

Session Six: Leader's Guide

Preparation

- Collect the following materials: newsprint diagram from previous sessions, pencils, copies of "Session Six: Participant Material," Bibles, *United Methodist Hymnals*, worship center from previous sessions.
- Check out the web site www.hopeandaction.org for additional stories and information that you may want to incorporate into the session.

1. Introduce the Theme

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 focuses on orienting our lives towards God's holy vision.

Divide the participants into three groups. As they listen to you read Luke 10:25-28, ask one group to imagine they are the lawyer, another group to imagine they are Jesus, and the third group to imagine they are a bystander watching the exchange.

After you have read the scripture, ask them to divide into groups of three, so that each triad has a member from each of the original three groups.

In the triads have them discuss the following:

- What did you see, smell, hear, and feel?
- What do you think the lawyer probably did afterward?
- What does this scripture say to us today related to orienting our lives to God's holy vision?

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

2. Read Segments of the Documents

Distribute copies of "Session Six: Participant Material" and ask the group to silently read the sections titled "From the Letter" and "From the Foundation Document." Discuss the following questions:

- Looking at the world through eyes of faith, where do you see love at work? Where is transformation happening in your community?
- The Foundation Document names several ways in which we love God and neighbors; are some more important than others? If so, which ones?

Brainstorm ways the congregation can live out the items listed in the section "Let Us Order Our Lives Toward God's Holy Vision."

3. Reflect on the Pledge

Ask participants to read "Pledge" in the participant material. Together make a list of decisions that have been made by groups in the church recently. This could include the Church Council, church committees, United Methodist Women and Men, the youth group, trustees, and so forth. Review each decision and discuss what decision might have been made if each group had asked: Does this contribute to God's renewal of creation? Or if the question was asked, how did it affect the decision? Consider ways the question could become a regular part of the church planning process.

Then ask participants to think about personal decisions they are facing and how asking the question might influence those decisions.

4. Evaluate the Study

Give each person a sheet of paper and ask them to finish the following sentences.

- One thing I have learned during this study is . . .
- I have changed my thinking about . . .
- I have started . . .
- I have stopped . . .
- In six months I hope our church . . .
- In ten years I hope our world . . .

Allow those who wish to share their answers.

Encourage people when they go home to respond to the survey listed in "Going Further."

- As a group discuss the following questions:
- What have we learned?
- What actions have we taken?
- What actions do we plan to take?
- What will we be praying about?

5. Pray Together

Lead "Rededication" from the Participant Material. Sing "We Utter Our Cry" as a response. 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.

Session Six: Participant Material

From the Pastoral Letter

Aware of God's vision for creation, we no longer see a list of isolated problems affecting disconnected people, plants, and animals. Rather, we see one interconnected system that is "groaning in labor pains" (Romans 8:22). The threats to peace, people, and planet earth are related to one another, and God's vision encompasses complete well-being. We, your bishops, join with many global religious leaders to call for a comprehensive response to these interrelated issues. We urge all United Methodists and people of goodwill to offer themselves as instruments of God's renewing Spirit in the world.

First, let us orient our lives toward God's holy vision. This vision of the future calls us to hope and to action. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). Christ's resurrection assures us that this vision is indeed a promise of renewal and reconciliation. As disciples of Christ, we take God's promise as the purpose for our lives. Let us, then, rededicate ourselves to God's holy vision, living each day with awareness of the future God extends to us and of the Spirit that leads us onward.

From the Foundation Document

When we open our eyes to God's vision of renewal, we also clearly see the ways in which we obstruct God's process. When we open our eyes to the presence of God's renewing Spirit in the world, we celebrate every charitable act, every just practice, every courageous stand for peace, every moment of reconciliation, every cessation of violence, and every restored habitat as a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, as a "seed-like presence of that which is hoped for."

We might think of opening our eyes as a spiritual discipline rooted in John Wesley's understanding of the "natural image of God" (*Works* 2:188). Three gifts are included in the basic equipment our Creator has given us as spiritual beings to be both independent and at the same time to relate to God and our neighbor. The first of these gifts is *reason*—the human ability to discern order and relationships, to grasp how things work, and to make judgments. The second gift is our *will*—the ability to commit ourselves to God, to persons, and to goals, and to carry through. The third gift is our freedom. God does not want automatons. "A mere machine" is not morally

answerable, says Wesley. Human responsibility requires freedom (*Works* [Jackson] 10:234).

