

IN RESPONSE TO THE  
*Call of Christ*



**A Bible Study and Reflection Guide**




*Produced by*  
Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ



## **Justice and Witness Ministries Mission Statement**



Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ embraces God's transforming mission to do justice, seek peace, and build community. Therefore, in response to the call of Christ, we speak and act prophetically through public witness, policy advocacy, issue education, and grassroots empowerment to build a more just, compassionate, and inclusive world.

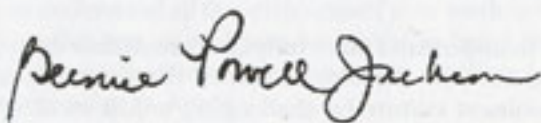


In November 2002, after more than two years of prayer, Bible study, conversation, and theological reflection, the board of directors of Justice and Witness Ministries, in consultation with our entire staff, gave final approval to a mission statement that now guides us in our work for justice and peace.

This process involved many drafts and rewrites, individual contribution, and group edits. Together we altered sentences, deleted words, and added phrases. We wanted something concise yet complete, something theological yet practical, something that encompassed the breadth and depth of our mandate, but something much shorter than Martin Luther's ninety-five theses. As you might imagine from a group of nearly one hundred UCC justice advocates, we engaged in healthy and lively debate!

We have wrestled with these words—not because we feel circumscribed by rigid definitions of organizational structure, but because we believe that justice work begins with a call by God and an understanding, a posture, a yearning for making things right. We know that words matter, and most importantly we know that our work matters. Through this process we have sought agreement not only about words on a piece of paper but also about our common understandings of what it means to be God's people in mission.

In times like these, it is crucial that people of faith understand just why the work of justice and peace is the work of the church. Moreover, through this process we have come to believe that this work is at the heart of God's mission. That's why we have produced this study document, so that you might wrestle with these words along with us. Let us join together to discover what God would have us be and do in this world.



Bernice Powell Jackson  
Executive Minister, Justice and Witness Ministries



# *Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church*

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You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

—ISAIAH 58:12B

SUGGESTED READING: ISAIAH 58:1–12

## **It's God's Mission!**

The mission to which we are baptized, to which we belong, to which we pledge our lives, to which we offer our time and talents, gifts and service—it all belongs to God. And if we believe this is true, then nothing less than seeking the heart of God must be our primary objective as Christ's people.

What does God want *for* the world, and what is God doing *in* the world?

These are not simple questions to answer. Yet if we are honest with ourselves, we must acknowledge that too often we forget to ask these very important questions. We are accustomed to talking about the mission of the church and not about God's mission. We usually begin the conversation with our own survival in mind and are often consumed with thoughts of how we might strengthen the church and its entities but give secondary consideration, at best, to God's active work in the world.

By devoting ourselves to the discernment of God's whereabouts, God's leading, and God's movement, we allow our ministries to be nurtured by God's spirit of transformation. When we try to live in concert with God's concern for the poor, as we read about in our sacred scriptures, we then begin to order, plan, and structure our ministries in different ways. This is how Justice and Witness Ministries seeks to live within the Church of Jesus Christ—as a body of believers intent on discovering God's pathway toward justice and then following God's lead.

Generally speaking, our ways are not God's ways. The prophet Isaiah says that God is sickened by the way we practice religious piety but remain undaunted by the hurts of those around us. Ultimately, according to Isaiah, God is concerned about loosing the bonds of wickedness, undoing the yoke of oppression, letting the oppressed go free, sharing bread with the hungry, offering shelter to the homeless poor, clothing the naked, and strengthening the bonds of community (Isa 58:6–7). Not by coincidence did Jesus choose these very words as the foundation for his own earthly ministry (Lk 4:18).

This description helps us to understand more fully God's multifaceted approach to mission in the world. God not only nurtures and serves those in need, but God seeks to undermine the dominant culture by challenging unjust structures and policies that serve the wealthy and the powerful at the expense of the poor and the powerless. Jesus talked about God's upside-down-*realm* as the last becoming first and the first becoming last (Mk 9:33–37). Mary, perceiving the radical work of God in the coming of Jesus, sang about God bringing down the powerful from their



high places, the hungry being filled with good things, the lowly being lifted up, and the rich being sent empty away (Mk 1:52–53).

