

2023 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Do good; seek justice (*Isaiah 1:17*)

Eight Days of Prayer

Resource for Bible Studies, Reflections and Daily Prayer

The daily themes, Scripture readings, reflections, challenges, and prayers below were prepared by the Minnesota Council of Churches and the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Writing Team.

The Canadian Introduction and “Further Discussion – Canadian Context” questions were prepared by the Canadian Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Writing and Animation Team.

We encourage you to be creative in your use of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity resources! For example, you may wish to alter the resources to better suit the context of your community, or you may draw inspiration from the WPCU materials to create something entirely new. Communities should also feel free to use the WPCU materials not only during the traditional Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25 in the northern hemisphere), but throughout the year, to pray for Christian unity and to foster ecumenical fellowship and service.

Canadian Introduction

How we read, hear, and interpret the Bible is affected by the context of our own lives and communities.

The daily reflections for the 2023 WPCU Eight Days of Prayer were prepared by the Minnesota Council of Churches. The themes for each day should be familiar to everyone who lives in Canada. The issues facing the churches in the United States affect us because of their proximity to our borders and as they relate to our present situation in Canada.

As Canadians we have been struggling with our past, especially in relation to the Indigenous peoples of this country. We are seeking a way forward as we reflect on the 94 Calls to Action from the TRC (the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada) hearings, which ended in 2015. We are asking ourselves how best to implement the UNDRIP (the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*) principles, officially passed into law by Canada in June 2021. We as a people are haunted by the Residential Schools legacy and by the horrors examined by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which gave its final report on June 3, 2019.

We are no strangers to the issues highlighted in the 2023 WPCU Eight Days of Prayer reflections!

Although Canadians often speak of building a diverse, inclusive, and just society, we know that racism is deeply imbedded in our society and that we have seen great violence against people of colour and against ethnic and religious minorities.

As we undertake these Bible Studies, let us bring the honest questions and reflections that come when the light of the gospel illuminates the truth of both our past and our present. As we seek greater unity, may it be in service to the love and justice God has revealed in Jesus.

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS AND PRAYERS FOR THE EIGHT DAYS

DAY 1

Learning to do the right thing

Readings

- Isaiah 1:12-18 Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan; plead for the widow.
- Luke 10:25-36 He asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

Reflection

According to Isaiah, God wants Judah not only to practice justice but to embrace the principle of always doing the right thing. God wants us not only to care for orphans and widows but to do what is right and good for them and anyone marginalised by society. The Hebrew word for good is *yaw-tab'* and it means to be glad, joyful, pleasing, to do well, to make something beautiful.

To be Christian means to be a disciple. All Christians sit under the Word of God, learning together what it is to do good, and who it is that stands in need of this solidarity. As society becomes more indifferent to the needs of others, we, as the children of God, must learn to take up the cause of our oppressed brothers and sisters by speaking truth to power and, if necessary, plead their case so that they may live in peace with justice. In doing this we will always do the right thing!

Our commitment to eradicate and to be healed of the sin of racism requires us to be prepared and willing to be in relationship with our Christian sisters and brothers.

Christian Unity

A lawyer asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus’ response asks us to see beyond the divisions of religion, tribe and nationality to recognise our neighbour in need. Christians likewise must see beyond these divides and the divisions within the Christian family to recognise and love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Challenge

Who are the marginalised or oppressed in your society? How might churches together walk with these brothers and sisters, respond to their need and speak up on their behalf?

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

- Religion and culture have been intertwined throughout the history of the world; a multicultural Canada implies a multi-religious Canada. What barriers and challenges have your churches encountered when considering who is your neighbour in Canada?
- Invite participants to create a timeline of events from the establishment of the Residential School system in Canada up to the present, with as many items as are known by the group collectively. For comparison and/or further study, look up The Canadian Encyclopaedia's online Timeline of Residential Schools
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/timeline/residential-schools>

Prayer

Lord, you called your people from slavery into freedom,

Give us strength and courage to seek out those who are standing in need of justice. Allow us to see this need and provide help, and through your Holy Spirit gather us into the one fold of Jesus Christ, our Shepherd. Amen.

DAY 2

When justice is done . . .

Readings

Proverbs 21:13-15 When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers.
Matthew 23:23-25 Justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done.

