congregation and our community?

## 4. Pray Together

Lead the group in the confession in the participant material. After the unison part of the confession, encourage the participants to name aloud or silently personal confessions related to being the stewards and caretakers that God created us to be. Sing together stanza five of "We Utter Our Cry" as a response to the confession. Close with the following prayer:

*May God's grace purify our reason, strengthen our will, and guide our action. May the love of God, the peace of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit be among you, everywhere and always, so that you may be a blessing to all creation and to all the children of God, making peace, nurturing and practicing hope, choosing life, and coming to life eternal. Amen.*

Encourage the group to explore the items in "Going Further" during the next week, particularly rereading the entire Pastoral Letter and Foundation Document.

# Session Five: Participant Material

## From the Pastoral Letter

*Third, let us live and act in hope.* As people in the tradition of John Wesley, we understand reconciliation and renewal to be part of the process of salvation that is already underway. We are not hemmed into a fallen world. Rather we are part of a divine unfolding process to which we must contribute. As we faithfully respond to God's grace and call to action, the Holy Spirit guides us in this renewal. With a resurrection spirit, we look forward to the renewal of the whole creation and commit ourselves to that vision. We pray that God will accept and use our lives and resources that we rededicate to a ministry of peace, justice, and hope to overcome poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and the proliferation of weapons and violence.

## From the Foundation Document

For many hundreds of years "The People of the Book"—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—have lived through hard times of drought, fire, floods, raging waters, and tempestuous winds, sustained by the ancient wisdom of the psalmists, who over and over again sang of "the steadfast love of the Lord."

Today, the human family is awakening to alarming news: after several thousand years of a stable climate that enabled us to thrive, the earth is heating up at an accelerating rate. Climate change poses a particular threat to the world's poor because it increases the spread of diseases like malaria and causes conflicts over dwindling natural resources. Easy access to small arms ensures that such conflicts turn deadly, and the specter of a nuclear war that would destroy the earth continues to loom over us.

Clearly we have arrived at "a hinge of history," a revolutionary time of great challenge. We turn again to the ancient wisdom and remember the ringing challenge of God: "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19). Do we not see signs that God is at work in this crisis?

As the earth is being transformed, God has blessed human beings with the capacity to read the signs of the times and to respond with intelligence and faith.

Learned scientists and experts monitor the changes that have an impact on our very survival. They are clarifying the measures we must take immediately to save our forests, oceans, air, and human and animal ecosystems.

**More than that**, God has inspired human beings to envision new futures and to invent the tools necessary to make them a reality: technologies to replace fossil fuels with energy from the wind and sun; new forms of transportation, "green jobs," and guides for reducing "carbon footprints." Thousands and thousands of persons in faith-based and community-based coalitions, congregations, businesses, and farms are already acting for change in quiet, persistent, and profound ways.

**Even further**, God is bringing people together to plan and to act upon emerging realities. Villages, towns, and local governments urge and guide neighbors to share common cause; cities, states, and nations identify the special needs of their citizens and implement solutions; the United Nations and international agencies research global problems, identify solutions, and shape the organizations to address them. Public leaders are working at a feverish pace to reshape the rules of engagement between humans and the earth. Empowering all these efforts is an amazing network of globe-circling monetary, industrial, transportation, and communications systems such as the human family has never before known.

**Finally**, Christian and interreligious communities are speaking out boldly on the interrelated nature of the present crisis. For example, the "Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace" currently being drafted by the World Council of Churches names justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

Why is all of this activity happening? Because the peoples of the world are reading the signs carefully—we see clearly that God is doing a new thing, and that God is inviting the human family to participate in transformation. . . .

We open our hearts to confess our sin, to receive God's grace, to discern God's call, and to feel strengthened by God's sustaining Spirit. We are not initiating these actions; rather we are responding to God's gracious invitation to join God's renewal of creation. God invites us, with all of our imperfections, to participate in this work. We open our hearts so that we can change. We open our hearts to feel God's presence with us as we labor. We open our hearts "that we may anchor our souls in the One who is just, who renews our strength for the work to be done."

We open our hearts to embody the "moral image of God," to use Wesley's words (*Works* 2:188). This moral

image is not something we possess but is ours only insofar as we continually receive it from the Source. We embody the moral image of God as we receive God's grace and then reflect that grace out into the world. To describe this process of receiving and reflecting God's grace Wesley used the image of breath, calling it "spiritual respiration": "God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God" (*Works* 1:442).

We open our hands to respond to the Spirit and do the work God calls us to do in the world. As human beings created in God's image, we have a special responsibility to care for the gift of creation. Wesley calls this "the political image of God" (*Works* 2:188). We often live as though "being created in God's image" gives us special privilege, but living with that assumption is a grave mistake. Our status as human beings increases our *responsibility*, not our *privilege*. Being created in God's image means that we are charged with caring for this world, not invited to abuse it. Doing justice, building peace, and mending the planet are ways that we take care of what we have been given. However, we are not caretakers for an absentee landlord; rather God's renewing Spirit works through us and courses around us breathing new life into the planet and its people. . . .

Renewing creation is an act of discipleship for us. It is the work we are called to do, and the One who calls us accompanies us as well, so that we experience a synergy of grace and human responsibility. God is even now "doing a new thing," and we are invited to serve the divine purpose of renewing creation. Despite the threats posed by these interrelated forces, we refuse to be governed by fear. On the stormy waters with his disciples, Jesus admonished them (and admonishes us) to live in faith rather than fear (Mark 4:35-41). His ministry in the world provides a pattern for us to resist the forces that terrify us without succumbing to them or employing terror. And his resurrection assures us of the new life to come, new life for every element of creation no matter how wounded. The God who raised Jesus from the dead is the God who breathes new life into every aspect of our broken world.

Facing these complex and difficult problems will press us to practice a "responsible hope," one that remains open to promise and peril. "And, given the often overwhelming experiences of life, we must frequently practice hope in pieces, sometimes grieving and shouting, sometimes celebrating. The cumulative effect . . . is a

disposition that generates and sustains moral action because it attends to possibilities and limitations. It buoys the spirit and steels the spine."

## Pledges

7. We pledge to provide, to the best of our ability, the resources needed by our conferences to dramatically reduce our collective exploitation of the planet, peoples, and communities, including technical assistance with buildings and programs, education and training, and young people's and online networking resources.

9. We pledge more effective use of the church and community Web pages to inspire and to share what we learn. We celebrate the communications efforts that tell the stories of struggle and transformation within our denomination.

## Confession

**Leader:** God sees the creation's wounds. God hears our lament. And God calls us to accountability. We cannot be instruments of God's renewal if we deny our complicity in pandemic poverty and disease, environmental degradation, and proliferation of weapons and violence.

**All:** As United Methodists, we confess our failure to embody the image of God. We rationalize our sin; satisfy our own desires; and exercise our freedom at the expense of the common good. We know that we should live within sustainable boundaries but we struggle to summon the moral will to change. As individuals and communities of faith, we have not been the stewards and caretakers that God created us to be.

## Going Further

- The Web site [www.hopeandaction.org](http://www.hopeandaction.org) has other articles and stories that relate to the Pastoral Letter.
- Reread the entire Pastoral Letter and Foundation Document found at [www.hopeandaction.org](http://www.hopeandaction.org). Reflect on what you have learned in the study of the documents.