Journey to Opportunity, Journey to Learn:
A Reflection on Public Education in God’s World Today
National Council of Churches
Committee on Public Education and Literacy

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http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/specialministries.htm#anchorwgpel
Our faith is a journey into deeper reflection. “Compassionate God,” begins our first reflection, “cause me to have a mind more like that of Christ,” for, “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” (Philippians 4:8)

This 40 day study guide is a collaborative project of the members of the National Council of Churches Committee on Public Education and Literacy. We have come to believe that the conversation about public school reform in the press and the conversation in Congress has gone badly astray, we invite you to journey with us to think more deeply about these things.

We have created a resource to help people of faith make connections between their faith by starting with scriptural/biblical principles and the complex issues associated with the public responsibility to educate all of the nation’s children. This guide suggests some ways that people of faith can respond to the great need and serve as advocates for public education.

In May of 2010, the NCC Committee on Public Education and Literacy drafted a Pastoral Letter, “An Alternative Vision for Public Education,” and sent it to the Council’s Governing Board for adoption. The Pastoral Letter lifts up core values of the church that we have come to believe have been lost when we think about public policy affecting the primary public institutions our society has entrusted with the mission of educating our nation’s fifty million children. Sharing the concern of the Committee, members of the Council’s Governing Board unanimously adopted the Pastoral Letter and sent it to President Obama, U. S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and members of Congress. You will find the Pastoral Letter posted on the Council’s website, http://www.nccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf. We urge you to read it as you join us for this study.

While in the past it was sufficient for advocates to address public education policies at the state level where control of public education has been historically lodged, today federal policies now affect every public school and classroom in a direct way through the testing policies of the No Child Left Behind Act. But while federal policy now has more direct impact
on public schools with the stated purpose of closing achievement gaps, it has not only failed to address desperate conditions in the schools of our poorest communities, but it has also punished rather than helping children and educators trapped in inadequate schools. Today’s concerns are systemic. How is opportunity distributed to children through the vast system we call public education?

You may not be aware of, nor is it necessary to know, the details of the Race to the Top program or the contentious debate that has now dragged the reauthorization of the federal education law into the fourth year past its scheduled renewal. The reflections and calendar of activities in these pages, while not focusing on the specific policy details, will help familiarize you with some of the ethical concerns underneath this debate. While we may not be able to agree on every aspect of the debate, in the words of National Council of Churches General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon, “we do stand united in our conviction that the church is called to speak for justice in public education. We affirm that each life is infinitely precious, created in the image of God, and therefore, that every child should be given opportunity for fullness of life, including a quality and affordable education.”

Commenting on this 40 day study guide, Kinnamon continued, “The material for each week offers reflection on a biblical text, and then relates it to pressing issues of the day—lack of civility in public debate, endemic poverty, and, especially, the urgent need for reform of this nation’s educational system. The texts reminded me, for example, of how often we don’t recognize and nurture the gifts God has given to every child. Nor do we give the education of our children the place it deserves in the list of social priorities. In short, these are meditations that have the potential to move us to repentance and action; and those are crucial elements of any faithful journey.”

We encourage you to use this as a guide for personal devotion and/or as the basis for group study, in an adult education class, a social action committee, a commission on Christian education, a women’s group or an intergenerational church school class. Each week there are activities for six days. There is a rhythm to the study—reflect, perceive-lament-confess, love, attend, do, and pray.

Please join us in this justice journey.
First Week, Day 1  Reflect
Scripture: Philippians 4:2-9
Think on These Things
Rev. Garland Pierce, Associate General Secretary, National Council of Churches, African Methodist Episcopal Church

Centering Prayer

Compassionate God, cause me to have a mind more like that of Christ. Cause my thoughts to dwell in things that edify others and myself and glorify you. The honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and excellent things—make these the subjects of my thoughts, my words, and my actions. In Christ’s name, Amen.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)

Here we have a teacher’s challenge to his students. Paul writes to the faith community of Philippi, with whom he has taught, worshipped, served, and struggled. It is clear that there are struggles in this faith community, without and within. As Paul encourages two leaders in the community in particular to find resolution to their differences, he also commends the faithful response of gentleness. Likewise, he encourages prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. This teacher reminds the community of the principles he has taught and the ways of relating to one another in community.

Paul then lifts up principles or standards—truth, honor, justice, purity, that which is pleasing and commendable, excellence, and that which is worthy of praise. Many biblical scholars note that these principles were not exclusive to the Christian faith but were lifted as ideals even in the broader Greek culture. Such principles certainly reflect the mind of Christ; but, what are we to make that these standards are not exclusively Christian? Might Paul have been signaling to the Philippian Christians and Christians today that there are standards of relating in community that can serve as common ground for our work for the common good?

The notion of common good seems to have been lost as of late in a climate of rigid partisan alignment and vitriolic debate on one social issue or another. Often there seems to be little agreement and even less tolerance to hear out and discuss differing opinions and approaches. Resolution appears elusive and civility sorely absent. In the public discourse related to public education, we cannot afford such division that will only leave our children—often poor children and children of color—as the victims. We must all appeal to those higher standards to which we hold and strive to be of the same or at least similar minds as the apostle urges.
The National Council of Churches (NCC) Pastoral Letter on education reform states:

“Our biblical heritage and our theology teach us that we live in community, not solely in the marketplace. As we strive to move our imperfect world closer to the realm of God, we recognize that we are all responsible for making sure that public schools, as primary civic institutions, embody our love for one another. We are called to create institutions that serve families and children with hospitality. We are called to work as citizens for the resources that will support a climate of trust and community within each public school.”

