

Living as a Covenant Community

LEADER'S GUIDE

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Living as a Covenant Community Leader's Guide
by elmira Nazombe

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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 to Leaders

“Our covenant agreement with God can be summarized as learning to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength” (*Living as a Covenant Community*, Introduction).

We can think of this study as an opportunity for deepening our understanding of learning how to love God. The biblical covenants recorded the establishment of a relationship between God and God’s people/the covenant community. This study is an opportunity to think about the development of this relationship and affirm how the covenant relationship with God is alive and flourishing in our lives today. It is also a chance to look closely at the biblical covenant community, learn from their experiences, and see how their fears, crises, demands, worship, and praises are mirrored in our own lives. As author Evy McDonald writes: “God’s covenants are a tool by which we can measure our faithfulness to the Holy One, or our lack of it” (Chapter 1, “From God’s Perspective”).

The accounts of the covenants tell us about the covenant community’s obedience, trust, and love, as well as its doubt and stubbornness. They are familiar accounts of special individuals—Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, David and Jonathan, Moses, and finally Jesus—and the communities they led as receivers of the covenant. This study is an important opportunity to reflect on our individual relationship to God, and to challenge ourselves to think about how our actions as a covenant community demonstrate our love and faithfulness to God.

In this study, we will learn about the experiences that surround the making of these covenants.

We will also learn about how the covenants reveal God as:

- **Covenant maker:** who initiates out of love a relationship with humanity.
- **Covenant keeper:** who never turns away from the covenant people no matter how often they stray from faithfulness.
- **Covenant equipper:** who provides the guidance that the covenant community needs to live as God’s people and to take responsibility for the whole of God’s creation and just relationships with their neighbors.

We will also learn about ourselves as individuals. And, as our author suggests, we will explore how we as the covenant community are learning to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we, as Christians, are heirs of the covenant relationship established between God and the covenant communities of the First Testament. The study will ask us to reflect on all of our covenant communities—the local church, United Methodist Women, The United Methodist Church, ecumenical organizations, etc.

Our hope is that through the course of this study, each person and the group will be challenged to think in new ways and examine and question their own understandings and beliefs. We hope that this study encourages each person to open themselves up to the possibility of a new spiritual inpouring of understanding guided by the Spirit.

The Learning Principles of the Leader's Guide

The learning strategy of the Leader's Guide seeks to make use of all of the elements of the quadrilateral learning model suggested by John Wesley: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. We will take the scriptures seriously. We will think about the history and work of our church and the lessons they can teach us. We will use our minds to make sense of the problems and struggles of the current time. We will call upon the well of our own experience to add to our insights about trust in and obedience to God. For your work with the biblical text, you may want to use the *Lectio Divina* process. It is a prayerful way of Bible study that encourages reading, meditation, prayer, and what is called “rest in the word of God.” You need to plan additional time for meditation following each reading (usually done slowly and aloud). The reward for taking this slower route results in deepened understanding that can be wonderful and rich.

The Leader's Guide is organized on the principle of participatory learning. Each session aims to provide maximum opportunity for interaction and dialogue among participants. Working together provides wonderful opportunity for creative growth. Personal sharing is encouraged and built into many of the exercises and discussions included in the Leader's Guide. At the beginning of the course, you will want to establish as a group some rules for confidentiality that honor the important contribution that each participant can make and ensure that each person feels comfortable and safe. All participants should have the opportunity both to learn and teach/share. It is a journey that you and the participants will have together, learning and sharing with each other.

As the leader/facilitator, you will need to remember that individuals have different ways of learning. And while this Leader's Guide leans heavily on participatory methods, you will need to leave space and encourage those who learn in a more individual way to help them make their contributions to the work of the class. For this purpose, journaling exercises can give class members an opportunity to write down and reflect on their own ideas and thoughts. For those who do not feel

comfortable journaling, encourage them to use whatever means — margin notes, pictures, poems, etc.— that will aid their learning.

Many activities call for dialogue processes/role-plays, which asks participants to put themselves into the minds of the biblical characters to deepen their experience of what these individuals may have encountered. This can add depth to the understanding of the texts as well as bring fun and laughter to the classroom.

The exercises in the Leader’s Guide can be adapted to your class size. Small groups of four or five individuals provide opportunities for everyone to participate. Reporting back can be time-consuming and sometimes tedious. Posting group contributions on the wall and allowing a few minutes for a “gallery walk”—a time for members of the class to walk around and view all of the results of the group activity—can help efficiently summarize what’s been learned. If you are working with a large group, you will need to think about other ways to encourage participatory learning. Even in a large auditorium setting, participants can work in pairs or with others who are seated nearby. You may need to check with organizers to see if the amount of time allotted for larger spiritual growth plenaries might be increased so that there is sufficient time for group “interaction.” (Note that the times indicated for the exercises in this guide are all suggestions.) In these settings, a computer with projection capabilities can be a useful tool if comparing newsprint sheets and gallery walks are not practical.

You will want to be aware of any participants with special needs so that you can ensure, for example, that activities that require standing or walking around the room are sensitively organized and do not place a special burden on these class members.

The Elements of the Leader’s Guide

The Leader’s Guide uses three of the many ways that McDonald has given us to study the covenants:

- Engage in **prayerful listening to familiar biblical stories** as you seek to better understand God and the covenant community, and think more deeply about the individuals and communities involved.
- Spend time thinking about **how the covenant speaks to today’s realities**. (See Appendix A for examples of how United Methodist Women is active in social justice issues.)
- Increase your understanding of **how the covenants can inform Christian discipleship**, and how to incorporate covenantal living into worship and prayer.

Preparing Yourself

Living as a Covenant Community is rich with information and insights. You will want to take considerable time to read and reread the text, immersing yourself in the fundamental understandings that you will find there. You will also find it helpful to take extra time to study the biblical passages that make up the context for the covenants we are studying. Especially helpful may be reading and studying different translations of the same covenant stories. Often changes in the language can bring new insights to these familiar accounts. In my own preparation, I found that reading both the New Revised Standard Version and *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* for each passage was very helpful. This process can take quite a lot of time, but it is both intellectually and spiritually rewarding and serves as a resource for you as you lead. You may want to keep your own journal as you prepare to lead the study to record your ideas and your reactions as you read the text, study the scriptural passages, and glean information from other sources. This journal can be a very helpful tool as you begin to make your own plans for each class session.

In addition, you may want to look at material from other writers discussing the covenants. I found the work of Walter Brueggemann especially helpful. His book *The Covenanted Self* is an excellent resource for gaining a deeper understanding of the covenants and their importance for Christians seeking to wrestle with contemporary social justice issues. In the book, Brueggemann calls attention to the writing of the psalmists. He believes that in the Psalms we find an echo of the rhythm of the covenant relationship between God and God's covenant people.¹ The covenant relationship is one that includes praise and thanksgiving as well as fear, quarreling, and God's chastisement of the covenant community for not holding up their end of the covenant. Taking time to read and study the Psalms is another excellent preparation for leading.

The covenant God is a God of justice acting in real time. Therefore, during the course of the study, contemporary social and political issues, especially the realities in the Middle East, might be a part of class discussion. In your preparation it is important for you to try to think through when these issues may come up and how best to engage with them. The excerpts from the interview with Maharat Rori Picker Neiss, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis (Appendix B), and the comments from Harpo Jaeger of the National Havurah Committee (see "One Jewish Perspective" in Chapter 6 of the study) will be helpful to you in handling these discussions. It will be important to encourage your class to consider the differences between the writings of faith and the writings of a historical community, and how they are intertwined. McDonald suggests that as we read scripture, we try to understand what kind of writing it is, the time and place it was written, what came before and what came afterward.

When you have completed your background preparations, you will want to begin planning each study session. The Leader's Guide provides an agenda and suggestions for each two-hour session, but you will want to adapt it to your own insights and teaching style. During the course of leading

the study, you should anticipate that you will likely need to change and adapt your plans for each session based upon what is happening during the session and as you realize that certain points need more or less time. Adaptability during the course of each session is critical in order to respond to the needs of your group.

