

Responding Faithfully to God's Call

Love Mercy, Do Justice: Responding Faithfully to God's Call (a video-based curriculum)

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The following ministries of the Evangelical Covenant Church partnered in the development of this resource.

Christian Formation

Website: CovChurch.org/who-we-are/departments/christian-formation/

Compassion, Mercy, and Justice

Website: CovChurch.org/who-we-are/departments/compassion-mercy-justice/

Covenant Communications

Website: CovChurch.org/who-we-are/departments/communication/

North Park University

Website: northpark.edu

To download more copies: CovChurch.org/resources/respondingfaithfully/



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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Love Mercy, Do Justice: Responding Faithfully to God's Call*. This video-based curriculum will assist small groups and individuals to explore the Resource Paper, “The Evangelical Covenant Church and The Ministry of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice.” This Resource Paper was adopted at the 2011 Covenant Annual Meeting and is available online at CovChurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/resource-papers/cmj-ministry/.

Curriculum Design

The readings, discussion guides, and video resources will help small groups, ministry teams, and individuals dig deeper into their understanding of God's call to love mercy, do justice.

This resource is divided into four sessions with two parts in each session.

Part One: Resource Paper

Part One includes a selection from the Resource Paper and several questions for personal reflection and journaling. Although it is recommended that the reading and reflection questions be completed in preparation for your discussion, Part One can be incorporated within the small group experience. It will be helpful for all participants to have a copy of Part One or a copy of the original Resource Paper to use in preparing for, or to use during, each session.

Part Two: Discussion Guide

Part Two is designed as a worksheet with

quotations and questions for groups to use as they dig deeper into God's call to love mercy, do justice. This guide can also be helpful for individuals to use for personal formational work.

The Discussion Guide is designed to be used in a 60 to 90 minute timeframe. It intentionally includes more questions than can be discussed in this amount of time so that the leader can select the questions and activities that will be most helpful for the group. Make copies of the Discussion Guide and distribute them to participants at the beginning of each session as a blueprint for the discussion.

Each session is divided into five sections:

- *Connecting*—introduces the session topic and includes sharing stories and prayer.
- *Digging Deeper: God's Word, Resource Paper and Video*—provides scripture references, quotations and questions to help participants better understand loving mercy and doing justice, and God's call to respond. Before the group gathering, the leader should select the scripture references, quotations, and questions that will be most profitable for the group to discuss.
- *Personal Response*—invites individuals to review the discussion using questions that will apply to the individual and the church. Following a time for personal reflection, the participants will join to share their insights.
- *Closing Prayer*—encourages the group to join together in one voice as a response to God.
- *Moving Forward*—provides an assignment for participants to consider between sessions.

Options for Using this Resource

Each session includes two parts: the Resource Paper and the Discussion Guide. This allows a leader to design the discussion that will be most helpful for the participants. Options include the following:

1. Groups read the Resource Paper prior to gathering and it becomes a foundation for their discussion using the Discussion Guide. (four sessions)
2. Groups gather and follow the directions in the Discussion Guide. The Resource Paper is used as a reference during the discussion. The discussion leader may select questions from either The Resource Paper or the Discussion Guide for discussion. (four sessions)
3. Groups choose to discuss the Resource Paper in one session and the Discussion Guide in the following session for a total of eight sessions. In this case, introduce the topic by using the Connecting activity from the Discussion Guide followed by discussing the reading and questions in the Resource Paper for the first session. In the following session the group focuses on the Discussion Guide using Digging Deeper Bible and Video, Personal Reflection, and Closing Prayer.

Conclusion

Klyne Snodgrass concludes his presentation in session three with this thought. “If we do not reflect the character of God with these issues, can we talk about being the people of God? I think not.” It is our prayer that this resource will help Covenanters explore this thought and commit to being the people of God as they love mercy and do justice.

Acknowledgements

This resource was developed for the Evangelical Covenant Church through its ministries of Christian Formation; Compassion, Mercy, and Justice; Communications; and North Park University. We are especially grateful to our presenters:

Session One: Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, associate professor of theology and ethics from North Park Theological Seminary, and Harold Spooner, president of Covenant Initiatives for Care.

Session Two: Bob Hubbard, professor emeritus of Old Testament, North Park Theological Seminary, and Rajkumar Boaz Johnson, professor of biblical and theological studies, North Park University.

Session Three: Soong-Chan Rah, associate professor of church growth and evangelism, North Park Theological Seminary, and Klyne Snodgrass, professor of biblical literature, North Park Theological Seminary.

Session Four: Pastor Alex Gee and Jerome Dillard, Fountain of Life Ministries in Madison, WI, and Pastor Allan Serrano, Iglesia Evangelica Misionera in LaVilla, TX.

Series Host: Armida Belmonte Stephens, a member of Libertyville Covenant Church, Libertyville, IL.

In addition several churches shared their Love Mercy, Do Justice stories and these are listed online in the video index.



Foundation: A Covenant Perspective

And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.—Micah 6:8

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”—Matthew 25:40

Introduction

In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus boldly announced his mission: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus announced good news for the whole world, with particular attention to the poor, the captive, the incapacitated, and the oppressed. Jesus persistently allied himself with untouchables as well as the voiceless. In both word and deed, he attacked discrimination against lepers, Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, shepherds, women, and children. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus condemned those who showed the poor neither compassion nor mercy (Luke 16:19-31). When the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the expected Messiah, he replied, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Luke 7:22). Compassion, mercy, and justice are at the heart of the mission of God the Father, empowered by the

Holy Spirit, and incarnated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

PONDER THIS...

How do I understand the following phrases as they relate to compassion, mercy, and justice?

“The heart of the mission of God”

“Empowered by the Holy Spirit”

“Incarnated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus”

As a community of faith centered on and actively engaged with the Bible, the Evangelical Covenant Church has a long and significant history of ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. In recent years our engagement in these ministries has increased, deepened, and

broadened. This focus reflects our deepening conviction that to be faithful to the Bible, the Covenant Church must work to live out the great commandment in all its ramifications. When asked by a teacher of the law, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” Jesus answered, “The most important one...is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31). Along with Luke 4:18-19, this text provides clarity about the foundation for ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice and intimately links love for God with love for neighbor. This perspective, reflecting the historic foundations and character of the Covenant, is inscribed succinctly in stone at the base of the first building erected at North Park University: “For God and Humanity.”

I WONDER...

“There is no commandment greater than these.” Why would Jesus see these as the ultimate commandments?

Linking love for God with love for neighbor, Henry Palmblad, known to his peers as the city missionary, proposed to the second Covenant Annual Meeting in 1886 the establishment of a home of mercy on the North Side of Chicago. An approving vote led to the purchase of a three-story building on Foster Avenue that served the sick on one floor, orphaned children on another, and the elderly on yet another. Through ministries of

compassion, mercy, and justice, generation upon generation of Covenant men and women have followed the example of Jesus in announcing the good news of the kingdom of God in word and deed. This is how the church participates in the ongoing work and mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

This participation in the mission of Jesus Christ is meaningful, however, only to the extent to which we understand the reality of sin. Human sin is at the root of the brokenness in the world. By their very nature, ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice seek to address sin in the world. The effects of sin are complex and pervasive and culminate in the suffering of Jesus on the cross as he took upon himself the sins of the world. In addressing God’s call to compassion, mercy, and justice we recognize our own sinfulness and the sin of the world with deep grief and humility. Our work, flawed as it is, is founded on God’s work, the redemption, reconciliation, and restoration of God in Christ. The Christ event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—is the decisive act of compassion, mercy, and justice in our world.