God's mission is radical love—offered generously yet always rooted in justice.

God rolls the stone away—completely! A charitable view of the church's mission seeks to treat the symptoms of evil structures, but the work of God seeks to transform those very systems that perpetuate unfair advantage and privilege for the few. God is in the business of transforming not only individuals, as contemporary Christians readily teach and preach, but God also works corporately by transforming congregations, communities, governments, businesses, and nations—any place or circumstance that is contrary to the spirit of God's love and mercy. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament help us to understand more fully how God desires the transformation of the world, in accordance with the justice and compassion that flows from God's own being.

It is not easy to live as a Christian in today's world. So too it is equally difficult to be the church in a culture with so many competing interests and loyalties. Often we pursue the *successful* way instead of the *principled* way of Christ. Yet, as we are faithful to God's mission in the world, we will remember God's intentions and thereby order our common life according to God's desire for all living things.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Where do you perceive God's movement in the world today? What does God especially want from the people of our nation?
2. Name historical and contemporary experiences where you have witnessed God working to change systems and structures that have perpetuated evil?
3. Considering the words of Isaiah 58:6–7 or other texts from the Bible, try to write a mission statement for God. Then discuss how your church's understanding of mission does or does not reflect your beliefs about the work of God in the world.

### Prayer

Transforming God, give us the desire to know you more fully. Although we may be unable to understand all the intricacies of your work in the world, give us the courage to follow after you, to seek you, to persist in being more like you. Let us feel the beating of your heart and to synchronize our lives in concert with your will. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

*Written by The Reverend J. Bennett Guess for the Office of the Executive Minister, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.*

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? —MICAH 6:8b

SUGGESTED READING: MICAH 6:1–8

## Doing, Seeking, Building

Micah, one of the Hebrew prophets of the eighth century before Jesus, defended with all his heart, soul, and mind the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Along with Isaiah and Amos, the prophet Micah denounced the socioeconomic abuses and the unethical behaviors of the religious and political leaders of his time. Micah is known by many as one of the great prophets of social justice.

In Micah 6:1–8, the nature of worship and faithfulness is the subject of controversy among the people of Israel. How does God want to be worshiped? What is the appropriate way to express true worship before God?

In Micah's day, many believed that true worship of God required ritualistic sacrifices, while the needs of the poor and oppressed were ignored. Some even systemically used the religious systems of the day to place further burdens upon the needy. While the people are consumed with concerns about religious correctness, God prioritizes justice as the truest form of worship.

This is a pervasive theme throughout the words of the prophets. Broken relationships and misplaced priorities create devastating consequences. In this case, the violation of the relationship between God and the people of Israel resulted in great injustice for those who were being increasingly marginalized by their own religious and political leaders.

God wants true worship, while too many of us only desire to demonstrate religious commitment. In days gone by, as well as today, those obsessed with religious ritual as the end-all of good religion often forget the concerns of those around them, their neighbors, those whom God loves. What God demands from us, however, is a commitment to do justice, to offer kindness, and to walk humbly. God does not need our correct understanding and demonstration of religious ritual.

There are many important words contained in Micah's prescription for true worship: justice, love, kindness, and humility.

Justice is a dynamic concept related to seeking peace. Without justice, there is no peace. The biblical concept of *Shalom* weds these two words into one, because *Shalom* literally means "peace with justice." *Shalom* calls us to work for fairness and equality, especially for the weak and the powerless, because only justice will lead to real and lasting peace.

The Hebrew word for kindness is *hesed*. It is rooted in an understanding of the mutual linkages of love, loyalty, and faithfulness and thus defines the nature of our

relationship with God and how we are expected to establish relationships with one another. Because God has established a relationship with us as God's new Israel, kindness to others is one way of recognizing and celebrating God's covenant of love among us.

*Halak* is the Hebrew word that means "walk humbly." Our journey calls us to walk with God as our companion, to put God first, and to live in conformity with God's will. As one biblical scholar describes this, we are called to live a particular lifestyle, to express a certain outlook on life, and to allow God's love to be the model by which we shape our ethical values.

As during Micah's time, God is not interested in sacrifices. Indeed, this is false and shallow religion. God wants to establish unity and community, and the consequence of true worship will be justice for all. This is the essence of God's mission for us, and it should be ours as well.

