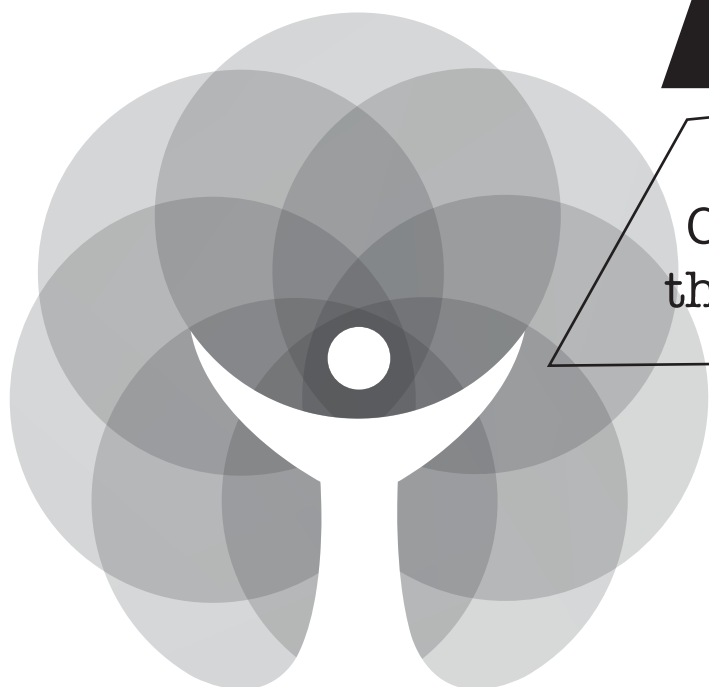


Leader's Guide

Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom

Living into the
Church's Moral Witness
through Radical Discipleship



Amanda Meisenheimer



*Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom:
Living into the Church's Moral Witness through
Radical Discipleship Leader's Guide*
by Amanda Meisenheimer

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United Methodist Women

Purpose

The organized unit of United Methodist Women shall be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.

The Vision

Turning faith, hope and love into action on behalf of women, children and youth around the world.

Living the Vision

We provide opportunities and resources to grow spiritually, become more deeply rooted in Christ and put faith into action.

We are organized for growth, with flexible structures leading to effective witness and action.

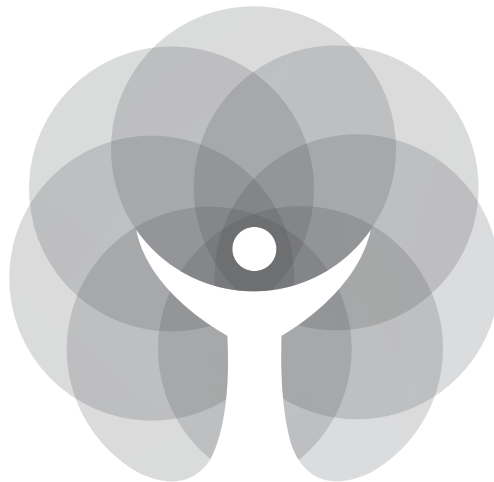
We equip women and girls around the world to be leaders in communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches.

We work for justice through compassionate service and advocacy to change unfair policies and systems.

We provide educational experiences that lead to personal change in order to transform the world.

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Introduction

*God wants me to be part of something larger than myself,
something holy, something that matters to all of creation.*

—DARRYL W. STEPHENS¹

This leader’s guide is an invitation to be part of something larger. It is a challenge to accept, a gauntlet to endeavor, a charge to embrace. The text, *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church’s Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship*, welcomes Christians to examine and claim our role as moral witnesses. But this morality is not easily defined by a static list of right and wrong behavior. Christian morality emerges from our calling to bring about a more loving and just world, a kin-dom, where image-bearers live in an abundance of grace and peace.

Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom requires participants to be honest about our history, empathetic in our present, and hopeful for our future. While this is deep, soulful work, the Holy Spirit accompanies us along this journey together. We are not alone. As facilitator, trust that God is equipping you with the peace and patience to take this journey with your group.

As you read the text in preparation to lead this study, take special note of what pricks your curiosity, your anxiety, and your passion. Identify the perspectives that you bring into leadership before you engage the text in community. If possible, debrief your anxieties with a trusted, wise person before leading.

I. How to Use This Guide

This leader’s guide is intended to be adaptable to an in-person or virtual setting. If you are meeting virtually, choose a digital platform to accommodate your gathering. Platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype each offer digital spaces where you can meet. Become familiar with all of the security and privacy features of whatever digital platform you use so you can provide optimal safety for your participants. Look for the virtual adaptations at the conclusion of each activity to help you prepare for this study in an online format.

Each session has the following structure, with virtual adaptations for many elements:

- 1. Module Outline:** The modules are based on the four moments that describe the process of living into the moral witness of the church through radical discipleship. Outlines of these moments are summarized in a chart on page 6 of the study text, and these outlines also appear at the beginning of each session in this leader's guide to help participants follow the patterns of the book.
- 2. Session Objectives:** Every element of the curriculum supports the objectives for the participants. A careful reading of the objectives will help facilitators to stay focused on the main themes of the study.
- 3. Supply List:** This curriculum is designed to require minimal physical supplies so that it can be easily adapted to online engagement. Most of the supplies needed center upon sharing ideas, whether via newsprint, sticky notes, a whiteboard, musical recordings, or digital slides. Facilitators are encouraged to make use of the visual aid supplies that are most relevant to their contexts.
- 4. Session Playlist:** Each session includes a playlist of songs, which participants can choose to play on their personal devices during journaling time if they like, either by muting the audio on their screen if the group is meeting virtually or plugging in their earphones. Send the playlists ahead of the sessions so participants can pull together the songs using their favorite streaming service such as Spotify, Apple Music, or YouTube.
- 5. Gathering Time:** The Gathering Time provides space for an appropriate on-ramp into thoughtful dialogue and learning. This is a space for participants to ground themselves before endeavoring to discuss challenging topics. Facilitators may choose to light a candle or create an altar in order to set the tone for focused spiritual engagement. Choose a small table to cover with a cloth and place artifacts of reflection such as stones, candles, a cross, flowers, or artwork.
- 6. Prayer:** Each prayer has been written to reflect the themes of the session. The prayers may be led by facilitators or participants and they may be incorporated into extemporaneous prayers, depending upon the needs of the context and the time constraints.
- 7. Learning Blocks:** The main movements of each session are the three sections called "learning blocks." Each learning block examines a major theme or point from *Bearing Witness in the Kingdom* and encourages large and/or small group engagement around that theme. Groups of four to five participants are ideal for the small group learning blocks, whether they are grouping digitally on a platform like Zoom, or in person around tables. Most of the learning blocks conclude with a few moments of debriefing within the large group setting. These debriefing moments should not be a report of everything that happened, but rather an opportunity for each group to discern where the Spirit was moving them. Encourage participants to share along their growing edges.

Some learning blocks will take place in small groups. If possible, choose some small group leaders in advance so that they can prepare for their sessions. This is most essential when using digital platforms because you will not be able to oversee each group as they will meet in digital breakout rooms.

