Objective

To develop a deeper understanding of the significance of food and fellowship in scripture and to create a sacred space of sharing food and thanksgiving.

Preparation

Materials

Gather the following items to use during the program:

- Colored markers
- Copies of the coloring page and colored pencils for each participant (optional)
- Crayons and/or colored pencils
- White poster board with the outline of a tree including leaves and roots drawn on it

Resources for Call to Action Activity

Use the National Farm Workers Ministry website (http://nfwm.org) to identify examples of service through food and advocacy towards sustainable practices to share during the Call to Action portion of the program.

In the September program, your group was invited to apply United Methodist Women’s Sustainability Principles to your gatherings. For this month, your group can apply and discuss Principle 4, “Healthy Food and Beverages,”

**Participants**

*Before the meeting, ask individual women to help with the following roles:*

- Welcome people as they walk through the door.
- Lead the opening and closing prayers.
- Lead the Bible study, reflection and other activities.

**Centering**

**setup:** Bring food appropriate for Thanksgiving (if this program is done in November) or for whatever season it is. Use all-natural, seasonal food. Whenever this program takes place, you might consider organizing a collection for your church’s food pantry, local food bank or community soup kitchen. If you do plan to collect food items, be sure to announce this well ahead of time and arrange for delivery of the food after the program. Use the time of arrival and gathering to build the centerpiece together using these food items. Ask someone to come early to greet people and include folks in building this focal point. And be sure to bring a few extra food items to share with those who may have forgotten.

**sound:** The sacred sound for this program should be something that could be considered a call to a meal, such as a dinner bell, doorbell or glasses clinking together like a toast. You can use a recorded sound or bring in a dinner bell, doorbell or glasses to use at the appropriate time.
PROGRAM

Sing

“Be Present at Our Table, Lord,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 621

Pause for the Sacred Sound . . .

Turning to the Bible

If you choose, invite everyone to work on their coloring pages as they reflect on the following scripture.

READ

John 21:1–19

Time for Reflection

Read or summarize the following:

Invite participants to share about times when conversations with family or friends around the meal table went on for long periods of time and became transformative or memorable.

This (if the program is taking place in November) is the season of celebration, family gatherings and feasting. Sharing meals is the core of activities folks consider when planning holidays. That is as it should be and it is something we do year-round whether planning meals in our homes, restaurants or churches. Sharing food provides an opportunity to create a sacred space for relationship, celebration and transformation.
Scripture contains stories of meals and feasts: instructions about food—what to eat and what not to eat, how food is used for sacrifices and offerings, and ways food is used for symbolism.

As Christians, we identify the Eucharist/Holy Communion as the core sacrament for our faith. In his initiation of this memorial, Jesus took simple items —bread and wine—blessed them and transformed them into something holy. With his words of institution, Jesus forever changed the impact of eating these simple components of a meal.

Scripture tells us that Jesus was often eating and drinking with others: Pharisees, tax collectors, disciples and friends. He observed the religious feasts like Passover. Many of Jesus’ parables were told around a table where he and his disciples were guests. In a number of instances, Jesus’ parables used meals to make a point. The common occurrence of a meal or banquet became the source of instruction.

In today’s reading, Jesus makes breakfast for the disciples—the only two references to breakfast in scripture are in this story. It is a beautiful picture of friendship and attending to the needs of others. It is also the picture of normalcy. In the sequence of things, this takes place after Jesus is resurrected. While any appearance of Jesus would have been surprising, it seems very appropriate that Jesus makes himself available to the disciples for an event that they had shared often, eating together. As they enjoyed fish and bread over an open fire on the beach, they were likely jovial and happy just to be together again.

After breakfast, Jesus asks Peter a series of questions that push him closer to repentance and reconciliation. Peter’s denial of Jesus during the trial still lingers in Peter’s mind and this exchange helps to assure Peter that Jesus loves and forgives him. Peter is restored at this meal.

Meals together can help create sacred space for love and fellowship. Shared meals not only feed us and nurture our bodies, they also nurture our spirits as we talk. In these encounters, we can find ourselves coming closer to God through sharing with each other.
Opening ourselves to share food with others—friends, family, strangers—can be a time of learning, growing, blessing. As you gather for a Thanksgiving meal or another special occasion in the days ahead, take a moment to look carefully around you at the faces assembled there. Listen carefully to the conversation. Extend the hand of welcome and fellowship so that your spirit may be blessed by the generosity of sharing food and faith to anyone who comes.

During any special days, pause for a moment to remember those who spend these days grieving the loss of a loved one or those who are facing daunting physical illness or those who have lost jobs or those who are poor. Consider those in our world who are living in war-torn areas, dealing with famine or environmental catastrophe. Offer prayers for all of these people and seek opportunities to share your resources to alleviate their struggles. Out of the joy you have, open your heart to share with others whatever resources you have.

Discuss:
What are the ways that you have been blessed to receive food? Or attended a meal that helped connect you to a group or an individual? Or opened your table to a guest whose presence touched you? Or had someone share a meal with you and the conversation really brought you closer to God? Or provided food for someone who was hungry or could not repay the kindness?