Jesus taught us similarly to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

No question, God makes demands of us. God's initiative calls us to undertake the cause of liberation and to help all people find their way from the wilderness to a new place of hope. God has made us a people, and in return, no liturgical ceremony will be pleasing to God until our commitment to doing justice, seeking peace, and building community becomes the truest expression of our worship life.

### Questions for Reflection

1. According to Micah 6:1–8, what does God require of us? Does this text affect your understanding of true worship?
2. What does it mean to be God's people today? in your immediate context? in the nation? in the world?
3. How does the United Church of Christ take seriously God's mission of doing justice, seeking peace, and building community?

### Prayer

God of justice and peace, teach us how to live and act as your people. Show us how to do justice, seek peace, and build community as you require. May we be guided by your Holy Spirit, inspired by teachings of the prophets, and led by the example of Jesus. Amen.

*Written by The Reverend Vilma Machín-Vásquez for the Human Rights, Justice for Women, and Transformation Ministry Team, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.*



The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.—LUKE 4:18

SUGGESTED READING: LUKE 4:16–19

## Responding to Jesus

In the church, there have been many debates throughout the centuries about the nature of our salvation through Jesus. Are we saved by our belief in Christ alone? And if so, what else must we do? Are we not obligated to act upon our faith by showing concern for the well being of our neighbors?

Many in our tradition believe that both of these are important. Christ not only redeems individual lives, but Christ transforms individual lives so that we can be about God's work of healing and transforming the world. In response to the call of Christ, we are set free from the power of sin's self-consuming force, and we are given new life to serve among and with God's people.

Unfortunately, we live in a culture where it is far too easy to practice our faith through narrow self interest. We think very little about others; we are concerned only about what affects us directly. Many pray this prayer: "Lord, bless me and my house; us four and no more." Our concept of God's love is rooted in our own context, our own geography, our own experience, and our own understandings.

Jesus challenges us to understand God as both loving and merciful. We are human and we make mistakes. Yes, we depend on the mercy of God to save us. However, this is only a part of the Christian life, because Jesus calls us to live for others, to bear one another's burdens, to love radically and sacrificially. We are called to practice justice in the world.

In Luke 4:16–19, we are reminded that the earthly existence of Jesus was not just about his own personal needs. We are called to share the good news of the gospel, but this requires that we work to remove injustice in its myriad of forms. We are called to relieve suffering, no matter what form this oppression takes. We are called to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord's favor, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. As people of faith, we know that God's acceptable time will be realized only when we live in a world where justice reigns and all people live in peace together.

When we work for justice, we do so in response to the call of Christ. When we advocate for the poor and oppressed, we are witnessing to the love of Jesus among us.