- 8. Closing Prayer:** Sessions conclude with prayer.
- 9. Journaling Prompts:** Invite participants to journal their responses to the prompts using any time remaining at the end of the sessions or to journal their thoughts during breaks between sessions. These prompts may also be used for further small group discussions. In virtual-only settings, these prompts may be given as opportunities for further reflection outside of the sessions.
- 10. Additional Scripture Resources:** Each session concludes with scriptures from which to choose further topics of discussion, create bonus learning blocks, or investigate ideas explored in the session more fully.
- 11. Suggested length of time** for each of the activities (5 minutes, 20 minutes, etc.)
- 12. Virtual Adaptation:** Each activity offers a suggested way to adapt the activity to a digital platform, such as Zoom and Google Jamboard. The virtual adaptations often offer choices, so leaders must prepare and practice on whatever platforms they choose to use. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the features of your chosen digital platforms before meeting.

Questions to ask yourself and features to review before facilitating this study virtually:

- A.** When people join, do they automatically enter into the room or does an administrator have to approve their entry?
- B.** Will participants have their cameras on or off? Will this be optional or automatic? Will cameras be required?
- C.** Will participants be muted? Will this be controlled by the administrator or will each participant have individual control of this feature? Inadvertent background sounds can come from any one of your participants, and create echoes and other feedback that will make it difficult to keep conversation moving forward.
- D.** How does the platform's screen share function work? Are you comfortable with turning screen share on and off? Do you know how to share sound from your computer? Will you allow other participants or leaders to share their screen? Do you know how to end a screen share if someone shares something inappropriate or accidental?
- E.** Do you or another co-facilitator know how to assist a group member in troubleshooting sound and/or camera issues? Can you designate someone to provide simple tech support for anyone having issues?
- F.** Depending on the size of your group it may be necessary to "break out" into smaller groups of three to five people for some of the activities. This can be accomplished using the breakout features available in digital platforms. This can be done randomly, or you can predetermine the groups and break them out on Zoom, one by one. Alternatively, you can have people meet in pairs by using the chat function with just one other person. It is a good idea to familiarize yourself with both of these options so that you are comfortable using and explaining their function.

Check out the United Methodist Women guide for leading Mission U curricula virtually for more information: unitedmethodistwomen.org/Media/PDF/MissionU/VirtualGuidelines.pdf. If you are new to digital platforms it is a good idea to practice these features before a meeting until you are comfortable with using them. Even if you consider yourself a pro at working with digital platforms, it is a good idea to review these things before the first session.

II. Preparation

Because this book invites us to examine our own assumptions about morality and witness, prepare your own heart and mind with self-reflection. What moral questions or justice issues make you feel uncomfortable? What do you do with the anxiety that comes when you question your assumptions? Are there moral frontiers that you have not yet explored?

Any fruitful study of the church's moral witness in the world today must also include acknowledgement of our social location individually, within our communities, and in relation to the world. Are you prepared to acknowledge privilege? Wealth? Ill-gotten power? Prayerfully observe your own hypocrisies and the hypocrisies that dwell in your community. The gulf between what we do and what we believe exists for all people. Our role is to be prepared to discuss this gulf that exists within ourselves.

Moral witness is messy and has been messy since the beginning of the church. Preparation for this study means becoming comfortable with the tough questions that may not have precise answers, and may exist in the gray landscape between obvious sides where Jesus often sets up camp. Some of us are less comfortable than others in this tension. Are you prepared to hold gracious space for those who have quick and simple answers and those who are more perplexed by the chaos? What will you do when these two worldviews collide?

Prepare yourself with the life of Jesus. Read about the times in which Jesus followed the law and cultural norms and preached about an upright life. Then read the texts where Jesus broke the rules, dashed expectations, created disorder, and preached about an upside-down kingdom. Hold this complex Jesus in your mind as you begin.

III. Supply List

Recommended slides or posts or printables:

- Centering quotes
- Introduction questions
- Journaling prompts

Other supplies:

- Newsprint
- Posterboard (optional)
- Sticky notes
- School glue
- Markers, crayons, colored pencils
- Variety of images (from magazines, printouts, etc.)
- Scissors

IV. Reading the Room

Moral leadership is holding a mirror up to the structures and systems that provide habitats for evil to thrive. Darryl W. Stephens chronicles multiple situations in which The United Methodist Church served to be the prophetic mirror. But most of the time the burden of prophetic speech has been placed upon those who suffer from oppression. This work is exhausting, and because justice work is personal, it is endless, and it is lonely. Who is entering your space who has been demoralized by the struggle? Who has been protesting alone? Who has been fired or harassed, infantilized or underpaid? It is impossible to see some of these challenges by looking at someone's appearance. But some are more obvious. If your meeting of United Methodist Women is populated by women, you already know one layer of oppression that individuals have faced, some more than others. Approach your facilitation knowing that there may be deep layers of oppression, deep layers of denial, and deep layers of privilege, all in one room, or maybe all in one person.

As your group wrestles with the challenge of the text, remember that some may need encouragement, some may require space, some may feel anxiety, and some may need to confess their complicity. Reading the room means maintaining a watchful eye on the varied responses that one group may contain. Your role as facilitator is to create a conversation that is as safe as possible for those who suffer injustice, a space that is gentle as possible for those who know suffering, and a space that is as challenging as possible for those who must grow.

V. Creating Community Guidelines and a Group Covenant

This ubiquitous piece of labor may seem redundant if you have participated in many small group experiences. The guidelines are almost always identical and the conversations are predictable. But the labor is essential.

With every day that passes and more voices are amplified we learn about how to be a better community. Did your last experience with community guidelines address learning disabilities? Sensory issues? Appropriate gender-neutral phrasing? Our guidelines must be rewritten when we gather for new experiences because there are always better ways of being, higher standards to which we can call ourselves. What new insights will your group gain as you establish yet one more list of community guidelines? And how will those guidelines create a safer space for participants in all four sessions?

Commit yourself to facilitate this labor earnestly. Emphasize the importance of the covenant as a foundational document for your time together. Build trust with those who may feel uncomfortable by demonstrating a commitment to good boundaries. This is the work of the kin-dom.

Endnote

1. *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2021), 3.



Session 1

Grounded Being

Module Outline

Perspective: Created Existence

God's Grace and Activity: Prevenient Grace, Bestowed Worth

Our Moral Activity: Recognition

Relational Context: Dignity

Moral Emphasis: Equality and Human Rights

Session Objectives

Participants will

- introduce ourselves to one another;
- establish group norms through a covenant;
- engage the contrasts between etiquette, morals, and ethics and explore why these distinctions matter;
- reflect on the sources of our own concepts of right and wrong; and
- explore our belief that all people have intrinsic worth and are worthy of love.

Supply List

Recommended slides or posts or printables:

- Centering quotes
- Introduction questions
- Journaling prompts
- Learning block III questions

Other supplies:

- Newsprint
- Posterboard (optional)
- School glue
- Markers, crayons, colored pencils
- Variety of images (from magazines, printouts, etc.)
- Scissors

Session Playlist

Encourage participants to play these songs on their personal devices during journaling time if they wish, plugging in their earphones (or muting the audio on their screen if the group is meeting virtually) so they don't disturb the other participants.

"Welcome into This Place," composed by Orlando Juarez, performed by Gary Oliver

"More Than I Ever Expected," Judah Band

"You Say," Lauren Daigle

"Like the Dew," Judith McCallister

"Be Thou My Vision," traditional hymn, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 451

Gathering Time

15 minutes

As you welcome participants into the space, invite everyone to reflect upon the main themes of this study, according to the author, summarized below. In addition, take a moment to read from the Gospel of Luke. These quotes may be posted on newsprint or on a screen.

