

HEALING AND JOY

on Our Journey
to God



Program
Resource
2021–2022



United
Methodist
Women
FAITH • HOPE • LOVE IN ACTION

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Photographs on page 106–111 courtesy of the subjects; photograph on page 109 by Ned Mountain.

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ISBN: 978-1-952501-14-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021915352

Printed in the United States of America.

United Methodist Women Purpose

The organized unit of United Methodist Women shall be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.

The Vision

Turning faith, hope and love into action on behalf of women, children and youth around the world.

Living the Vision

We provide opportunities and resources to grow spiritually, become more deeply rooted in Christ and put faith into action.

We are organized for growth, with flexible structures leading to effective witness and action.

We equip women and girls around the world to be leaders in communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches.

We work for justice through compassionate service and advocacy to change unfair policies and systems.

We provide educational experiences that lead to personal change in order to transform the world.

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Introduction

This has been an enormously challenging year. For each of us as individuals, for our United Methodist Women groups, for our churches and communities, there has been so much loss, change, and challenge.

As we begin a new program year, we seek to step into that pain and find something new. Our goal this year is to sow healing and joy, in all the surprising ways God offers it.

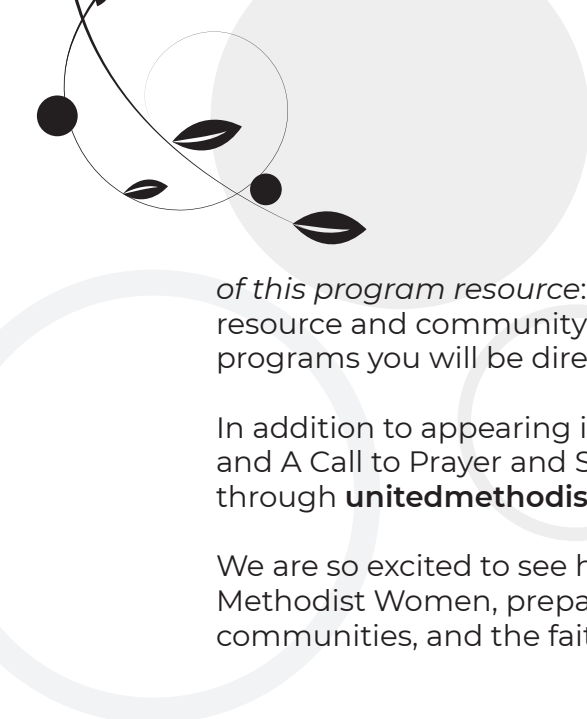
Each quarter, we will focus on a different aspect of healing and joy. The first three months, during autumn, will focus on finding God's healing and joy in the midst of grief and loss—whether that's throwing big parties to celebrate returning to church like Nehemiah did, or quietly connecting with our ancestors' strength like the people of Hebrews demonstrated.

The second quarter in winter will focus on healing and joy through our mission commitments, such as ending the school-to-prison-pipeline, climate justice through attention to our energy usage, and the health care system's too often frequent failures to secure the health of women, particularly Black women, with respect and care.

The third quarter, springtime, will focus on finding healing and joy in our meaning-making and search for personal growth, while the final quarter in summer will focus on finding healing and joy as we move into the future, and consider how we will share the gospel of United Methodist Women's spiritual and justice work and discomfort ourselves with change to make great new things with God possible.

In the last year, we have learned that we can be much more creative in the ways we communicate than we knew, so each session will have options for in-person or online gathering as well as devotions and questions that are appropriate for personal study, sharing with one neighbor or friend, or for discussion in large groups. There are some overall tips for holding online gatherings in the next section. In addition, each session has an introductory page where leaders can identify any materials needed for the program as well as virtual adaptations if needed. Each session also has a "Take the Next Most Faithful Step" idea to close the program, ways participants might extend the ideas they've learned into their personal lives. You may want to check in every so often and see if and how people are taking these steps in their lives.

All new this year is an opportunity to experience the programs in an online platform via Mighty Networks. To start exploring this platform go to **united-methodist-women.mn.co/share/zCizNRL0rLvZap20?utm_source=manual** and check out how you and your group can experience this resource online. *Free with purchase*



of this program resource: You will be able to access the September program resource and community gathering for free on Mighty Networks. For subsequent programs you will be directed to pay in order to register.

