**THE PREPARATION OF**

**THE MATERIAL FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER**

**FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2023**

Do Good; seek justice

(Isaiah 1:17)

The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 was chosen, and the materials prepared, by a group of Christians in the United States of America (USA) convened by the Minnesota Council of Churches. In December 2020, the group first met online, many knowing each other and all knowing the work of the Minnesota Council of Churches, some of them leaders in that organization as well as being activists and/or pastors in their own congregations and communities.

The international group jointly sponsored by the *Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity* and the *Faith and Order Commission* of the World Council of Churches to finalize materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 met with delegates from the Minnesota Council of Churches, in the Château de Bossey, Switzerland, 19 - 23 September 2021.

For years, Minnesota has had some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. Minnesota saw the largest mass execution in the history of the USA in 1862, when 38 members of the Dakota Indigenous people were hanged in Mankato, the day after Christmas Day, following the US - Dakota War. When Covid-19 shut down the world in March 2020, the murder of a young African American man, George Floyd, at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin drew people from all over the world out onto the streets in unity and righteous anger, to protest the injustice they witnessed on their television screens. Chauvin, who was dismissed immediately after the assault, would become the first police officer in modern history convicted for murdering a Black person in Minnesota.

The history of mistreatment of communities of colour in the United States has created longstanding inequities and relational rifts between communities. Consequently, the history of the churches in the United States includes racial issues as a major factor of ecclesial division. In other parts of the world, other non-doctrinal issues play a similar role. That is why the theological work on unity done by the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order has traditionally sought to hold together the search for the churches’ unity and the search for overcoming walls of separation within the human family such as racism. That is why prayer, especially prayer for Christian unity, takes an even more important meaning when it takes place in the heart of the struggles against what separates us as humans created with equal dignity in the image and likeness of God.

**The search for unity: throughout the year**

The traditional period in the northern hemisphere for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is 18 - 25 January. Those dates were proposed in 1908 by Paul Wattson to cover the days between the feasts of St Peter and St Paul, and therefore have a symbolic significance. In the southern hemisphere where January is a vacation time churches often find other days to celebrate the Week of Prayer, for example around Pentecost (suggested by the Faith and Order movement in 1926), which is also a symbolic date for the unity of the Church.

Mindful of the need for flexibility, we invite you to use this material throughout the whole year to express the degree of communion which the churches have already reached, and to pray together for that full unity which is Christ’s will.

**Using the Week of Prayer material**

For churches and Christian communities which observe the Week of Prayer together

through a single common service, an order for an ecumenical worship service is provided.

Parishes and Christian communities may also incorporate material from the Week of Prayer

into their own services. Prayers from the ecumenical worship service, the “eight days”, and

the selection of additional prayers can be used as appropriate in their own setting.

Biblical Text for 2023

ISAIAH 1: 12 - 18

When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

New Revised Standard Version

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME FOR 2023

Do Good; seek justice

(Isaiah 1:17)

**Introduction**

Isaiah lived and prophesied in Judah during the eighth century BCE and was a contemporary of Amos, Micah, and Hosea. This was towards the end of a period of great economic success and political stability for both Israel and Judah, due to the weakness of the ‘superpowers’ of the time, Egypt and Assyria. However, it was also a period when injustice, inequity and inequalities were rampant in both kingdoms.

This period also saw religion thriving as a ritual and formal expression of belief in God, concentrated on Temple offerings and sacrifices. This formal and ritual religion was presided over by the priests, who were also the beneficiaries of the largesse of the rich and powerful. Due to the physical proximity and interconnectedness of the royal palace and the Temple, power and influence were centred almost entirely on the king and the priests, neither of whom, for much of this history, stood up for those who were enduring oppression and inequity. In the worldview of this time (one which recurs throughout history), the rich and those who made many offerings were understood to be good and blessed by God, while those who were poor and could not offer sacrifices were understood to be wicked and cursed by God. The poor were often denigrated for their economic inability to fully participate in Temple worship.