This book is about living into the kin-dom of God through the moral witness of the church. The moral witness of the church encompasses our participation as Christians in God's response to suffering and injustice in light of what we believe about God and God's intention to reconcile all creation (p. 3).

In this study, we will also examine how to practice the good news of resurrection through the body of Christ, the church. Beginning with the sacrament of baptism, this book focuses upon what it means to follow Christ in a broken world and to join in God's mission. Moral witness is a ministry of all of the baptized (p. 4).

Luke 4:16-21

When (Jesus) came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

*In response to these centering texts, invite participants to introduce themselves and state their pronouns: We share pronouns so that we may show respect to all gender identities. For example, some people may use *she*, *he*, or *they*. It is important to refer to a person by the name and pronoun with which they introduce themselves.*

Invite each participant to finish one of these sentences after they have introduced their name and pronoun.

Option A: When I hear the phrase “good morals” I think of . . .

Option B: I would like to know more about the moral response to . . .

Virtual Adaptation: Display the opening quotes on the screen and invite two to three people to read them aloud. You may choose to display the prompts on the screen, or paste them into the chat box so that people can see one another during introductions.



Prayer

One: Holy and righteous God,

You call us to the narrow path of your way of love and justice.

Even though we do not always know which way to go,

Your Spirit guides us into discipleship and service.

Today as we examine what it means to be moral beings,

We remember that your grace abounds into every crevice of humanity.

Your grace and compassion accompany us in our imperfections and immaturities.

We open our hearts and minds to meet you and your wisdom today.

Amen.

Learning Block I: Community Guidelines and Group Covenant

20 minutes

Explain the purpose of community guidelines and a group covenant, and invite participants to create them together.

Community guidelines allow us to establish what is acceptable or appropriate and unacceptable or inappropriate during our time together. These guidelines also help ensure that we stay focused on our goals while giving us permission to avoid the things that may get in the way of the rich, healthy discussion. Lastly, community guidelines invite us to be mindful of our individual prejudices and privilege.

Some aspects to consider:

- Confidentiality
- Inclusive language with regard to race, gender, disability, age, sexuality, and ethnicity
- Timeliness
- Hearing from a variety of voices
- Active listening
- Conflict
- Recordings, photographs, social media posts

Invite participants to suggest guidelines and list them on a piece of newsprint so that the guidelines can be saved and used as a reference throughout the study.

While group guidelines establish helpful boundaries in our group, a group covenant represents our commitment to each other and to our collective fulfillment. Our covenant is our sacred *yes* to the boundaries that will serve to protect our hearts and minds as far as we are able.

A group covenant should be clear, succinct, and easily understood by everyone. Whether your group is meeting in person or in a digital space, ask all participants to acknowledge their commitment to the group covenant. If necessary, continue refining your guidelines until a covenant can be reached.

Individual commitments can be demonstrated through signatures, votes up or down, or even thumbs-up emojis.

Virtual Adaptation: Create a Word document that will serve as your community covenant and share your screen so everyone can see it. Type into the document as people suggest guidelines verbally or in the chat box.



One method you can use to do this is to go “around the room” with everyone taking turns with their mics on and sharing their ideas, or typing them directly into the chat box. After everyone has shared their ideas, open up the forum to broader discussion that will allow the group to refine and clarify the covenant.

Once discussion is finished, ask people to signal that they agree to the covenant with a thumbs-up emoji or by typing in the chat box.

Learning Block II: Why Do We Believe This?

30 minutes

In the introduction to his study, Darryl W. Stephens proposes that any discussion of our moral witness to the world must be centered upon the gift of God's grace to every human being. This foundational belief, that all people have intrinsic worth and are loved by God, inspires the way we imagine and process moral decisions. Stephens writes, "Through prevenient grace, God's love for each person bestows infinite worth, grounding our commitment to human rights and equality" (p. 7). Because this belief undergirds our ethical and moral claims, use this learning block to explore the origins of and inspirations for this belief.

Why do we believe that every human being has intrinsic worth?

Begin by giving participants a few minutes of quiet brainstorming time to reflect on the question and make notes on an individual basis. Suggest that participants complete the sentence "I believe that all human beings have intrinsic worth because . . ."

After a few moments to individually contemplate the question and formulate some thoughts, divide into groups of three to five participants.

Breakout groups will work together to generate a collage of reasons and sources of this belief. Your collage may include general, specific, scriptural, experiential, scientific, or universal reasons. The collage may be comprised of key words, sketches, song lyrics, movie titles, graphic images, or any other media.

Create your collage on newsprint or poster board to hang or display during the debriefing.

Large Group Debriefing

Come together for the last 10 minutes of this learning block to discuss. For this discussion and all other discussions in this guide, choose the questions that are most relevant to your community and conversation. You may also use these questions as conversation starters and follow the conversation into arenas that are most appropriate for your group.

Invite groups to share the themes and insights that they experienced: How do we know that all humans have value? What are the ramifications of each human having intrinsic worth? How might life be different if we acted as though each human has intrinsic worth?

When we struggle on behalf of the value of all human beings, we often find ourselves in conflict with the morals of the world around us. In those times, we find strength and solace in our faith. Reflect upon this question from author Darryl W. Stephens: "Consider a time when you spoke out about a moral wrong, even when it required you to be disruptive. How did your faith inform your witness?" (p. 13).



Virtual Adaptation: There are several ways to adapt this activity. First, you can choose to create a Word document to post for the larger group when you come back together. Second, you can use an application like Google Jamboard, a collaborative digital whiteboard, that allows for people to participate, post, and write at once. The third option is for participants to create their own physical versions of the collage using home supplies and then upload a photograph to share with the group. For this option you will need to give participants advanced notice to gather supplies.

Learning Block III: Etiquette, Morals, or Ethics?

45 minutes

We may easily affirm the statement “all humans have intrinsic worth,” but when we begin to make moral decisions based on this value, our paths diverge. Our culture, family of origin, life experiences, privilege, and trauma all shape how we will interpret and express our commonly held values. And sometimes these influences actually undermine our values. We do not always see the dissonance between our behaviors and our assumed values, nor do we see the potential range of human expression of our common values.

We may assume that our understanding of right and wrong is obvious, static, and based upon divine truth. But in order to be a moral witness in the kingdom of Christ, we must be willing to interrogate our assumptions of right and wrong, morality and immorality, justice and injustice. This inner work may cause distress or pain as we challenge closely held beliefs. We must examine the ways in which we have been shaped by the disease of our environment, whether that be the lie of white supremacy, the bondage of patriarchy, the injustice of poverty, the audacity of privilege, and/or the suffering of trauma. We must ask ourselves, where might I grow my perspective? Where is my understanding too small?

When we question the influences that formed us, we become disoriented. But the community of Christ exists to challenge us and to support us in this journey to reorientation.

In order to help us to examine our moral witness, Darryl W. Stephens describes etiquette, morals, and ethics as three distinct concepts:

On etiquette: “When we follow proper etiquette, we conform to the social expectations of our culture, context, role, and relationship to other persons. There is usually no moral discernment required when observing proper etiquette; we simply conform to what is expected of us” (p. 14).

On morals: “Morals, in contrast to etiquette, involve a recognition of what is right and good. . . . However, most morals are contextual: They are culturally conditioned and change over time” (p. 15).

