HEALING AND JOY on Our Journey to God

Program Resource 2021–2022
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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**November 2021**

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NOVEMBER 2021: World Thank Offering: Embracing Change, Sharing Grace

PREPARATION

Pray
Before the gathering begins, take a moment to pray for yourself and your leadership, for everyone who will be present, and for everyone who you hope will be impacted by the ministry of your women’s group over the next year that God might be with you in this hour.

Review the Purpose
This session concludes the first quarter of our program guide, and with it the theme “Healing and Joy in the Midst of Grief.” One frequently acute form of grief is the grief that accompanies any change—change is both one of the most constant things in life, and something we consistently struggle with. The purpose of this session is to listen to Jesus’ message about embracing change and newness even in the midst of inevitable loss, and practice embracing new ways of doing things within ourselves and our communities that might help us experience more healing and more joy when things change. Grief is not linear and is never over, so these themes will return throughout the year and throughout all of our lives. But hopefully some of what we learn and practice now can accompany us into those future experiences of loss and change, and help us to weather them in faithful community and share God’s grace in the world through our gifts.

Gather Materials
• Three large pieces of paper everyone involved can see—large sticky notes or chart pads are ideal for large groups, or a large-ish notebook for one or two people
• Markers in multiple colors

Virtual Adaptations: The “Live the Story” activity in this session, “You Have Heard It Said, But I Say To You!” can be very fun to do on any of the videochat providers that have a whiteboard feature like Zoom does. When you turn on the whiteboard feature, a board appears on your screen that all participants can edit, one by one or simultaneously. You can create your lists together as you go, and watch them appear right in front of you!
Loving God,

Help us to find the material for the “new wineskins” of our day.

May the faith, spirit, charisms and other elements of our “wine” that we have so long tended find new shapes and forms that meet the needs of your people and your creation in this time.

Grant us your wisdom to preserve the essence of all you have blessed and given to us in your abundance.

May we be generous and generative, passing on these treasures to a new generation, but allowing them a new way to evolve in your name.

Help us, O God, to shed the old wineskins of things that no longer serve us or our ministry to our new members or to your Church. Grant us the courage to risk and “put out in deep water” trusting in you.

Break us out of brittleness that keeps us resistant or complacent. May we instead be renewed and expanded by the joy of your presence surprising us in new ways.

Lastly, O God, may this blending be a blessing to your people and your creation. May the wine of our lives outpoured be your love as gift to all.

(Pause to quietly reflect—What are the treasures of our life that we want to pass on? Where do we need some new wineskins? What might they be?)

Let us pray:

(Response—Hear us O God)

For all those who are responding to God's invitation to “come and see,”
For all those in formation in our communities,
For all those in vocation ministry,
For all those in leadership,
For a world in need of your peace,
For all those with whom we minister,
For all those for whom we have promised to pray and for all the prayers we hold in our hearts . . .

Jesus, teacher, healer and Son of the living God, guide us with your Holy Spirit for the wisdom to be women and men of your good news to our world. AMEN.

Credit: The National Religious Vocation Conference. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
SHARE THE STORY OF GOD (10 MINUTES)

Mark 2:13–22

Jesus went out again beside the sea; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

“No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

REFLECTIONS ON THE STORY (7–10 MINUTES)

It can be easy, on this side of Easter, to look down on all those within Jesus’ community who questioned his actions. We would be like Levi, we tell ourselves, and follow Jesus wherever he called. We would not question his decision to fast or not fast, to heal on the Sabbath, to spend time with tax collectors and sinners. We’d just join up!

But most of human experience would indicate we’re wrong. To see why, consider this. Say a young member of your church, who’s only really been around for a year or two, who seems faithful and passionate but a little bossy, stands up right in the middle of a silent prayer moment during worship and just starts talking. Or at coffee hour, when we always have a member say grace before we get in a line to get food, they just go up and grab all the cookies. No matter what profound things this person said about God and the scriptures, how do you think you would feel? How would your community respond? Would this person be considered a wild and precious gift from God, or a problem to be solved?
Jesus Christ most often comes in the form of the bold, the new, the unexpected, that which flips power and expectation on their heads and turns everything upside down. That’s how he saves us. But a lot of the time, those are the things we are most scared of.

In this passage, Jesus names himself as healer of the sick. In our own desire for healing in the midst of grief we may assume that Jesus comes to heal our pain by fixing it, soothing us, or taking it away. But just as often, Jesus heals us by challenging us to confront the sickness within ourselves and our communities—the sickness which harms the other because we cannot tolerate the new, rejects justice because we don’t want to change, or justifies leaving communities broken and unsafe because of what it would require of us to make them whole.

For Jesus to heal us means to heal the ways we harm others as well as the ways we have been harmed. For us to know the kind of healing and joy Jesus calls us to in the midst of change means to embrace doing uncomfortable and unfamiliar things, if that’s what it takes to center the marginalized in our lives and churches.

Who do you feast with? Who do you follow? Who follows you? Would the answers you have to these questions burst the wineskins you knew even just a few years ago? Or are you serving stale and sour wine, so that you might never have to stretch the skin you have already?