Worship and Prayer

Worship and prayer should play an important role in your sessions. Neiss remarked that worship is a means of considering covenant responsibilities in the broader world. The Leader's Guide encourages you to develop the times of worship and prayer for your class in this way. Times of worship offer an opportunity to place the discussions of the day on the altar of prayer—committing our concerns to God. It is a chance to affirm that prayer is indeed a form of two-way communication: In prayer we speak and God listens, and in prayer we must try to listen to God speaking.

You will want to carefully consider the elements that you might want to include on or in a worship table or area. These items can help the group make a clear transition to the time for worship during each lesson. Keeping electric “covenant candles” burning throughout each session can be a way to symbolize the ongoing presence of the Spirit in the classroom. Think about other symbols of the covenant that you might bring or that participants might make for the worship table: symbols from covenant accounts such as colored paper for rainbows, or a toy boat symbolizing the ark, a globe to symbolize the whole of creation, a cross, etc. McDonald makes the excellent suggestion of utilizing a “covenant pitcher,” which can be filled with a little more water during each session to symbolize the growing nature of God's covenant with the covenant people. A colorful cloth to cover the worship table is always an important addition.

Music

Music can play an important part in the sessions by providing an opportunity to affirm some of the lessons and sentiments expressed in the covenants. You may want to lead the songs yourself, or look for someone in your class who has experience leading songs who would enjoy the opportunity to give leadership in this way. Each session includes some song suggestions. Music can also serve as a transition during moments when you are taking the class from one kind of activity to another. You have permission to project the songs and hymns included in the sessions at Mission u events. Please include the complete copyright notice provided in the sessions. For other songs and hymns, it is helpful if hymnals and songbooks are available for the classroom because songs sung from the hymnal do not require special permissions.

The Meeting Space

Organizing the space in a way that feels comfortable and encourages the learning process is very important. As much as it is possible, arrange the seating in a way that allows participants to see each other, face-to-face, and makes it possible for them to work in pairs or in groups of four or five. If possible, have multiple translations/interpretations of the Bible available. You can encourage participants to bring their favorite translation, but you will also want to bring the translations that have been most helpful to you in your preparation. In fact, you may want to bring any materials that you have used in your own preparation, as these might be helpful for your students to browse. Past issues of **response** that address some of the contemporary issues you will be discussing can also be a valuable resource.

Honoring Knowledge

Newsprint can be invaluable as a way to record and honor the contributions of the members of your group in discussions. The sheets can be a long-term memory tool to help you and participants connect parts of your discussion. They can be very useful to you as you review progress after each session, too. Blackboards and whiteboards can also be used for this purpose, but they don't have the permanence of newsprint. Alternatively, one or more participants might photograph class notes on their smartphone cameras so they could be available for future discussions. Some classrooms may have electronic capability, which makes it possible to project the notes. I would, however, suggest that electronic presentations be used sparingly unless you're working with a very large group, because it tends to discourage the participatory learning process.

Posting Materials

Follow the rules of the facility where Mission u will take place in regard to posting material on the walls. If there are brief quotations or texts that you wish to hang on the walls, it is possible to have these blown up at a nearby copy center for a fairly reasonable price and in a variety of sizes. Once the class is over, you might want to give these to participants who will be teaching the class at the conference or district levels or in their home churches. The quotations and questions can also be written on newsprint for posting. You may want to set aside a special place in your classroom where homework assignments are posted each day.

Supplies

Having plenty of colorful markers with broad tips on hand is always useful. In order to be gentle on the planet, you might want to bring and encourage class members to bring a few sheets of recycled computer printer paper that can be used for note taking or preliminary discussion work. Newsprint that can be used to record group work deliberations is always helpful. Be sure to have a way to fasten the newsprint and other materials on the walls that is approved by the Mission u facility (whether that's tape, sticky tack, push pins, or something else).

Communicating with Participants before Mission u

You may want to obtain a roster for your class two weeks before Mission u begins and send participants a short note introducing yourself and encouraging them to read at least the opening chapters of the text before the first class. The note might suggest that they bring the Bible translation they favor, a journal for recording their own reflections on the class, and spare recycled printer paper for additional note taking. You might also suggest that they begin their journal at home by writing down their own ideas about the meaning of the word “covenant,” which will be the opening question for Session 1.

Endnotes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 7.

SESSION 1

God as Covenant Maker

Goals

In this session, participants will try to collectively develop an understanding of “covenant” using their own experience with the word as a starting point. Secondly, they will explore how covenant is God’s way of establishing a relationship with humanity—God as the covenant maker and God’s people as the covenant community. Participants will have an opportunity to draw on the conversation with Maharat Rori Picker Neiss to reflect on Jewish community understandings of the term “covenant” (see Appendix B). Finally, this session will look at the first examples of God’s covenant-making activity and its meaning for us today.

- To develop an understanding of the meaning of “covenant” from our personal understanding, the Hebrew words, and from traditional and contemporary Jewish community understandings.
- To explore covenant making as God’s way of establishing a relationship with humanity through the biblical accounts of God, creation, and Adam and Eve.

Materials

- Hymnals or songbooks
- Index cards for participants to record their goals for the study
- Large-scale prints or posters of the goals, questions, and quotations to be posted
- Name tags
- Newsprint
- Recycled printer paper
- Several translations of the Bible

Preparation

- Post the goals of the study and of the lesson in the room.
- Post key phrases from the biblical text on the wall, such as Genesis 1:26–28 from *The Message* “God spoke: ‘let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature . . .’”

- Post (optional) Hebrew words that are identified in the text along with their definitions: *hesed* (loving-kindness) and *berîth* (covenant).
- Ask one or more participants ahead of time if they would be willing to read scripture at the appropriate time.

Welcome

As participants enter, welcome them to the class and hand out index cards where they can write their names and one goal that they have for the study. You'll want to review these after the session to help you with your planning.

Opening Song

Sing one of the following:

“Amen Sikudumisa,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2067

Amen Sikudumisa

Words: Trad. (South Africa); attr. To S.C. Molefe as taught by George Mxadana

Music: Trad. (South Africa); attr. To S.C. Molefe as taught by George Mxadana

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“Our God is an Awesome God,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2040

Our God is an Awesome God

Words: Rich Mullins

Music: Rich Mullins

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Introducing Ourselves and Our Understandings of Covenant (30 minutes)

Welcome participants to the session. You might want to offer your own brief opening prayer for the work of the class. Take a few moments to point out the overall goals of the study. It is helpful to ask for any comments or additions that participants may wish to make.

Introductions are an important way to begin the session and to establish good learning relationships for this study. You will want to demonstrate the form of the introductions and the timing (between one and two minutes). The following are some suggestions of what introductions could include:

- The name you would like to be called.
- A definition or experience of “covenant” in your own life (such as: thinking of marriage as a covenant relationship or the experience of restrictive covenants that barred certain racial and religious groups from housing or sports facilities).
- A suggestion for “classroom covenant making” that would foster open, inclusive, and participatory learning, such as sharing, listening and giving attention to each other, and confidentiality.

Record and post the definitions and suggestions separately, where everyone can see them (newsprint/whiteboard). Keep these visible throughout Mission u as a permanent reference point for the sessions. (In the first session it is best for you as the leader to begin as an example, just to establish the style and pattern. If there is a study helper this might be his or her task.)

Living as a Covenant Community calls our attention to two Hebrew words with covenant meanings: *berîth* and *hesed*. Maharat Neiss points out, “The Hebrew word *berîth* traditionally referred to covenant that signified an agreement between two parties. But the word *hesed*, which is used less frequently, gives us the deeper meaning of covenant as the kindness or graciousness of God toward humanity in establishing a relationship.” (See Appendix B for for more about the meaning of *berîth* and *hesed*.)

Add to the list of meanings and definitions of “covenant” any class responses and questions from Neiss’ quote. Ask participants to summarize their new insights about the meaning of the word “covenant.”

The First Covenant: God as Covenant Maker and God’s Covenant People— The Covenant of Care and Grace (40 minutes)

“We have a covenant-making God who keeps the covenant, reveals God’s self through the covenant, and enables us to fulfill our part of the covenant” (Chapter 1, “Overview of the Covenants”).