PONDER THIS...

Where have I seen the brokenness in the world as a result of sin?

The purpose of this paper is to articulate our understanding of the biblical call to ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. As a Covenant Resource Paper this document is the result of a process of communal discernment of the whole of the Covenant Church.

Toward Understanding Compassion, Mercy, and Justice

Compassion, mercy, and justice—all three express essential characteristics of God’s nature and God’s call to us. God’s heart is clearly revealed in the words of Jesus: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me” (Matthew 25:35-36). This passage gives expression to our call to be engaged in ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice. Likewise, Micah 6:8 succinctly states what God requires of us: “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” And a prayer in the following chapter speaks directly of the compassion of God, linking it to God’s forgiveness: “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea” (7:19).

As we explore the Bible, we find that compassion, mercy, and justice are inseparable. Their meanings are woven together, belong together, and illuminate each other. One without the others truncates and limits the work of God in our world. They should be viewed as a unified whole.

With these texts and this perspective in mind, we believe:

Compassion is identifying with and joining in the suffering of others.

When we are compassionate we incarnate the heart of God, carrying God’s love into action for all people, especially for those who are poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Compassion is a call to sacrificial love for others in the name of Jesus. In compassion we ask, “Where is the brokenness in our world? What is our obedient response to that brokenness?”

Mercy is extending God’s unconditional love.

Mercy is our recognition of God’s grace given to us while we were yet sinners. Mercy is expressed as we extend compassion, forgiveness, and care to others as God extends mercy to us, undeserved and without limits. Mercy is seeing ourselves in the brokenness of others, and leads us to a compassionate and just response. In mercy we ask, “Who is broken? Who is in need? Who is my neighbor?”

Justice is joining God in making things right.

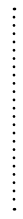
Justice is the work of God confronting and overcoming evil and sin, both individually and systemically in our world. The people of God are commanded to join God in this work, restoring God’s righteous purpose and shalom for creation and the human family. For the follower of Christ, injustice is not an abstraction but a reality that we must identify, name, and intentionally address. In justice we ask, “Why does this brokenness exist? How do we address the causes?”

PONDER THIS...

After reading these three definitions describe how each is critical and all three are inseparable?

Our understandings of compassion, mercy, and justice are rooted in Scripture rather than in secular debate in which complex issues often become mired in toxic and self-serving polarizations. Scripture calls us to seek constructive solutions. Compassion, mercy, and justice ministry is not a matter of retribution; nor

does it mean that those who run afoul of the laws of humanity or of God should escape judgment. It is not equivalent with judicial justice in society of God as revealed in the Scriptures. Our desire is to keep alive, strong, and always growing the



flame that first burned in our forbearers for the authority and power of God's word. For these reasons, developing a shared understanding of how we read Scripture is critical for our life together.



Foundation: A Covenant Perspective

Key Idea

Compassion, mercy, and justice are at the heart of the mission of God the Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and incarnated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 1)

Objectives

The participants will:

- Discuss Matthew 25:40 and Micah 6:8 and identify the connection between these two verses of scripture.
- Review the definitions of compassion, mercy, and justice and list the challenges these definitions create for the church today.
- Answer, personally and corporately, the questions asked in the definitions for compassion, mercy, and justice.

Connecting

The following questions will help us gain a better understanding of each other and our experiences with loving mercy, doing justice.

- Where did you go to elementary school and what was your life like as a child?
- When did you discover injustice in your world?
- What do you want to gain from this discussion on loving mercy, and doing justice?

Before proceeding, pray for the awareness of God's presence and direction in the following discussion.

Digging Deeper: God's Word

The Matthew-Micah Connection

Use the following questions to create a biblical foundation as we begin our discussion of compassion, mercy, and justice.

- 1) When considering compassion, mercy, and justice, what scripture passages come to mind? Why?
- 2) Read Matthew 25:40: *Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*

Think about the world in which Jesus lived, and list several "brothers and sisters of mine" that he referenced by this statement.

Who are the "brothers and sisters of mine" that you regularly encounter?

- 3) Micah 6:8: *And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

What does it mean to act justly? What examples from your world illustrate acting justly?

What does it mean to love mercy?

- 4) How does Matthew 25:40 help us understand Micah 6:8 and vice versa?

Digging Deeper: Resource Paper

The following quotations provide definitions and insights for a Covenant Resource Paper as well as compassion, mercy, and justice. Review each statement and respond to the questions that follow. Allow time for individual reflection on each definition before discussing it in the group.

Resource Paper

The Covenant website defines them as follows: *A Covenant Resource Paper is a teaching document approved by the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church to provide context and clarity for Covenant churches on critical issues of concern in matters of faith, doctrine, and conduct... A Covenant Resource Paper exists to educate and inform and call Covenant people to the full nature of the biblical message and life in Christ.* (<http://www.covchurch.org/who-we-are/beliefs/resource-papers/>)

- Why might a resource paper like this be helpful to us?

Compassion

Compassion is identifying with and joining in the suffering of others. When we are compassionate we incarnate the heart of God, carrying God's love into action for all people, especially for those who are poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Compassion is a call to sacrificial love for others in the name of Jesus. In compassion we ask, "Where is the brokenness in our world? What is our obedient response to that brokenness?" (CMJ Resource Paper, p 2)

- What do you like about this definition?
- Where does the definition challenge you?
- What key ideas from this definition are critical for the church today?

Mercy

Mercy is extending God's unconditional love. Mercy is our recognition of God's grace given to us while we were yet sinners. Mercy is expressed as we extend compassion, forgiveness, and care to others as God extends mercy

to us, undeserved and without limits. Mercy is seeing ourselves in the brokenness of others, and leads us to a compassionate and just response. In mercy we ask, "Who is broken? Who is in need? Who is my neighbor?" (CMJ Resource Paper, p 2)

- What do you like about this definition?
- Where does the definition challenge you?
- What key ideas from this definition are critical for the church today?

Justice

Justice is joining God in making things right. Justice is the work of God confronting and overcoming evil and sin, both individually and systemically in our world. The people of God are commanded to join God in this work, restoring God's righteous purpose and shalom for creation and the human family. For the follower of Christ, injustice is not an abstraction but a reality that we must identify, name, and intentionally address. In justice we ask, "Why does this brokenness exist? How do we address the causes?" (CMJ Resource Paper, p 3)

- What do you like about this definition?
- Where does the definition challenge you?
- What key ideas from this definition are critical for the church today?

A Unified Whole

As we explore the Bible, we find that compassion, mercy, and justice are inseparable. Their meanings are woven together, belong together, and illuminate each other. One without the others truncates and limits the work of God in our world. They should be viewed as a unified whole. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 2)

- In your own words explain how compassion, mercy, and justice belong together.

Digging Deeper: Video

Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, associate professor of theology and ethics from North Park Theological Seminary, and Harold Spooner, president of Covenant Initiatives for Care, expand our understanding of compassion, mercy, and justice with poignant illustrations and insights.

View the video and record your insights and questions in the space provided. After the presentation, discuss your insights and questions. You may choose to expand your discussion by using some of the quotations and questions that follow.

Questions & Insights

Inclusion

The Pietists were a religious movement that significantly influenced the Covenant Church's formation. In the following quotation, Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom describes their conventicles as places where they read God's word and practiced it in their life together.

