BIBLE STUDIES FOR THE WEEK OF PRAYER AND COMMITMENT, 28 JAN – 2 FEB. 2014
AND
ORDER OF SERVICE FOR COVENANT SUNDAY, 3 FEBRUARY 2014

BIBLE STUDY NOTES

THEME: CHRIST IS CALLING US: PARTICIPATING IN SUFFERING AND STRUGGLE
“Surprise us O Lord, with your presence; renew our sense of wonder and give us peace and courage to live as your people with a culture for justice and respect for the integrity of all your creation.” UCC Prayer Book

Introduction

As we introduce these Bible reflections for this year’s Week of Prayer, Commitment and order of service for Covenant Sunday, we are mindful of the recent leadership transition that has taken place in our beloved UCCSA. We encouraged to continuously pray for the church and political/civic leaders in the continent of Africa. We should pray and work for the elimination of wars, hunger, poverty, greed and all that denies the people the fullness of life. We are also thankful for the fact that Covenant Sunday was placed early in the year when the momentum of the turn of the New Year should spur us on to greater commitment to the cause of the gospel in every situation. This combined situation of the New Year and new leadership should spur every member of the church to strive to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church and society in which we live and serve. In the vast majority of cases, people in all our member countries, continue to suffer and struggle for food, shelter/housing, health, security, education, employment and other needs for decent living. To all these issues we ask ourselves what should be the way forward? One thing clear is that Christ continues to call the church to be the symbol of hope in an increasingly desperate context.

The contributors for these Bible Reflections have approached the UCCSA theme, “Christ is Calling Us: Participating in Suffering and Struggle”, from their varied points of view as women, men, youth, persons with disability, but all united in re-calling the church to its core value of justice. It is my prayer therefore that you will find these Bible Reflections inspiring and that you will be re-energised for the journey into 2014. May the Lord bless your times of reflection and lead you to deeper wrestling with the pertinent issues raised. More importantly may you be inspired for faithful missional action as you bear public witness as people of faith.

To God be the glory.
Bible Study 1

Topic: “Christ is calling us; participating in suffering and struggle”

Scripture: Luke 1: 48ff

Overview

Significant in this theme and for this period of prayer and commitment are the two phrases that make up the UCCSA theme. First is the call, that ‘Christ is calling us.’ A calling is something special. It is not automatic, because I am Christian I am called, or because I am a UCCSA member I am called. One cannot adopt or create a calling. My sense is that one's calling is that which is latent within you and drives your life. The ordering of your life is therefore determined by that energy within you which gives you purpose sometimes you’re calling may not be so clear early in life, it may be dormant, but it is there and is a gift of God to you. Secondly is that the calling has implications for how we live our lives. A calling cannot be lived out in an empty space, it has a context. In this case we are called to ‘participate in suffering and struggle’ of our communities.

One of my favourite passages and an example of somebody being called for a special purpose is the young woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus. It seems that Mary had gone through several stages of discernment when she was called to be the Mother of Jesus. One might think that this process of discernment started when the angel Gabriel appeared to her but I think it must have grown and developed within side of her over time. She must have recognised how her society was unjustly structured since her childhood and this we can see in the song that she sings in Luke 1: 48ff. The appearance of Gabriel to Mary was just one of the many signs of confirmation within the process of her calling. The other moment of affirmation of what she already knew to be her calling is during her visit to Elizabeth. On this occasion she feels the child leap inside of her. What Mary had felt and known all along have now become real. Her moment of truth has arrived whereby that which she has been feeling deep within her has to eventually be spoken and lived out. One cannot read Mary's song without being moved by the depth of emotions which floods her as she relates and commits to this very special task to which she has been called.

Mary's call was not a comfortable one. It never is. The society in which Mary lived was one of pain, suffering and struggle. If you were not in line with the Roman authorities, your life could easily end in death. It is to this context that Mary commits to serve God, as an oppressed person, in her vision for a new society in one of the most powerful manifestos recorded in scripture popularly known as 'The song of Mary’ or 'the Magnificat.' Mary sees herself called by God to be a participant in bringing about a new society and to correct the wrongs which she has identified. Clearly this would have
been how she raised her children, including Jesus, who was crucified so that the world might be saved from all its evil.

Questions for Group Reflection

1. In our reading of the song of Mary, what do we understand her calling to be in her own society?

2. Reflect on your call and that of your local Church in the light of today's reading.

3. Name and write down one action item through which we can make our theme 'Christ is calling us to participate in suffering and struggle' authentic and in line with Mary's beliefs. This prayer item should be something realistic that we can commit to, live out and pass on to the next generation as set by the example of Mary.

