

## 2010 Lenten Prayer Vigil

### Prayer Booklet-Extravagant Hospitality

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. . .” (I John 4:18a NRSV)

Thank you for participating in our third annual Lenten Prayer Vigil. The hope for our prayer vigil is to pray that God will enable our churches and our Conference to live from our highest ideals and not our deepest fears. Jesus commissions us in the Gospel of John, “To love each other as he has loved us.” (John 15:12 NRSV)

The theme for this year’s vigil reflects our Annual Conference’s priority of extending God’s Extravagant Hospitality to all of God’s creation.

As always, we seek to understand the focus of prayers to the teachings we receive from our scripture. Hebrews 13:1-2 expresses the importance of this theme of hospitality very clearly.

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

In this passage we see that our hospitality is an expression of our love. Also the passage actually provides us a definition for being hospitable. The Greek root for hospitality is *xen* which means foreign and strange, reflecting the word stranger in the passage. But, *xen* also means guest. *Xenos* is defined as foreign and *xenia* is defined as hospitality. What an interesting, but important pairing as we seek understanding for our walk with each other. As one commentary says, “Strangeness produces mutual tension between natives and foreigners. Surely we see this as people from other countries bring their cultural norms with them, and they can, at times, make us uncomfortable in their unfamiliarity. We can see that xeno is the cognate used in our word xenophobia, which means “the fear or hatred of foreigners or strangers or anything foreign or strange to us in our lives.”

The word *philoxenia* is the biblical word translated as hospitality. *Philo* means “to love.” So we can see that philoxenia is the opposite of xenophobia as it calls us “to love the stranger, the foreigner or those whose lives are foreign or strange to us.” As the reflection in the commentary referred to earlier continues, “Hospitality overcomes the tensions and makes an alien a friend.” I would add, it helps take what is foreign or strange to us and helps us find peace and comfort together in our differences.

One of the themes used at Annual Conference was “Invitation to the Table.” Why is this an expression of “Extravagant Hospitality?” In biblical times, if you sat at

table and ate a meal with someone, you were telling everyone who saw you that this person was your friend and acceptable to you. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg claims that the reason Jesus was crucified was because of his table fellowship, the people he chose to break bread and drink wine with. When he ate with tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, women, the poor, he challenged the very social and religious structures and tenets of his day. It was believed that a person was born into the life they received based upon how much God loved them. The lower the social status the less God cared about you. Jesus, in breaking bread with the poor and lowly, challenged this basic religious belief. By sitting at table with those cast to the fringes of society, Jesus was saying that not only are these people acceptable to me, but as the recognized Messiah his table fellowship said they were acceptable to God. This aligned the religious leaders of his day against him.

**Prayer: Please empower me and your church O God that we may have the courage of table fellowship. May we reach out to all inviting them to the table of your grace, where for Jesus gave his life in love for all your children. May we do this in remembrance of him and as an expression of our gratitude for his love that saved us all.**

The prayer vigil is important as it calls us to a life of extravagant hospitality, but we, as the Board of Church and Society, hope it does even more.

There was a made for television movie that aired probably thirty years ago. The movie was about a woman's factory football league. As we think back to this time, it was the time of the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) and the move toward an expanding role for women in our society. The movie focused on one team in the league and what they experienced as they formed a team and played in the league. Some made fun of them; some were angry at them for crossing gender accepted roles; some ignored and isolated them. It was not easy for those who chose to play. (One only wonders how many wanted to, but were too timid to face the consequences.) Toward the end of the movie, the factory was sold, and the new owner did not believe women should be playing football, so he disbanded the team. The closing scene in the movies has the woman who played quarterback walking out of the factory with one of her male friends. She is lamenting (and maybe cursing) how unfair it is that the team was forced to stop playing, just because the owner decided he did not like it. "Who does he think he is," she exclaims, "that he can tell me what I can and can't do. Why should he be able to decide what I like and what I do in my life?" On and on the lamenting continues. Finally, her male friend says, "Hang in there. It will be okay. Someday this will all pass and you will be able to play football again." Wrong answer. The quarterback turns to her friend glaring at him and says, "How long would you have me wait? This is the only life I have to live."

Our focus on "Extravagant Hospitality" is not only to help us embrace all God's children, but to also feel the urgency of those who are not permitted, for whatever reasons, to fully live life as one of God's beloved.

**Prayer: May I have an open heart that helps me embrace all of your children O God. And may I have a restless spirit as I seek to bring the fullness of life to those who are still denied the holiness of your love. Amen.**

Prayer is always a beginning in opening our lives to the presence and leading of God. But, Jesus calls us to a way of living that truly brings a personal understanding to the focus of our prayers. In Luke 6:36 Jesus says, “Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.”

Biblically, compassion means “to enter into another person’s life so fully and completely that you understand it from their perspective.” A more literal meaning is, “so you feel their feelings in your gut.” It is to live an incarnational life, just as God did in the life of Christ.

We feel a passion and a call to action when we know first hand the deep hurt and pain of those we love and care about. When we know a story, when we have seen justice and life denied, in our love we cannot rest, and we surely cannot remain silent.