Reflection

From the beginning the Book of Proverbs sets out to provide wisdom and instruction in “wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity” (1:2). Throughout its oracles of wisdom, the call to act justly and to pursue righteousness is a constant refrain, relentlessly shared and affirmed as more acceptable to God than sacrifice. In a one-sentence pearl of wisdom, the speaker testifies that the righteous rejoice when justice is done. But justice upsets the workers of iniquity. Christians, across their separations, should be united in joy when justice is done, and prepared to stand together when this justice brings opposition. When we do what the Lord requires and dare to pursue justice, we may find ourselves in a whirlwind of resistance and opposition to any attempt to make things right for the most vulnerable among us.

Those who benefit from the systems and structures buttressed by White supremacy and other oppressive ideologies such as “casteism” and patriarchy will seek to delay and deny justice, often violently. But to seek justice is to strike at the heart of the powers, making space for God’s just ordering and enduring wisdom in a world all too often unmoved by suffering. And yet, there is joy in doing what is right. There is joy in affirming that “Black Lives Matter” in the pursuit of justice for God’s oppressed, dominated, and exploited beloved.

There is joy in seeking reconciliation with other Christians so that we may better serve the proclamation of the kingdom. Let that joy manifest itself through our shared experiences of God’s presence in community in the known and unknown spaces where God journeys with us toward healing, reconciliation and unity in Christ.

Christian Unity

The religious leaders Jesus addresses in the Gospel passage have grown accustomed and comfortable with the injustices of the world. They are happy to perform religious duties such as tithing mint, dill and cumin, but neglect the weightier and more disruptive demands of justice, mercy and faithfulness. Similarly Christians have grown accustomed and comfortable with the divisions that exist between us. We are faithful in much of our religious observance, but often we neglect the Lord’s challenging desire that all his disciples be one.

Challenge

How can local congregations support one another to withstand the opposition that may follow from doing justice?

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

- What does the experience of uncovering unmarked graves at the sites of Residential Schools mean to the people whose stories have been neglected, and to us as Christians living in Canada?
- What does it mean to have the church leaders admit wrongdoing, accept responsibility, express sorrow, and acknowledge the injustices and abuses of the Residential Schools in Canada?
- What steps are necessary for ‘Colonizers’ as they seek to enter a time of ‘justice and mercy and faithfulness’?

Prayer

God, you are the source of our wisdom. We pray for wisdom and courage to do justice, to respond to what is wrong in the world by acting to make it right;

We pray for wisdom and courage to grow in the unity of your Son, Jesus Christ, who, with you and the Holy Spirit, reigns forever and ever. Amen.

DAY 3

Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly

Readings

- Micah 6:6-8 And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
- Mark 10:17-31 Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Reflection

We – not me. The prophet warns the people what faithfulness to God’s covenant means: “... and what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.” In Biblical Hebrew justice and kindness (mercy) are not different or opposite from each other. They are in fact bonded together in a single word, *mishpat*. God has shown us what is good, asking us to do justice by loving kindness and by walking humbly with God. Walking humbly with God means walking alongside others and therefore it is not just about the individual: my walk, my love.

The love that God invites us into is always a love which gathers us into communion: we – not me. This insight makes all the difference in how we “do justice”. As Christians we act justly to manifest something of God’s kingdom in the world, and therefore to invite others into this place of God’s loving kindness. Within God’s kingdom we are all loved equally as God’s children, and as God’s Church we are called to love one another as brothers and sisters and to invite others into that love.

To do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God, calls Christians to act together in bearing a united witness to God’s kingdom within our communities: we – not me.

Christian Unity

“Walking humbly” was challenging for the rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. He had obeyed all the commandments from his youth, but he could not take the further step to join Jesus’ disciples because of his wealth; he was beholden to his possessions. How difficult it is for Christians to let go of that which we perceive as riches, but which keep us from the greater wealth of joining Jesus’s disciples in Christian unity.

Challenge

How can our churches better respond to the needs of our most vulnerable neighbours? How can we honour every voice in our communities?

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

The word used for justice throughout the Bible, and in Micah 6:8, is *mishpat*, and it includes punishment, or retributive justice. But it also means more than that; it includes giving people their due or right. This is often referred to as restorative justice. What would that look like in your faith community's response to the TRC Calls to Action?

Prayer

Gracious and loving God,
Expand our vision that we might see the mission we share with all of our Christian brothers and sisters,
to show forth the justice and loving kindness of your kingdom.
Help us to welcome our neighbours as your Son welcomed us.
Help us to be more generous as we witness to the grace that you freely give us.
Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

DAY 4

Look, the tears of the oppressed

Readings

- Ecclesiastes 4:1-5 Again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power with no one to comfort them.
- Matthew 5:1-8 ... Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted ...