A closing prayer should be done during which members could paste their action items on the alter that they feel they are called to, can commit to and implement at the entrance of this new year 2014 during this week of prayer and commitment to make the UCCSA theme real within our societies.
Bible Study 2

Topic: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep

Scripture: John 21:15-19

Overview:

God’s call to salvation and mission is to and for everyone not to the select few. This means that we are all called and have different roles and responsibilities in the household of God and the world at large. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, we are told of different spiritual gifts in which we are called for. Having different responsibilities in the household of God means that each and every one of us has to respond to his or her own calling and do his/her responsibility diligently. The Church has to carry out its mission, which is God’s mission, as it responds to her calling. In this Bible Study, we are going to reflect on John 21:15-19 as we try to understand our responsibilities as disciples of Christ. In this period of prayer and commitment, we need to commit and recommit ourselves to Christ and our calling.

In John 21:15ff, we read about Jesus re-instating Peter. Simon Peter was a disciple of Jesus and along the way he decided to quit ministry and go back to his old profession as a fishermen. (John 21:3) This was a call to Peter to recommit himself to the ministry and mission of God. Peter is the one who had denied Jesus during the time of his trial because of fear and cowardice, and is the same Peter who quits ministry and goes back to his old profession because Jesus was no more. What lesson do we learn here? Was Peter committed to his call to ministry and mission? The call of God is not easy and a bed of roses as some may think. It comes with responsibilities and challenges. It was not meant to be easy but we need to recommit ourselves and remain rooted in Christ through disciplines of prayer, meditation, study and recreation. As we carry out God’s mission, we should not be prevented by the storms that come our way. We must be bold to proclaim the message of God. We must be a praying church in and out of season, and it is only through this that we can be able to stand firm in Christ and participate in the struggle and suffering of God’s people.

Our call from this text is to tend and feed God’s sheep and lambs. As a Church, we must take care of God’s people. This means practical evangelism as we respond to the needs of the people in a holistic manner. We must be advocates for justice and the voice for the downtrodden. We are called to fight for the rights of the poor and the marginalised.
Questions for Group Reflection

1. What do we understand to be your calling to discipleship and responsibilities as a local church?
2. Jesus instructs Peter to tend and feed the sheep as well as the lambs. What does this mean to us as a Church today? Who are the sheep and who are the lambs?
3. Carry out a ‘Mission audit’ in your locality and make a Mission response plan for your church. (For more ideas on doing Mission please refer to the UCCSA Mission Manual, Tell me the old, old story.)
Bible Study 3

Topic: Give us this day our daily bread


Overview:

Give us today our daily bread // Give us each day our daily bread (NIV) These variations of the reading of this part of the Lord’s Prayer could be better translated to read: Give us today, our bread for the morrow! This somewhat refers to the assurance that God’s providence encompasses the present as well as the future. It is also significant that the first petition in the Lord’s Prayer is the one about bread. As we shall see below that “bread” has various shades of meaning and refers essentially to a means of one’s basic sustenance. It talks of the essential and not the luxury which is usually at the expense of others.

The petition ‘Give us this day our daily bread refers to the physical and spiritual needs of the disciples. To pray for our daily bread is to pray for the basic necessities of life. The sharing of bread with the needy is among the main demands for a justice driven community. Sharing bread ranks higher than religious observances such as fasting as these count for nothing if done without concern for the other people.

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help and he will say: “Here am I”   Isaiah 58:6-9 (NRSV)

WHAT ABOUT OUR DAILY BREAD TODAY?

The fact that we are doing this Bible study shows that we are concerned about the real issues of life as it affects us today. Our daily bread concerns the very basic and minimal human right and that of any other living creatures. Life must be sustained otherwise it cannot last. People have to work in order to have food for their families. It starts with the farmer as he/she works on the land to produce food. The process of food production has always been covered with many pitfalls. And these include access to land for farming, water (or the availability of rainfall), farming inputs, harvesting, market forces, costing and sales, storage and grain reserves of both grain and seed, etc. These can be seen as the hazards that people have to negotiate in a very hostile socio-economic and political environment.
The ‘hazards’ in the line of production of bread that are mentioned above, tend to affect the poorest of every nation. Bread has become a monopoly of the rich and powerful. They make laws so subtle that one cannot see their monopolizing tendencies. For instance, the principle of “willing-seller to willing-buyer” in the case of land makes it difficult if not impossible for the poor to access good farming land where there is the best rainfall.