In addition to appearing in the Program Resource, this year the Pledge to Mission and A Call to Prayer and Self-Denial services will be offered as free downloads through unitedmethodistwomen.org.

We are so excited to see how the most creative folks of all, the resilient United Methodist Women, prepare to use this resource to shape themselves, their communities, and the faith.

IF YOU'RE GATHERING ONLINE

Considerations:

- Allow time for individuals to sign on and become familiar with the platform. You might want to have a test meeting to allow everyone to sign on for a casual chat before your first program.
- It can help people feel centered to have a physical ritual to begin your virtual meeting—consider lighting a candle, ringing a bell, or something else small that feels tangible.
- Tech goes wrong, all of the time and unpredictably. That's okay! It can help everyone feel more comfortable just to say at the beginning, "We may have tech issues throughout and they will be opportunities for us to laugh and show one another grace. If you can't hear or someone gets logged off, feel free to text or alert us in whatever way you can, or just log back on."
- Welcome people as they join the call. It takes a few seconds from the time they join to the time their audio begins to work.
- Ask multiple people to be involved in the program so all feel included and engaged.
- Be available via text, phone, or other form of communication for those who are struggling to access the meeting—especially before your first few meetings on the platform.
- Recording and uploading your meeting is an option so that those who cannot attend can watch the material at a later time. But before you do this, be sure to get the consent of your group. You can upload the recording to YouTube and share the link for easy access. (See "Recorded Meetings," opposite.)
- Meeting facilitators can mute all participants during portions of the meeting when just one leader needs to be heard to eliminate background noise.
- Give time for people to socialize even though you are online. It is different in that only one person can speak at a time, so it will take some getting used to.



How to Adapt Programs

It will take some creativity to adapt the monthly programs to online meetings, but it can be done! The following are some ideas:

- Allow extra time at the beginning of the meeting for everyone to get online and greet one another.
- Invite participants to show and share items from their home for the worship table or altar to create a virtual altar.
- Ask different individuals to read the prayer, scripture, and litanies. Consider sharing your screen during readings so people can read along or share readings.
- Use YouTube or other online recordings of songs to help lead singing and worship. You can share your screen to show the video. (Practice this ahead of time with a small group to see how it works.) Or participants can mute their screens and watch the video simultaneously on their own devices.
- Email (or mail) a list of needed materials and instructions ahead of time for activities, so that each member can do them individually and perhaps ahead of the meeting and be ready for discussion.
- Explore Zoom breakout rooms as a way to have small group discussions during your session. Check out: unitedmethodistwomen.org/Media/PDF/HowToHostVirtualEvent.pdf
- Set up PowerPoint slides to share reading materials and discussion questions during the meetings. You can share your screen and show the slides from your computer.
- For additional tips and resources for holding virtual meetings online, visit: unitedmethodistwomen.org/member-resources

Recorded Meetings

If you want to record the meeting, be sure to ask participants for their consent before the session begins. A recording is a large file, and you may wish to upload it to YouTube to more easily share it with those not present. If you upload it as an unlisted video anyone who has the link can easily view and share it with someone else, but it would not be searchable. To limit circulation, you can also mark the video “private.” When a video is private, it can only be seen by an approved list of people and the link may not be shared.

Carefully consider if the information shared in the meeting should be shared with an audience outside of those present and remember to ask participants for their permission before uploading the video. Also, you may choose only to record a portion of your gathering.



About the Author

Hannah Kardon is the teaching pastor of Urban Village Church—a multi-site, bold, inclusive, relevant United Methodist community in Chicago. She and her co-pastors authored the 2020 United Methodist Women Spiritual Growth Study, *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*. Hannah believes that God is good, God made us to be exactly who we are, and Jesus can transform our lives. This has led her to all kinds of places—from a nonreligious upbringing in Tokyo to a Christian commune in Memphis to an outdoor church of homeless folks, to Urban Village Church to be a part of God’s bold inclusive, relevant mission. When not at church Hannah loves puzzles, swimming, baking, and, always, her husband, Matt, and their two children.



First Quarter:

Healing and Joy as We Grieve

(Fall)

Take a deep breath.