On ethics: “A third level of moral witness is ethics, the intentional practice of examining our morals. Ethical reflection is needed especially when morals change or become contested. Ethics provides tools for seeking validation, explaining reasons, and connecting with logic. This is the task of ethics” (p. 17).

Break into small groups of three or four people and work together in a circle to examine the following statements identifying them as etiquette, morals, or ethics, based on the descriptions in the study text. The statements are not necessarily correct or incorrect, but they are statements that imply someone’s view of right and wrong. You will not agree with every statement, and you will not agree with the conclusions of everyone in your group every time. When disagreements are identified, note them, and remain curious about the ways in which our life experiences and our identities shape our perspectives. What are the underlying ethics behind these statements? Which are morals that have changed or will change? How are these statements contextual? (These statements are available in a printable format in the Appendix).

- Do not steal.
- Withholding information is lying, and lying is wrong.
- Do not hang up without saying “goodbye.”
- Save sex for marriage.
- Treat animals humanely.
- If physical violence is wrong and ineffective, then spanking is wrong.
- If we believe in the sanctity of life, we must oppose the death penalty.
- If you accidentally sleep through your alarm and miss work, tell your employer that you have a cold.
- Say “thank you” when someone gives you a gift.
- Pay employees fair wages.
- Use your turn signal before turning.
- Do not murmur during a wedding.
- Sneeze into your elbow.
- If children are unable to consent to sex, then sex with underage people is rape.
- Do not kill.
- When you allow yourself to murder someone with your mind, you might as well be murdering them with your hand.
- Limit your consumption of reality television and video games.
- Do not wear blouses that show your midriff.

Virtual Adaptation: Share the list of statements with participants so that each group may see them in their breakout room. You may share the information in the chat box, through an email in advance, or in a document they can open. *Note:* As of the publication of this guide, in order to form Zoom groups without leaving the host alone and behind in the main room, you may have to use the main room as one of the groups.



Large Group Debriefing

Come back together for the last 10 minutes of this learning block to discuss. For this discussion and all other discussions in this guide, choose the questions that are most relevant to your community and conversation. You may also use these questions as conversation starters and follow the conversation into arenas that are most appropriate for your group. Ask:

Which questions were the most difficult to examine? When did you experience anxiety?

When did scriptures come to mind? Were they helpful?

If you disagreed with other participants, why do you think those disagreements exist?

From where do your differing perspectives originate? How did you feel when your perspective differed from others? How did you process those differences?

When it comes to taking a moral position on an issue in our community, we are not always fully informed or attentive to the circumstances around us. Sometimes we get it wrong. Consider this question from the text.

Question for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

- Share a time when you or your faith community took a stance on a moral issue and later changed your mind, realizing you had been mistaken (or at least not completely correct—perhaps the situation turned out to be more complicated than anticipated). What did you learn about the risk of moral witness from this experience?¹



Closing Reflections

10 minutes

Methodists have wrestled with our moral witness since the inception of our denomination. Darryl W. Stephens mentions the story of our denomination's journeys through the moral dilemmas of alcohol, billiards, divorce, and gambling.² We wrestle with these issues because we believe "individual behavior matters" (p. 17). That value has not changed.

Remind participants that the collective journey of this study may be uncomfortable but that our steadfast presence with one another grounds all of this important work. We are not required to be perfect or agree on every ethical or moral question, but we find commonality in our commitment to being witnesses of Christ's love on earth.

Invite everyone to pray together.

Prayer

Holy and righteous God,

You call us to the narrow path of your way of love and justice, but we do not always know the way. Thank you for the gift of community that helps us to refine our wisdom, express our suffering, and find hope for the future. Help us to absorb the difficult truths that we have explored today and to find peace in our collective growth.

Amen.

Journaling Prompts

Take a few moments before the next session to reflect on one or more of the following questions (including the questions from the study text in the box below):



What is a way that your faith community forms your moral witness?

What is a way that scripture forms your moral witness?

What change will you seek to integrate into your life so that you are living out your moral witness?

Questions for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*



1. Consider the ambiguity and necessity of moral codes. Name an obsolete moral expectation you were taught as a child. Name an enduring moral expectation you continue to uphold.
2. Consider the ambiguity and necessity of public policy advocacy. How have you gotten involved in supporting community efforts to address social problems? This might include letter writing, voting, participating in a community forum, contacting your political representatives, etc. How did your faith inform these actions?³

Additional Scripture Resources

Use these relevant texts to continue discussion, create bonus learning blocks, or investigate ideas more fully.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Isaiah 1:17

Learn to do good;
seek justice,
 rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
 plead for the widow.

Proverbs 31:8-9

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
 for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
 defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Jeremiah 22:1-3

Thus says the LORD: Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, and say: Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David—you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.

In preparation for Session 2, please read Module II of the study text.

Endnotes

1. Darryl W. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration" in *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2021), 13.
2. Stephens, *Bearing Witness*, 16–17.
3. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration" in *Bearing Witness*, 19.



Session 2

Attentive Presence

Module Outline

Perspective: Present

God's Grace and Activity: Justifying Grace, Conviction of Sin

Our Moral Activity: Empathy

Relational Context: Love

Moral Emphasis: Basic Goods for the Most Vulnerable

Session Goals

Participants will

- experience the powers of presence and empathy;
- examine individual and systemic barriers to empathy; and
- explore the role of empathy across borders.

Supply List

Recommended slides or posts or printables:

- Centering quotes
- Introduction questions
- Six-word story samples
- Journaling prompts
- Chart for each small group leader

Other supplies:

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Sticky notes

Session Playlist

Encourage participants to play these songs on their personal devices as they write their personal faith stories during the Gathering Time if they wish, plugging in their earphones (or muting the audio on their screen if the group is meeting virtually) so they don't disturb the other participants.

"All Belong Here," The Many

"No Outsiders," Rend Collective

"You Will Be Found," *Dear Evan Hansen*

"Never Gonna Let You Down," Colbie Caillat

"Way Maker," Benita Jones

Centering Quotes

As you welcome participants into the space, invite everyone to reflect upon the main themes of this session. These quotes and scripture from the study text may be posted on newsprint or on a screen.

Bearing witness is about my willingness to participate in what God is doing with my neighbor (p. 34).

To bear witness is to unburden our neighbors from the agony of an untold story. We are called to be present and attentive, to hear one another's stories. And then, to care for that story as if it were our own (p. 35).

Philippians 2:1-4

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Gathering Time: Six-Word Faith Stories

20 minutes (5 minutes to explain, 10 minutes to write, 5 minutes to share)

Author Darryl W. Stephens asks us to consider a time when someone gave us their full attention during a time of need. How did their attentive presence express neighborly love? How did you experience God's grace through this encounter?¹ Today we will take an opportunity to practice this kind of attentive listening.

The facilitator will explain the following exercise and place examples on a poster or print-out or slide for the group to see while they write. Using their headphones and personal devices (or muting the audio on their screen if the group is meeting virtually), participants may play meditative music from the playlist while they write their stories, if they like.

In 2014 the Reverend Jes Kast (@RevJesKast) started the hashtag #MySixWordStoryofFaith on Twitter. Immediately people began to respond with short stories of faith:

Nothing but the blood of Jesus. @PensivePoet97
Held by Love, I unlearn fear. @revsean
I love Jesus, not his fans. @skafuller
OMG IDK @keegzzz

The exercise was so powerful, it went viral and continues to be popular today because it inspires people to think of their faith journey in a new way. How do you tell your story in six words? Take a few moments to write your own six-word story of faith. It can be definitive and complete or it can be a first draft, open to change. Your story of faith does not have to include your whole journey. The only rule is that it must be six words or less. You may keep your six-word story of faith private, and if necessary, write two versions so that you may share one with the group. If you have extra time, write a few versions.