Isaiah spoke into this context, attempting to awaken the consciousness of the people of Judah to the reality of their situation. Instead of honouring the contemporary religiosity as a blessing, Isaiah saw it as a festering wound and a sacrilege before the Almighty. Injustice and inequality led to fragmentation and disunity. His prophecies denounce the political, social, and religious structures and the hypocrisy of offering sacrifices while oppressing the poor. He speaks out vigorously against corrupt leaders and in favour of the disadvantaged, rooting righteousness and justice in God alone.

The working group appointed by the Minnesota Council of Churches chose this verse from the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah as the central text for the Week of Prayer: “*learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow*” (1:17).

**Learn to do good**

In the Scripture passage chosen for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023, the prophet Isaiah teaches us how we are to cure these ills.

Learning to do right requires the decision to engage in self-reflection. The Week of Prayer is the perfect time for Christians to recognize that the divisions between our churches and confessions cannot be separated from the divisions within the wider human family. Praying together for Christian unity allows us to reflection what unites us and to commit ourselves to confront oppression and division amongst humanity.

**Seek justice**

Isaiah counsels Judah to seek justice (v. 17), which is an acknowledgment of the existence of injustice and oppression in their society. He implores the people of Judah to overturn this status quo. Seeking justice requires us to face up to those who inflict evil on others. This is not an easy task and will sometimes lead to conflict, but Jesus assures us that standing up for justice in the face of oppression leads to the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt5:10). Churches in many parts of the world must acknowledge how they have conformed to societal norms and been silent or actively complicit regarding racial injustice. Racial prejudice has been one of the causes of Christian division that has torn the Body of Christ. Toxic ideologies, such as White Supremacy and the doctrine of discovery2, have caused much harm, particularly in North America and in lands throughout the world colonized by White European powers over the centuries. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and to advocate for justice.

**Rescue the oppressed**

The Bible tells us that we cannot separate our relationship with Christ from our attitude towards all God’s people, particularly those considered “the least of these” (Mt25:40). Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in *mishpat*, the Hebrew word for restorative justice, advocating for those whose voices have not been heard, dismantling structures that create and sustain injustice, and building others that promote and ensure everyone receives fair treatment and the rights that are due to them. This work must extend beyond our friends, family and congregations to the whole of humanity. Christians are called to go out and listen to the cries of all who are suffering, in order to better understand and respond to their stories of suffering and their trauma.

**Defend the orphan, plead for the widow**

 Widows and orphans occupy a special place in the Hebrew Bible, alongside strangers, as representatives of the most vulnerable members of society. In the context of the economic success in Judah at the time of Isaiah, the situation of orphans and widows was a desperate one as they were deprived of protection and of the right to own land, and therefore the capacity to provide for themselves. The prophet called on the community, as it rejoiced in its prosperity, not to neglect to defend and nurture the poorest and most vulnerable among them. This prophetic call echoes in our time, as we consider: who are the most vulnerable people in our society? Whose voices are not being heard in our communities? Who is not represented at the table? Why? Which churches and communities are missing from our dialogues, our common action and our prayer for Christian unity? As we pray together during this Week of Prayer, what are we willing to do about these absent voices?

**Conclusion**

Isaiah challenged God’s people in his day to learn to do good together; to seek justice together, to rescue the oppressed together, to defend the orphan and plead for the widow together. The prophet’s challenge applies equally to us today. How can we live our unity as Christians so as to confront the evils and injustices of our time? How can we engage in dialogue, increase awareness, understanding and insight about one another’s lived experiences?

These prayers and encounters of the heart have the power to transform us –individually and collectively. Let us be open to God’s presence in all our encounters with each other as we seek to be transformed, to dismantle the systems of oppression, and to heal the sins of racism. Together, let us engage in the struggle for justice in our society. We all belong to Christ.

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