For all of us, this last year has been a difficult and unpredictable one. Almost all of us, and everyone we know, have endured a period of unimaginable loss. That is loss in lives, loss of health, loss of jobs, loss of certainty, loss of intimacy and experience, and many more compounding losses that are unique to each of us, yet shared throughout our community.

We are hungry for healing and in need of God's deep joy. So this will be our theme throughout this year in the United Methodist Women: How do we find healing and joy for ourselves, and how do we help create a world with healing and joy for all, including the natural world? Each season will focus on finding healing and joy in a different part of our spiritual lives.

This fall we will face what we have just been through head on—cultivating healing and joy as we grieve. In quarters to come we will move towards healing and joy in justice, in personal growth, and in building the new future. For now, let your grief in. And let God's healing and joy transform you in the midst of it.

MEETING/PROGRAM

Date _____ Time _____ Place _____

Program focus _____

Leaders _____

Host _____

Amount of pledge paid _____

DISTRICT/ CONFERENCE EVENT

Date _____ Time _____ Place _____

Program focus _____

Leaders _____

Amount of pledge paid _____

September 2021

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1 Season of Creation (Sep. 1 - Oct. 4)	2	3	4
5	6 Labor Day	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15 Sep. 15 - Oct. 15 Hispanic/Latino/a/x Heritage Month	16	17	18
19	20	21 International Day of Peace	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

SEPTEMBER 2021: Nehemiah Throws a Party

PREPARATION

Pray

Before the gathering begins, take a moment to pray for yourself and your leadership, for everyone who will be present, and for everyone who you hope will be impacted by the ministry of United Methodist Women over the next year that God may be with you in this hour. You could focus your prayer on one friend, your family, your neighbor, a mentee, or your whole women's group or circle.

Review the Purpose

This session is designed to give the women of your community an opportunity to breathe, celebrate one another, and practice being joyful again after what has for most been an extraordinarily difficult year. How can you create a space where people feel safe to celebrate?


The primary activity of the program is to throw a PARTY celebrating your resilience and the beginning of a new year. This party might look different depending on your context—maybe you will all still be online and using balloon Zoom backgrounds as you lift beloved dishes up to the camera to share them. Maybe you can have a potluck, where everyone brings a beloved dish they haven't been able to share for a year. Maybe you can get some party streamers at a local store, to make things feel festive. Whatever "party" means for you and this group, let folks know what you will need from them ahead of time so they are able to prepare: Do they need to dress festively? Bring a potluck dish?

This first devotional is significantly longer than most program reflections, and than all the reflections in the sessions that follow. It has been a really difficult year, and we wanted to take the time to root ourselves spiritually in that reality before moving forward. You will need to budget time for the longer reading.

Note: Often United Methodist Women groups meet with a fellowship for hospitality hour *prior* to the program. If this is your usual rhythm, it's worth considering if you want to change things up this time around so that your fellowship hour comes after the program, and can serve as the party activity.

Gather Materials

- Device to play the visual meditation on, or the printed prayer to read
- Decorations and/or hospitality items for the joy party



Virtual Adaptations: If you are online for this gathering, there are several adaptations you can make to this session to make it work:

The “Center Your Spirits” section is already a video, to share to everyone’s screen. The Bible reading interspersed with discussion doesn’t have to be adapted at all—but you can enhance it by sharing your screen with the scripture passage displayed while you conduct the discussion. Finally, the “Live the Story” activity is to throw a party. To make this work online, consider trying to find filters or background images featuring party themes for participants to use. You could also drop off party supplies at people’s homes ahead of time, or decorate your own space festively so it can be seen and enjoyed by all.



CENTER YOUR SPIRITS (5 MINUTES)

To help everyone center down into this time of joy and healing, read Howard Thurman’s prayer “Lord, Lord, Open Unto Me,” or invite them to mute their screens and simultaneously experience the prayer as a visual meditation on their own devices: theworkofthepeople.com/open-unto-me (3:17 minutes)

Lord, Lord, Open Unto Me
Open unto me—light for my darkness.
Open unto me—courage for my fear.
Open unto me—hope for my despair.
Open unto me—peace for my turmoil.
Open unto me—joy for my sorrow.
Open unto me—strength for my weakness.
Open unto me—wisdom for my confusion.
Open unto me—forgiveness for my sins.
Open unto me—love for my hates.
Open unto me—thy Self for my self.
Lord, Lord, open unto me!
Amen.