Therefore, we reflect the natural image of God when we exercise our reason for accurate understanding and good judgment, and when we respond to God's grace by freely exercising our will to choose good and resist evil. We open our eyes in order to perceive the world accurately, understand our roles and responsibilities, and exercise good judgment. . . .

In order to live fully in God's image, we must make God's promise our purpose. We respond to the groaning of creation and to this vision of renewal by making ourselves a channel of God's blessing. We open our hearts to receive God's grace, and we open our hands in response, to do the work God calls us to do. What does it really mean to fashion ourselves as instruments of God's renewing Spirit? This is not a new question. It is, in fact, a variation of the question posed to Jesus many times. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). Jesus answers with the dual love commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). Participating in God's work of renewal looks like love shining forth in action.

We love God by paying attention to God's creation. We pay attention to poverty, environmental degradation, and weapons and violence. Neglecting these ills and those who suffer their effects is contrary to love. We respond to Jesus' commandment by paying attention to our world. And we begin to fashion ourselves as instruments of God's renewal by deepening our spiritual consciousness as faithful stewards and directing our attention to the world God loves.

We love God and neighbor by practicing compassionate respect. We extend our care and concern, and provide assistance and comfort as needed. But we also respect the ones cared for as subjects in their own right. We respect the earth, knowing that it is not ours to plunder. We respect those suffering poverty and disease, granting them full autonomy to determine their own needs and path to well-being. We respect victims of violence by supporting their pursuit of a just peace. In sum, we "work toward societies in which each person's value is recognized, maintained, and strengthened."

We love God and neighbor by changing our behavior. We cannot be instruments of love if we hold on to selfishness and greed. Jesus calls us to love, but he also calls us to conversion, to a radical change in our lifestyle and attitude. His message is clear: We cannot help the world until we change our own way of being in it.

We love God and neighbor by challenging those who do harm. We must not only respond to the suffering already created, but also challenge people, companies, and governments that continue to exploit the weak, destroy the earth, perpetuate violence, and generate more weapons. We follow Jesus' example of confronting authorities non-violently, using the force of love. And we adhere to our Social Principles, which affirm the "right of individuals to dissent when acting under the constraint of conscience."

Anyone who has experienced genuine love knows its power. Looking at the world through the eyes of faith, we can see love at work, transforming an abandoned lot into a community garden, transforming a neglected child into a healthy and happy toddler, and transforming people at war into communities committed to reconciliation. We witness God's work of renewal in these pockets of transformation. And we participate in that work of renewal by living fully as Christ's disciples, people whose love of God and neighbor shines forth in action.

Let Us Order Our Lives Toward God's Holy Vision

- Renew our understandings of God's holy vision for peace, peoples, and planet Earth.
- Start with personal spiritual transformation reclaiming the "commission" as a faithful, hopeful caretaker with renewed power and energy;
- Establish small groups to sustain practices of prayer, study, empathy, and action;
- Collect, celebrate and share stories of progress, improvement, hope and struggle; share them within communities, congregations, conferences, and regions;
- Strengthen spiritual disciplines privately and within small groups, and attend to the guiding of the Holy Spirit;
- Prayerfully identify the specific responsibilities for action and transformation urgently needed in your region or context (Global South or Global North, urban or rural, powerful or vulnerable, host or sojourner).

Pledge

2. *We pledge to make God's vision of renewal our goal.* With every evaluation and decision, we will ask: Does this contribute to God's renewal of creation? Ever aware of the difference between what is and what must be, we pledge to practice Wesleyan "holy dissatisfaction."

Rededication

Leader: Find solace and strength in the knowledge that God's creative work continues. This gracious and loving God still calls us forth and prepares us to care for one another and the planet. With John Wesley, let us all affirm the "unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith," and turn to God offering "up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, and all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be an holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus."

All: We pray for the wisdom and courage to change the ways we live and work, relate to one another and the earth, and allow our nations to be governed. Through God's grace, we renew our minds, reorient our wills, and recommit ourselves to faithful discipleship as instruments of God's renewing Spirit. We rededicate ourselves faithfully to follow the One who came into the world to reconcile us to God and to one another.

Going Further

- The Web site www.hopeandaction.org has other articles and stories that relate to the Pastoral Letter.
- Go to www.surveymonkey.com/s/hopeandaction and complete the survey. This survey will help the Council of Bishops to understand how the Pastoral Letter has been received and what actions individuals and congregations are taking.