Explain that there are two parts of the first covenant that we will need to consider. Have at least two different translations of the text available, one being *The Message*. Be sure to allow time to read the biblical texts slowly. Reading the text more than once is best. To allow for

deep contemplation, it is useful to follow each reading with a time of silent reflection. Ask a participant to slowly read again the language of the first covenant from *The Message*: Genesis 1:26–28, 31. Ask the class to stop and take time to reconsider what it means when it says “reflecting God’s nature.” McDonald notes that the “us” in Genesis 1:26 “points more to the communal nature of God, a recognition of the inner community within God. . . . This communal nature of God was further defined to be an egalitarian and harmonious relationship” (Chapter 1, “The Call to Be a Covenantal Community”). Encourage participants to take a moment to add their thoughts to their journals or to use whatever method they like to record their thoughts in response to the following questions:

- What aspects of God do “in our likeness” or “reflecting God’s nature” bring to mind?
- What is the relationship between God’s loving and creative nature and God’s intention for the community?
- What demand/responsibility does it place on the covenant community (Adam and Eve) in relationship to the rest of creation? Is that what “reflecting God’s nature” means?

Ask the group to then consider the second aspect of this first covenant as a result of the temptation of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). Ask a participant to read the “serpent’s” words in Genesis 3:4–5 from *The Message*: “You’ll see what’s really going on. You’ll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil.”

Post the following questions for this text. Give time for participants to consider their own responses before sharing in the larger group:

- What do you think was going through the minds of Adam and Eve (the community), when they were in the midst of this wonderful creation?
- What is the difference between being created “reflecting God’s nature” and the voice of temptation saying, “You’ll see what’s really going on. You’ll be just like God.” What does the experience tell us about human nature? Did Adam and Eve create a crisis where there did not have to be one?
- Imagine being a part of that first covenant community: Put yourself in the minds of Adam (“she gave it to me”) and Eve (“the serpent seduced me”). Can you develop some additional justifications for their response to the serpent? Why did they choose to eat from the tree of knowledge? Why did they want to be just like God? Does anything like that ever happen to us as a community or as individuals?

Ask for volunteers to share the justifications they imagined.

TRANSITION

If needed, use music as a transition between parts of the discussion. Invite the class to sing a verse of the opening song as a transition, affirming in song the wonder of creation and the first covenant. This will also give the class a chance to stand up for a brief stretch break.

What Is the Meaning of the Covenant for Our Own Lives?: The Covenant Community Today (25 minutes)

Direct participants' attention to "How Does This Covenant [of Blessing] Inform Our Christian Discipleship?," in the second half of Chapter 2 in *Living as a Covenant Community*, asking one member of the class to read the author's story of her personal health crisis, God's guidance, and her own stubbornness in finding her path.

Ask: What might be some similarities between the author's experience and that of Adam and Eve?

Invite the group to work in pairs to share similar stories from their own faith journeys, moments of crisis that led to depending upon themselves rather than on the promises of God.

THE JOY OF REFLECTING GOD'S NATURE AND THE DIFFICULT TASK OF OBEDIENCE

Divide participants into two groups. Assign one to develop a list of positive examples of United Methodist Women and other covenant communities' work on current crises like climate change. The fact that United Methodist Women members are taking the community's responsibility for creation seriously by working on the 13 Steps to Sustainability or trying to Be Just. Be Green. could be used as examples.

Ask the second group to recall contemporary experiences and make a list of the hard places/opportunity moments for covenant community stewardship as reflected in Genesis 3, where there is a temptation to follow our own knowledge (or popular opinion or corporate justifications) rather than listening for the guidance of God.

Refer both groups to Appendix A to aid the discussion.

Post both lists for all to see and encourage participants to take a brief gallery walk to review the results of the group discussions.

Lessons for Discipleship and Covenant Living: Closing Prayers

The writers of the Psalms echo the relationship between the covenant-making God and God's covenant people. The words of a psalm often include first praise, then complaint and worry, and then praise again. For example, Psalm 40 (see Appendix C) is both a song of thanksgiving for deliverance and a prayer for help in the midst of trouble. Ask participants to work individually or in groups to develop their own brief covenant, writing "psalms" from their conversations together that reflect:

- Praise for the care and grace of our covenant God.
- Complaint about the difficulty of the task of obedience in the midst of fear and crisis.
- Praise for the joy of "reflecting God's nature" in our responsibility for the care of creation.

As you begin sharing the prayers, light the covenant candles and add water to the covenant pitcher.

Ask participants to form a circle and speak aloud the prayers/psalms they have written expressing their understanding of the first covenant.

For example:

(Praise) **I waited patiently for God . . .**

(Praise for the care and the grace of the covenant God in the life of the community. *Name your own examples of blessings, personal and communal.*)

(Complaint) **Troubles surround us . . .**

(*Name the temptations and challenges of the covenant community that you identified.*)

Save us God, come quickly. We are needy and need help.

(*Add a second praise about the joy of the responsibility for the care of creation and the work for social justice.*)

God you are my guide; God you are my God. Please act right away. Help us.

After all have contributed you may wish to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for beginning this work together and for our covenant-making God.

Closing Song

“Our God is an Awesome God,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2040

Our God is an Awesome God

Words: Rich Mullins

Music: Rich Mullins

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Prepare for Session 2

Ask half of the participants to read the Noah texts: Genesis 6:5–13 and Genesis 6–9:17.

Ask the other half of the participants to read the Abraham texts: Genesis 12:1–7; Genesis 15:1–6; Genesis 16–17.

Ask all the participants to read Chapters 2 and 3 of *Living as a Covenant Community*.

SESSION 2

Covenant-Keeper God and Faithful and Obedient Covenant People: The Covenant of Redemption & Safety and the Covenant of Blessing

Goals

The goal of this session is to continue the exploration of how God expands and deepens the covenant relationship of safety and blessing during a period of crisis and fear. We will explore this in the lives of the covenant community as represented by Noah and Abraham. Participants will also consider how these experiences mirror events and crises of the present day.

- To learn how God expands the covenant relationship in periods of crisis and fear for the covenant community.
- To consider the importance of great trust and acts of faithfulness by the covenant community.

Materials

- Bibles in various translations
- Hymnals and songbooks
- Large-scale prints or posters of quotations and questions to be posted on the walls, including highlights from Genesis 6:5–7, Genesis 12, 15, etc.
- Markers
- Newsprint
- Plain or colored paper

Preparation

- Post lesson goals on the wall.
- Post quotations and questions on the wall.

Opening Song

Sing a favorite song such as one of the hymns listed below:

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 140 (one verse)

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Words: Thomas O. Chisholm

Music: William M. Runyan

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“My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me,” *African-American Heritage Hymnal*, no. 391

My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me

Words: W.C. Martin

Music: Charles H. Gabriel

“God Will Take Care of You,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 130

God Will Take Care of You

Words: Civilla D. Martin

Music: W. Stillman Martin

Listening Again to the Biblical Texts (30 minutes)

Tell participants that they will work in two groups based upon their homework reading assignments. The groups should record the highlights of their discussions on newsprint for sharing later in the session.

Group 1 will study the story of Noah: The Covenant of Redemption and Safety (Genesis 6:5–13, Genesis 6–9:17).

Group 2 will study the story of Abraham: The Covenant of Blessing (Genesis 12:1–7, Genesis 15:1–6, and Genesis 16–17).

Each group should first review the story in total and then look at specific texts as they imagine themselves being Abraham, Noah, or their families. Ask the groups to make notes on what they think attitudes and responses might have been among Abraham and Noah’s communities.

After reading the texts, try to imagine what Noah and Abraham may have been thinking during these experiences. You might want to create a monologue or a dialogue that expresses their thoughts, the difficulties of obedience and faithfulness, and their responses to God’s covenant

blessings. For example: Noah—I know God promised to save me and my family, but I began to think it was never going to stop raining and I didn't know what we were going to do if we never saw land again; after all, God promised to destroy the earth. Abraham—The number of family and friends is really quite small, how can we possibly take over a whole land? Is God going to fight against the Canaanites?