Without comment or explanation, we will share our faith stories before we open in prayer. You will have the opportunity to unpack your six-word story in Learning Block I.

Virtual Adaptation: Invite participants to share their stories aloud or in the chat box to be read aloud by the facilitator.



Prayer

Creator God,
You are the author of life,
Yet you partner with us to author our own stories.
You know both our joys and our pain,
Our happy endings and our tearful disasters.
Thank you for sending Jesus to live the human experience,
The ultimate form of empathy.
As we share our hearts with one another today,
Teach us how to empathize.
Open our ears so that we may listen well.
Amen.

Learning Block I: Attentive Listening

30 minutes

Small Group Activity

Invite participants to sit in small group circles and share an expanded version of their six-word stories. Alternatively, participants may use a talking piece. Allow folks to pass if they aren't ready to share.

Participants may take one to two minutes to expound on the six words they chose and their meaning. There is no right or wrong way for this to be done. Each story is valid because each participant is the author and originator of their story. Listeners should attempt to connect and empathize with the significance of those words for the author.

We are active listeners when it is obvious that we are listening and paying attention to the person/people we are having a conversation with. Our whole demeanor says to a person "I am paying attention. What you are saying matters. I care about your experience."

We show attentiveness with our body language, our gestures, our tone and feedback, and our facial expressions. Attentive and active listening is the first step toward empathy.

Active listening suspends judgment and avoids the temptation to listen only to respond. Instead, we are listening to know the person and in place of judgment we offer attention, acceptance, and care. As attentive listeners, we keep these things at the center of our intention as we listen to one another and we go one step further: As attentive listeners we become invested in the truth that is being shared with us.

Empathetic feedback may sound like:

That sounds incredibly difficult.

Thank you for sharing that.

I'm so sorry that happened.

Virtual Adaptation: Instruct participants to share their faith stories one at a time. After one person finishes, invite two to three participants to respond, and then ask the next participant to share their story or pass. Instead of asking for volunteers, ask each person to share in an order that seems most appropriate to your group, such as the order that participants appear on the screen in front of you, or alphabetically.

Active, attentive listening on Zoom or other digital platforms is not easy. It may be helpful to acknowledge this before beginning the exercise.

continued





Virtual Adaptation

Encourage participants by providing the following Zoom listening strategies:

1. Mute yourself when you are not speaking.
2. Face your screen and watch the person speaking.
3. Be aware of your facial expressions and the feedback that you are giving silently.
4. Use the digital hand-raising function and be proactive about speaking if you have something to say.
5. Sometimes we all freeze up when we are using digital platforms. The discussion leader may call on each person in order to ease the pressure or invite commentary. If you do not wish to respond, just say "pass."

Small Group Debriefing

Debrief this exercise in your small groups.

The following are several suggested conversation starters, though your group may not have time to get through all of them. You do not have to force your way through all of them. Instead, pick one or two that best suit your group, or use these as inspiration for coming up with your own. You can offer the rest as prompts for further personal reflection, if you wish.

How did active, attentive listening affect your experience?

What did you hear that you might have missed otherwise?

In what ways could you incorporate attentive listening into your daily life?

What changes might that bring about?

What is the relationship between active listening and empathy?

Learning Block II: Barriers and Bridges to Empathy

30 minutes

Large Group Activity

What gets in the way of empathetic listening? What supports empathy?

Part 1: Using sticky notes and newsprint, brainstorm a list of the influences that increase or decrease our empathy within ourselves, our church, our communities, our demographics, etc.

Examples:

- Privilege
- Cultural differences
- Life experiences
- Travel
- Personal suffering

Part 2: Brainstorm specific examples that demonstrate how these influences could inhibit empathy. What have you experienced in these categories?

Large Group Debriefing

Take the last 10 minutes of this learning block to discuss your experiences with this activity, choosing appropriate questions from below.

How has our church or denomination supported empathy as a community?

How has our church or denomination created barriers for empathy?

Learning Block III: Empathy Across Borders

35 minutes

In *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*, Darryl W. Stephens describes the mission and work of an international organization called Doctors Without Borders. In contrast to the mission of the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders does not enforce silence in the presence of suffering and oppression. Teams of physicians may offer medical aid to those in need, and they may also speak truth about what they have seen.

To bear witness is to say *no* to the suffering of our neighbor. To bear witness is to speak out on behalf of our neighbor for their full human flourishing. For Doctors Without Borders, this means they act: "to alleviate suffering, protect life and health, and to restore respect for human beings and their fundamental human rights." Recognition, dignity, human rights, and basic goods all flow from being present with our neighbors, especially the most vulnerable (p. 46).

For Doctors Without Borders, empathy motivates them both to act and to bear witness.

Small Group Activity

Action and witness play important roles in every movement toward love and justice. In your small groups, reflect upon the following movements and identify elements of action and witness for each movement. Complete this chart together with words or pictures on paper or using an online Word or Google document. The first story has been started as an example.

EMPATHY CHART

| Story or Event | Actions | Witness |
|--|-----------------|---|
| Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt (Exodus 1–15) | Plagues, escape | God bears witness to the suffering “Let my people go!” Miriam’s song |
| Civil Rights Struggles, 1960s | | |
| Doctors Without Borders (pp. 45–46) | | |
| Red Cross (p. 45) | | |
| Civil Rights Struggles, 2020 | | |
| #Me Too, 2010s | | |
| Jesus Blesses Little Children (Matthew 19:13–15) | | |
| Queen Esther Protects Her People (Book of Esther) | | |
| Struggle for Marriage Equality (2015) and LGBTQ Protections (2020) | | |
| What other movements can you identify? | | |

Virtual Adaptation: This empathy chart can be created in a Word document and displayed through screen share via Zoom, or can be printed out and photographed for sharing with the larger group. In real time the responses can be in the chat feature if using Zoom, allowing for more contributing voices than may be possible otherwise.



Large Group Debriefing

Come back together for the last 10–15 minutes of this learning block to discuss.

What did you notice about your chart? Do you see any patterns?

What other stories or events came to mind?

If action and witness both emerge from empathy, in what areas do you think our community could grow?

When we participate in the transformation of our world into the kin-dom of God, we are partnering with the Holy Spirit. Consider this question from the study text.

Question for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

- What evidence do you see of the Holy Spirit at work in the church’s moral witness, either in your own experience of church or in the history that you have read?²



Virtual Adaptation: Provide the Empathy Chart in a Word document to each small group leader. Group leaders may screen share the document as groups work together to fill in the chart. Remember to prepare your small group leaders in advance to lead this activity in breakout groups. They should receive the chart and instructions in time to reflect and prepare. Return to the main “room” to debrief together.



Closing Reflections

5 minutes

Conclude this session by reminding participants about these distinctive features of empathy.

Empathy is not pity.

Empathy is not saviorism.

Empathy is compassion for self and others.

Empathy is the ability to share and understand feelings with others.

Empathy does not mean you understand exactly what a person is feeling.

British-Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid said, “Empathy is about finding echoes of another person in yourself.”

Empathy is a muscle that must be stretched. Thank participants for taking the risk to exchange empathy today.