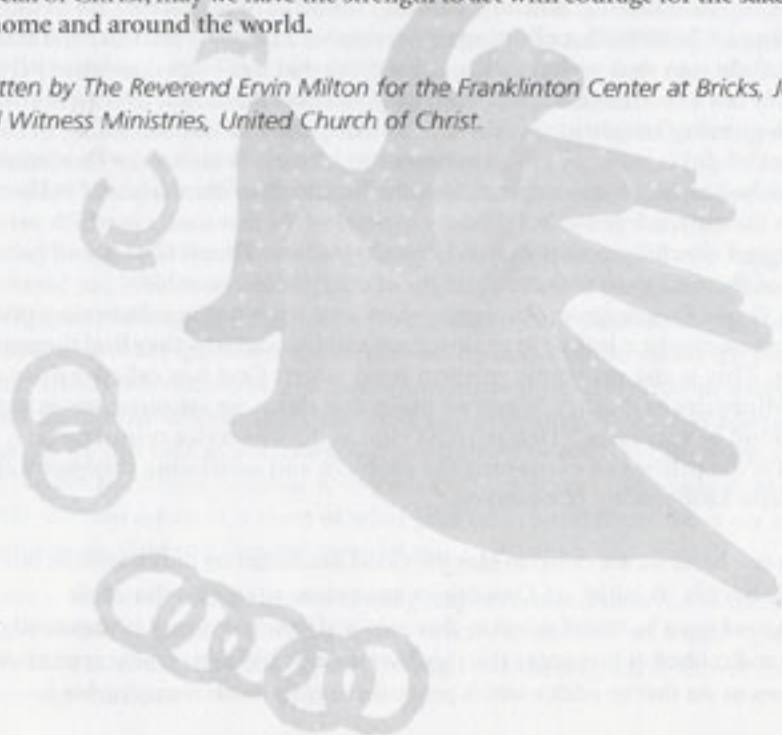
### Questions for Reflection

1. Do you feel that working for justice is an expression of our baptismal promises?
2. What is God calling you to do and be in the world? in your church? in your community?
3. We must not feel guilty for taking care of own lives and our own families, but at what point does taking care of your own needs hinder your ability to be an advocate for justice?

### Prayer

Creator, you are a loving and just God, but we have not always lived in ways that attest to your will and your desires for humankind. We have not lived in peace with our neighbors. Forgive us our shortcomings and our abuse of what you have created. We pray that you will give us the ability to seek justice in the world. In response to the call of Christ, may we have the strength to act with courage for the sake of peace at home and around the world.

*Written by The Reverend Ervin Milton for the Franklinton Center at Bricks, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.*



So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. —EZEKIEL 33:7

SUGGESTED READING: EZEKIEL 2:3-7; 33:6-7

## From Charity to Justice

I admit it: I am one of those eccentrics who actually enjoys mowing my lawn. Before you denounce me as loony, let me share my reason. I enjoy it because the task gratifies me immediately. After toiling for an hour or so, I can look back at the fruit of my labor and see a nicely trimmed patch of green, smell freshly mown grass, and feel the softness of green grass under my feet.

I have volunteered in soup kitchens and other feeding ministries for that very reason. It gives me great and immediate joy in knowing at least a few more stomachs are filled with nutritious food for another couple of hours. I suppose that is one of the reasons, if not the main one, that so many churches and other people of good will get involved with providing direct services to those who have need. Whether it is the building of affordable housing, stocking a food bank, collecting for a clothing closet, doing a CROP Walk, collecting for victims of a flood or hurricane, it affords us deep satisfaction that we have done something that has helped another person.

I recently saw a *60 Minutes* segment that explored how the lines at feeding ministries have been growing longer in this time. This fact points to the increasing need for these types of direct services in this moment in history. Without the thousands of churches who reach out in compassion or the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who make the outreach possible, I shudder to think of the dire straits in which persons being dragged down by poverty would find themselves. Thank God for all persons who give of themselves to make such works of compassion possible.

But as Paolo Freire once observed, when you keep pulling drowning people from the water, maybe it is time to go upstream and find out why they find themselves drowning. This is the prophetic mission onto which God has called Justice and Witness Ministries to journey. When we make that claim, we see ourselves as part of a "great cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1). As vital as direct-service ministries are, just as critical is the process of examining the problem and addressing it systemically.

As Martin Luther King Jr. observed:

On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion ... comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore we can address the problem of hunger and food security, in part, by temporarily feeding hungry people. But we must also ask the provocative question: Why is it, that in a country that produces enough food to feed the entire world, people still suffer from hunger and hunger-related illness?

That question leads us to examine food policy under present laws. Why is grain held in storage when it can be distributed? What needs to change in order for the food that is being produced to get to people who need it? What are the motives behind welfare reform that limit lifetime eligibility for very vulnerable citizens to two years? These systemic questions force us to go upstream, to discover the source of the problem.

The Hebrew prophets set a precedent for us in this upstream ministry. They not only questioned the powers-that-be, but they railed against them—vociferously. They saw that the misery of poverty was not simply an accident of nature or history. They spared no one in naming the culpable evildoers who were most responsible for the plight of the poor. They saw that the poor were not always there through fault of their own but through the policies of the rich and powerful.

As Rabbi Abraham Heschel exclaimed: "The prophet is intent on intensifying responsibility, is impatient of excuse, contemptuous of pretense and self-pity. His tone, rarely sweet or caressing, is frequently consoling and disburdening; his words are often slashing, even horrid - designed to shock rather than to edify."<sup>1</sup> No small wonder that the prophet was often lonely and often outcast.