Clifton-Soderstrom: Conventicles were small groups of people who gathered to read God's word, but they did more than read, they let the word go to work. These groups were made up of people from different socio-economic groups. They transcended gender roles, and they even allowed children access to scriptures. This was not normal in their context. The way I read it is that compassion, or the desire to be an inclusive community, led to justice and the transcending of class boundaries and gender boundaries and age boundaries.

- How is this inclusive spirit evident in our church?

Examples

Harold Spooner introduced us to Henry

Palmblad, an instrumental voice in helping the Covenant church establish the Home of Mercy.

- Who are the Henry Palmblads in our world today? In our church?

Justice

To help us understand justice, Spooner shared John Perkin's story about a person who falls into the river.

- Retell that story and illustrate it with examples from our community or church.

Compassion

Clifton-Soderstrom: Compassion is being with. If we think of the word of God as something that we read and ... actually transforms us, we become the word of God. We become Christ to one another, and that seems to sum up what compassion is.

- How do you understand the statement, "we become the word of God?"
- How does this image help us understand compassion?

Mercy

Spooner: Mercy is one of God's characteristics. We are called to love God. So we love God, and we love our neighbor.

- What does "love mercy" look like in your own context?

Truth-Telling

The presenters mention Sankofa, Journey to Mosaic, and Invitation to Racial Righteousness as opportunities to explore racial justice and the need for truth-telling.

- What is "truth-telling" and why is it necessary?
- How might experiencing cross cultural events like these be helpful to our church community?

If someone in your group or church has participated in one of these or similar events,

invite them to tell about it. To learn more about these opportunities in the Covenant church go to the Racial Righteousness webpage. <http://www.covchurch.org/justice/racial-righteousness/>

Our Role

- How does the cross, as represented in Clifton-Soderstrom's description, help us understand who we are as God's people?
- How does it help us see our role in relation to loving mercy and doing justice?

Personal Response

Reflect on the group's discussion by answering the questions that the Resource Paper uses to help define compassion, mercy, and justice. Take 5 minutes to silently respond to the questions individually and then join to share insights for individuals and for the church.

- Compassion: "Where is the brokenness in our world? What is our obedient response to that brokenness?"
- Mercy: "Who is broken? Who is in need? Who is my neighbor?"
- Justice: "Why does this brokenness exist? How do we address the causes?"

Closing Prayer

Spend time sharing prayer requests and praying for each other. Conclude by reading the following prayer together.

God of unending mercy, we pray with those who are crying.

For women and men who are battered in body or spirit, for children who sleep the fitful sleep of hunger, for all who are imprisoned by walls or worries, for all who are despondent because they feel unloved.

Christ, have mercy upon those who cry;

Christ, have mercy on us

when we turn away from the cries of others.

Give us the strength of compassion,

that we may not shield our eyes and hearts

from the pain of our sisters and brothers,

but seek to understand and to hear.

Bless us with courage and arm us with hope, that we may help lessen the suffering of our world.

Hear this our common prayer

and those of our hearts which we offer now.

Amen.

(The Covenant Hymnal, A Worshipbook, 922)

Moving Forward

Between now and the next session, research one or two of the compassion, mercy, and justice needs identified in the Personal Response time. How do others view these needs? What do statistics say about them? What potential solutions are identified?



Framework: An Old Testament Perspective

The Image of God

The Bible states in Genesis 1:31 that God is pleased with creation, declaring it to be good. This means that all people bear the full image of God in their very being—people from every race, tribe, language, and nation; people from every religion and ideology; people who are rich and people who are poor; people who are selflessly good and people who traffic in cruelty. Every woman, man, and child carries the indelible image of God. This idea from the first verses of the Bible establishes personal human identity and dignity for every person.

PONDER THIS...

Is there a time or situation when I may not have seen someone in this light (as made in the image of God)? What contributed to that response?

Yet, the goodness of the created world and of the fabric of human society is fractured by sin—disobedience to God’s will. The murder of Abel (Genesis 4) by his brother Cain is a terrible affront

to God’s intention. The remainder of Genesis chronicles the pervasiveness and destructiveness of sin and evil. Murder, rape, betrayal, revenge, and retribution all reveal the deep and pervasive damage caused by human sin. God’s creatures—human beings—have diverged so far from God’s good purpose and intent that in Genesis 6:7, God declares: “I regret that I have made them.”

I WONDER...

Why was it so difficult for the people in Genesis to live according to “God’s good purpose and intent?”

God does not, however, abandon a corrupted creation to its own ways. God reaches out to save and restore, first through Noah and his wife (Genesis 6:9–10:32), then through the calling of Abram and the formation of a covenant community (Genesis 12). Yet even this community is beset by violence, infidelity, and jealousy. Remarkably, as chronicled in Genesis, God persists in reaching out, saving and restoring, even while judging and declaring displeasure with the actions and deeds of God’s people. These

repeated saving acts show God's nature and character more richly and fully, even while society sinks deeper into chaos at every level.

God Sees and God Acts

God's response to this chaos is found in the Exodus story. In the burning bush God says to Moses, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7). God does not turn from the anguished cries of people. God sees and hears oppression, suffering, and misery. God sees all injustice and all of its consequences, all that fails to measure up to the goodness that God intended in creation.

PONDER THIS...

How does this statement of concern for God's enslaved people relate to our situation today?

God then acts to deliver, save, and rescue, and ultimately to establish a new reality, evidenced by the plan for a new place, a new land, flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8). But God does not act alone. God invites Moses into the work of compassion, mercy, and justice. Moses recognizes it will be hard, painful, demanding, disruptive, and full of risk to join God in bringing justice to his people. He would rather avoid the task, preferring to look away and defer to someone else. But Moses accepts God's call, and in so doing he becomes a participant in God's work to address human suffering and human injustice.

God despises injustice created and perpetuated by systems and actions that oppress and result in all manner of human suffering. Let this be said clearly and forthrightly: God has compassion for suffering humanity. God extends mercy to suffering people. God addresses injustice in our world. God enlists people through the Holy Spirit, as he enlisted Moses, to work with God to bring about change in the structures that create suffering and oppression, along with change in people's lives.

The Message of the Prophets

As God's people are to enter into the new land, they are warned not to forget God's call to be faithful and to remember God: "When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Deuteronomy 6:10-12). And as God provides for them with compassion and mercy, God charges them to provide that same care for others: "When foreigners reside among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigners residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34).

But God's people do forget the Lord, again and again and again. As God's people are established in the land, they begin to forget who they are and who they are called to be. They worship other gods. They do not maintain God's call for care either for the poor or the marginalized or the foreigner. Instead of the beauty of a nation that will bless all the nations of the earth, the people of Israel re-establish the human chaos described in the first chapters of Genesis. Yet, God does not abandon his unfaithful

people. God sends prophets to express God's mercy, and to call out injustice caused by human sin, and to call God's people to respond. God thunders in the opening chapter of Isaiah, "Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (1:16-17).

I WONDER...

Who are today's prophets, the people who call out injustice and call others to respond?

Who do I know personally that fits this definition of a prophet?

What are the messages that these prophets bring to the church?

Time and again the people of God, while called by God to ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice, contribute to injustice, benefit from oppression, and turn a cold shoulder to the plight of the outcast. Amos 6:4-7 addresses behaviors rooted in self-indulgence: "You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches...but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph." Similarly, Isaiah 58:3 points out self-interest: "Yet on the day

of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers." Such self-centeredness does not like to be confronted: "There are those who hate the one who reproves in court and detest the one who tells the truth" (Amos 5:10).

PONDER THIS...

In what ways do I "contribute to injustice, benefit from oppression, and turn a cold shoulder to the plight of the outcast?"