And as long as the tentacles of the land tenure Act are still undone, it will be difficult for the ordinary person, the one who is not “bankable”, to access land and start producing bread, Our Daily Bread.

Questions for Group Reflection:

1) Share your experiences or observations on the challenges of accessing “daily bread” in your area. Who are the people most likely to have little or no access to daily bread in your area?

2) Identify the hurdles that people in your area or city have to overcome in order to access bread?

3) Make suggestions on how the church could deal with the hurdles identified above.

4) Make practical suggestions for a Mission programme based on the Lord’s Prayer “Give us today our bread for everyday.”

PRAYER-THOUGHT:

“Lord God, creator of the earth and all that is within it, we pray for people who lack bread or the means of producing enough food for themselves. Grant our leaders hunger and thirst for justice in the form of land for the production of food. May it be that no person may be threatened by hunger, malnutrition or scarcity. Teach us what is enough for today, and to share with those who have less than enough; Lord, give us this day our daily bread, We pray through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who himself is the Bread of Life, Amen.”
Bible Study 4

Topic: The earth and all that is in it, belongs to the LORD

Scripture: Psalm 24: 1-2

Overview:

Psalms 24: 1

"1 The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, 
   the world, and all who live in it; 
2 for he founded it on the seas 
   and established it on the waters.” (NIV)

Overview:

The psalmist reminds us that the earth belongs to God. All of the earth resources and its abundance including the people, trees, flowers, animals and minerals belong to God. More than 2000 years ago the psalmist concluded this through revelation and from his observation of nature. This is also the conclusion of many scientists today. Still when we study history and listen to the daily news reports we see an unsettling contrast from that recorded in Psalm 24. Wars have been fought for land and the earth’s resources for centuries. Many of us live in communities that have direct experiences of being made landless through acts of greed such as colonialism and apartheid. Many communities throughout the world have also experienced the negative impact and effects of an increasing lack of regard and care for the environment.

Psalm 24 encourages us to reflect on the sovereignty of God over the earth and creation. Such a reflection should encourage us to recognise that we are stewards of the earth and its resources. As stewards we must act to take individual and collective responsibility to care for all God’s people and all of God’s creation. We must be willing to stand in solidarity with those who are poor, unjustly treated, marginalised and defrauded of their rights to land and benefit from mineral resources of their countries. We can become advocates in communities with those who are working for peace and justice. We must act to take care of our environment. We can avoid littering, support recycling initiatives and buy and use products that lessen the impact on the environment. We should also advocate for proper usage of the land and mineral resources that we have access to as churches and organisations.

Suggested Prayer Response

Recognising that the earth and the fullness thereof is a gift from our gracious God, and that we are called to cherish, nurture and provide loving stewardship for the earth's resources.

And recognising that life itself is a gift, and a call to responsibility, joy and celebration, let us make the following declarations:
1. We declare ourselves to be world citizens.
2. We commit ourselves to lead an ecologically sound life.
3. We commit to share our personal wealth with the world's poor.
4. We commit ourselves to join with others in reshaping institutions in order to bring about a more just global society in which each person has full access to the needed resources for their physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual growth.
5. We commit ourselves to occupational accountability, and in so doing we seek to avoid the creation of products which cause harm to others.
6. We affirm the gift of our bodies, and commit ourselves to responsible nourishment and physical well-being.
7. We commit ourselves to examine continually our relations with others, and to attempt to relate honestly, morally and lovingly to those around us.
8. We commit to renewal through prayer, meditation, study and exercise.
9. We commit ourselves to responsible participation in a community of faith.

(Slightly adapted from "Visions of a Hungry World" by Thomas G Pettepiece Quoted in Faith for Daily Living Number 460 - January/February 2014)

Questions for Group Reflection:

1) **Consider the suggested commitments above and choose the one/s that you would concentrate upon this year.**

2) **What specific actions can you take in your daily life to live out the commitments and declarations?**
Bible Study 5

Topic: Identity, Mission and Relationship in the Body of Christ

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31

Overview:

