



WELCOMED BY GOD
Welcoming All



A CALL TO PRAYER AND SELF-DENIAL 2015

A Gesture of Gratitude

By Mary Z. Longstreth and Donald W. Turman

OBJECTIVE

That United Methodist Women members will identify new dimensions of welcoming and expressing hospitality to newcomers and envision its transforming power to move strangers and hosts into relationships that reflect God's love. And that, through scripture and stories from active and retired United Methodist deaconesses, home missionaries and missionaries, participants will see models of extending Christian welcome and hospitality and give to the Call to Prayer and Self-Denial offering.



A woman speaks during a workshop at Assembly 2014 in Louisville, Ky., on April 25, 2014. (Paul Jeffrey)

PREPARATION

Prayerfully prepare for the program, thinking of ways to make this time together meaningful for everyone attending the gathering.

Prior to the program

- Use the items in the A Call to Prayer and Self-Denial packet to promote the program in your church and community.
- Order extra prayer cards to share with the women in the program at www.umwmissionresources.org.

Materials

Gather the following items to use during this program:

- “Forever Called,” from the December 2013 issue of **response**.
- “Making Shalom in the World,” from the December 2013 issue of *New World Outlook*.
- Pens, index cards and newsprint for writing down ideas shared by the group.

Resources

Make the following available for the program:

- Have several persons read in advance some of the suggested articles about welcoming ministries. Articles about welcoming ministries from the United Methodist News Service Daily Digest, such as: “Haywood Street Congregation Invites Hungry to Table,” www.citizen-times.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2013312260019.
- Prayer Calendar.
- Stories of welcome experiences from active and retired deaconesses and missionaries.
- *The United Methodist Hymnal*.
- United Methodist Women Bible (NRSV).

Participants

Before the meeting, ask individuals to help in the following roles:

- Welcome people as they walk through the door.
- Read the prayer (included in the program under Devotions).
- Read 1 Peter 4:9-10.
- Read Genesis 18:1-8.
- Read and lead the meditation (included in the program under Devotions).
- Facilitate the Exploration and Challenge for Mission sections (one to two women for each section).
- Read the designated deaconesses’ and missionaries’ stories about welcome (included in the program in the sidebar).
- Help with activities.
- Lead the Closing Song.

Room Setup

Set up the room with sufficient space for everyone to sit and move around as needed for the business meeting and the program.

- Arrange seating that facilitates one-on-one sharing and group discussion, preferably a circle.
- Prepare a center table with objects of hospitality, such as flower bouquet, drinks service setting, fruit tray, etc.

NOTES

LEARN ABOUT DEACONESS AND MISSIONARY SERVICES

Background: Volunteers of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and Methodist mission work in the late 1800-1900s conceived and organized deaconess and missionary services based on the needs of women and children. Their early mission projects have produced the United Methodist Women mission institutions of today. United Methodist Women carries the responsibility to undergird active and retired missionary personnel services and needs. This includes personnel pensions, health insurance, the Brooks-Howell Home retirement and health care facility, communications and service resources. This year's offering supports all of these programs. Your gifts make a difference. Our Call to Prayer and Self-Denial offering sustains this ministry into the future.

For more than 125 years, deaconesses and other missionaries have been in mission service in many places. It's likely that some have served in or near this community or are serving now. Perhaps you can remember hearing about or meeting a deaconess, home missionary or missionary. If we look in the Prayer Calendar, we can find a list of who is actively serving nearby.¹

Let us recall who and what mission personnel you know about.

Pause, ask for remembrances of mission personnel past or present by name, location, and or service. Identify aloud names in the Prayer Calendar of those currently serving in your region or state, if any.

To meet a deaconess/missionary in person is less important than our meeting them through gestures of supportive care and prayers as they welcome others and convey God's radically inclusive love.

Deaconess Susan Carmichael says, "The financial support from United Methodist Women local units convey welcome and nurture to retired and active deaconesses by continuing to recognize, adopt and support them in other ways."

DEVOTIONS

Read and meditate on scripture and respond in faith.



READ: 1 Peter 4:9-10, Genesis 18:1-8

Pray

O welcoming God, we see more clearly that your love excludes no individual or group of persons. As followers of Jesus, we want to be like you and ask that you so fill us with your unconditional love that we will seek out, welcome and love the strangers in our community as we depend on the strength and wisdom that you give us, we pray. **Amen.**

Sing

"In Christ There Is No East or West," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 548, verses 1-3 (This can be sung as a group or solo.)

Meditate

Our current mission studies have the common thread that God's welcome is to every person in every location and circumstance. This year's Call to Prayer and Self-Denial focuses the lens of faith on welcoming, its meaning, its expression and how one can reflect God's inclusive welcome to all—especially those viewed as strangers to the individual or group, those simply strange to us, or persons who are estranged. It is easier to welcome friends than unknown persons we perceive to be strange. Let's consider a few of many biblical stories providing guidance for welcoming.

Reader 1:

This passage provides a *directive* to "be hospitable to one another without complaining," coupled with *instruction* that "like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received."

Note that no one is without the God-given gift to provide hospitality through welcoming. It's a given task of faith to be welcoming to others.

Reader 2: *Before reading Genesis 18:1-8, ask the group to listen for Abraham's response to the Lord's surprise appearance with the three men at his tent.*

Did you catch some specific actions to welcome strangers in our midst?
Abraham: 1) approached and greeted strangers; 2) provided them opportunity to clean up; 3) gave provision for comfortable rest, 4) offered refreshment, 5) arranged a meal, 6) and remained with them during their visit.

Share with a person beside you your thoughts on important ways to practice Abraham's example of welcome in our homes, church and community.

Notes may be made to share with the group. Take a few moments to hear some of the suggestions; then continue reading the meditation.