Journaling Prompts

Take a few moments before the next session to reflect on one or more of the following questions (including the Question for Consideration from the study text that follows):

What are your obstacles to empathy?

What anxious thoughts prevent you from being fully present with others?



Question for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

- Why is it important to take time to be present with your neighbor before rushing to provide answers, goods, or services?³



Prayer

Knowing God,

You sent Jesus to walk this earth as a human being.

You know our suffering, our feelings, our experiences.

Thank you for the incarnation, the ultimate form of empathy.

Expand our ability to empathize with our human siblings.

And grant us understanding and grace when we have conflict.

Amen.

Additional Scripture Resources

Use these relevant texts to continue discussion, create bonus learning blocks, or investigate ideas more fully.

Leviticus 19:32-37

You shall rise before the aged, and defer to the old; and you shall fear your God:
I am the LORD.

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien.
The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt:
I am the LORD your God.

Colossians 3:12-14

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the LORD has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

In preparation for Session 3, please read Module III of the study text.

Endnote

1. Darryl W. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration" in *Bearing Witness in the Kingdom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2021), 34.
2. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration" in *Bearing Witness*, 25.
3. Stephens, *Bearing Witness*, 25.



Session 3

Historical Clarity

Module Outline

Perspective: Past

God's Grace and Activity: Justifying Grace, Forgiveness

Our Moral Activity: Memory and Repentance

Relational Context: Justice

Moral Emphasis: Righting Relationships, Restitution for Victims

Session Goals

Participants will

- explore the complexity of our relationship to historical sin;
- engage current issues of systemic injustice;
- reflect upon the role of individuals and the church in opposition to systemic injustice; and
- identify where we can find hope in the midst of despair.

Supply List

Recommended slides or posts or printables:

- Centering quotes
- Introduction questions
- Journaling prompts

Other supplies:

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Sticky notes

Session Playlist

Encourage participants to play these songs on their personal devices during journaling time if they wish, plugging in their earphones (or muting the audio on their screen if the group is meeting virtually) so they don't disturb the other participants.

"Make Room," Jonathan McReynolds

"Isaiah 58 + Purge Me," Urban Doxology

"My World Needs You," Kirk Franklin

"Blessed Assurance," traditional hymn, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 369

Centering Quotes

As you welcome participants into the space, invite everyone to reflect upon the main themes of this session. The quote and scripture from the study text may be posted on newsprint or on a screen.

Love has a way of creating within us a righteous discontent, causing us to seek causes and explanation, prompting us to see patterns and connections. Bearing witness through historical clarity gives us opportunity to realize personal and social responsibility for the world around us (page 53).

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

LORD, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

LORD, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the LORD

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the LORD!

For with the LORD there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.

Gathering Time

10 minutes

Session 1 focused upon our foundational belief that every person is inherently worthy and valuable. This belief inspires us to challenge any structures that might diminish human worth or human flourishing.

This session challenges us to acknowledge our participation in systemic injustice. And we must begin by grounding ourselves. It is easy to assume a defensive posture when examining the problematic crevices of our traditions and culture, so read this gathering litany based upon Isaiah 61 together and take some moments to prepare yourself to respond reflectively to any anxiety that might arise.

One: The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

**All: God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty for the captives,
and release to the prisoners;**

One: to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
and to provide for those who mourn in Zion—

**All: to give them a garland
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and the mantle of praise
instead of a faint spirit.**

One: They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord
to display God's glory.

**All: They shall build up the ancient ruins,
and they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.**

Virtual Adaptation: In order to avoid the problem of digital delay, which causes feedback and asynchronous speaking, ask two people to read the parts aloud while others join in while muting themselves.



Prayer

Holy God and righteous judge,
When we seek you we find you among the poor
Among those who suffer abuse
Among children
Among outsiders
Among the powerless
Open our minds as we examine the evils of systemic injustice.
Soften our hearts so that we may be changed by what we discover.
Amen.

Learning Block I: The Water We Swim In

30 minutes

Darryl W. Stephens describes the Black Lives Matter movement as an important call to repentance for a systemic and historical pattern of discrimination against African Americans. Racism and other forms of discrimination and hate permeate our culture so deeply that it is like the water we swim in—sometimes we are not even aware of the way it affects us and our behaviors.

But the truth breaks through if we are open to hearing it.

The first half of this exercise is an examination of that water that we swim in. Draw or post an image of a flowing river with a person swimming in it. If you are meeting in person, invite participants to think about the ways our surroundings influence us to pre-judge, discriminate against, or hate different people or groups. Write the influences in the water to represent the visible and invisible in our environment.

Examples: Emphases upon white authors and white protagonists in school literature, mostly male representation in church leadership, retreat activities designed for able bodies, etc.

For the second half of this exercise, place the following questions around the room on newsprint. Invite participants to rotate around the room independently and write their answers to the following questions on the newsprint or on sticky notes.

- If a person wanted to expand their understanding of social justice, where or how would they learn?
- Who do you read, listen to, or follow in order to challenge the water we swim in?
- What justice movements can you name?
- What are some words that you associate with justice movements in the United States?
- What justice movements would you like to know more about?
- What justice movements does your church actively engage in?
- How has engaging in and learning about different systemic injustices led to changes in and around you?



Virtual Adaptation: One digital tool that can replicate the activity above is Google Jamboard. Set up this digital tool so that each question has its own slide, like the newsprint in the activity. When it is time for this activity, explain that we will be using a collaborative tool for the next part of the study. Share the link in the chat and invite participants to open the Jamboard on their devices. Explain that you will be spending 10 to 12 minutes adding to the Jamboard together.

Participants can add their thoughts on virtual sticky notes, and scroll from topic to topic using the bar at the top of the screen. You may want to demonstrate this ahead of time, or invite people to test the tool before the session so they can become familiar with it. Jamboard is a helpful platform for this activity because it is visual, interactive, and it creates a space where we can all learn from one another in real time.

If you decide not to use the Jamboard tool, you can lead the group through the questions as a discussion, inviting “lightning round” responses in the chat. Or you can substitute the alternative activity below.



ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITY: Question for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

- Read portions of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (found at un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights) with the group and discuss how your faith leads you to uphold the basic political rights affirmed in this document. Which parts of the Social Principles also affirm these rights?¹

Learning Block II: Retelling Our Stories

45 minutes

Module III of the study text contains multiple stories of repentance and restoration. Divide into four small groups of three to five participants and examine one of the following stories in greater depth. Read over it together and prepare a response to present to the larger group. Your response should include a brief summary and a reflective group response. Your summary and reflections may be in any form: art, music, spoken word, or casual sharing. You may choose one or more participants to present. (*Note:* If you have a group of twenty or more, you may choose to create multiple groups for each story.)

- Repentance for the Methodist support of eugenics policies (pp. 94–95)
- UMC “Act of Repentance for Racism” (p. 95)
- UMC resolution and formal apology to Native Americans (pp. 96–99)
- Specific case study: Sand Creek (pp. 99–103)

As your small group determines your reflective response, use the following questions from the study text to inspire you.



Questions for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

1. Consider the liturgy in your congregational worship services. How is repentance ritually enacted? What has this meant for you in the past? What additional meaning might this have for you in light of this study?
2. Have you ever thought about repentance as an act of justice? If justice is about righting relationships, how does repentance help us do this?
3. How has the pervasive “Anglo-American mind-set of superiority” affected you and the relationships you have with people of other races and ethnicities?²

Large Group Debriefing

Present your summaries and reflections. Each small group should keep your portion to 4 to 5 minutes.