These words can pierce our hearts if we contemplate our own lives and the sometimes unseen links between our comfort and the plight of others. The fear of God's judgment is not paralyzing, but brings us to repentance, conversion, and a righteous response.

Ultimately, to know God is to do justice, and in doing justice we deepen our knowledge of God. "Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? Did not your father have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 22:15-16).



Framework: An Old Testament Perspective

Key Idea

God enlists people through the Holy Spirit, as he enlisted Moses, to work with God to bring about change in the structures that create suffering and oppression, along with change in people's lives. (CMJ Resource Paper, p.4)

Objectives

The participants will:

- Share personal experiences related to the definitions for compassion, mercy, and justice.
- Identify the compassion, mercy, and justice concerns addressed in the Old Testament.
- List and consider the potential compassion, mercy, and justice concerns to which God is calling our church.

Connecting

The Covenant Resource paper defines compassion, mercy, and justice as follows:

Compassion is identifying with and joining in the suffering of others.

Mercy is extending God's unconditional love.

Justice is joining God in making things right.

- 1) Begin this session by sharing a time when you experienced one of these definitions.
- 2) Take time to share information and insights gained from your research related to the compassion, mercy, and justice issues identified at the last session.

Prayer

Use the following to guide you in a group prayer.

- 1) Adore God with words that reflect God's qualities of compassion, mercy, and justice. (Pause for individual spoken prayers)
- 2) Confess our sins (in unison): *Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your name. Amen.* (Covenant Hymnal, a Worshipbook, 906)
- 3) Thank God for signs of compassion, mercy, and justice in our world, community, and church. (Pause for individual spoken prayers.)
- 4) Seek God's guidance and intervention as you journey together toward compassion, mercy, and justice. (Pause for individual spoken prayers.)

Digging Deeper: God's Word

The Old Testament writings include the law, history, wisdom, and the prophets. Each section includes strong words and direction related to compassion, mercy, and justice. Take turns reading some or all of the scripture passages listed below as a sample of the expectations of God's people. After each reading, identify how it supports the definitions.

- *The Law*—Exodus 23:1-9; Deuteronomy 24:17-22
- *History*—2 Samuel 12:1-7a; 1 Kings 3:10-12
- *Wisdom* —Psalm 15:1-5; Psalm 82:1-4; a sample from Proverbs: 14:21; 18:5; 19:17; 20:23; 21:3, 13, 15, 21; 31: 8, 9
- *The Prophets*—Isaiah 58:6-9; Zechariah 7:8-14

Digging Deeper: Resource Paper

The following quotations from the Covenant Resource Paper summarize the Old Testament’s emphasis on compassion, mercy, and justice. Read and discuss the quotations that will deepen your understanding.

Image of God

The Bible states in Genesis 1:31 that God is pleased with creation, declaring it to be good. This means that all people bear the full image of God in their very being—people from every race, tribe, language, and nation; people from every religion and ideology; people who are rich and people who are poor; people who are selflessly good and people who traffic in cruelty. Every woman, man, and child carries the indelible image of God. This idea from the first verses of the Bible establishes personal human identity and dignity for every person. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 3)

- In what ways have you failed to see others as made in the image of God?
- Conversely, if we saw each person in the image of God, what would be the results?

Disobedience

Yet, the goodness of the created world and of the fabric of human society is fractured by sin— disobedience to God’s will. The murder of Abel (Genesis 4) by his brother Cain is a terrible affront to God’s intention. The remainder of Genesis chronicles the pervasiveness and destructiveness of sin and evil. Murder, rape, betrayal, revenge, and retribution all reveal the deep and pervasive damage caused by human sin. God’s creatures—human beings—have diverged so far from God’s good purpose and intent that in Genesis 6:7, God declares: “I regret

that I have made them.” (CMJ Resource Paper, p 3)

- These words from Genesis are powerful. How can it be that a loving God can express this kind of regret?
- What sins are evident when compassion, mercy, and justice are lacking today? Give specific examples.

God’s Invitation

But God does not act alone. God invites Moses into the work of compassion, mercy, and justice. Moses recognizes it will be hard, painful, demanding, disruptive, and full of risk to join God in bringing justice to his people. He would rather avoid the task, preferring to look away and defer to someone else. But Moses accepts God’s call, and in so doing he becomes a participant in God’s work to address human suffering and human injustice. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 4)

- How does God’s call to us compare with God’s call to Moses?

Change

The paper answers the above question as follows: God enlists people through the Holy Spirit, as he enlisted Moses, to work with God to bring about change in the structures that create suffering and oppression, along with change in people’s lives. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 4)

- What examples today illustrate the truth of this statement?

Knowing God

Ultimately, to know God is to do justice, and in doing justice, we deepen our knowledge of God. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 5)

- How has your knowledge of God been deepened lately?
- How does that deepening relate to justice?

Digging Deeper: Video

Bob Hubbard, professor emeritus of Old Testament, North Park Theological Seminary, and Rajkumar Boaz Johnson, professor of biblical and theological studies, North Park University, provide additional insights regarding the importance of compassion, mercy, and justice in the Old Testament.

As you view the video, record your insights and questions in the space provided. After the presentation discuss your insights and questions. Additional quotations and questions follow to expand your discussion.

Questions & Insights

Translation

Rajkumar Boaz Johnson shares the following translation of Micah 6:8 and suggests that this text is crucial or central to the Hebrew Bible: *He has narrated to you. He has shown you, oh human being, what is good. And what does the Lord require, desire, exegete of you? He requires you to do justice. He requires you to love with your heart, love, covenant love, which is also translated as mercy. And to walk humbly with your God.*

- How does this enhanced translation of Micah 6:8 expand your understanding of the verse?

Action Expected

Bob Hubbard continues: *The thing that I find interesting about that is that justice comes first in the list. It is the first thing, though all are important, it is the first thing that is spoken of. The other thing that strikes me about that is that we are to do it or to make it. The Hebrew word is to do or to make. It is something that we don't just think about or ponder or discuss, but it is something that we do. There is action that is expected.*

- How do Christians “do justice?”
- In what ways has our church moved from discussion about justice to “doing” justice? List some successes and failures.

Differences

The presenters discussed the difference between the Old Testament and other ancient Middle Eastern writings.

- What are the primary differences? Why are they significant?

Because You Were Slaves

Hubbard identifies the significance of the Exodus and the escape from slavery to the Hebrew people: *Here you have slaves who were liberated from slavery to Pharaoh, and later on in the Torah the Israelites are to do or not to do this because you were slaves. Having been slaves, that leads God to say, “and you are not to enslave each other.”*

- Why was this idea so central?
- How do people today enslave others?

Mistreatments

- What kind of Old Testament mistreatments or abuses were identified by the presenters?
- If the prophets were writing to us today, what mistreatments or abuses would they include?

Power

Toward the end of the presentation Johnson asks: *Why do you think the kings and the people of the Old Testament did injustices?*

Hubbard responds: *They're selfish. That's part of being fallen human beings. They have the additional advantage or disadvantage of having power... It's easy for them to think themselves more important than they should. Certainly more important than God sees them.*

- What is the problem with power? How is this problem evident in our world today?
- How have you experienced misuse of power?

Remember

Johnson concludes: *In the church we have to be mindful of the prophetic word. You've got to remember that you are a human being created in God's image and when you do that you will treat people with justice and mercy and with compassion. And when you do that you will walk humbly with your God.*

When we apply this statement to our own life and our life together, what might we enhance, add, or eliminate?