But God has made clear that this is the vocation to which Justice and Witness Ministries, along with individuals and congregations, is called. This calling can be divided into the three tasks often used as a paradigm for doing justice: See. Judge. Act.

1. **SEE.** We are called to keep our eyes and ears on the times. What is happening around us? Who is involved? Who is affected? What is the cast of characters? What are the long-term trends? Are communities of faith involved? How? These and other questions are all part of the information gathering process that affects our decisions and commitments to ministry. Without this careful and thoughtful discernment, the work of justice cannot proceed adequately. Again, we can take as our example the prophets of old. We take them to be explosive preachers, bombastic voices who rain down God's judgment, but they are also astute observers of what goes on around them. They see what is happening. God requires the same of us.
2. **JUDGE.** Gathering data about what is going on around us is not sufficient. We have to do the hard work of analysis. We have to ask the "so what?" questions. We have to distill the information through our theological filter. We have to connect the dots.



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This analytical task requires us to be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves. It demands that we use all the sociological, political, ethical, and economic tools at our disposal to help us discern what we see.

Importantly, we would remind readers that for Christians, such discernment must occur within community. We do not live out our vocation as peacemakers as isolated pilgrims but as accountable, responsive persons in community. Equally important, we must continue to remind ourselves that the Christian community always and inextricably lives under the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. This dual accountability always keeps us humbly aware of our propensity toward believing we alone have all the right answers.

3. **ACT.** It is not enough to come to right conclusions. Prophetic work involves being spurred to action. Whether the judgment is that we need to mobilize constituents; inform persons of pending legislation and write letters, make calls, or send e mail; or bring large numbers of people together to demonstrate for or against policy, prophetic work requires that we act.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Consider the work of your congregation. What are some issues to which God may be calling you to see, judge, and act?
2. Ezekiel uses the metaphor of a guard on the tower. Discuss the ways in which the prophetic task is similar to that of the security-post watcher. What does that say about the role of the church?
3. List the charitable works of your congregation. Discuss how you can strengthen those ministries by adding prophetic dimensions to your work.

*Written by The Reverend Wallace Ryan Kuroiwa for the Economic Justice Ministry Team, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.*

1. Martin Luther King Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," an address delivered at the meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned, Riverside Church, New York, N.Y., April 4, 1967.
2. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 7.



How terrible it will be for those who make unfair laws, and those who write laws that make life hard for people. They are not fair to the poor, and they rob my people of their rights. They allow people to steal from widows and take from orphans what really belongs to them. —ISAIAH 10:1-2

SUGGESTED READING: ISAIAH 10:1-2

## Witnessing for Justice

The story is told of a village on the banks of a mighty river. From time to time, the people of the village would hear the cries of one who had fallen into the river and was swept up in the current, pleading for help. One day, the cries were multiplied, and the people of the village were exhausted by their efforts to pull people out of the river. This continued for days, and the people of the village began to wonder if they could keep up their efforts. Finally, someone made a decision to go up river, to find out why so many people were suddenly falling into the river. He discovered a ravenous tiger was terrifying travelers along the river, who jumped in to avoid attack.

By asking why and discovering the cause, they were able to provide safe passage for travelers without exhausting their efforts. Asking why and searching for causes is the point where justice becomes a possibility. This is the point of decision—to imagine a new common life in which no one is left behind, no one is swept down the river. This is where we hear the call to be engaged in public witness, policy advocacy, issue education, and grassroots empowerment.

Many of our congregations minister to those who have been swept up by the current—people without access to affordable housing, a livable wage, and health care. Many of our congregations join efforts with other community organizations to provide safety and healing for women and children affected by domestic violence. We seek ways to provide education and safe space to all children. Even in the midst of these faithful efforts, we are not able to reach everyone in need. We are called to ask new questions and to make new decisions. Why are so many being left behind, left on the margins of society? What would need to change to make this different?

Isaiah points to one answer—“unfair laws, and those who write laws that make life hard for people.” In Hebrew Scripture, the witness of the law and the prophets makes clear that the way in which the life of the people is structured reflects the relationship of the community to God. When human community is broken by injustice, the relationship of the community to God is broken. Right relationship—in human community and with God—is reflected in how the “least,” the orphans, the widows, the sojourners, are treated. The ministry and teachings of Jesus echo the call to make just our common life. “As you have done for the least of these . . . you have done for me” (Mt 25:45).