Reflection

“Look, the tears of the oppressed.” One can imagine that the writer has witnessed atrocities like this before with sickening regularity. And yet perhaps this is the first time the writer has truly seen the tears of the oppressed, has fully taken in their pain and their subjugation. While there is much to lament, in a new looking and a new seeing there is also a seed of hope: maybe this time this witnessing will lead to change, will make a difference.

A young woman looked and saw the tears of the oppressed. The video she shot on her phone of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 was seen all around the world and unleashed a holy rage as people witnessed, and finally acknowledged, what African Americans have experienced for centuries: undue subjugation by oppressive systems in the midst of privileged blind bystanders. Acknowledging this painful reality has led to a global outpouring of overdue compassion both in the form of prayer and protest for justice.

The progression from simply looking to seeing and understanding gives encouragement for us as actors in this earthly reality: God can remove scales from our eyes to witness things in new and liberating ways. As those scales fall, the Holy Spirit provides insight, and also, conviction to respond in new and unfettered ways. One response the churches and communities made was to establish a prayer tent at George Floyd Square, the place of his murder. In this way, these churches and communities were united in offering comfort to those who mourned and were oppressed.

Christian Unity

Matthew’s account of the Beatitudes begins with Jesus seeing the crowds. In that crowd he must have seen those who were peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, men and women who mourned, and those who hungered for justice. In the beatitudes Jesus not only names people’s struggles, he names what they will be: the children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. As Christians we are called to see the holy struggles of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Challenge

How have you engaged with Christian groups addressing oppression in your neighbourhood? How can the churches in your locality come together to better show solidarity with those suffering oppression?

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

Highway 16 between Prince George and Prince Rupert, British Columbia, is called the Highway of Tears. It is the location of many missing and murdered Indigenous women. (According to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which gave its final report on June 3, 2019.)

- What does the Highway of Tears mean to you?
- How might we imagine bringing comfort and closure to the families of those still missing?

Prayer

God of justice and grace, remove the scales from our eyes so we can truly see the oppression around us.

We pray in the name of Jesus who saw the crowds and had compassion for them. Amen.

DAY 5

Singing the Lord's song as strangers in the land

Readings

- Psalm 137:1-4 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- Luke 23:27-31 Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

Reflection

The lament of the psalmist originates in the exile of Judah in Babylon, however, the pain of exile is one that reverberates across time and culture. Perhaps the psalmist shouted this refrain towards the heavens. Perhaps each verse was given voice between deep sobs of grief. Perhaps this poem emerged with a shrug of indifference that can only come from living within injustice and feeling powerless to effect any meaningful change. However the words were brought forth, the heartache of this passage finds resonance in the hearts of those who are treated as strangers in other lands or in their own lands.

The demand in the psalm comes from the oppressor to smile and make merry, to sing the songs of a "happy" past. That demand has come to marginalized people throughout history. Whether it was in minstrel shows,¹ or Geisha dances,² or Wild West cowboy and Indian shows,³ oppressors have often demanded that oppressed people perform happily to ensure their own survival. Their message is as simple as it is cruel; your songs, your ceremonies, your cultural identity, that which makes you sacredly unique, is only allowable so long as it serves us.

In this psalm generations of the oppressed are given their voice. How could we sing the Lord's song when we are strangers in our own land? We sing not for our captors but to praise God. We sing because we are not alone for God has never abandoned us. We sing because we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. The ancestors and saints inspire us. They encourage us to sing songs of hope, songs of freedom, songs of liberation, songs of a homeland where a people is restored.

Christian Unity

Luke's Gospel records that people, many of them women, follow Jesus even as he carries his cross to Calvary. This following is faithful discipleship. Furthermore, Jesus recognises their struggles and the suffering that they will have to endure in faithfully carrying their own crosses.

¹ Thought to be the first original form of popular American entertainment, minstrel shows originated in the 1830s as a combination of blackface, a form of theatrical makeup employed by primarily White people, and theatrical productions depicting derogatory appearances and personas of African Americans. Yet, in the 1890s, African American artists "blackened up," sang, danced, and discussed provocative issues like sex in the "colored minstrel shows" while feeling the added responsibility to counter the stereotypes of black identity as laughable, primitive and overly sensual, leading them to develop a self-presentation on stage that balanced racist stereotypes and political commentary.

² In the 17th century, the role of the geisha emerged in Japan as an "artist" who entertained with dance, music, conversation, and other acts in various tea ceremonies.