Personal Response

Reflect on the group's discussion by answering the following questions. Take 5 minutes to silently respond to the questions and then join to share insights for individuals and for the church.

Fractured by Sin

The Resource Paper connects sin with compassion, mercy, and justice in the following quotation: *Yet, the goodness of the created world and of the fabric of human society is fractured by sin—disobedience to God's will.*

Review the list of compassion, mercy, and justice needs identified in the last session and identify the sin that must be confessed and removed.

Legacy

Boaz Johnson: *And wouldn't it be great if we as Covenanters were known for that, showing God's compassion, mercy, and justice.*

Select one need from your list and write a description of a world where that need is eliminated.

My description:

Closing Prayer

Spend time sharing prayer requests and praying for each other. Conclude by reading the following prayer responsively.

O God, Sovereign of the universe, without you nothing is true, nothing is just.

In your Word you reveal the way of love.

By your Spirit you make it possible.

From greed and selfishness, from a society in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer,

compassionate God, deliver us.

From racial prejudice and religious intolerance, from a society which makes its weakest and most recent members into scapegoats,

compassionate God, deliver us.

From indifference to the needs of other countries, from the delusion that you love any other nation less than you love us,

compassionate God, deliver us.

From self-indulgence and indifference, from a society in which fidelity and responsibility have little place,

compassionate God, deliver us.

Author of life,

give us hearts set on the coming of your reign;

give us wise, just, and humble leaders;

give all who live in this land a will to live in peace,

through Jesus Christ,

the One who is above all powers and dominions.

Amen.

(The Covenant Hymnal, A Worshipbook, 928)

Moving Forward

Between now and the next session look for examples, insights, causes, and responses for some of the needs identified during this discussion.



Fulfillment: A New Testament Perspective

The Prophets' Fulfillment

As he began his work, Jesus read these words from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus—true God in human form—lived this mission in word and deed, fulfilling the words of the prophets.

In his teachings and actions, Jesus confounded the expectations of the believing community, and turned the social structures of his world upside down. His companions were outcasts. In teaching about compassion, his example was the hated Samaritan. He showed mercy to the traitor. He overturned the tables of exploitation in the temple. The rejection of the cross was preceded by his rejection in his hometown. He went without a word of defense to his death at the hands of religious authority and government power. The compassion, mercy, and justice of God are embodied in his own being and life as God incarnate. There is in Jesus an alignment between his character and identity and his actions in the world. In the resurrection we witness God’s vindication of the life and death of Jesus.

PONDER THIS...

If Jesus came to visit our church, what would make us uncomfortable?

What would make him uncomfortable?

Thy Kingdom Come

The central event of the Christian narrative is the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God surprises us by breaking into our world. The risen Christ is the sign that God’s rule and kingdom are already present in this broken world. We do not enter that kingdom when we die. We enter it here and now, wherever God’s will breaks into human life. So we pray with Jesus: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

I WONDER...

The Resource Paper says we enter God's kingdom here and now. What does that mean to me?

The new Jerusalem—Revelation's compelling vision of the coming kingdom of God—represents the ultimate and final restoration of a new heaven and a new earth. It is the place where compassion, mercy, and justice have prevailed, and God's intent is no longer ignored or corrupted. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Revelation 21:4). The new Jerusalem is a city in which God's presence is fully revealed and dominant (Revelation 21:22–22:2). Evil will not be present, and sin will be absent as the presence of God creates life, gives purpose, and establishes righteousness for all in that newly established city.

We are people living in the kingdom of the present, informed and liberated by our understanding of the realized kingdom of the future. Heaven is not simply our escape but the reality that empowers our service today. Each cup of cold water offered, every hungry person fed, every captive set free is both a reflection of and a contribution to the new Jerusalem. Everything done here and now that incarnates God's compassion, mercy, and justice is neither lost nor wasted, just as the act of turning away from sin to become a follower of Jesus is neither lost nor wasted. Certainly there is profound difference between this life and the life to come in the new Jerusalem. But there is also glorious continuity. In his argument for the bodily resurrection

in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (v. 58). God will gather up all that is good and righteous in this life and bring it into God's coming kingdom. How we live our lives matters for eternity. Ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice are not wasted, not in vain, not fleeting. They are eternal.

PONDER THIS...

If someone in our church were to propose a ministry of (a current day issue), what objections might be raised?

In what ways do the above paragraphs address those objections?

Covenant Historical Foundations

From its inception the Covenant has cared about ministering to hurting people. In 1886, the year after the church's founding, delegates gathered to chart direction in mission. As noted earlier, one of the first decisions was to establish the Home of Mercy to care for the sick, elderly, and orphaned. That decision set in motion what is today a network of hospitals, retirement communities, enabling residences for developmentally disabled adults, and other community services for at-risk women and children. Combined, these institutions annually provide millions of dollars of free services.

Similarly, soon after the Covenant's founding, the first Covenant missionaries ventured to the territory now known as western Alaska. While preaching the gospel, they also established schools, clinics, and orphanages. This set in motion what is today an expansive global effort that partners with national leadership on five continents to provide education, health care, economic development, clean water, agricultural sustainability, disaster relief, and initiatives such as combating human trafficking.

Local congregations and regional conferences have found countless ways to address community needs through hunger programs, addiction recovery, medical clinics, child care, tutoring, short-term housing shelters, prison visitation, pregnancy support, advocacy for victims of abuse, and more.

Even so, we confess that far too little of our time, talent, and treasure has gone to the gaping needs around us, and far too much has gone to care for and gratify ourselves. We cannot be self-satisfied in our seeming generosity—personally and collectively—when the needs of our communities and the world are so profound and our ability to contribute to make a difference is so great. Jesus clearly warns us in Matthew 25 that we are held accountable for how we treat those at the margins, those who are the “least of these.” We will not be immune from that accountability.

PONDER THIS...

While reflecting on the Covenant church's progress with respect to diversity, the late Rev. Dr. Willie Jemison put it this way: “We're doing good, but we could do better.” In what ways is this true in my own context?

We also confess that when we have cared for hurting people, we have been persistently reticent to address the causes that hurt people. We are more comfortable taking up the questions of compassion and mercy: “Who is broken? Who is in need?” We are less comfortable with those of justice: “Why does this brokenness exist? How do we address the causes?” Micah 6:8 calls us to love mercy, do justice, and to walk humbly with our God. When it comes to doing justice, the ability to document the Covenant Church's engagement is difficult compared to the ways we can point to strides in compassion and mercy.

Throughout our history, the Covenant Church has been silent on matters such as suffrage and Jim Crow laws, and too quiet on many such as civil rights. As the children and grandchildren of the immigrant generation that founded the Covenant settled more fully into the North American experience, memories and sensitivities toward the hardship of newer immigrants were sometimes lost. Concern about poverty and its accompanying issues were not always understood as central to God's call. Like other evangelicals, we often pursued growth at the expense of investing in other priorities of God in the world. There are instances of blatant racism, including churches participating in white-flight from urban areas. Further, while today we may speak to challenging matters of public discipleship through Annual Meeting resolutions on topics such as immigration, criminal justice, and racial righteousness, we confess that these too infrequently translate to specific action. Too often our values and actions are shaped more by political beliefs or financial self-interest than by biblical teaching.

As hard as it is to admit to ourselves, this passivity in engaging matters of justice means that we—individually and collectively—contribute both implicitly and explicitly to perpetuating ills in the world that are offensive to God and destructive to people. We confess this. In repenting we earnestly resolve to follow God's call to do justice and work to make things right in the world. We proceed with Scripture as our frame

of reference rather than secular debate in which complex issues often become mired in toxic and self-serving polarization.