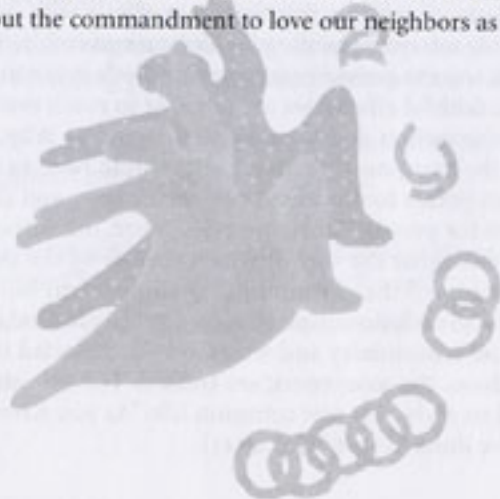
The laws and policies of our nation, states, and cities serve to order our common life. They reflect our priorities as a people, what and whom we value. A review of the 2003 federal budget reveals a high priority for military spending, while programs like Head Start or Medicaid, which draw people in to our common life more fully, face drastic funding cuts. Do our policies and values reflect the vision to which our faith calls us? If not, what must change? How can things be different?

In responding faithfully to God's call for abundant life for all people, a common life in which no one is left behind, we are drawn inevitably to engage in public policy advocacy and decision making. Several years ago, a justice advocate described that engagement in a piece called "The Good Samaritan: The United Church of Christ and Public Policy":

Politics is often taken to be a dirty word. . . . But political processes are simply the way that communities of people organize their common life, allocate their resources and tackle their shared problems. Politics is about the rules we make, the values we honor, the processes we follow so that large groups of people can live together with some measure of fairness, order and peace.

How can people of faith possibly wash their hands of that public arena when our Scriptures clearly show God's preoccupation with it: with honest weights and measures in the marketplace; with judges who will not take bribes; with the plight of the poor and the perils of wealth; with hospitality for strangers and foreigners; with beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

For people of faith, public policy is never merely politics, merely economics. It is one way we try to plow the biblical vision of shalom into the soil of our history. It is a way to living out the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>1</sup>



## Questions for Reflection

1. Reflect on an area of need in your local community or beyond. Who is hurting? Theologian Walter Brueggemann describes this process as “naming the pain rightly.” Try to identify the causes of the hurt. What are some possible responses? What would need to happen to bring about change and healing?
2. How are the direct service ministries of your congregation connected to public policy decision making at a local, state, or federal level? What are the possibilities for connection?
3. Name any current trends in public policy that seek to divide, exclude, and leave the vulnerable behind, and consider how you might work to transform the system in order that we might more fully seek the common good.
4. How does viewing public policy advocacy as part of the ministry of the church challenge our understanding of how we transform politics and the public policy process?

## Prayer

Gracious God, God of all people, help us to be a people who look up the river. Help us to ask difficult questions and grant us the imagination to envision a transformed human community. When we feel weak and alone, grant us the strength and voice to challenge unjust laws and policies that leave some behind. Help us make the decision to act justly, to respond to hurt faithfully, and to walk humbly with our God. Amen.

*Written by Sandra L. Sorensen for the Public Life and Social Policy Ministry Team, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.*

1. Richard G. Watts, “The Good Samaritan: The United Church of Christ and Public Policy,” adapt. David Bahr. Note: no longer in print.



I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good. . . . So we rebuilt the wall . . . for the people had a mind to work. —NEHEMIAH 2:18, 4:6

SUGGESTED READING: NEHEMIAH 1-4

## Let Us Start Building!

Can you believe how bad things are getting in the world?

What the church needs to do is . . .

If I were president for a day, I would . . .

Why doesn't somebody just do something?

Do you ever find yourself or others making such statements? Have you ever felt that you were waiting for someone else to *do something* about the state of the world? Have you ever heard people second guessing others without being involved themselves in social change, sitting on the sidelines without getting in the game?