—Howard Thurman¹



SHARE THE STORY OF GOD (10 MINUTES)

Note: Every session this year has a Bible passage to be read prior to the reflection and activity. Much of the time, we will simply read the scripture together. Today we will read it a little differently, with prompts in a **bold** font throughout for the reader to read aloud and facilitate in order to incorporate some of our reflection and discussion into the reading of the passage itself.

Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, and 9–12 (NIV)

All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Where are the first times you remember hearing the Bible read aloud? What did it mean to you then? [time for discussion]

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

The people are so thankful to be returned to each other and to their faith community. As we gather together, what are you praising God for? [time for discussion]

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

Weeping and grieving is a part of the process of recovering from trauma. What are you mourning right now? A person, an experience, time? [time for discussion]

Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

Grieving is necessary, and so is joyful celebration. We don't want to forget either. What would you like to express joy for on this day? [time for discussion]

Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.



REFLECTIONS ON THE STORY (7–10 MINUTES)

Imagine the first time you worshipped in person after all COVID-19 restrictions were lifted. Depending on who you are and where you live, maybe that was a few months ago. Maybe it's still a week or few away. But fill yourself with that feeling of returning to an enlivened community of song and bread after so many months of separation. What do you want to do first? Hug someone, go to your regular table, sing your favorite song, remember your now gone friend right where she used to sit? Are you mourning? Dancing? Laughing? Weeping? Maybe it's a little bit of all of the above.

Now, imagine that instead of one year apart, it has been more than seventy.

This is where we find the people in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah. Decades ago, the Jewish people had been deported from their homes in Israel. The Babylonian empire had destroyed the Temple and walls of the city of Jerusalem and scattered the Israelites to many nations, wherever they could find safe haven.

In this ancient world, seventy years was not just a lifetime but many lifetimes. It was enough time for whole new generations of the diaspora, who had never known their parents' home or traditions, to be born. Most were illiterate, so any faith sharing was oral and through trusted family and community. Then, after years of establishing new lives in new places, struggling to honor what had been while making a way forward in unavoidable new realities, all of a sudden—the people are called back home.

There is a new empire in town, ruled by the Persians, who have a greater tolerance for religious diversity and less interest in Jerusalem's destruction. The cupbearer of its king, Ataxerxes, is Nehemiah, one of those children of the exile who cares for and perhaps longs for a home he has never known. In response to Jerusalem's distress and crumbling walls, he asks to be made governor of Judea, and to commit resources for repair to rebuilding the walls of the city and the Temple as well as welcoming back any and every Jewish person who wishes to return.

After the hard labor of cleaning and rebuilding the physical spaces, now different in some ways from the original but hard-won treasures, it is the priest Ezra's task to gather the people for blessing and re-entry into spiritual community. How does he do it? With a six-hour communal reading of the scriptures, followed by a giant party.

This may or may not be how you would plan to honor such a momentous occasion, but these first hours of healing for the people have many lessons for us as we slowly return from our own traumatic time to rebuild a new world together. We can find in the Israelites many of our own responses to grief and change, and an invitation from God that we can at once acknowledge what has been painful about the past, believe in a resurrection of our present, and move forward as one community unified by God.

Here are a few of the most important aspects of the community's return to themselves that we might emulate—they dwell in the scriptures, they are radically inclusive and accessible, they weep and grieve and finally, they party and celebrate.



This passion for the scriptures shown here is one we might all pray to find in our own communities. The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney says they “waded in the waters of the word together” and notes that “this bible study was not in the sanctuary or even a private home, it was in the street. It was worship without walls.”¹ After a year of worshipping in unusual spaces and places, it is a good reminder that what matters is that we drink in God together, not necessarily where or how.

Nehemiah also makes sure we know that ALL members of the community were needed for this healing experience. As Roger Nam, a professor of the Hebrew bible, points out, “Grammatically, the Hebrew word for “men” can be understood as inclusive of both genders.”² The text doesn’t need to say “men and women and all who were able to understand” in order to mean those groups. But it does, because it’s so critical to know that every single person, every child and every person of every gender, was present and was necessary for the community to experience healing, joy, and restoration. For the community to be whole, the whole community has to be there.