Unlike biblical times, methods of communication today usually provide advance notice of strangers arriving. It is also easier to devise ways of hospitality that illuminate the reality of a stranger's inclusion in a community of love.

A stranger becomes one's guest by a welcome that conveys full acceptance through a prepared setting, safe space, attentive listening, time and the freedom to be authentic. Such reception communicates, nonverbally and verbally, God's inclusive nature that honors the recipient.

One's experience of this kind of welcome can transform one's understanding of the character and qualities of relationships within a spiritual context.

Modeling for strangers the honest pleasure and courtesies of nonjudgmental welcoming may nudge the recipients toward a deeper understanding of God's unconditional love in relationship.

Carefully listening to life stories told by a newcomer is a wonderful gesture of welcome. Practicing welcoming as ministry is to see God in the other person and to use opportunities for hospitality to serve her or him as one's sister or brother in Jesus Christ.

Deaconess Carmichael, former educator at Pfeiffer University, noted, "In working with others, I always tried to be a good listener. Students could usually work out their own problems if someone they trusted would just listen and give some guidance."

EXPLORATION

Explore the work of mission personnel and various aspects of welcome.

Over the years, deaconesses, home missionaries and other missionaries have learned a great deal about being welcomed to their places of assignment. They are dedicated to present God's welcome and lead others through relationships.

Everett and Vera Woodcock served 40-plus years as missionaries in the Democratic Republic of Congo when it was the Belgium Congo. Their knowledge of the language and culture eased their welcome into the lives of the people they served. One of their witnesses was the willingness to fellowship with all people—a change from the social custom of that time.

If time permits, read aloud the Welcoming Stories on the next page.

Recall a personal experience of being welcomed that impressed you. What specific acts conveyed sincerity of the hospitality given? Briefly share that experience.

Select one or two of the following activities to participate in as a group.

1. Perform a three-minute role play highlighting nonwelcoming behaviors.
2. Provide scripture passages to each or several persons. Read them aloud and comment how it's a challenge to give welcome to the stranger or new visitor in your midst. In which scriptures do you recognize yourself in extending hospitality? Suggested scriptures: Colossians 4:10; Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; Luke 15:11-32.
3. Ask: How does extending welcome require self-denial?
4. Ask: When you have welcomed a stranger, what skills and gifts were used to convey hospitality in God's service, Christ's acceptance of the stranger?
5. Ask: What new actions would you take in future opportunities of welcoming?
Write your responses on your index card.

Sing

"Help Us Accept Each Other," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 560 (stanzas 1-2)

Present your gifts of gratitude: This year's offering will support the Retirement Benefits Fund for retired missionaries and deaconess for whom United Methodist Women is responsible.

WELCOMING STORIES

Here are stories from mission personnel. Be alert to how they convey or receive welcome.

Laura Wells

Deaconess Laura Wells organized and led churches in jail and prison ministries in Missouri and Tennessee during her active assignment. Now retired, she lives at Brooks-Howell Home.

Rough-looking men and women in jail or state prison often communicate, verbally and nonverbally, warnings of no desire to meet with “free-world” volunteers whose social and spiritual manner extends welcome and friendship. In such settings, who are the strangers?

Laura learned that being a “ministry of presence” in such settings can bring captives into believing they are accepted as they are and they can experience normal, healthy relationships. She found angry, hurt and distrusting incarcerated persons can gradually change scowls into smiles, laughter and friendship.

Chita R. Framo

Chita R. Framo serves as an adviser and volunteer with Diakonia Philippines’ House in Manila, Philippines. She shares her story in her own words:

“As an active deaconess in a local church, I learned the ministry of visiting families in their homes is very important. I’ve been welcomed even without appointment. Knowing family situations, with even only a few minutes to visit, helps my serving, which always ends with a prayer for the family. It is a joy to see smiles on their faces, sometimes even tears of relief or thanksgiving that remind them of God who cares.

“Although now officially retired, in coordination with the Korean Methodist Church pastor, I actively volunteer assisting children of families in the nearby slum. On occasions of welcoming, when guests drop by a family’s home an elder member, especially the mother, will offer food or drink.”

Jody Halstead

Deaconess candidate Jody Halstead, registered nurse program manager at Haywood Street Respite, anticipates consecration at United Methodist Women’s Assembly 2014.

“Since 2009, the Haywood Street Congregation has been a model for radical grace, hospitality and welcome, come as you are. January 2014 the Haywood Street Respite opened. Respite provides a safe, family home environment for adults experiencing homelessness and needing 1-2 weeks safe place following discharge from acute inpatient and hospital care. All persons are treated with dignity, offered choices for their wellness, and are encouraged to be active in forming community.” Together they search for ways to move from their past toward the future they seek.

Here, Jody participates in God’s promise to make all things new by seeking justice, resisting evil and serving neighbors. At Respite, all welcome all and help establish God’s kingdom on earth.

CHALLENGE FOR MISSION

Step out to show gratitude and welcome.

- Discover how your church and community are reaching strangers in your area.
- Since persons in need of welcome include the people who are homeless, new residents, returning from incarceration, of other faiths and cultures, consider new welcoming ministries that your unit can start or encourage.
- Visit residents at Brooks-Howell Home if you are able, or go to the website for contacts and more mission stories (www.brooks-howell.org).
- Interview a deaconess, home missionary or missionary in your area (see the Prayer Calendar indexes). Invite a deaconess, home missionary or missionary to share about his or her work. Send a thank-you card to persons in your conference.
- Read recommended articles in **response** and *The New World Outlook* and magazines and other sources.

Sing

“Help Us Accept Each Other,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 560 (verses 3-4)

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NOTES

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1. Drawn from *Historical Development of National Mission Institutions, Handbook for National Mission Institutions* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 2011).