GROUP 1

Group members should choose one person to read/facilitate their discussion as follows.

Group 1 will try to understand the crisis of Noah's time as well as Noah's faithfulness in building the ark and going into the unknown. In light of Noah's faithfulness, God responds with a new covenant and a promise to never again destroy the earth through a flood.

Genesis 6:5–7 describes the crisis in Noah's time: "God saw human evil was out of control. People thought evil, imagined evil, evil from morning to night. God was sorry that he made the human race in the first place; it broke his heart. God said. 'I'll get rid of my ruined creation, make a clean sweep: people, animals, snakes and bugs, birds—the works. I'm sorry I made them'" (*The Message*).

While they are listening ask Group 1 to:

- Imagine how Noah must have felt in this situation.
- Think about the fears and anxieties Noah might have had.

In Genesis 6:8–9 we see that Noah was different than those around him. God liked what he saw in Noah. Noah was a good man and a man of integrity in his community. Noah walked with God.

After the flood, as described in Genesis 8:20–22, Noah's faith response was to create an altar and rest in God's presence, and God smelled the sweetness of the altar and sent the sign of the rainbow (Genesis 9:1–16).

While they are listening ask Group 1 to think about:

- What is the importance of Noah's worship response to the end of the flood and finding land?
- How did Noah's action influence God?

GROUP 2

Group members should choose one person to read/facilitate their discussion as follows.

In Genesis 12:1–3 God asks Abraham and the covenant community to strike out into the unknown to leave for a land Abraham will be shown and promises to make him a great nation.

While they are listening ask Group 2 to think about:

- How this blessing came to Abraham and why.
- What we know about Abraham’s situation and what it would be like to be a group of people living as nomads.
- What the text might mean to the whole community when it says: “I’ll make you a great nation and bless you. I’ll make you famous; you will be a blessing. All families of the earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:2–3, *The Message*).
- How the blessing gives identity and definition to the covenant community and makes them a people, as Neiss suggests.
- How Abraham and the community could both receive a blessing and be a blessing.

In Genesis 15:5–6 God promises Abraham that his descendants would be many, so many that it would be like counting the stars. The text records Abraham’s simple response: “And he believed.”

- Why was the crisis of barrenness so critical not just for Abram and Sarai, but also for the community?
- How did the family crisis call the covenant promise into question?
- What was the meaning of the signs that were given in Chapter 17, the changing of names (Genesis 17:3–8), and the requirement for circumcision (Genesis 17:9–14)?

TRANSITION

Participants might want to sing one verse of “I Will Trust in the Lord,” no. 391 in the *African American Heritage Hymnal*, during a gallery walk to review the results of the group discussions and as they move from this activity of thinking through the minds of Abraham and Noah into considering their own realities.

The Covenant Community Today (30 minutes)

Participants will want to consider and name the personal and community situations in which they have been challenged to step out into the unknown. These would be their personal experiences of trying to live the covenantal life. The group might want to share first in pairs (10 minutes) their personal crises and crises of faith that are similar to the experiences of Noah (the storms of our lives) and Abraham (at the edge of the unknown) and texts that note some of the important lessons from those experiences. Ask participants to think of situations facing today's covenant communities that require a similar kind of obedience in the face of the unknown (consequences within the community) and going by faith rather than by sight (class and race privilege, popular opinion, media discussion). (See Appendix A for examples from United Methodist Women.)

Make three lists as follows on the board or on newsprint, or draw large murals to portray the situations and experiences as they are shared.

1. Situations that feel like evil all around and uncertainty in the modern world.
2. Signs of the rainbow, of God's covenant, in the faith experience of their community.
3. Ways in which the covenant community can be a "rainbow" or an "ark."

Post the following questions to help with the group reflections:

- a. What are the actions of the community of justice?
- b. Where is God calling the community to challenge the status quo?
- c. Where has the covenant community become stuck?
- d. What risks need to be taken? (See Appendix A for examples from United Methodist Women.)

Lessons for Discipleship and Covenant Living: Closing Prayers

Transition to a time for prayer and worship, light the covenant candle, and add water to the covenant pitcher. Ask for a volunteer to lead the closing prayers. Class members might share their thoughts on the three lists they just created as a prayer.

After each individual prayer, the common response will be: God, your servants are listening.
After all who wish to speak have finished, the community will say: Amen.

Closing Song

Suggested songs include:

“I Will Trust in the Lord,” *African American Heritage Hymnal*, no. 391

I Will Trust in the Lord

African American spiritual

“Trust and Obey,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 467

Trust and Obey

Words: John H. Sammis

Music: Daniel B. Towner

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 140

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Words: Thomas O. Chisholm

Music: William M. Runyan

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Prepare for Session 3

Review the portions of the study covering the experiences of Moses on the mountain as described by McDonald in *Living as a Covenant Community*: Chapter 4, “Understanding the Story,” “What Does Making the Covenant Say About Moses?,” and “Understanding the Covenant, Its Blessings and Conditions,” plus Exodus 19–20.

Divide the class into two groups to reflect on biblical text accounts of the Ten Commandments and the laws: Exodus 19, Moses and the covenant community at Mount Sinai; Deuteronomy 5–6, the giving of the commandments; Deuteronomy 10:12–22, justice for widows, orphans, and strangers; Exodus 20:1–17, economic and environmental justice; and Leviticus 25:1–7, sabbath for the land.

SESSION 3

God the Equipper and God's Covenant Nation: The Covenant of Guidance and Law

Goals

The goal of this session is to gain a deeper understanding of the commandments and laws handed down through Moses. Participants will ponder how God's covenant with Moses and the Israelite community is relevant for our lives today.

- To increase understanding of the laws handed down by Moses as a detailed articulation of the elements of the covenant for the community/nation.
- To ponder the relevance of the commandments and laws to our lives today.

Materials

- Bibles in various translations
- Colored markers
- Hymnal and songbooks
- Large-scale print or poster of the opening words
- Large-scale prints or posters of the Ten Commandments that can be hung around the room: commandments 1 through 3, commandments 4 through 10, and perhaps the Great Commandment (See Appendix D)
- Newsprint

Preparation

Post the goals for this session as well as the commandments, opening words, and any questions to be used during the session.

Opening Song

Sing the following:

“What Does the Lord Require of You,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2174

What Does the Lord Require of You

Words: Jim Strathdee (Mic. 6:8)

Music: Jim Strathdee

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Opening Words (unison)

- “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3).
- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. . . . ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30–31).

Introduction

The journalist Chris Hedges has suggested that “The commandments guide us toward relationships built on trust rather than on fear. Only through trust can there be love.”¹

Write on the board or post the question: Do Christians need the commandments? Take five or ten minutes to poll participants on their answers and record them on newsprint so that they are available for reference throughout the session.

Listening Again to the Biblical Texts (1 hour)

To set the background for thinking about the covenants, ask participants to recall their reading about Moses and his seven trips up the mountain to get the Ten Commandments, as reported in Exodus 19 (see “Understanding the Covenant, Its Blessings and Conditions”). As a group, make a list of the crises that were facing the covenant community, for example:

1. Seven years of wandering in the desert.
2. The community’s fear of seeing God directly.
3. Moses being absent from them for forty days.
4. Their temptation with idols as a way to relieve their fears.

Post or share the commandments according to the breakdown in Appendix D. Divide the class into two corresponding groups.

1. Commandments about the relationship to God and loving God.
2. Commandments about living in community.

Ask each group to keep in mind how all the commandments are interdependent. Loving God is reflected in the way the community lives together, and the way the community lives together reflects their love of God—heart, soul, and mind.

Encourage this part of the session to be a prayerful time for each person to deeply search their own mind and spirit to discover and reclaim the meaning of the words that are being spoken. Use the *Lectio Divina* method of study and meditation, if it seems appropriate. Listen with eyes closed. This is another good time for participants to record their first thoughts in their journals. Then, participants might work in pairs or in small groups to repeat to each other the language of these commandments several times, with a pause in between so that these powerful words might be taken in deeply. They may want to write down or share the ideas that these words bring to their minds.