One of the enduring images of the church is that of the “body”. The apostle Paul used this image of the church as the ‘body of Christ’ in his attempt to deal with the problem of disunity in the church at Corinth. The Corinthians were so divided that they had lost all signs of being a church. Some of their members were claiming allegiance to Apollos or Cephas or Paul. (1 Corinthians 3: 3-6). The main part of Paul’s advice on this matter is contained in the passage for our Bible study today, 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31. The simple point is that the church, as the body of Christ, has many members just as the human body is made up of many members. As such it is important for the members of the body to operate in unity with complimentary roles. There is no way in which one part of the body can survive or be useful on its own in isolation from the rest of the body. It looks so simple and straightforward a point that one wonders why the Corinthians were not getting it! But when one looks at how the church is still riddled with divisions today, one begins to appreciate the depth of the problem. It was not just a lack of reasoning on the part of the church at Corinth. It was a basic identity and relational issue that the members at Corinth failed to grasp. The new identity of belonging to Christ through Baptism and continuing in Him through Holy Communion meant that the members would have to relate to one another in a new way as they were now members of one body. It meant that to be ‘church’ would no longer be on singular terms but on plural terms with others. And the ‘others’ would not be chosen on the basis of friendship, tribe, race or style of worship but on the basis of the fact of also belonging to Christ. It is sad to find that the church has not moved very far on the question of unity since the times of Paul. We are not necessarily more united as church today than in the early days of the church. As members of the body of Christ, we have been given gifts not for selfish use but for the sake of the greater body of Christ. The gifts we have are meant to benefit the whole church as it carries out its mission mandate. The church exists for the Mission of God in the world, starting from where we are. The church’s calling is to spread the message of the gospel by making the world a better place for all creation. We are called to discern the signs of the times, and to take responsibility for our actions. We are also called to confront the forces of sin and death, to face down false messiahs, to open our lives and the lives of our churches to the witness of the Holy Spirit. We have today become even more aware that the challenge posed by senseless, brutal violence against women and children and so many innocent people everywhere.
As we look ahead, irrespective of our differences, let us continue to be bound together as Children of God, As Africans, and to maintain a disciplined focus on the task of developing our churches and communities for the benefit of future generation hosting national unity as our solid bond. The starting point for the church is the efforts to find healing and restoration for our badly wounded world and lives is to start with faith and confidence in the Bible, the word of God. To re-read the same old stories and parables of the Bible with the intention to find fresh and relevant messages that give hope to the hopeless.

We must stand unwaveringly on the promises of the word of God for our world and our lives. I long for a time where Church will be conveying the Gospel, its joy and its comfort, to challenge, refresh and inspire. I have a dream that one day UCCSA will be a place where all are accepted, whatever their background, whatever their past, whatever their pain. This Union is indeed God’s work because we are united together as one Body in Christ. I believe that in Christ there is a future and that Christ is calling to participate in the suffering and struggle.

Questions for Group Reflection:

1) What is our identity in the UCCSA?

2) What characterises our relationship in the UCCSA?

3) What are the major threats to our unity in the UCCSA how can we eliminate these threats?

4) What do you see as the main calling of your local church?

5) What can help to keep us together in unity in the UCCSA?
Bible Study 6

Topic: Can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Scripture: John 1: 35-42; 43-51

Overview:

This story is the second in a series that John has put together about the call of the first disciples of Jesus. It should be noted that the disciples had been associated with John the Baptist and they had thus been prepared to receive and work with Jesus when he began his ministry. In the first story, John 1:35-42, the focal question, which was in response to Jesus question, "What are you looking for?" , addressed to the two disciples, Teacher, where are you staying? It is what lies behind such questions that is of greater and deeper importance than the simple and factual answers that one could give. The questions, “Teacher, where are you staying”, and Nathanael's question or remark, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth", have a feeling of prejudice about them and can been summarized together as “Can any good Teacher/Master and indeed the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, come out of Nazareth? Jesus proved that one did not have to come from the so-called important places in order to contribute to wider society. God does not judge us by our places of origin or other superficial considerations, but by the content or spirit of love and grace in our actions. It is interesting to note that Jesus’ first words to Nathanael were positive and affirming ones, even surprising to Nathanael,: “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” How often are we affirming of one another instead of being pre-judicial and negative?

We apply the word to our context.

In these days of multi-directional movements of people, the question of where one comes from is raised quite often and for a number of reasons. Sometimes ones’ treatment is based on where one comes from or where one stays. Ones’ location or place of origin can be used as a basis for preferential or negative treatment by some.

- Allow people to share their experiences and observations where issues of origin and residence have been used to discriminate against others?

- What other bases of discrimination have members of your group experienced in church and/or society? (For example, people with disabilities, people from outside your country, Afro-phobia, zenophobia.)
For our prayer and commitment

- Pray that all forms of discrimination and prejudice can be acknowledged, confronted and eliminated from the Church and society at all levels.

- Commit yourselves to prayer and work for an affirmative attitude and treatment of other people and thereby spread a positive spirit in church and society.