Learning Block III: Where Is the Hope?

30 minutes

When we face the dismal, destructive patterns of our world, we cannot help but feel our own powerlessness. Before breaking into small groups, briefly summarize the story of Jenny Phillips from pages 56–59 of the study text, describing how Phillips walks people through the process of grief when they face the realities of climate change.

Darryl W. Stephens follows the story with the following observations: “Recognizing that we all have dirty hands when it comes to systemic injustices, such as climate change, could cause us to despair if it were not for the promise of forgiveness. And even if we are not paralyzed with inaction through despair, we can easily become overwhelmed trying to save the world. Yet it is not through our own power but through the power of the Holy Spirit that we join in the work of justice. The good news is: God has already forgiven us and is already making all things new” (p. 59).

Supply this quote to each small group. Small groups will discuss grief in the context of global and community suffering, using these questions from the study text to inspire conversation.



Questions for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

- Consider your personal journey through the stages of grief on issues facing your community. What are you in denial about? What are you angry about? What are you bargaining about? What are you depressed about? How has a measure of acceptance of the reality of a problem prepared and enabled you to begin working towards justice?³

Large Group Debriefing

Come together for the final 10 minutes of the learning block to share the patterns and themes that emerged from your groups. Where do you despair? Where do you find hope? What can we do with our hopes and despair?

Closing Reflections

5 minutes

Journaling Prompts

Choose one or more quotes or questions from the following and respond in your journal by writing or drawing or dictating your thoughts.

Love has a way of creating within us a righteous discontent, causing us to seek causes and explanation, prompting us to see patterns and connections. Bearing witness through historical clarity gives us opportunity to realize personal and social responsibility for the world around us (p. 53).

Understanding sin as brokenness, we can see that individuals as well as institutions and all of society suffer from sin. Individuals as well as groups need healing in their relationships. Through the process of repentance, we identify injustices and begin preparing for the future work of reparation and restitution. We join with God to repair broken relationships (p. 55).

When have you witnessed injustice? What did that feel like in your body? What emotions did you experience?

In what areas of injustice have you struggled to bear witness to? What would it look like for you to choose to lean in and bear witness?

Recall a time when someone witnessed a pain, struggle, or injustice you experienced. What was that experience like? Did someone bearing witness to you and your situation help you? How did it feel?

Prayer

Gracious God, we are reminded today of the ways in which we have been complicit in patterns of evil and victims of patterns of evil. As you convict and comfort our hearts, may we lean into your care and love.

Amen.

Additional Scripture Resources

Use this Psalm to continue discussion, create a bonus learning block, or investigate ideas more fully.

Psalm 30

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

As for me, I said in my prosperity,
"I shall never be moved."

By your favor, O LORD,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.

To you, O LORD, I cried,
and to the LORD I made supplication:

"What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?

Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?

Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me!
O LORD, be my helper!"

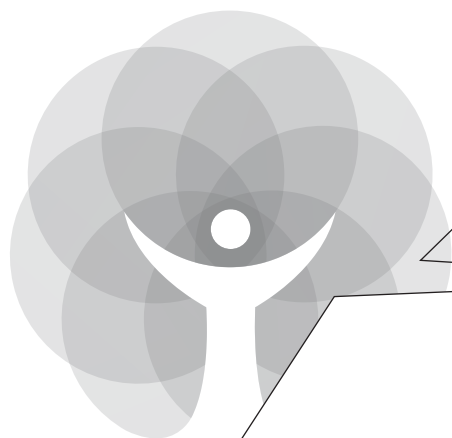
You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,

so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

In preparation for Session 4, please read Module IV.

Endnotes

1. Darryl W. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration" in *Bearing Witness in the Kingdom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2021), 22.
2. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration," 66.
3. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration," 59.



Session 4

Meaningful Participation

Module Outline

Perspective: Future

God's Grace and Activity: Sanctifying Grace, Reconciliation, Shalom

Our Moral Activity: Imagination

Relational Context: Solidarity

Moral Emphasis: Full Flourishing of All Creation

Session Goals

Participants will

- imagine a future of repair and reconciliation;
- reflect upon the changes we must make to push further into solidarity with our neighbors;
- create a worship experience that embodies the themes of the sessions; and
- worship together.

Supply List

Recommended slides or posts or printables:

- Centering quotes
- Journaling prompts

Other supplies:

- Newsprint
- Markers
- Sticky notes or notecards

Session Playlist

Encourage participants to play these songs on their personal devices during journaling time if they wish, plugging in their earphones (or muting the audio on their screen if the group is meeting virtually) so they don't disturb the other participants.

"Praise to the Lord the Almighty," traditional hymn, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 139

"Surely Goodness," Israel Houghton

"Bird Set Free," Keala Settle

"Changed," Aaron Niequist

"Beautiful Things," Gungor

Centering Quotes

As you welcome participants into the space, invite everyone to reflect upon the main themes of this session. These quotes and scripture from the study text may be posted on newsprint or on a screen.

Growth in Christ-likeness allows us to love each other, to encourage development of each person's full human potential. Flourishing is for everyone, not just for the select few or the demonstrably pious. As children of God bearing God's full image, all of humanity is redeemed through Christ. Each person is invited to flourish (p. 84).

Faith always includes a social dimension. To nurture the potential of Christ-likeness in ourselves and our neighbors is the communal task of being church together (p. 86).

The Glorious New Creation: Isaiah 65:17-25

For I am about to create new heavens

and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind.

But be glad and rejoice forever

in what I am creating;

for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,

and its people as a delight.

I will rejoice in Jerusalem,

and delight in my people;

no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,

or the cry of distress.

No more shall there be in it

an infant that lives but a few days,

or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;

for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD.

Gathering Time: Imagining a New Heaven and Earth

15 minutes

Module IV lists several ways in which the church and our denomination have either contributed to or resisted injustice. Although waves of healing and restoration continue to change the Christian church at large, there is so much to be done to make things right with our neighbors and right with God. Tweedy Sombrero Navarette exemplifies this dedication to bearing witness to the community that exists outside of the walls of the physical building.¹ Summarize her story and share this quote from the study text:

Without a foundation of dignity and love, attempts at repentance falter.
When I asked her about the “Act of Repentance and Healing for Indigenous Persons” at General Conference 2012, (Tweedy) told me she was against it. Her congregations were not ready for repentance. She explained, “I was serving an Anglo church at the time. The people were asking, ‘Why are we apologizing? Why do we have to do that?’ So, we hadn’t done our job. If those are the kinds of questions you’re asking, we need to do some teaching” (p. 71).

Distribute note cards or sticky notes to participants and direct participants to write down one way that our faith community can move more deeply into learning, repair, restoration, and healing.

Prayer

Using the contributions from the Gathering Time, pray through the note cards together, seeking to align yourself to the heart of God.

Begin with this prayer from the study text:

Lord, let us act in recognition, love, justice, and solidarity with our neighbors, even those who may be strangers, and to all of creation. Empower us through your Spirit to bear witness to your will for a more just world. Create in us a new spirit. Let us become the moral witness of the church (p. 77).

Virtual Adaptation: Instead of using note cards, invite participants to type their thoughts, words, and phrases into the chat box.



Learning Block I: What Is the Kin-dom of God Like?