PART 1: LOVING GOD: COMMANDMENTS 1–3

First, ask participants to work in groups or pairs on the two different commandment categories of relationship to God and living in community, beginning with the commandment about our relationship to God (15–20 minutes). Review the following scriptures:

- “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3).
- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5).
- “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name” (Exodus 20:7).

Discuss:

In their discussion, pairs may want to name each experience, such as what does it mean to love God with your whole heart?

- How does an individual live up to this command?
- What are some examples of what it might mean?
- Is it about acts of worship or acts of justice?

- What are the temptations for idol worship that represent barriers to being able to faithfully respond to the commandments, such as the idols of privilege and wealth and education and nationality and race?
- How well are we really doing at loving God?

Ask each pair or small group to summarize their responses. Pairs can post any of their reflections that they choose on newsprint. Clearly this would be optional since these hearings are very personal.

PART 2: BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR: COMMANDMENTS 4–10

Divide participants into several larger groups to consider the rest of the commandments that represent the rules for the life of the covenant community. These commandments give a vision of an alternative society with the shape of justice. Ask each group to consider them not in the personal terms that we often use, but also in collective terms to apply to a neighborhood, nation, or the world as a whole. As they think about it in this collective way, ask each group to develop an annotated version of the commandment that reflects the contemporary meanings for a community. For example, to honor parents is not just about biology, it also includes respecting the wisdom and experience of elders in our community and the broader world, ensuring that their voices are a part of the process of collective decision making. (Appendix A can be a helpful reference.)

The groups may want to refer to the textual material in Deuteronomy, Exodus, and Leviticus that speaks about the rules for the community, such as (choose some of the social rules that seem most relevant to them):

These commandments cover the topics of work, slavery, and rest (Exodus 20:8–11); honoring parents (Exodus 20:12); murder (Exodus 20:13); adultery (Exodus 20:14); stealing (Exodus 20:15); false witness (Exodus 20:16); and coveting the spouse of a neighbor and the property of others (Exodus 20:17).

Discuss:

- What are the relationships between members of the community? Think about how “neighbor” is understood in a global sense.
- What does it mean collectively/politically/nationally to think about bearing false witness, such as speaking from national interest about other societies rather than a sense of justice for all?
- What does it mean to think collectively about lying and stealing as actions of structures, institutions, and nations with regard to resources and people?
- What is the prohibition against murder in a collective context? What happens when killing “the enemy” is a part of the national strategy?

Each group might post some annotated commandments or place their comments next to the posted commandments. Leave spaces on the page or use different colored markers to indicate different themes in the commandments.

PART 3: THE PRAXIS OF ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOR A NATION

Next, we will look at God’s instructions for the sabbatical year and jubilee year. Following the same pattern, read the text slowly.

Leviticus 25:1–7 Sabbatical Year

Leviticus 25:8–9 Jubilee Year

After meditatively reading the commandments, ask yourself:

- How do these laws build economic and environmental justice?

Lessons for Discipleship and Covenant Living

“God called the Israelites, and us today, to not blindly obey, but to listen to God, and let our love for God lead us to do what is right in God’s eyes” (Chapter 4, “The Blessings for Keeping the Covenant and Curses [Consequences] for Breaking It”).

Ask one participant to read the author’s account of her encounter with the two boys at Best Buy (below). Or make a handout of this covenant-fulfilling opportunity.

I had a powerful and unforgettable lesson of not responding when called by God to care for the poor. It was a blustery winter day in Seattle, Washington, where the damp, cold wind chilled you to the bone. My friend, Monica, and I were doing some Christmas shopping at Best Buy. Out of the corner of my eye I saw two young boys, maybe six and eight, holding hands and quietly walking around the store. They were dressed in only flimsy t-shirts and shorts. Their feet were bare. Suddenly, a store clerk stomped up to them and in a loud voice said, “Get out of here, you do not belong in this store.” Immediately, these words formed in my throat, “Oh, there you are, I have been looking all over for you.” However, they remained unspoken as I watched them leave. Fear of what the clerk would say, or maybe do, kept me silent. When I realized what I had not done, I ran out of the store to find them in order to buy them some warm clothes and maybe a meal; but it was too late. Those two beautiful children of God had disappeared into the dark coldness of late afternoon. My consequence has been the regret I have felt all of these years. God has worked with that regret to show me how to respond in the moment of need. While I was not cursed in the biblical sense, I certainly missed a blessing (Chapter 4, “The Blessings for Keeping the Covenant and Curses (Consequences) for Breaking It”).

Ask the group to consider and share some contemporary examples of the work of the covenant community on crises such as mass incarceration, reproductive health, economic justice, and racism (see Appendix A for examples from United Methodist Women) and how an understanding of the commandments and the responsibility of the covenant community challenge us to be moved to deal with these issues or miss blessings.

Prayers of Obedience (30 minutes)

Using the model of Psalm 106 (see Appendix E) ask participants to voice their understanding of the ongoing history of the covenant community by speaking out loud the responses of the covenant community to some of the challenges that have been discussed during this session, such as naming the moments of “exile” that the community may have experienced. For example: “Still God saw the trouble we were in and heard our cries for feeling exiled from God’s purpose. God showed us how to reach out to those in the community that surrounded our church community because they were in need of our care and blessing. Thanks be to God, the Covenant Keeper, who showed us how to be a blessing to our community and receive a blessing from the community.”

Closing Song

“What Does the Lord Require of You?” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2174

Prepare for Session 4

Read Chapters 5 and 6 from *Living as a Covenant Community*, as well as the following scriptures: 2 Samuel 7:1–17, Jeremiah 31, Chronicles 17, Psalm 89:3–4, 1 Samuel 18–20, Acts 10:34–43, and Philippians 2:1–5.

Endnotes

1. Chris Hedges, *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 6.

SESSION 4

Covenant-Fulfilling God and Grace-Filled Covenant Community: The Covenants of Eternal Rule, Everlasting Friendship, and the Everlasting Covenant

Goals

Participants will review the covenant of radical friendship between David and Jonathan and consider how God's Covenant of Eternal Rule with David represents a further elaboration of the covenant promises made to Abraham and Moses for the development of the nation. Participants will also explore the connection between these covenants and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and consider how the life and ministry of Jesus represent the fullest articulation of God's relationship with the covenant community/humanity through the Everlasting Covenant.

- To understand God's Covenant of Eternal Rule with David as an elaboration of the covenant promises to Abraham and Moses for the development of the nation and its implications for modern church structures.
- To review the Covenant of Everlasting Friendship between David and Jonathan as a model for human relationships and a foretaste of the sacrifice of Jesus.
- To consider how the ministry and life of Jesus represent the fullest articulation of God's relationship with the covenant community/humanity in the Everlasting Covenant.

Materials

- Bibles in various translations
- Hymnals and songbooks
- Large-scale prints or posters of quotations and questions to be posted on the walls, including highlights from Genesis 6:5–7, Genesis 12, 15, etc.
- Markers
- Newsprint
- Plain or colored paper

Preparation

Post the session’s goals and Brueggemann quote from *The Covenanted Self*: “We are bound to a God for whom the neighbor comes first.”¹

Ask a participant ahead of time to read Jeremiah 31:31–34.

Opening Song

Sing one of the following:

“Lord I Lift Your Name on High,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2088

Lord, I Lift Your Name on High

Words: Rick Founds

Music: Rick Founds

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“We Are Marching (Siyahamba),” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2235

We Are Marching

Words: South African

Music: South African

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The Covenant of Eternal Rule: God’s Covenant with David

Review 2 Samuel and *Living as a Covenant Community*, Chapter 5.

In 2 Samuel 7:1–17 we learn of the four elements of the covenant between God and David: everlasting reign, rest from his enemies, a home to live in, and the land for his people. But David wanted to build a temple to house the ark of the covenant (2 Samuel 7:18–29), which for many years had been a movable worship place, as a sign of his gratitude to God. However, God told David that this temple would only be built by his son.

Ask participants to consider David’s failure to meet his personal goal and build the temple in light of our own experiences. How important are the buildings and structures of the church?

- Might David have had what the author described as “the dark night of the soul”—a sense of frustration at not being able to complete the temple himself? Have you ever felt that way?