This year’s prayer vigil draws its focus from two resolutions that were passed at last year’s Annual Conference. One resolution is entitled, “Extravagant Hospitality.” It calls us “to encourage every local church in the Desert Southwest Conference to find one way to extend hospitality beyond the present level of their church’s ministry.”

**Prayer: May I quiet my heart and mind O God, so I may hear your hope for me and my church. Who is crying out in need of my hospitality? What witness of urgency may I bring to those who have the power and willingness to bring life where it is now denied? Help my church have a new vision of how we may be extravagant hosts.”**

The second resolution that has greatly influenced this booklet is the one calling us to be “A Reconciling and Welcoming Conference.” It is one that truly challenges us to an expression of urgency as it says, “We Will Not Be Silent.” It says, “We Will Build A Table.” But even more, “We will invite everyone to it, so all may know the grace of our God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

**Prayer: Who are those upon my heart, who have touched my deep compassion? Whom must I speak out for so they may live as a child of God?”**

There are specific groups mentioned in the resolution that you may find uncomfortable being lifted up. Please know that every group listed is an expression of the deep compassion of some of your brothers and sisters in the Desert Southwest Conference. Part of welcoming and living together in our

reconciliation is the uncomfortableness of knowing we do not always agree. Yet, our ability to care about and love each other in the midst of our differences is an important witness to our community, nation and world.

It was for this reason that Church and Society wrote a short curriculum this year for conducting Holy Conferencing. Part of “Not being Silent” is to help people understand why we feel the way we do. It is living in real community. It is truly living in hospitality in the sense we may need to embrace each other, even when what we think and feel may seem foreign or strange to us.

**Prayer: God, you have told us we are saved, we are reconciled through grace by faith. We are made one in trusting deeply in your unconditional love for us all. Yet, some have shortened this to we are reconciled through faith, through right beliefs, and not unconditional love. Help us to know we are not always one in thought, but we are always one in how much you love us.**

We share what has touched the hearts of some who already feel the urgency to cry out for hospitality for ones they love. If you are interested in reading all the resolutions passed at Annual Conference last year, they are on the Conference’s web page. We share these, as you, too, may want to lift those who are upon the hearts of brothers and sisters already in your prayers as well.

We will not be silent concerning poverty. More and more people are living in poverty in our communities. Every United Methodist and every United Methodist Church is invited to join us in developing personal action plans to provide hospitality to the poor within our churches as well as to prevent poverty and to counter the effects of poverty within the communities served by our churches. We recommend The Council of Bishops resources concerning Children and Poverty as excellent resources for planning a shared ministry in this area.

**Prayer: In our abundance O God, may we never forget those who live in poverty and need. May we provide food, where there is hunger. May we provide shelter for people who lay their heads under a bush for shelter. May we provide healthcare for those whose lives lack coverage for an aching tooth to needed medications. Amen**

We will not be silent concerning racism. Racial and cultural isolation remains a problem for our ministries. (This is especially true today in our climate toward immigrants) We call upon all United Methodists and United Methodist churches to join us in developing personal action plans for building hospitality and gracious welcome across the divisions of race, language, and culture. We seek a dramatic increase in the number of cross racial/cultural appointments. We invite all in our churches to develop personal plans for building racial justice locally and globally.

**Prayer: Gracious God, you gave our human family the same beauty as the rainbow when you created us in our unique personhood. We thank you for the variety of colors and textures of our lives. For the many and varied ways we celebrate our lives and even in how we worship you. May we see the incredible richness in our diversity that enlarges the understandings we receive in our lives. Amen.**

We will not be silent concerning full participation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender persons at all levels in our church and society. We call upon United Methodists to join us in making deliberate plans for hospitality to include LGBT persons in the leadership of our Church. We invite local churches to make clear their willingness to support and celebrate a pastor who is "out" concerning his/her sexual identity. We will seek to remove all discrimination against persons based upon sexual identity.

**Prayer: Gracious God, we know how frightening it is to be different. We lament that people must live hidden lives afraid of the response they may receive if anyone discovers who they really are. How lonely this must be. How hard to know you are loved. May we embrace all Your children, and especially our LGBT brothers and sisters, who are often forced to the fringes of life. May we seek to be like Christ, inviting all into your grace as extravagant hosts. Amen.**

We will not be silent concerning discrimination against people with different mental and physical abilities. Accessibility remains a problem in many of our ministry settings; therefore, we urge church bodies to be sensitive to people with different mental and physical challenges. An accessibility plan needs to be developed for every ministry facility, including campuses, churches, and church agencies. Communication tools need to be expanded to relate more fully with people who have physical, learning, hearing, and visual challenges.

"Extravagant Hospitality" means providing access to the disabled, not only "access", but "meaningful access" that fits the needs of the individual person.

**Prayers: Gracious God, may we overcome any barriers, not only our spiritual but also the physical barriers in our church that prevent others from gathering with us as the family of God. May we do all in our power to insure that anyone who comes to our churches will be able to receive fully the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.**