I WONDER...

Where have we cared for the hurting but not addressed the causes?

One of God's gifts to the Covenant today is our increasing ethnic and socio-economic diversity. For a good part of our history, even beyond our immigrant roots, we lived in a largely Euro-immigrant denominational context, and often chose communities for expansion that reinforced that insularity. In so doing, we did little to help the church in North America experience the power of the cross of Jesus Christ to overcome deep racial, ethnic, and socio-economic divisions. The growing Covenant mosaic and the contributions made by an increasingly diverse leadership are giving us a broader perspective and are inspiring and empowering us as we address issues of injustice in our world. As our community becomes more reflective of the entire kingdom of God, we find new energy and are

able to work more persistently on the full scope of God's mission. We are also spurred on by the compelling examples of compassion, mercy, and justice seamlessly lived out by our international friends, often in areas of grinding poverty and exploitation.

In Christ we dare to say at our best we desire to be people who are evangelistic, compassionate, merciful, and just. Yet we confess that we consistently fail to share the good news, act out of compassion, demonstrate mercy, and advocate for justice. We repent, desiring to grow more and more into the kind of people we aspire to be as followers of Jesus Christ. Thankfully God does not give up on us, and so we continue with renewed vibrancy to live fully into the call of the whole mission of God.

PONDER THIS...

Our world is much different today and we have not always responded faithfully to God's call. If God gave our church a chance for a new start, what would it look like?



Fulfillment: A New Testament Perspective

Key Idea

Klyne Snodgrass (quotation from the video): *If we do not reflect the character of God with these issues of compassion, mercy, and justice, how can we talk about being the people of God?*

For this session you will need two or three large sheets of chart paper, markers, and Bibles.

Objectives

The participants will:

- Discuss feelings, questions, and inner arguments experienced when encountering a homeless person.
- Identify ways that Christians today reflect and fail to reflect God's character in relation to compassion, mercy, and justice.
- Identify and assess their church's compassion, mercy, and justice ministries.

Connecting

Use the following questions to learn more about each other and compassion, mercy, and justice.

- 1) Imagine encountering a homeless person. What feelings, questions, and internal conflicts surface?
- 2) In earlier sessions we informally identified compassion, mercy, and justice needs and ministries that address those needs. In this session we begin to seek God's call and look to the future. List the following terms on a

piece of chart paper: a. compassion, b. mercy, c. justice, and d. all three. Next consider the loving mercy and doing justice ministries of our church and write them next to the appropriate term. Finally, consider each of the ministries listed and identify how it is effective and where improvement is needed.

- 3) At the end of the last session we were encouraged to look for examples, insights, causes, and responses related to loving mercy, and doing justice. What issues did you encounter? What formal and informal responses did you observe? Which of these issues should we add to our list under a new term, "for future consideration?"

Pray together seeking God's guidance and insight for the discussion and conclude the prayer time by reading the following together:

Dear God, we ask that you open our eyes to see the needs that surround us, our ears to hear your call to respond, and our hearts to venture out in faith. Amen.

Digging Deeper: God's Word

Read Matthew 11:2-6 and answer the following question.

- What do we learn about Jesus from this passage of scripture?

Read Matthew 25:34-40 and answer the following question.

- What do we learn about the Christian life from this passage of scripture?

Consider both of these scripture passages and identify two or three important teachings or insights for disciples of Jesus today.

Digging Deeper: Resource Paper

The following quotations from the Covenant Resource Paper highlight the importance of compassion, mercy, and justice from a New Testament perspective. Select quotations and discuss the questions that will deepen your understanding of loving mercy, and doing justice, and its role in the church today.

Rejection & Vindication

The rejection of the cross was preceded by his rejection in his hometown. He went without a word of defense to his death at the hands of religious authority and government power. The compassion, mercy, and justice of God are embodied in his own being and life as God incarnate. There is in Jesus an alignment between his character and identity and his actions in the world. In the resurrection we witness God's vindication of the life and death of Jesus. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 5)

- The people in Israel rejected Jesus' message. How do people today reject the message?
- How do God's people embody this message today? (List specific examples.)

New Jerusalem

The new Jerusalem—Revelation's compelling vision of the coming kingdom of God—represents the ultimate and final restoration of a new heaven and a new earth. It is the place where compassion, mercy, and justice have prevailed, and God's intent is no longer ignored or corrupted... The new Jerusalem is a city in which God's presence is fully revealed and dominant... Evil will not be present, and sin will be absent as the presence of God creates life, gives purpose, and establishes righteousness for all in that newly established city. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 5)

- How can this vision of the new Jerusalem inform our character and life together as God's people on earth?

Kingdom Present & Future

The paper answers this question as follows:

We are people living in the kingdom of the present, informed and liberated by our understanding of the realized kingdom of the future. Heaven is not simply our escape but the reality that empowers our service today. Each cup of cold water offered, every hungry person fed, every captive set free is both a reflection of and a contribution to the new Jerusalem. Everything done here and now that incarnates God's compassion, mercy, and justice is neither lost nor wasted, just as the act of turning away from sin to become a follower of Jesus is neither lost nor wasted. Certainly there is profound difference between this life and the life to come in the new Jerusalem. But there is also glorious continuity. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 6)

- How does this statement encourage us as we seek to be the church?

Confess

The Resource Paper identifies Covenant efforts to address loving mercy and doing justice. But, the paper also includes the following confessions:

Even so, we confess that far too little of our time, talent, and treasure has gone to the gaping needs around us, and far too much has gone to care for and gratify ourselves. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 6)

- How do you respond to this confession?

We also confess that when we have cared for hurting people, we have been persistently reticent to address the causes that hurt people. We are more comfortable taking up the questions of compassion and mercy: "Who is broken? Who is in need?" We are less comfortable with those of justice: "Why does this brokenne.

- How do these words challenge you?

Digging Deeper: Video

Two professors from North Park Theological Seminary, Soong-Chan Rah, associate professor of church growth and evangelism, and Klyne Snodgrass, professor of biblical literature, focus our attention on a New Testament understanding of compassion, mercy, and justice and challenge us to include both right thinking and right doing in our life together as Christians.

As you view the video, record insights and questions in the space provided. After the presentation discuss these insights and questions. Additional quotations and questions follow to expand the discussion.

Questions & Insights

Social Justice & Evangelism

Soong-Chan Rah: *In the 20th century, American Christianity witnessed the unbiblical divorce between acts of personal evangelism and the work of social justice. Compassion, mercy, and justice came to be seen as a distraction from the work of evangelism. When we look at the scripture, and especially the New Testament, we see that compassion, mercy, and justice are not simply add-ons.*

- How has this divorce between acts of personal evangelism and the work of social justice been evident in the church?
- In our church?

Right Doing

Klyne Snodgrass: *Quite often the church looks at the faith as if it is right thinking. Right thinking is not right unless it leads to right doing. Jesus and the other people we meet in the New Testament are always emphasizing a holistic approach to life. You don't separate these*

categories. It is not about separating private piety and social action, it is about being a whole person.

- When have you experienced or observed this heightened concern for right thinking, as opposed to right doing?
- Why does this breakdown between right thinking and right doing occur?

Participation

The presenters discuss the importance of community and Snodgrass concludes, *"You cannot be a Christian by yourself. The images are all about participation with Christ, in the body of Christ, and with and for other people."*

- In what ways does our church demonstrate this truth that you "cannot be a Christian by yourself?"

