

Resources for
THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
and throughout the year

2023

**Do good; seek
justice**

(Isaiah 1:17)

Jointly prepared and published by

Holy See Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity
Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches

THE PREPARATION OF THE MATERIAL FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2023

The search for unity: throughout the year

The traditional period in the northern hemisphere for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is the week between the feasts of St Peter and St Paul in January. In the southern hemisphere where January is holiday time churches celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity between Ascension Sunday and Pentecost Sunday. You are invited to use this material throughout the whole year.

Preparation of the text

The resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity are prepared each year under the oversight of the Holy See's Dicastery for Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. Each year a group in a different part of the world is invited to develop the resources.

The theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 was chosen, and the materials prepared, by a group of Christians in the United States of America convened by the Minnesota Council of Churches. The draft resources were finalized by an international group jointly sponsored by the Dicastery for Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

Adapting the text

This material is offered with the understanding that parishes and other groups will adapt it for their own local situation. Such adaptation should ideally take place ecumenically.

The Order of Worship has been adapted for use in Aotearoa New Zealand by members of the National Dialogue for Christian Unity (NDCU). The NDCU member churches are Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). A number of ecumenical organisations and other denominations such as the Salvation Army are associated as observers.

BIBLICAL TEXT FOR 2023

Isaiah 1:12-18

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

likesnow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

New Revised Standard Version

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME OF THE YEAR 2023

Do good; seek justice

(Isaiah 1:17)

Introduction

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

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

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

This verse from the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah as the central text for the Week of Prayer: *"learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (1:17).*

Isaiah taught that God requires righteousness and justice from all of us, all the time and in all spheres of life. Our world today in many ways mirrors the challenges of division that Isaiah confronted in his preaching. Justice, righteousness and unity originate from God's profound love for each of us, and are at the heart of who God is and how God expects us to be with one another. God's commitment to create a new humanity *"from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev 7:9)* calls us to the peace and unity God has always wanted for creation.

The prophet's language with regard to the religiosity of the time is ferocious – *"Bringing offerings is futile, incense is an abomination to me ... When you stretch out your hands I will hide my eyes from you" (vv. 13, 15).* Once he has spoken these blistering condemnations, diagnosing what is wrong, Isaiah offers

the remedy for these iniquities. He instructs God's people to, *"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil"* (v. 16).

Today, separation and oppression continue to be manifest when any single group or class is given privileges above others. The sin of racism is evident in any beliefs or practices that distinguish or elevate one "race"¹ over another. When accompanied or sustained by imbalances in power, racial prejudice moves beyond individual relationships to the very structures of society – the systemic perpetuation of racism. Its existence has unfairly benefitted some, including churches, and burdened and excluded others, simply due to the colour of their skin and the cultural associations based upon perceptions of "race".

Like the religious people so fiercely denounced by the biblical prophets, some Christian believers have been or continue to be complicit in supporting or perpetuating prejudice and oppression and fostering division. History shows that, rather than recognising the dignity of every human being made in the image and likeness of God, Christians have too often involved themselves in structures of sin such as slavery, colonisation, segregation and apartheid which have stripped others of their dignity on the spurious grounds of race. So too within the churches, Christians have failed to recognise the dignity of all the baptised.

All division has its root in sin, that is, in attitudes and actions that run counter to the unity that God desires for the whole of his creation. Tragically racism is part of the sin that has divided Christians from one another, has caused Christians to worship at separate times, and in separate buildings, and in certain cases has led Christian communities to divide.

Learn to do good

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

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

The prophet Micah points out that God has told us what is good and what God requires of us: *"to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God"* (Mic 6:8). To act justly means that we have respect for all persons. Justice requires truly equitable treatment in order to address historic disadvantage based on "race", gender, religion and socio-economic status. To walk humbly with God requires repentance, reparations, and finally reconciliation. God expects us to unite in a shared

1. There is only one race, the human race. However, we must acknowledge that the myth of race has caused the reality of racism. Race is not biological; it is a social construct which separates humanity according to physical traits. It is important to acknowledge that while the term may not be used in various parts of the world, it has been used as a tool to effectively divide and oppress groups of humans.

responsibility for equity for all God's children. The unity of Christians should be a sign and foretaste of the reconciled unity of the entire creation. However, Christian division weakens the force of that sign, serving to reinforce division rather than bring healing to the world's brokenness which is the Church's mission.

Seek justice

Isaiah counsels Judah to seek justice (v. 17), which is an acknowledgment of the existence of injustice and oppression in their society. He implores the people of Judah to overturn this *status quo*. Seeking justice requires us to face up to those who inflict evil on others. This is not an easy task and will sometimes lead to conflict, but Jesus assures us that standing up for justice in the face of oppression leads to the kingdom of heaven. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:10)*. Churches in many parts of the world must acknowledge how they have conformed to societal norms and been silent or actively complicit regarding racial injustice. As Christians we must be willing to disrupt systems of oppression and to advocate for justice.

The year during which the Minnesota writing group was preparing the texts for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was filled with the evil and devastation of oppression in its many forms all over the world. This suffering was greatly amplified in many regions, especially in the Global South, by the Covid-19 pandemic, where even basic subsistence was almost impossible for many, and practical assistance was largely absent. The author of Ecclesiastes seemed to be speaking to the current experience: *"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" (Eccles 4:1)*.

Oppression is harmful to the entire human race. There can be no unity without justice. As we pray for Christian unity, we must acknowledge current and generational oppression and be resolute in our commitment to repent of these sins. We can make our own Isaiah's injunction to *"wash yourselves; make yourselves clean" because "your hands are full of blood" (vv. 15, 16)*.

Rescue the oppressed

The Bible tells us that we cannot separate our relationship with Christ from our attitude towards all God's people, particularly those considered *"the least of these" (Mt 25:40)*. Our commitment to each other requires us to engage in *mishpat*, the Hebrew word for restorative justice, advocating for those whose voices have not been heard, dismantling structures that create and sustain injustice, and building others that promote and ensure everyone receives fair treatment and the rights that are due to them. This work must extend beyond our friends, family and congregations to the whole of humanity. Christians are called to go out and listen to the cries of all who are suffering, in order to better understand and respond to their stories of suffering and their trauma. Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr. often stated that *"a riot is the language of the unheard."* When protest and civil unrest arise, it is often because the protesters' voices are not being heard. If churches join their voices to those of the oppressed, their cry for justice and liberation will be amplified. We serve and love God and our neighbour by serving and loving one another in unity.

Defend the orphan, plead for the widow

Widows and orphans occupy a special place in the Hebrew Bible, alongside strangers, as

representatives of the most vulnerable members of society. In the context of the economic success in Judah at the time of Isaiah, the situation of orphans and widows was a desperate one as they were deprived of protection and of the right to own land, and therefore the capacity to provide for themselves. The prophet called on the community, as it rejoiced in its prosperity, not to neglect to defend and nurture the poorest and most vulnerable among them. This prophetic call echoes in our time, as we consider: who are the most vulnerable people in our society?

Whose voices are not being heard in our communities? Who is not represented at the table? Why? Which churches and communities are missing from our dialogues, our common action and our prayer for Christian unity? As we pray together during this Week of Prayer, what are we willing to do about these absent voices?

Conclusion

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

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