- “As a people, the church is really not a place to which we go but the dynamic community that actively reaches out in Christ’s love to the needy and underprivileged of our society” (Chapter 5). What from your own experiences might reflect the truth of this statement?

Considering David’s Covenant of Everlasting Friendship with Jonathan

Review 1 Samuel 18–20 and *Living as a Covenant Community*, Chapter 5, “Understanding the Covenant Between Jonathan and David” and “The Covenant of Everlasting Friendship.”

The covenant between David and Jonathan represents an important picture of ideal human relationships. The sacrifices they needed to make often involved deep understanding of the love of neighbor, especially in its relationship to injustice and issues of power. The covenant also can inform our relationship with God and Jesus, as well as with our neighbors. “A sacred covenant relationship meant you did not make decisions without taking into account how your actions or choices would affect your covenant partner” (Chapter 5, “The Elements of the Covenant”). From the relationship between David and Jonathan, we learn that a covenant can transcend cultural and family loyalties, encouraging us to embrace the stranger and the alien.

- What can we learn from the elements that symbolized the friendship between David and Jonathan—the exchange of armor, the exchange of names, and the willingness to sacrifice?
- Can you think of a time when you have been asked to enter into such a radical friendship?

Listening Again to the Biblical Texts (30 minutes)

The Covenant of Eternal Rule: God’s Covenant with David
(2 Samuel 7:1–17, 1 Chronicles 17, and Psalm 89:3–4)

Covenant of Friendship between David and Jonathan
(1 Samuel 18–20)

The accounts of the covenant between God and David and the covenant between David and Jonathan are not only full of examples of injustice, intrigue, and jealousies, but also of great faithfulness and willingness to sacrifice for friendship.

Divide the class into two groups. Ask one group to concentrate on the texts about David’s covenant with God.

- Why was David an unlikely choice to replace Saul?
- How was the jealousy and injustice of Saul a crisis context for David’s covenant?
- Consider the elements in God’s covenant with David: a home, peace, and a nation with the promise of eternal rule. How do these elements represent a continuation and expansion of God’s promises to Abraham and Moses?

Ask the second group to concentrate on the texts about the covenant between David and Jonathan:

- How did Saul’s injustices towards David strengthen Jonathan’s friendship with David?
- How do Jonathan’s feelings for David (“Jonathan loved him as his own soul” [1 Samuel 18:1]) after David defeated the Philistines set up the inevitable situation of conflict with his father?
- What was the significance of Jonathan’s gift to David: his cloak and his armor?

Each group records their insights on newsprint to share in the gallery walk.

Do a quick ten-minute brainstorming session, asking participants to name and write on the board or newsprint any contemporary examples when such a radical friendship is called for or when political rivalries, and conflicts of power and privilege, create situations of injustice. Is there anything in the relationship between David and Jonathan that seems similar to the sacrifices made by Jesus?

Listening Again to the Biblical Texts (30 minutes)

Jesus and the Everlasting Covenant
(Jeremiah 31:31–33)

To begin the discussion of Jesus and the Everlasting Covenant, ask a participant to read aloud the text of Jeremiah 31:31–34, which was written in the context of exile of the Israelites. The text promises that a new covenant will be given. Ask participants to try and remember the facts of the historical context into which Jesus was born. It was a time of colonialism for the Israelites, yet another kind of crisis of conflicting political and religious values. Does this seem like ripe conditions for another development of God’s covenantal relationship with the covenant community?

What does Jesus have to do with the covenant? How did Jesus fulfill the covenants? Post a series of sheets around the room using the headings below as titles: Care, Safety, etc. Give each participant a marker and encourage them to walk around the room and recall from memory elements and texts of the ministry of Jesus that mirror these covenant acts from the First Testament.

- Care—e.g., the healing of the blind man
- Grace—e.g., the promise of grace in the gift of the Holy Spirit
- Redemption—e.g., woman possessed by demons

- Safety—e.g., calming the storm
- Blessing—e.g., creating a new social order that overturns oppression of the money changers in the Temple
- Guidance—e.g., Beatitudes
- Eternal rule—e.g., a new understanding of power in relationships: the tax collector and the rich, young ruler

When the entire group has finished writing down their examples of Jesus’ covenant actions, ask individuals to give a one-minute testimony (sometimes in the first person) of the covenant-fulfilling activity of Jesus, reflecting on these examples beginning with the phrase: “I am a witness to the goodness of God . . .”

The Meaning of the Covenant Today: Exploring the Power of Living in the Covenant

To explore the meaning of the Everlasting Covenant for the covenant community, ask participants to consider Brueggeman’s statement that “we are bound to a God for whom the neighbor comes first.”² Brueggemann’s interpretation of the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians is that Paul believed that the church was not to conduct business or settle disputes in the same way as other communities. Different disciplines and ways of being in relationship must be practiced because of the covenantal relationship between the community and God.

It is important that we attempt to affirm for ourselves what it means for our way of living to be a covenant community that is bound to a God for whom the neighbor comes first (Chapter 6). In Philippians 2:1 Paul recommends using the following disciplines:

The disciplines of the community . . .

1. “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the spirit, any compassion and sympathy . . .

The goal of the community . . .

2. make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind . . .

Elaborations on the meaning of the tasks . . .

- 3–4. 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...

Goal of the disciplines of community. . .

5. let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Divide the class into groups to consider this text and to answer the question: “What would putting your neighbor first look like?” Ask participants to share examples from their lives in the covenant community. (See Appendix A for examples from United Methodist Women.)

Lessons for Discipleship and Covenant Living: Time for Commitment (30 minutes)

“Covenants are holy and sacred. In this study, we have explored God’s covenants with humanity. The stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and their communities help us understand the depth of God’s love and justice for all. The covenant through Jesus encompasses all of God’s covenants and is foundational to our faith in God” (*Living in a Covenant Community*, Chapter 6, Conclusion).

At the end of the four sessions it is important to have an activity that summarizes and brings together both the group’s learning and the participants’ sense of connection to each other. Sharing commitments is often a way to help a group have a sense of ongoing relationship to one another and continuing accountability.

As their last activity, participants are asked to write their personal covenant community commitments (including when, where, and how often) based on insights from the study and their journal notes as needed:

- **Prayer:** Conversation—even debate—with God to deepen our relationship with our creator and covenant maker. Consider how often and how long you would commit to pray.
- **Advocacy:** Action on behalf of God’s just kin-dom. Consider how and where you are called to serve.
- **Intentional growth:** Seeking ways to grow spiritually, emotionally, and mentally and using weekly disciplines to foster that growth as individuals and in community. Consider what disciplines you will use and how often you will employ them.
- **Community life:** Learning how we are to live in community and take seriously the commandments and laws in our life together. Consider who you need to reach out to and how you can deepen your community life.

Closing Worship

Light the covenant candle and add water to the covenant pitcher, leaving room at the top, affirming God's ongoing revelation to the covenant community and affirming our commitments to covenant community.

Encourage participants to form a closing circle to share their discipline commitments as they feel led.

Once the commitments have been shared, the group can read the closing litany based on John Wesley's Covenant Prayer.

Closing Litany: Wesley's Covenant Prayer (adapted)

Read in unison.

We are no longer our own, but yours.
Put us to what you will,
Place us with whom you will.
Put us to doing, put us to suffering.
Let us be put to work for you or set aside for you,
Praised for you or criticized for you.
Let us be full, let us be empty.
Let us have all things, let us have nothing.
We freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and sacrifice.
And now, a wonderful and holy God,
COVENANT MAKER, COVENANT KEEPER AND COVENANT EQUIPPER,
You are ours, and we are yours.
So be it. And the covenant, which we have made on earth,
Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.

Closing Song

"The Summons," *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2130

The Summons

Words: John Bell

Music: Traditional Scottish

Words: GIA/The Iona Community/WGRG. All rights reserved. Reprinted under OneLicense.net A-709087.

Benediction (unison)

“Now to [God] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20–21).

Endnotes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 85.
2. *ibid.*, 7.