NOTE: For additional passages that illustrate the role of food and meals in relationship with God and with others see the Appendix for this program.
Prayer

Leader: God of Bread and Water and Fruits and Vegetables,

ALL: Thank you that you nourish our bodies with the good gifts from your good earth.

Leader: God of the Table and the Mat and the Tent and the Hut,

ALL: Thank you that whatever we have is yours and is our opportunity to share.

Leader: God of Cup and Plate and Bowl and Leaf,

ALL: Thank you that you have given love to us and through conversation and sharing we pass that love on to others.

Leader: God of Holidays and Birthdays and Covered-Dish Meals and Casseroles,

ALL: Thank you for opening spaces in our lives for celebration and memories.

Leader: As Jesus fed his disciples fish and bread by the seashore,

ALL: He created a place for friendship and fellowship and forgiveness.

Together: God, may we look for you in meals, in gatherings, in communion and in every encounter of faith and life. Amen.
In John 21:1–19, Jesus had a sacred encounter on the Galilean shore with the disciples who were tired, weary and hungry after fishing all night, but catching no fish. Jesus called out to the disciples: “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When the disciples followed Jesus’ instructions, they caught so many fish that they could barely haul in the net. Jesus later prepared a hearty breakfast of bread and fish, which satisfied the disciples’ hunger.

In our own communities, many families are struggling to put food on the table on a daily basis. In the United States, one in six people, or 49 million Americans, do not have enough to eat to lead a healthy, active life. The figure jumps to 795 million people worldwide, according to the World Food Programme.

Participants should discuss where they see hunger in their community, country and world. Discuss the ways in which hunger impacts both individuals and society. Using the outline of the tree you created, write their responses on the tree trunk using a brown marker.

Next, ask group members about the root causes of hunger and write them on the roots of the tree with a black marker. What are some of the causes of hunger? Why are people hungry in one of the world’s most developed countries and in countries with bountiful arable land?

In the scripture, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Peter answers yes each time. In response, Jesus tells him to “Feed my sheep” and “Take care of my sheep.” How are we, as United Methodist Women members, following Jesus’ example of feeding and caring for people who are hungry or in need?

Next, brainstorm possible actions that United Methodist Women members in your congregation can take to help address hunger in your community and globally. Write your responses on the leaves of the tree using a green marker.
Lightly color the white spaces of the tree with crayons or colored pencils. Then, review and discuss the responses written on the tree. On a separate piece of paper, write an action plan on how your group can take steps to tackle hunger locally and on a global level. Consider ways you can open up your church space to share food and be in fellowship with families in your community who are facing hunger and food insecurity.

You can hang your Hunger Tree poster in an area that will be visible to United Methodist Women members and parishioners as a commitment to bolstering food security in the United States and worldwide.

Adapted from the World Food Programme’s Hunger Tree activity (www.wfp.org/students-and-teachers/blog/new-classroom-activity-hunger-tree).

Call to Action: World Thank Offering

Share examples of service through food and advocacy towards sustainable practices in the farmworkers movement (http://nfwm.org).

The World Thank Offering offers United Methodist Women members an opportunity to show their gratitude for God’s blessings and find creative ways to raise funds to improve the lives of women, children and youth. Some women drop a coin in a box each day to give thanks for their daily blessings, while others add coins and dollars on special occasions in their lives.

We learned in this month’s program that scripture lifts up many stories of meals and feasts and what they symbolize. Sustainability Principle 4 asks United Methodist Women members to provide healthy food and beverages in a just and environmentally responsible way at their gatherings. Your group can apply this principle by offering healthy food choices or a nutritionally balanced meal during the gathering.

We enjoy eating fresh fruits and vegetables, but how often do we think about the farmworkers who pick our produce? What kinds of conditions do they endure while picking our fruits and vegetables? Do they receive a fair, livable wage for their labor?
We rely on farmworkers, whose hard work puts food on the table, to feed our families. Yet, farmworkers often lack basic rights and encounter exploitation and abusive labor practices while working in the field.

Just as he asked Peter, Jesus asks us to “Take care of my sheep.” We are called to speak out against injustice in our midst.

United Methodist Women members and national staff have joined in solidarity with the National Farmworker Ministry and Coalition of Immokalee Workers to improve the livelihoods of tomato farmworkers in Florida. Your group can participate by urging major fast food and retail chains and the tomato industry to join the Fair Food Program, which requires companies to adopt a code of conduct for humane farm labor standards and promote fairer wages for farmworkers.

Through World Thank Offering, your group can support the total program of mission carried on through United Methodist Women’s national office in the United States and around the world. To make a contribution and to print out collection boxes, please visit www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/worldthank.

Invite participants to bring their World Thank Offerings to the table.

Benediction (unison)

We pray for those who struggle with food, with faith and with forgiveness. May we offer ourselves as companions and cooks and caregivers in the sacred space of sharing food and love. Amen.

Sing

“Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow,” The United Methodist Hymnal, no. 94