40 minutes

Jesus began many parables with the opening line, “The kingdom of God is like . . .”

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (Luke 13:17–19).

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast (Matthew 13:33).

The kingdom of heaven is like a net (Matthew 13:47).

These parables used common imagery from the historical context to explain the nature of a world made right. What imagery would Jesus use if he spoke in parables today? Would he allude to the Avengers? A protest? Wall Street?

Small Group Activity

Divide into small groups and choose a parable that exemplifies the kin-dom of God.² Create a story or skit that captures the meaning of that parable within your current context. For example, what would “The Parable of the Lost Coin” look like today? You have about 20 minutes to do this.

Large Group Debriefing

Come together for the last 20 minutes of this learning block and share your contemporary parables with the other groups. What patterns do you notice? What is missing? Who is missing? Who is represented? How are the biblical parables different from the world we live in right now? When you realized a “what” or “who” was missing, how did that feel? What can be done to ensure we are not leaving people out of the move towards kin-dom living?



Virtual Adaptation: It is possible to create and perform a skit on Zoom or other digital platform, but there are other ways to capture a parable in a digital format. Working together, use the resources you have to create a PowerPoint, a physical or digital poster, a meme, a TikTok, a series of tweets, or a fictional Facebook post. Use your creativity to present your virtual parable to a digital world. These can be serious, reflective, humorous, and/or ironic. Because groups will still be working within a 15 to 20 minute timeframe, this need not be polished or formal. Have some fun!



Questions for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

- Why do you suppose God voices special protections for widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor? What is our role in participating in this redemptive activity?³

Learning Block II: Worship Preparation

30 minutes

In your small groups, prepare a section of liturgy for a closing worship gathering. Groups may choose to write a prayer, choose a scripture reading, read aloud/share a reflection, lead a song, or whatever portion of worship that the groups are inspired to contribute.

Groups may also contribute to a common altar or focal point, placing items or images (physically or digitally) to incorporate elements from all the sessions.

A suggested structure is provided below but feel free to create your own structure, as well.

Suggested Worship Structure:

Call to Worship: Write liturgy to be read in unison or by call-and-response to open up the worship space.

Music: Lead a familiar hymn or simple chorus. Share your intention for choosing the song.

Scripture Reading: Read a biblical text from any of the four sessions that stood out to your small group. You may choose to read it in a creative or dramatic way.

Reflection: Share a reflection or testimony about how this experience has inspired you into more radical discipleship, or share several short reflections from multiple group members.

Response: Invite participants to respond to the Word as it has been shared today. This could be done through more discussion and sharing, or it could be a private time of reflection such as journaling.

Closing Prayer: Write your own prayer, or use the Optional Closing Prayer found on the next page.

Large Group Debriefing

Compile your components into a cohesive program. What worship experience has emerged from your prayerful conversations?

Virtual Adaptation: Singing in unison is difficult in virtual spaces. When you get to this part of the worship experience, participants can either sing as soloists, or mute microphones and sing while listening to one song leader. You can also choose a song from the playlist and ask participants to listen to it with headphones (or with the sound muted) on their own digital devices.



Learning Block III: Closing Worship

30 minutes

Using the suggested structure or a modified structure, begin your worship service together.

Prepare hearts and minds by reading the quote from the beginning of this guide:

*God wants (us) to be part of something larger than (ourselves),
something holy, something that matters to all of creation.*

—DARRYL W. STEPHENS⁴

Welcome participants and invite the first group to lead.

When the service has concluded, take a few moments to close the session. Thank the participants for their efforts and offerings. Thank participants for their commitment to all of the sessions and for being open to the prodding of the Holy Spirit to grow in radical discipleship.

Optional Closing Prayer

A prayer by Pamela Brubaker, from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom* (p. 95):

May we know when to listen and learn, and when to speak and teach. And may we be inspired by the Hebrew people and the hope that we hear in Isaiah, a hope born of oppression, but planted in you God, may we also be inspired by the strength and resilience and hope of our immigrant neighbors. May we join you in Your great work of justice and equality. Amen.⁵

Post-Session Journaling Prompt

This is a post-session assignment for further reflection. Instructions may be printed to take home or relayed in a follow-up digital communication.



Dear Church,

Write a letter to the church as if you are an apostle, calling your church community into greater engagement as a moral witness. Address the barriers that might prevent your church from engaging, as well as the strengths within yourself and your community that you may draw upon as you do this work of active, intentional, participation. Invite your siblings in Christ to the specific work of repentance and reorientation. Cast a vision for what might be possible and/or result from the hard-but-necessary work you are calling them into.

Here are questions and concepts from the study text that you may choose to address in your letter to the church:

Questions for Consideration from *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*

1. What does shalom look like—for you, your church, your community, and the world? What would it be like to exercise environmental holiness in your everyday life? In the community? In national and international politics?
2. In what ways does your community fall short of what God intends for us? What would full flourishing look like in your neighborhood and municipality?
3. How can you enter into the ministry of reconciliation with the most vulnerable persons in your community? How can you enter into the ministry of reconciliation with the most polluted and neglected parts of the environment in your community? What would solidarity mean in your context?⁶



If you will be worshipping in a conference experience and would prefer to reserve worship for that time, use this prompt as your final module, offering participants to share their letters if they choose to do so.

Additional Scripture Resources

Use these relevant texts to continue discussion, create bonus learning blocks, or investigate ideas more fully.

Imitating Christ's Humility, Philippians 2:1-11

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one

mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

2 Corinthians 5:16-19

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation: that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Endnotes

1. Darryl W. Stephens, *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom: Living into the Church's Moral Witness through Radical Discipleship* (New York: United Methodist Women, 2021), 69-71.
2. For an explanation of the use of the term "kin-dom" in this guide, see the introduction to *Bearing Witness in the Kin-dom*, page 2.
3. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration," in *Bearing Witness*, 40.
4. Stephens, *Bearing Witness*, 3.
5. Pamela Brubaker, Sermon, Santee Chapel, Lancaster Theological Seminary, November 19, 2019.
6. Stephens, "Questions for Consideration," in *Bearing Witness*, 88.

Appendix

Session 1: Learning Block III

Break into small groups of three to four people and work together in a circle to examine the following statements, identifying them as etiquette, morals, or ethics based on the descriptions in the study text. The statements are not necessarily correct or incorrect, but they are statements that imply someone's view of right and wrong. You will not agree with every statement, and you will not agree with the conclusions of everyone in your group every time. When disagreements are identified, note them, and remain curious about the ways in which our life experiences and our identities shape our perspectives. What are the underlying ethics behind these statements? Which are morals that have changed or will change? How are these statements contextual?

- Do not steal.
- Withholding information is lying, and lying is wrong.
- Do not hang up without saying "goodbye."
- Save sex for marriage.
- Treat animals humanely.
- If physical violence is wrong and ineffective, then spanking is wrong.
- If we believe in the sanctity of life, we must oppose the death penalty.
- If you accidentally sleep through your alarm and miss work, tell your employer that you have a cold.
- Say "thank you" when someone gives you a gift.
- Pay employees fair wages.
- Use your turn signal before turning.
- Do not murmur during a wedding.
- Sneeze into your elbow.
- If children are unable to consent to sex, then sex with underage people is rape.
- Do not kill.
- When you allow yourself to murder someone with your mind, you might as well be murdering them with your hand.
- Limit your consumption of reality television and video games.
- Do not wear blouses that show your midriff.



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