We all could use time to dedicate to challenging ourselves and trying new things in the service of greater hospitality and justice. You’re about to practice an activity that will help you identify areas where you might embrace just that sort of Jesus stretching. But before, discuss this a little bit with one another. Communities and honesty, calling one another in to more Christ-like ways of being, can help create the conditions where we can be braver and more creative than we thought we were capable of. Ask one another:

- Where do you see us closing ourselves off and stuck in a rut as a community?
- Where do we see each one of us resisting change, resisting new people at the feast, in ways we might be able to work on?
- What is a new wine of discomfort we might take on with grace and purpose, so that we create communities of openness to newness and change that allow for the healing and joy of all?
**LIVE THE STORY IN THIS MOMENT** *(10 MINUTES)*

Put the two large pieces of paper on the wall or in front of you, as appropriate for the number of folks present. On the sheet of paper on the left, write together in marker a list of “Ways Things Are Done” in your church and United Methodist Women community. What are the little habits you’ve gotten into over time, good, bad, and neutral, that have become deeply ingrained? Make as long a list as you can.

Now, write up at the top of that list, “You Have Heard It Said . . .” Write at the top of the piece of paper on the right, “But I Say to You.” Now for each item on the left hand side, come up with a *different* way you could try to do things, just to see what new ways might feel like. Brainstorm as many as you can, and write these on the right side.

Now consider—can you try any of these “But I Say to You”? What would it take to try something new? Encourage participants to be inspired by these insights as they leave the incubator of this small group to interact with their larger United Methodist Women community and church.

**NOTES:**

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THE WORLD THANK OFFERING (15 MINUTES)

Now that we have practiced embracing newness and change, it’s time to embrace another aspect of this program—sharing God’s grace in the world through our gifts.

For more than 135 years Methodist women have given to the World Thank Offering through United Methodist Women and its predecessor organizations. The World Thank Offering is an opportunity for individuals to respond to God’s abundant grace in the midst of change. When we share our gifts and they are combined with the gifts of others, our contributions make possible the support of national and international work to meet the physical and social needs of women, children, and youth in your neighborhood and around the world.

Take a few minutes to hear more about how the World Thank Offering makes mission possible.

• Read about the World Thank Offering at unitedmethodistwomen.org/worldthank

• Look in the copies of response magazine and find a World Thank Offering story to share with the group.

Sing: “Now Thank We All Our God,” The United Methodist Hymnal, #102

This hymn was written during the Thirty Years’ War amidst disease and hopelessness. As we grieve the losses brought by the pandemic, we embrace change, and we pause to give thanks to God and share our gifts.

Invite guests and members to bring forward their World Thank Offering envelopes and boxes.

Note: We’ve included a template for a World Thank box at the end of this program. Assemble one according to the directions to use as an example, and supply photocopies of the template so group members can create their own box and place their donation inside it.
TAKE THE NEXT MOST FAITHFUL STEP  
(this month)

What the United Methodist Women and church show us about who Jesus is isn’t meant to be a static thing, only spoken of here, but a dynamic breathing gift that inspires us in the rest of our lives. Here are some suggestions for how you can live out what we have experienced today in your everyday life, in a few different forms of community.

Plan on taking these actions sometime during the month.

**By Yourself:** If you took an honest inventory of your soul, what is a group (a town, a profession, a culture or race, an age group, a religion) that you feel uncomfortable or uncertain about? Find a media source (a newspaper, a blog, a book, a song) from members of that group, and devote yourself to trying to increase your open understanding so you can move through your initial suspicion or resistance.

**At Church:** Who are the “tax collectors and sinners” from the perspective of your church community? Think of one way you could serve that group on their own terms, not yours, and do it.

**In Your Community:** Challenge yourself to ask one person in your community who is not at all related to United Methodist Women what it might take for them to find the group relevant to their life. Would it need to meet at a different time or place? Expand the topics it addresses? Do “meetings” a different way? You don’t have to make any changes yet, but open yourself to the possibility that some kinds of change could make your service stronger.

**With the United Methodist Women:**

**Gather** differently! Most of us have set habits about how we do United Methodist Women ministries and programs. Plan to do your next one in some way you never have before—whether its in a different location (a local diner or coffee shop rather than at church?), with different people (invite someone new!), by purchasing the resource on Mighty Networks, or in some other way that embraces that God is always making all things, including the United Methodist Women, new.

**Give** to the World Thank Offering: unitedmethodistwomen.org/?form=missiongiving. Click on “Where it is needed most” and then select “World Thank Offering” from the drop-down menu.

**Pray** every day for people and projects serving in the world supported by your giving using the Prayer Calendar.
WORLD THANK DONATION BOX

Instructions:

1. Photocopy box on cardstock or other heavy paper.
2. Cut out along outside lines.
3. Fold and crease along inside lines.
4. Using glue or tape, attach tabs to the sides of the box or tape sides together. Don’t attach the lid if you want to be able to open and reuse the box.

Please give generously to support women, children and youth through the World Thank Offering!

Thank you!

give thanks!

Your gifts are used in the total program of mission carried on through United Methodist Women’s national office in the United States and around the world.

World Thank Offering