APPENDIX A

United Methodist Women as a Covenant Community

Session 1: Faith Responses and Moments of Opportunity

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- Five United Methodist Women members have been trained to act as jurisdictional guides to implement the 13 Steps to Sustainability in the life of conferences and communities.
- The jurisdictional guide in the Rocky Mountain Conference is studying and working to address toxic flooding of the southern Ute tribe.
- A Be Just. Be Green. team in the Holston Conference has started intentional sharing and working to implement the 13 Steps to Sustainability across the annual conference.
- United Methodist Women is partnering with young women (21–38 years old) to form the New Generation Climate Justice Group. They began a five-month home study of climate change issues in order to begin working more intentionally on these issues with the support of their local communities.
- The United Methodist Women Be Just. Be Green. initiative encourages United Methodist Women members to actively resist prevailing popular and public opinion and corporate power justifications, and challenge our own economic and social power in order to listen to the voice of God, using intentional decisions and lifestyle changes to begin the movement towards a new way of life.

RACIAL JUSTICE/ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- United Methodist Women actively engaged in advocacy efforts in regards to the crisis in Flint, Michigan. The organization and its members called out injustices such as popular calls for tax breaks, particularly for the wealthy, which meant austerity programs for everyone else; state government authority for emergency management strategies that neglected and silenced the voice of the people; higher utility rates to cover the problems created by corporate polluters; and structural racism that perpetuates injustices as seen in underfunded schools, lack of public transportation, high rates of maternal and child mortality, and now lead poisoning.

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

- Community Development for All People, a National Mission Institution in Columbus, Ohio, is working to honor the creation of new life and address issues of infant mortality by hosting a “first birthday party” to engage women who are pregnant or mothers of infants with the goal of connecting them to resources and support that will hopefully reduce infant deaths.
- A National Mission Institution in Oklahoma City runs a WIC center that coaches pregnant and new mothers on nursing, pregnancy, nutrition, etc. It is strategically located next door to a private market that carries WIC-approved foods.

Session 2: Stepping Out in Faith: Covenant Community as a Rainbow or Ark for Justice

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

- National Seminar participants aware of racial disparities in birth outcomes joined in a protest to save the neonatal intensive care unit at one of Chicago’s hospitals that serves the underserved. Local units also joined the coalition for ongoing work to save the hospital’s pediatric unit.
- Young women from the New York Limitless group participated in a Days for Girls advocacy training sponsored by United Methodist Women during the 2016 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. As a result they began raising money for Days for Girls reusable hygiene kits.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- New York Annual Conference President joined the Coalition of Immokalee Workers calling for the fast food chain Wendy’s to sign a fair food agreement to support a wage increase by paying an additional penny per pound for the tomatoes it purchases and require a human rights–based code of conduct to be implemented on the farms that grow their tomatoes.
- Several United Methodist Women leaders, inspired by the 2015 National Seminar, are now leading a workshop with United for a Fair Economy titled “Overworked and Undervalued: Women, Race and the Economy” to spur more United Methodist Women members into action.
- A local United Methodist Women leader in the Northern Illinois Conference has been active in efforts to increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, including a focus on the fast food industry.

RACIAL AND GENDER JUSTICE

- Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church in Nashville partnered with the Children's Defense Fund Freedom School® Program. Freedom Schools®, are free summer programs that focus on reading and provide other summer experiences for low-income and at-risk children. The six-week program also has a strong focus on advocacy, encouraging parents to work for change in their public schools and communities.
- United Methodist Women called for justice in communities and recommitted itself to continuing work to end systemic racism. The call for action included expanding conversations on racial justice by using the Showing up for Racial Justice Police Brutality Action Kit; regularly reexamining United Methodist Women obligations under the Charter for Racial Justice; viewing media through a social justice and racial justice lens; and using the Reading Program and annual studies to deepen understanding of other people's experience of injustice.

Session 3: The Work of the Covenant Community in Individual and Collective Crises

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

You shall not steal.

- El Pueblo Immigration Services, a mission of the Seashore District in Mississippi, received a Call to Prayer and Self-Denial Grant in 2014 from United Methodist Women to help unbanked and underserved Hispanic immigrants handle their financial affairs and consumer needs, protecting themselves from fees, predatory lending practices, and high interest rates through a financial literacy program.

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy . . . Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out . . . With a mighty hand.

- United Methodist Women is encouraging members to tell Congress it's time for a moral and just minimum wage and advocate for increasing the minimum wage in their community or state to \$15 per hour.
- United Methodist Women members are encouraged to join Arise Chicago, an advocacy and education partnership between faith communities and workers, and learn how faith groups are engaged in supporting workers and fighting wage theft.

RACIAL JUSTICE

You shall not murder.

- United Methodists are joining other faith groups in the national religious campaign against torture. The campaign seeks to make torture visible and also to ban its use by signing the National Religious Campaign against Solitary Confinement statement and joining state and local campaigns.
- United Methodist Women from the Great Plains and Rio Grande conferences have been active in local campaigns to end the death penalty. In Nebraska, a United Methodist Women leader participated in a vigil to try and stop the governor from reinstating the death penalty.

Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

- Following the 2008 General Conference Resolution, "Healing Relationships with Indigenous Persons," United Methodist Women of the Yellowstone Conference pioneered reconciliation efforts with the Northern Cheyenne tribe in light of the 1864 participation of Methodist minister Col. John Chivington in the attack on the unarmed encampment at Sand Creek.
- Across the United States, twenty United Methodist annual conferences are engaging in healing relationships with indigenous people groups, including work in Oklahoma and in Alabama.

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

Honor your father and your mother.

- Three women die each day in the United States from childbirth, disproportionately affecting women of color, low-income, and rural families—this is the highest maternal mortality rate among industrialized nations. United Methodist Women is advocating for Maternal Death Review Panels in the nineteen states that do not have them.
- In many parts of the world, women are reluctant to seek care because of negative experiences. We will be in a new quadrennium by the time this book comes out. United Methodist Women will be joining an international movement advocating for respectful maternity care to eliminate disrespect and abuse and encourage women to receive the care they need before, during, and after giving birth.

Session 4: Covenant Community Actions

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- United Methodist Women members are encouraged to read *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America*. Also to consider making a pledge to commit to fair workplace standards and joining the Hand-To-Hand Network of Caring across America.
- United Methodist Women members are encouraged to read *Forked!*, a book about women restaurant workers. They can also download the Diner's Guide to Ethical Eating app to help determine which restaurants they should frequent. The app highlights restaurants that pay workers fair wages and benefits, and allows patrons to rate them on racial equality through Yelp!

RACIAL JUSTICE/ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- United Methodist Women members are urged to join the Color of Change campaign to restore funding to the Center for Disease Control's Healthy Homes/Lead Poisoning Prevention Program for fiscal year 2017.
- United Methodist Women members are urged to look at safe drinking water issues in their own community and how they may disproportionately impact communities of color and call for state and federal accountability for communities facing toxic drinking water.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE/RACIAL JUSTICE

- In response to the unfair practices of family detention centers and United Methodist Women's Campaign to End Family Detention, 250 Texan United Methodist Women members went to Dilly, Texas, in May 2015 to join a protest outside of the family detention center there to call for an end to family detentions.

MATERNAL HEALTH/GENDER JUSTICE

- The Neighborhood Center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is a United Methodist Women-supported National Mission Institution with programs for children and support activities for young mothers. The summertime free and reduced-price lunch program is staffed by United Methodist Women members from the Susquehanna Conference.

- A grant from United Methodist Women in 2011 to the Nyadire United Methodist hospital in Zimbabwe helped fund the establishment of the School of Midwifery, where one hundred midwives graduate each year with emergency training in obstetric and newborn care.
- United Methodist Women members in Huntington, West Virginia, are assisting with HER Place, an educational center founded in 2013 by a United Methodist Women member. It serves drug-addicted women and their children in the community through educational and support programs as well as other services.

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE/GENDER JUSTICE

- A United Methodist Women Call to Prayer and Self-Denial Grant has enabled women's groups in rural Uganda to purchase seeds and tools, and learn new methods to improve women's status in their communities.