And last, the community experiences overwhelming and multiple emotions. The text ends with Ezra instructing the people not to weep and mourn, because things are okay now—but for him to say that means the people must have been weeping for literally hours while the Torah was read! Mourning has an important and needed place in our healing and processing of trauma, as evidenced by the existence of a whole book of the Bible called Lamentations. When we have been through enormous grief we need to mourn it, and honor any of the many impacts grief might have. Some of us grieve and can’t eat, others want to eat all the richest “funeral food” of comfort we can find. Some of us can’t sleep, some of us start sleeping all the time. But however grief impacts us it is important to feel it, to acknowledge it, and to ask for help from our community to bear the burdens that, painful as they are, do not have to be ours alone. (We will be exploring this more deeply in next month’s program, in anticipation of All Saint’s Day).

But what Ezra warns against is becoming consumed only by our mourning, so that we never notice when our body yearns to dance. If we only remember what we’ve lost, we might never notice how much redemption has been worked in our lives, and begin to live as if joy really is possible.

So the story ends with a call to the people that echoes through to us now, in our own time of redemptive return—“celebrate with great joy!” The people eat and drink and party and exalt, because this is how they can begin to live in their bodies that God’s promises have begun to come true. So should we, and so we shall.

Listening to the story of what God did for their ancestors so long ago gave Ezra and the Israelites a powerful gift. It knit them back together into one community of faith—inclusive, weepy, and joyous all at once. We are in need of the same miracle. So now that we have heard the story. Now that we have mourned. Now that we are gathered. Let us go celebrate with great joy! And throw a party for all we have to be thankful for.



LIVE THE STORY IN THIS MOMENT (20 MINUTES)

Just as the Israelites did, we have had our reading of the Holy Scripture. Now, let us have our eating and drinking with great joy! Live this story together by having a celebratory party, right now, of all you have survived and of all God has made you to be. Let us all respond with an Amen.

This party will have to be a little bit different depending on where you are and how many of you there are, but some ideas to make it festive:

- If there's a small number of you, share compliments with one another. Make the celebration personal! You can make toasts to the group, or to each individual present.
- What is a frivolously joyous party game you played once (at a birthday party, baby shower, anything you can think of) that you can share with your group now?
- For the Israelites, Ezra's call to festivity started with food and drink. Is there food available or that you can get that feels particularly celebratory?

Before you part ways, take a moment to thank everyone for coming together today and invite them to move forward with joy as one community unified by God.

NOTES:

Endnotes:

1. Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 188.
2. wilgafney.com/2014/06/01/making-it-plain-biblical-study
3. [commentary-on-nehemiah-81-3-5-6-8-10-4](#)

TAKE THE NEXT MOST FAITHFUL STEP (this month)

What the United Methodist Women and church show us about who Jesus is isn't meant to be a static thing, only spoken of here, but a dynamic breathing gift that inspires us in the rest of our lives. Here are some suggestions for how you can live out what we have experienced today in your everyday life, in a few different forms of community.

Plan on taking these actions sometime during the month.



By Yourself: Write down a few things you are really proud of yourself for, or that you feel joyous God has gotten you through this last year. Revisit them when you need a festive boost.



At Church: Has your church had a “welcome back” or celebratory worship or post-worship party to celebrate who you are? Suggest it! Help plan it!



In Your Community: Write one of your local legislators or activists about something they did in the last year that you thought was good and just. Positive, celebratory reinforcement is as important to bringing the Kingdom closer as pressure!



With the United Methodist Women:

Join us for a virtual gathering to meet and celebrate with sisters around the country and globe who have led or participated in this month's program. For more information check out United Methodist Women on Mighty Networks:

united-methodist-women.mn.co/share/zCizNRL0rLvZap20?utm_source=manual

Host a launch party for Assembly: For promotional resources you can use at the event go to: **assembly2022.org/promote**

Read with us—*The Journey Between Us: My Faith Walk: Overcoming Grief to Finding Joy in the Journey* by Lisa McGrath through the Reading Program:

unitedmethodistwomen.org/readingprogram

Give a gift to the Mission Giving fund as a tribute to a loved one at: **unitedmethodistwomen.org/?form=missiongiving**. Click on “Give in honor or memory” to make your donation.

Pray every day for people and projects serving in the world supported by your giving using the *Prayer Calendar*.