Ethic of Concern

Rah: *This is the wonderful thing about scripture, this consistent ethic of concern. It is not just about personal righteousness, but also about the justice of God. It is not just about caring for yourself and your personal piety, but it is about caring for others.*

- How does the church teach this connection between personal piety and caring for others?

Breaking Down Walls

Snodgrass: *What cannot be allowed to exist is the classism, racism, and sexism that we find in our societies. You think of a passage like Galatians 3:28 where Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male or female." What he is setting aside is the valuation that says this kind of person is less valuable than that kind of person. In Ephesians 2, the dividing walls are broken down and a unity is established so that you live together in Christ and care for each other.*

- Snodgrass says that racism, sexism, and classism cannot be allowed to exist. How have you experienced or observed overcoming racism, sexism, and classism?

Opportunity

Rah: *This is an amazing time in the 21st century where we are now seeing the whole of creation in terms of diversity, different races and nationalities, coming right into our backyard. How are we going to live into that, where the dividing walls of hostility are falling? So we as the church have a great opportunity in the 21st century to live into the call of scripture, especially in the New Testament, to overcome these elements of racism, sexism, classism that Paul challenges and the whole of the New Testament and the whole of scripture challenges.*

- How do you feel about the opportunity that Rah describes where the “whole of creation is coming into our backyard?”
- What can we do to bring down the dividing walls of hostility in our community and church?

Personal Response

Reflect on the group’s discussion by answering the following questions. Take 5 minutes to silently respond to the questions and then join to share insights for individuals and for our church.

During this session much of the discussion has identified elements in God’s character and how God’s people reflect and fail to reflect that character. The video concludes: *If we do not reflect the character of God with these issues, can we talk about being the people of God? I think not.*

- How do I respond to this statement?
- In light of this statement, to what do I feel God is calling me personally?

- In light of this statement, to what do I feel God is calling our church?

If changes or additions are suggested related to the ministry list created earlier, add them now.

Closing Prayer

Spend time sharing prayer requests and praying for each other. Conclude by reading the closing affirmation from 1 John 3:16-18 together.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Moving Forward

A call to action: *In repenting we earnestly resolve to follow God’s call to do justice and work to make things right in the world. We proceed with Scripture as our frame of reference rather than secular debate in which complex issues often become mired in toxic and self-serving polarization.* (CMJ Resource Paper, p 12)

This statement identifies a resolve to “follow God’s call to do justice and work to make things right.” During our discussions we identified needs in our church, community and world. Now we begin to consider what we do about them.

Before the next session, spend time talking to God about the needs and identify possible responses to those needs. Also, look for other agencies and ministries who are already addressing those needs. What are they doing? What are the outcomes of their effort?



Faithful Response: A New Perspective

Characteristics of Biblical Ministry

How do we grow in biblical compassion, mercy, and justice? One of our defining documents, Covenant Affirmations, articulates our core values and principles, giving definition to our identity and guiding the directions in which we seek to grow in Christ. Similarly, we are aided in the pursuit of compassion, mercy, and justice by affirming a set of Christ-like characteristics that display the kind of people we seek to be in these ministries and that direct our continuing formation as a movement guided by the Holy Spirit.

We do ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice:

Biblically

The Bible is our primary source for inspiration and guidance in the discernment of ministry opportunities, the development of strategies and plans through which we respond, and the articulation of the outcomes that we seek to accomplish.

Prophetically

Guided and empowered by Scripture and the Holy Spirit, we seek to honestly and courageously call out injustice. We speak truth to power and we call God's people to righteous action.

Humbly and prayerfully

We confess our sin. Without humility, prophetic words easily degenerate into arrogant pronouncements. Our belief in “level ground at

the cross” helps keep us from acting and thinking that we are in any way superior to those we serve or to those with whom we disagree. Our ongoing prayer acknowledges our dependence on God and our desire to align our living with God's expectation.

Formationally

Engagement in compassion, mercy, and justice ministry is a formational experience for the people who give themselves in service. We engage in these ministries in obedience to Jesus Christ and become more faithful, Christ-like disciples through our personal engagement and investment.

I WONDER...

Describe a formational experience of loving mercy and doing justice.

Hopefully

It is only with hope that ministry can be sustained in the face of daunting adversity, entrenched opposition, evil, or simple apathy. Our

hope demonstrates our belief in the resurrection, God's great act of hope in the face of death, and the glorious promise of Jesus coming again to establish a new heaven and a new earth. Through acts of compassion, mercy, and justice, God works to create and instill hope.

Holistically

Word and deed, proclamation and demonstration, evangelism and social concern are elements of an integrated whole, not disparate values. There is one gospel of Jesus Christ, which calls for a holistic approach to mission.

Transformationally

Papers such as this are not an end in themselves. They inform and guide us as we seek transformation in individuals, families, churches, communities, and systems of the world through ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice.

Collaboratively

We create and work in partnerships whenever possible. There is strength and wisdom in shared ministry that increases effectiveness and reach. From large institutions with denominationally based governance structures to local food distribution programs, we have a history of doing more over a sustained length of time when there is genuine partnership. Collaboration also extends to communities we serve, offering dignity to each person as God's beloved creation.

Generously

In John 3:16 we read, "God so loved the world that he gave...." God calls his people to break the tragic pattern of selfishness in our world. God calls for generous, consistent, first fruits giving. There is no ministry of compassion, mercy, and justice without our commitment to giving sacrificially of our time, our service, and our financial resources.

Gratefully

Again and again we receive forgiveness and new life at the table of our Lord. We are merciful and just toward others out of gratitude to God for the inexpressible compassion, mercy, and justice shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

Local Covenant Church Mission

The church always begins with certain basic missional affirmations: God loves all people; God is present and at work in the community and in the world; all people are created in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect; and individual and corporate brokenness are present in the wider community as well as in the church. With these affirmations the church must prayerfully and sometimes recklessly seek ways to participate in God's transforming mission.

PONDER THIS...

How are these affirmations evident in the life of our church?

How are these affirmations evident in my life?

As we the church develop the capacity to see the image of God in other people, we find ourselves asking, "Who are the marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and in our world?" They may be refugees, people who suffer

abuse, children lacking opportunity for a good education, people without legal standing, high-school drop outs, people with addictions, the sick, the lonely, prisoners, and victims of crime.

A local church should seek to serve and work together with those in their community and in the wider world in ministries that express compassion and mercy and that work to bring justice. While there is a tendency to develop compassion and mercy ministries that address symptoms of brokenness in the community, the more difficult task is to seek justice by addressing the root causes of the brokenness. We cannot claim to be a biblical people if we are not active in God's mission of compassion, mercy, and justice.

I WONDER...

Why are people more comfortable addressing compassion and mercy needs, and less comfortable addressing justice needs?

In Conclusion—Our Story

In the mid-nineteenth century as Pietism spread throughout Scandinavia, Maria Nilsson, grandmother of David Nyvall, was joined by other women in her rural district of Sweden to read and discuss Scripture. To do so, she had to face the displeasure of her alcoholic and abusive husband who tied her to the kitchen stove in an effort to prevent her from attending small groups in neighbors' homes where the Bible was discussed and people prayed.