³ After the 1876 Battle of Little Bighorn, Buffalo Bill Cody founded the Wild West Show, a touring pageant of all things western including a recreation of General Custard's Last Stand. The biggest draw was the real life Native Americans who appeared domesticated instead of savage, participating in the shows while the American government was still engaging in battle in Indian territory.

Thanks to the ecumenical movement, Christians today share hymns, prayers, reflections and insights across traditions. We receive them from one another as gifts borne of the faith and loving discipleship, often enduring struggles, of Christians from different communities than our own. These shared gifts are riches to be treasured and give witness to the Christian faith we share.

Challenge

How do we raise up the stories of ancestors and saints who lived among us and have sung songs of faith, hope, and liberation from captivity?

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

The whole story needs to be told. The song the psalmist sings is against their oppressors and in the TRC experience many of the songs and stories that are told are filled with anguish and anger against their oppressors and need to be heard. The TRC stories remind us of those who weep for the lost children of the Residential Schools.

- Encourage the group to talk about the place of stories in the healing and reconciliation process as such stories were told as part of the TRC process.
- For further consideration, invite participants to look up the story of the *Remember the Children* initiative of Indigenous and Church leaders.
- Show this video on the life of Chanie Wenjack: https://youtu.be/v_tcCpKtoU0

Prayer

God of the oppressed,
Open our eyes to the harm that continues to be inflicted
On our sisters and brothers in Christ.
May your Spirit give us the courage to sing in unison,
And raise our voices with those whose suffering is unheard.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY 6

Just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.

Readings

Ezekiel 34:15-20 I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.
Matthew 25:31-40 I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

Reflection

In the Gospel of Matthew, we are reminded that we cannot separate our love for God from our love for others. We love God when we feed the hungry, give the thirsty something to drink, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoner. When we care for and serve “one of the least of these,” we are caring for and serving Christ himself.

The years 2020 and 2021 made visible the immense suffering among God’s family members. The world-wide COVID-19 pandemic, along with economic, educational and environmental disparities, impacted us in ways that will take decades to repair. It exposed individual and collective suffering throughout the world and brought Christians together in love, empathy and solidarity. Meanwhile, in Minnesota, the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin exposed continued racial injustice. Floyd’s cry of “I can’t breathe” was also the cry of many suffering under the weight of both the pandemic and oppression.

God calls us to honour the sacredness and dignity of each member of God’s family. Caring for, serving and loving others reveals not who they are, but who we are. As Christians, we must be unified in our responsibility to love and care for others, as we are cared for and loved by God. In so doing, we live out our shared faith through our actions in service to the world.

Christian Unity

The prophet Ezekiel describes the Lord God as a shepherd who makes the flock whole by gathering in those who have strayed and binding up those who are injured. Unity is the Father’s desire for his people and he continues to bring about this unity, to make the flock whole, through the action of his Holy Spirit. Through prayer we open ourselves to receive the Spirit which restores the unity of all the baptised.

Challenge

How are the “least of these” invisible to you or your church? How can our churches work together to care for and serve “the least of these?”

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

- The COVID-19 pandemic had many people considering a move toward GLI (guaranteed living income). There is need for societal change at the ground level. We have the potential to live in a changed world/society after the pandemic ... will we embrace this opportunity and in what ways?
- Look up the Council of Canadians' materials on 'Just Recovery':
<https://canadians.org/tag/just-recovery/>

Prayer

God of Love,
We thank you for your unending care and love for us.
Help us to sing redemption songs.
Open wide our hearts to receive your love
and to extend your compassion
to the whole of the human family.
We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

DAY 7

What is now does not have to be'

Readings

Job 5:11-16 So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth.
Luke 1:46-55 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

Reflection

Job was living the good life and unexpectedly suffered the loss of his livestock and servants, and endured the devastation of the death of his children. He was suffering in his mind, body, and spirit. We all have suffering that is manifested in our minds, bodies, and spirits. We may pull away from God and others. We may lose hope. Yet, as Christians, we are unified in our belief that God is with us in the midst of our suffering.

On April 11, 2021 in Minnesota, Daunte Wright, a twenty-year old, unarmed African American man, was fatally shot by a White police officer during a routine traffic stop. This incident occurred during the Derek Chauvin trial for the killing of George Floyd.

It is easy to feel hopeless when we are once again reminded that we live in a fractured society that does not fully recognize, honour, and protect the human dignity and freedom of all human beings. According to Fr. Bryan Massingale, a leading Catholic social ethicist and scholar in racial justice, "Social life is made by human beings. The society we live in is the result of human choices and decisions. This means that human beings can change things. What human beings break, divide and separate, we can, with God's help, also heal, unite and restore. What is now does not have to be, therein lies the hope and the challenge."