Nehemiah, a Jewish descendant and a servant in the fourth-century-BCE Persian court, was a person faced with the challenge of needing to act rather than merely lamenting the need for change. He learned from his brother that the walls and gates of Jerusalem had been burned and destroyed. Distressed at the ruined condition of his beloved city, he exhibited leadership by praying and meditating on the situation, then acting on it. He returned to Jerusalem and mobilized the people to rebuild those parts of the city. Nehemiah didn't look to someone else to right the wrong; he simply looked within himself and his community. He understood then what a twentieth-century writer, the late June Jordan, would articulate so well: "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

Certainly, an accurate reading of Nehemiah shows that part of the desire to rebuild the city walls was to keep out foreign influences, not a behavior we would call inclusive. Yet the lesson we can take from the story is that of mobilizing a people of faith into action, into building, into doing that which will change society.

*Webster's Dictionary* defines the word *build* as, "constructing or developing an integral part of something." It is a verb that implies that an action must be taken. As one writer put it, "Nehemiah was called to act for God in God's world." His effort to rebuild Jerusalem's wall was successful through inward preparation and outward action; after endeavoring to discern a path he thought would be true to his faith practices, he then organized others to act. We, likewise, must engage in prayer not merely to be pious but to lead us toward action to build a better world.



The mission statement of Justice and Witness Ministries calls us “to build a more just, compassionate, and inclusive world.” Just as Nehemiah responded to the need of his people, we who would be disciples of Christ are challenged to respond to the brokenness of this present world and to build a better one—a world in harmony with the Creator. Just as Nehemiah mobilized the people of Jerusalem to work together, we must work in concert with world communities to transform an unjust society into a fair and equitable one. And, just as the Jerusalem community was mocked and threatened with violence (2:9, 4:1), so too must we expect resistance from those who would maintain oppression. We must continue, nonetheless, to build a new society.

This means more than simply using our gifts to meet immediate needs; we must seek justice. The late Helder Camara once said, “When I give the food to the poor, they call me a saint; but when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a heretic.” We must likewise risk being called heretics if we are to do justice. To build a compassionate world is to challenge the hatred, the stereotyping, the greed and exploitation, the lust for war that defines our society; it is to empower folk to treat other human beings as fellow daughters and sons of the Creator. To build an inclusive world is to celebrate our humanity by cultivating a society that relishes its multiracial and multicultural nature and that is open, affirming, and accessible to all—regardless of race or ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, or ability.

The call to build a new society resounds not only throughout history but also throughout the words of our Holy Scriptures.

Consider the wonderful vision in the book of Revelation. Consider the promise of a new heaven, a new earth, a new Jerusalem where there will be no more suffering, where all will walk in harmony and in light, in justice, and in compassion, where all will be included in God’s realm. Does not our Creator call us to build such a place now—a place, as Jesus said, “on earth as it is in heaven?” (Mt 6:10).

## Questions for Reflection

1. Where do you see injustice in your community? How does this make you feel? How does this conflict with God’s will for the world?
2. Just as Nehemiah’s community contributed various talents in the building process, working for justice also requires all kinds of gifts and abilities (1 Cor 12). What are your gifts, your contributions?
3. What are the characteristics of an inclusive world? How does your church practice inclusivity? Exclusivity?

## Prayer

Creator, cleanse our hearts and renew our spirits that we may hear your call to be ambassadors of peace, advocates for justice, and builders of community. May your words guide and equip us as we seek to rebuild the ruins of broken relationships caused by oppressive attitudes, behaviors, and environments. Teach us how to be community, despite hurtful histories and experiences. In the name of Jesus, our liberator, we pray. Amen.

*Offered by the Racial Justice Ministry Team, Justice and Witness Ministries,  
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One-click faith-based e-advocacy

## About the Cover

The cover image is a photograph of a quilt created especially for Raising Up the Prophets, a United Church of Christ seminarians event hosted by Justice and Witness Ministries in January 2003 in Cleveland, Ohio. The quilt, made by Ann L. Hanson, a fiber artist who serves as Justice and Witness Ministries' minister for children, family, and human sexuality advocacy, utilizes a replica of moondance figures designed by Jan Richardson and incorporates the logo of Justice and Witness Ministries. The quilt dramatically tells the transforming story of how the chains of injustice and bondage that haunt the world are being broken everyday by the energy of the heart and the movement of the Spirit.

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