This simple practice of discussing the Bible

and its meaning for life was transformational, leading Maria and her friend, Brigitta Olson, to intervene in the not uncommon practice of auctioning parentless children. While this was ostensibly for the care and nurture of these children, it was usually a form of unregulated child labor and indentured servitude in which many of these children were abused. These women intervened, caring for the children in their own homes. To accommodate growing numbers of these children, Maria built an orphanage and a school on her meager farm using funds they raised through knitting and sewing. Challenged, inspired, and changed by God's word, these women were compelled to join with God in making things right. As we today gather to discuss and listen to the powerfully transformational words of the Bible, may these women, and others who have gone before us, inspire and encourage us as we seek to express and live into God's compassion, mercy, and justice in our day.

We pray for this through the power of the Holy Spirit and for Christ's sake.

PONDER THIS...

How does Maria Nilsson's story challenge and inspire me?

Who provides a similar example for me?



Faithful Response: A New Perspective

Key Idea

As we the church develop the capacity to see the image of God in other people, we find ourselves asking, “Who are the marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and in our world?” (CMJ Resource Paper, p 9)

While there is a tendency to develop compassion and mercy ministries that address symptoms of brokenness in the community, the more difficult task is to seek justice by addressing the root causes of the brokenness. We cannot claim to be a biblical people if we are not active in God’s mission of compassion, mercy, and justice. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 10)

For this session you will need three or four sheets of chart paper, markers, and a Bible or a copy of 1 John 4:16-21 for each person.

Objectives

The participants will:

- Identify areas of appreciation and challenge based on previous discussions and content.
- Seek God’s call through Bible reading and prayer related to love mercy, do justice.
- Identify needs and responses for the “marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible” in your community.

Connecting

Use the following questions to reflect on the content and discussion from previous sessions.

It will be helpful to consider the questions silently before responding as a group.

- 1) What have I appreciated about our discussions and the contents of the Covenant Resource Paper and Discussion Guides?
- 2) How have these sessions challenged me regarding compassion, mercy, and justice?
- 3) What troubles me about the realities of our church, community, or world as a result of these discussions and what might I do about it?

Digging Deeper: God’s Word

Silently read 1 John 4:16-21 and listen for God’s word for you. Read the passage prayerfully several times as you consider the following questions:

- What strikes me as I read this passage?
- What do I hear related to love mercy, do justice in these words?
- What might God be inviting me to do or be?

Discuss together the insights revealed in the silent reading.

As a group, pray for the awareness of God’s presence and direction in the following discussion as we seek God’s call to respond.

Digging Deeper: Resource Paper

The following quotations from the Covenant Resource Paper challenge us to think about possible responses related to loving mercy,

doing justice. Select quotations and discuss the questions that will be helpful to the group.

Affirmations

The church always begins with certain basic missional affirmations: God loves all people; God is present and at work in the community and in the world; all people are created in the image of God and worthy of dignity and respect; and individual and corporate brokenness are present in the wider community as well as in the church. With these affirmations the church must prayerfully and sometimes recklessly seek ways to participate in God's transforming mission. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 9)

- How important are these missional affirmations in the life of our church?
- How important are these missional affirmations in my life?
- When has our church “recklessly” pursued participation in God’s transforming mission?

Work Together

A local church should seek to serve and work together with those in their community and in the wider world in ministries that express compassion and mercy and that work to bring justice. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 9)

At the end of the last session we agreed to identify other agencies and resources that address love mercy, do justice in our community.

- What did we learn about these agencies and resources? Where is effective work being accomplished?
- How might we partner with an existing organization to encourage transformation?

Digging Deeper: Video

Alex Gee and Jerome Dillard from Fountain of Life Ministries in Madison, WI, and Allan Serrano from Iglesia Evangelica Misionera in LaVilla, TX, discuss how their churches discovered “the marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible” in their communities and organized to respond in Jesus’ name.

As you view the video, record insights and questions in the space provided. After the presentation, discuss these insights and questions. Additional questions follow to expand the discussion.

Questions & Insights

Remember

The video presentation highlighted the way these churches responded to the “marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible” in their communities.

- How do these churches address needs related to compassion, mercy, and justice?
- What specific ideas and insights from the video do we need to remember and incorporate as we proceed to respond to needs in our community?

Note: The online index lists additional love mercy, do justice videos from other churches. It may be helpful to view one or more of these videos to see how other churches responded to God’s call.

Personal Response

Reflect on the group’s discussion and respond to the question posed in the following quotation. Take a few minutes to silently respond and then join to share insights for you as an individual and for our church.

As we the church develop the capacity to see the image of God in other people, we find ourselves asking, “*Who are the marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and in our world?*” (CMJ Resource Paper, p 9)

- A similar question was asked during the first session. Now, after discussing loving mercy,

doing justice for several weeks, who do I include from my context on this list?

Join together and list on a sheet of chart paper the “marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible” identified by each person. When a person identifies a response that was already listed, put a check mark next to it to record the number of times it was listed.

What insights does this list of “marginalized, oppressed, voiceless, and invisible” people provide?

Moving Forward

The people of God are commanded to join God in this work, restoring God’s righteous purpose and shalom for creation and the human family. (CMJ Resource Paper, p 3)

As this is the final formal session, it is important to identify specific responses to apply the insights from our experience together. During these weeks we identified many issues, needs, and possible responses. Where do we feel that we are being called to “join God” in making things right in our broken world?

- 1) Begin with a period of silent prayer seeking God for guidance in our personal or church community response. Follow the silent prayer with group prayer.
- 2) Quickly list possible needs related to the “marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, and invisible” identified earlier.
- 3) Briefly discuss the list and ask any clarifying questions.
- 4) Where do we feel that we are being called to “join God” in making things right in our broken world? It is important to come to a consensus with respect to one or two needs to which we might respond. If consensus

is difficult, take time to discuss and allow participants to speak to the needs about which they feel most strongly.

- 5) When consensus is achieved, use the following questions to explore this need and possible responses. It is appropriate that some in the group will be called to a personal response, in addition to the church community response.

Exploring Identified Needs & Responses

- 1) Why does this need exist? What are the factors that create or contribute to this need? As a church how do we respond? As Christians how do we respond?
- 2) What would be a compassion response?
- 3) What would be a justice response?
- 4) How does this discussion align with our church mission statement?

5) What affirmation do we need from the church to proceed?

6) What other individuals or groups might join us in addressing this need?

7) What additional information do we need to proceed?

8) Based on our context, what other questions do we need to ask?

9) What is our next step? It is important to answer this question before concluding this discussion. Scheduling another gathering may be helpful to continue the discussion and follow up on the responses we listed.

Closing Prayer

Spend time sharing prayer requests and praying for each other and our responses. Conclude by reading the following prayer responsively.

For exploiter and exploited;

for persecutor and persecuted;

for criminal and victim,

God of perfect love, we pray.

As we pray, remove the fear that makes us strident and vengeful,

and take away the woolliness of thought that makes us sentimental.

Give us clear eyes to see the world as it is and ourselves and all people as we are;

but give us hope to go on believing in what you intend us all to be.

We pray for children growing up with no sense of beauty, no feeling for what is good or bad, no knowledge of you and your love in Christ.

We pray for men and women who have lost faith and given up hope;

for governments who crush people's spirits,

and for governments slow to act in the cause of justice, freedom, and development.

We pray for the whole church and the world, giving thanks for your goodness,

for your love made known in Christ,

for your truth confirmed in his death and resurrection,

for your promises to us and to all people, keeping hope alive.

All:

Let us go to our work and into our relationships stimulated by hope,

strengthened by faith,

directed by love,

to play our part in the liberation of all people, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Amen.

(The Covenant Hymnal, A Worshipbook, 962)