In prayer, Christians align their hearts to the heart of God, to love what he loves and to love as he loves. Prayer with integrity therefore aligns the hearts of all Christians beyond their divisions, to love what, whom and how God loves, and to express this love in our actions.

Christian Unity

The Magnificat is Mary's song of joy for all that she sees God is doing: restoring balance by raising up the lowly; righting injustice by feeding the hungry; and remembering Israel, his servant. The Lord never forgets his promises or abandons his people. It is easy to overlook or undervalue the faith of those who belong to other Christian communities, particularly if those communities are small. But the Lord makes his people whole by raising up the lowly so that the value of each is recognised. We are called to see as He sees and to value each of our Christian brothers and sisters as He values them.

Challenge

How can we come together in Christ with hope and faith that God will "shut injustice's mouth?"

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

The Ecumenical Justice Initiative – KAIROS – took as its theme for its tenth anniversary “It’s the end of the world as we know it... thank God!” (<https://www.kairoscanada.org/kairos-calls-for-apocalyptic-living>)

- What do you think of this theme of “apocalyptic living”? What is your reaction and response?
- What are some of the changes in the world we would wish to embrace “So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth”?

Prayer

God of Hope,

Help us to remember that you are with us in our suffering.

Help us to embody hope for one another when hopelessness is a frequent unwelcomed guest in our hearts.

Grant us the gift of being grounded in your loving Spirit as we work together to eradicate all forms of oppression and injustice.

Give us the courage to love what, whom and how you love, and to express this love in our actions.

Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

DAY 8

The justice that restores communion

Readings

- Psalm 82:1-4 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
- Luke 18:1-8 Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

Reflection

The Book of Psalms is a compilation of prayer, praise, lamentation, and instruction from God to us. In Psalm 82, God calls for a justice that upholds the basic human rights to which all people are entitled: freedom, safety, dignity, health, equality and love. The Psalm also calls for the overturning of systems of disparity and oppression, and fixing anything that is unfair, corrupt, or exploitative. This is the justice that we, as Christians, are called to promote. In Christian community we join our wills and actions to God's, as he works his salvation for creation. Division, including that between Christians, always has sin at its root, and redemption always restores communion.

God calls us to embody our Christian faith to act out of the truth that every person is precious, that people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institutional structure in society is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of each person. Every person has a right and responsibility to participate in society, seeking together the common good and wellbeing of all, especially the lowly and the destitute.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the Revd Dr Howard Thurman, who was spiritual adviser to the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr., states that: "We must proclaim the truth that all life is one and that we are all of us tied together. Therefore, it is mandatory that we work for a society in which the least person can find refuge and refreshment. You must lay your lives on the altar of social change so that wherever you are, there the Kingdom of God is at hand."

Christian Unity

Jesus tells the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in order to teach the people "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (Lk 18:1). Jesus has won a decisive victory over injustice, sin and division, and as Christians our task is to receive this victory firstly in our own hearts through prayer and secondly in our lives through action. May we never lose heart, but rather continue to ask in prayer for God's gift of unity and may we manifest this unity in our lives.

Challenge

As the people of God, how are our churches called to engage in justice that unites us in our actions to love and serve all of God's family?

Further Discussion – Canadian Context

- Invite people to watch the movie *Just Mercy* (2019 Netflix). How does the justice system in Canada work differently for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) individuals and communities? [*Note to local organizers: If you are watching this movie as a group, we recommend that you look into how to show a movie with appropriate copyright permissions in group settings (for non-profit organizations). We also recommend testing your bandwidth in advance of the screening; if there are any issues, ensure that you download the movie in advance.*]
- Indigenous communities have embraced Sentencing Circles as an alternative approach to the criminal system. How might such a process strengthen the justice system for people who are marginalized, so they take part in “the justice that restores communion”? [Sentencing Circles typically involve a multi-step procedure that includes: (1) application by the offender to participate in the circle process; (2) a healing circle for the victim; (3) a healing circle for the offender; (4) a sentencing circle to develop consensus on the elements of a sentencing plan; and (5) follow-up circles to monitor the progress of the offender.]

Prayer

God, Creator and Redeemer of all things,
teach us to look inward to be grounded in your loving Spirit,
so that we may go outward in wisdom and courage
to always choose the path of love and justice.
This we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.