- Commit yourselves to a plan of action that will show that the church is an inclusive community and thereby encourage acceptance of all the people.
ORDER OF SERVICE FOR COVENANT AND COMMITMENT SUNDAY

3 FEBRUARY 2014

PROCESSIONAL HYMN

LIGHTING OF CANDLES (OR OTHER SYMBOLIC ACTION SUCH AS FILLING UP THE JARS/JUGS WITH WATER OR WATERING A POT PLANT)

GREETING

GOD CALLS THE PEOPLE TO WORSHIP

All you who are thirsty: This is the place for water,
All you who are hungry: This is the place to be fed,
Why spend your money on what is not food? Why pay for that which does not satisfy?
Here without money, here without price: We may all enjoy the bread of heaven.
God speaks: and all who listen will have life in fullness, Amen.

SCRIPTURE SENTENCES: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant which I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it within their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord”, for they shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31: 31-34)

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.” (John 13:34-35)

PRAYERS OF ADORATION

“Our faces are sometimes lined with worry, O God, our days are full of stress and struggle, and we often face discouraging results.

Yet we come today, grateful that in the midst of this crowded and troubled world, Jesus was born, lived and died full of grace and truth. We ask you Lord for a share of the same grace and truth as we seek to serve and worship you with justice for all people.

Surprise us O Lord, with your presence; renew our sense of wonder and give us peace and courage to live as your people with a culture for justice and respect for the integrity of all your creation.
Strengthen us to serve our fellow human beings, especially the poor, widows, refugees and aliens and the down-trodden people in this world until at last your reign of justice and peace has become a reality on this earth. May you be glorified in us as in Jesus Christ, in whose name and power we pray, Amen.”

THE LORD’S PRAYER (Nicaraguan) (Silence before saying the responses)

Leader: Do not say ‘Father’ if you do not behave like the child of God each day;
And do not say ‘Our’ if you only think about yourself; [Silence]
Cong: Our Father who art in heaven
Leader: Do not say ‘Hallowed be your name’ if you don’t honour that name. Do not say your kingdom come if you if you are weighed down with material goods. [Silence]
Cong: Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come
Leader: Do not say ‘Your will be done’ if you do not accept the hard times as well; [Silence] And do not say ‘As it is in heaven’ if you only ever think of yourself; [Silence]
Cong: Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven
Leader: Do not say ‘Our daily bread’ if you have no concern for the hungry, orphans, widows, foreigners and the poor; [Silence]
Cong: Give us this day our daily bread
Leader: Do not say ‘Forgive us our sins’ if you remain angry with your neighbours; [Silence]
Cong: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us
Do not say ‘Lead us not into temptation’ if you intend to continue living selfishly; [Silence] and Do not say ‘Deliver us from evil’ if you will not make a stand against injustice; [Silence]
Cong: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
Leader: Do not say ‘Amen’ without considering the words of your prayer;
Cong: For the kingdom and the power and glory are yours, now and forever, Amen.

HYMNS AND CHORUSES
NOTICES
OFFERTORY

READING OF SCRIPTURE


Hymn| Sermon| Hymn

THE LORD’S SUPPER

COVENANT RENEWAL
Leader:
And now as one people within the household of God, in the unity of the faith, in the communion of the saints, in love and goodwill to all, Let us in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, give ourselves afresh to the Lord and to one another in joyous covenant.
Congregation:
We believe in God our heavenly Lord
We confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour;
We depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit;
We seek to live in God’s presence according to all that God has made known and will make known to us
We covenant to worship, work and witness together in the fellowship of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa
For the building up of the body of Christ and the manifesting of the reign of God on earth”
Leader: May Almighty God, guide and guard all your people, grant that the covenant we have made here today on earth be sealed in heaven, through our Lord Jesus Christ,
Congregation: Amen.

OUR COMMITMENTS
- We, members of the ------------ UCCSA, do commit ourselves to:
- Continuously proclaim the Lordship and the love of Christ Jesus in Church and society
- Be a welcoming, embracing, caring and inclusive church, never to discriminate, ignore, reject or undermine any person or group.
- Pursue the fullness of life given by Christ Jesus
- Fight all forms of corruption within the church and society
- Re-reading the Bible in the light of our experience and mission
- Journeying together in the search for transformation of the systems that deny justice, equality and human rights
- Become what God wants us to be

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING: The grace of God, deeper than our imagination; the strength of Christ, stronger than our need; And the communion of the Holy Spirit, richer than our togetherness; guide and sustain us today and in all our future. Amen.