APPENDIX B

Conversation between Maharat Rori Picker Neiss and Kathleen Stone

This is an excerpt of a conversation between Maharat Rori Picker Neiss, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis, Missouri, and Kathleen Stone, former United Methodist Women executive and current pastor at Wharton United Community Church at St. John in Wharton, New Jersey.

On the Meaning of the Covenant

On the most basic level we see it as being the relationship, a relationship that involves a requirement from both parties. . . . But the crucial difference when we start talking about a religious covenant, we recognize it as something of an absurd statement to say that we can be in covenant with God to the extent that there is no way that there can be equity in this covenant. . . . So within the covenant there is a sudden sense of generosity. The covenant is not some kind of business deal. It is really an act of graciousness on the part of God in the exchange.

The Meaning of *Berîth* and *Hesed*

Berîth is the word that we often use when we are talking about covenants. In the Torah, we talk about Abraham, we talk about *berîth*—the covenant between parties. And that we understand as a kind of business deal. We talk about the ritual of circumcision, we talk about *berîth*. . . . *hesed* we would not typically use in relationship to covenant. *Hesed* we really understand meaning kindness . . . (covenant). Yes, this is a kindness of God. This is God's *hesed*, God's kindness. *Hesed* is really unidirectional.

About the Covenant Relationship

God creates the world and the relationship starts to evolve as people are given autonomy. . . . And so the relationship between us has to change. That's one way to look at God's promises to Adam and Eve, but what God promises to Noah is going to be different after sin has overtaken the world. . . . We don't see covenants replacing the prior ones, but the covenant that begins with Abraham and then with Moses is very much a particular covenant whereas the covenant with Adam and Noah are universal.

The Jewish Covenant Community

God has a covenant with humanity, but God also has a unique role for the Jewish people in the world. That unique role doesn't replace the relationship of others. But we very much see ourselves as having a responsibility in the world. . . . It's really not my real concern to figure out your role but it is my concern to try to figure out my role. And I need to be focused on what it is I have responsibility for in this world.

It seems like God is saying: I'm going to give you all these things and in exchange I want you to walk my path. . . . But a very crucial part of the Jewish faith, when we don't follow the path, God is able to rescind some of the gifts but never break the covenant. So we get kicked out of the land of Israel but we never lose the covenant with God.

The Covenant and Daily Life

It worked its way into my life in the everyday ritual. The way I choose to honor the Sabbath, and the holidays. All of those are going to be reflected in this relationship that I feel that I have. . . . But I very much believe that all those rituals are meant to push us to think about what they mean in the broader world. That's where we have a responsibility as Jews to be asking questions about things like Syrian refugees, climate change, hunger, poverty. . . . When I choose to eat matzos on Sabbath. . . . I need to ask myself what that means that we were slaves in Egypt. That freedom doesn't exist everywhere in the world. That is something that is a personal question for me. To me the law is love. Love towards God; it is love towards others.

Land

A big part of the promise of the covenant, especially with Abraham, is not only the land, but becoming a people. And so what does it mean to become a people? So people seem to be tied to land. . . . In the modern context: what does it mean to be a people and what does it mean to be a people without a land? Where is our identity? So some will say for the context of the time that in that context of becoming a people was the promise of growing as a people and then having a land. And that's what made them a people.

The Special Responsibility and the Covenant

There is another challenge to the covenant equation, which is that historically for the Jewish community it has come to mean a covenant of suffering. Somehow what it meant to be chosen as Jewish people meant to be persecuted throughout history. . . . Because you're trying to reconcile, what is my special role with that I am given with the land and what is my responsibility to protect myself when historically every culture seems to want to exterminate the Jewish people?

Brueggemann's Interpretation of Canaan

Typically, we talk about Canaan as a literal place, what became the precursor to the land of Israel. So, it's interesting to understand because we do understand the Canaanites as not being a righteous people. . . . And so it becomes one way for us to justify what has transpired. It also becomes a beautiful way of universalizing some of the message. So, it is not about conquering this one land but about combating exploitation in all lands. I don't think that goes against Jewish thought but it is not traditionally how we have understood it. We have understood it in a very literal sense.

Israel

It's one of my favorite topics how in the second [exile] the rabbis kept Judaism alive when it should have died out, given that so many of our rituals were about the holy Temple and Jerusalem. And so it's fascinating the way in which that happens and so within that talking about Israel within the prayers was about talking about some sort of lofty goal. And not necessarily in a literal land. . . . But, when we talk about Israel we talk about restoration of the Temple, of the kingdom, of the peoplehood that we had. . . . And so, when it started to become a possibility in the land of Israel . . . many Jews felt . . . that only God could bring the people back. It was really only after 1967 after this Six-Day War . . . that we start to see a shift into what we call religious Zionism. Yes, [God] goes back to the covenant. Yes, the idea that God gave us this land and then kicked us out of this land. But it was always meant to be our land. Now we're seeing a budding up of this religious worldview with the political movement. . . . Everything in our prayers talked about this ideal futuristic perception and then all of a sudden we have the United Nations saying sure there can be a country called Israel.

Maharat Rori Picker Neiss is executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis, Missouri. Maharat is the title given to Orthodox Jewish women who are trained in the Torah and spiritual leadership.

APPENDIX C

Litany: Psalm 40

PRAISE

I waited patiently for the Lord;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.
Blessed is the one
who trusts in the Lord,
who does not look to the proud,
to those who turn aside to false gods.
Many, Lord my God,
are the wonders you have done,
the things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.
Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—
but my ears you have opened—
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.
Then I said, “Here I am, I have come—
it is written about me in the scroll.
I desire to do your will, my God;
your law is within my heart.”
I proclaim your saving acts in the great assembly;
I do not seal my lips, Lord,
as you know.
I do not hide your righteousness in my heart;
I speak of your faithfulness and your saving help.

I do not conceal your love and your faithfulness
from the great assembly.

DEMAND

Do not withhold your mercy from me, Lord;
may your love and faithfulness always protect me.
For troubles without number surround me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.
They are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails within me.
Be pleased to save me, Lord;
come quickly, Lord, to help me.
May all who want to take my life
be put to shame and confusion;
may all who desire my ruin
be turned back in disgrace.
May those who say to me, “Aha! Aha!”
be appalled at their own shame.

PRAISE

But may all who seek you
rejoice and be glad in you;
may those who long for your saving help always say,
“The Lord is great”!

CONFESSION

But as for me, I am poor and needy;
may the Lord think of me.
You are my help and my deliverer;
you are my God, do not delay.

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APPENDIX D

The Ten Commandments

Part 1: Loving God (Exodus 20:1–7)

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation for those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousand generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Part 2: Rules for the Community (Exodus 20:8–17)

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days shall you labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slaves may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with the mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

Neither shall you commit adultery.

Neither shall you steal.

Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.

Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife.

Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The Great Commandment (Mark 12:30–31)

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

APPENDIX E

Psalm 106 (paraphrased)

God pours out mercy on us
Still when God saw the trouble we were in
and heard our cries for help
God remembered the covenant with us
and immense with love,
takes us by the hand.
While 'others' look on amazed
Save us God, our God!
Gather us back from our exiles
from your word and purpose
so that we can give thanks to your holy name
and join in the glory
when you are praised!
Blessed be God, the covenant maker,
covenant keeper and covenant equipper
Bless now, bless always!
Oh! Let everyone say amen!
Hallelujah

About the Author

elmira Nazombe has worked in the areas of social and economic justice and human rights for over five decades. She was an executive secretary for racial justice for United Methodist Women for seven years. She has worked for a variety of ecumenical organizations including Church World Service, All Africa Conference of Churches, and National Christian Council of Kenya. She has been active for the last twenty years as a social justice educator. She is the author of the mission study *Globalization and Its Impact on People's Lives* and co-author of the leader's guide for the mission study *God's People in an Urban Culture*. She was part of the team of writers for *A Mission Journey: A Handbook for Volunteers*. She is trained as both an educator and an urban planner. She holds a doctorate in education, focused on using education to work for social and economic transformation. She currently teaches social justice courses at Rutgers University in New Jersey, hoping to nurture a new generation of social justice activists.