As people of faith we are called to pray, reflect and act in pursuit of the common good. Access to quality education for all our nation’s children certainly is one such common good. Paul calls for thinking on these higher standards; but, this is not mere contemplation. The Greek is better rendered “calculate”—take fully into account—weigh them, examine them deeply. We are called to fully and deeply calculate the cost of these greater goods for the common good as if we plan to commit to the actions required to achieve them. And just perhaps, we are to do so within and beyond our immediate communities. Paul promises that in doing so—praying, reflecting, working toward the “same mind,” and calculating on the greater good, the God of peace will be with us. With this assurance, the impossible suddenly seems possible.

Questions for Reflection

- In current public discourse or in your faith community, where do you find the discussion and contemplation on the honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and excellent things? If these are not the subject of the discourse, what are the small things that can be done to shift the discourse? What resources do we have at our disposal to start this process?
- With the common good foremost in our minds, who are those partners who may worship differently than we do or have different ways of understanding the world or political perspectives that we might enter into dialogue about the education of all our children, appealing to the highest standards that we share?

Day 2 Perceive – Lament – Confess

The reflections each week in this study guide explore concerns raised by the National Council of Churches Governing Board in a Pastoral Letter sent to President Obama, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and Congress on May 18, 2010. Today, read this pastoral letter, http://www.ncccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf, and think about the way it defines principles that are central for the common good. Are the values in the Pastoral Letter the values of the church or are they also recognized as central for civil society? Do you agree with the values in the Pastoral Letter?

Prayer

God of Peace, your presence with us is promised and needed. Make it known even as we set our minds and calculations on things that are desperately needed yet seem beyond our grasp and attainment. Knowing you are near, we strive on. In the name of the Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.
Day 3   Love
As you walk or drive around your neighborhood or community today, pass by one of your community’s public schools. Stop for a few moments to reflect. Even though the press is filled these days with stories of problems in public schools, think about the positive things this school or your community’s schools in general contribute to your community’s overall well being. Do you have memories of experiences with this school as a parent or even as a student there many years ago? Who are the people in that school who blessed your life, your children’s lives, or your neighbors’ lives? What experiences at this school have made the most difference in your family’s life? How has this local school impacted the lives of children in your church and community? So often today we idealize private institutions, but today consider especially the blessings of this school that have public consequences.

Day 4   Attend
“Citizens in a democracy must continually assess the performance of their public institutions. But the quality and language of that evaluation matter … Neither the sweeping rhetoric of public school failure nor the narrow focus on test scores helps us here. Both exclude the important, challenging work done daily in schools across the country, thereby limiting the educational vocabulary and imagery available to us. This way of talking about schools constrains the way we frame problems and blinkers our imagination … There have been times in our history when the idea of “the public” has been invested with great agency and hope. Such is not the case now … We have to do better than this. We have to develop a revitalized sense of public life and public education.” — Mike Rose  Why School?, pp. 155-157

Day 5   Do
Read one of the important blogs about public education. One is the “Bridging Differences” blog that is published on Tuesday and Thursday on the site of Education Week http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/, and another is the daily blog, “The Answer Sheet,” on the website of the Washington Post http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/ It is interesting to familiarize yourself with blogs . . . each with a specific point of view. Compare and contrast the point of view of the writers of these blogs with the point of view on public education you are seeing in the mainstream press.

Day 6   Invitation to Pray
• Pray for the ability to “calculate” those higher principles to which we are called.
• Pray that partners for this work and approaches for working together might be identified.
Second Week, Day 7  Reflect
Scripture: Exodus 17: 1-7
Resources in the Wilderness
Ms. Martha Bettis Gee, Presbyterian Church, USA

Centering Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit. As you worked in and through Moses to release the water deep within the wilderness rock, make me receptive to your will. Break open my mind to receive Your Word. Amen.

The Lord said to Moses, . . . “Strike the rock and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.”
Moses did so . . . (Exodus 17: 5a, 6b and c)

After the hardships of slavery, the uncertainties of plagues and the angel of death passing in the night, after the terror of the flight and the crossing of the Red Sea, the Israelites were facing the hard reality of life in the wilderness—not for days or weeks, but for months and years. Freedom came with a price, and that price was not knowing where the next meal would come from. And now, there was no water either—none at all. It was natural to be discouraged, and to cry out to God. If God was really there, then surely the Holy One would provide for their needs, if necessary making water materialize out of thin air.

But God is not the One to be put to the test. In response to the Israelites’ cries, God responded to Moses, not with advice on how to deal with the people’s complaints, but with directions on how to find water. Rather than a miraculous flood of water out of nowhere, God worked in and through Moses to release the water coursing through deep rock formations.

The issues that impact public education today can seem like an intractable wilderness experience, too. The more we try to break free into real solutions, the more we seem to wander further and further away, aimlessly drifting toward barrenness instead of life. If God really cared about the fifty million children in our public education system, we say to ourselves, God would provide for their needs, if necessary making the will and the resources materialize out of thin air.

As it was in the wilderness, so it can be with the things needed to make our public schools the best they can be for all children. Like the water deep within the rock in the wilderness, it is not for lack of material resources that our schools languish. The resources our children so desperately need are there, but too many children in too many schools lack access to them. The children of privilege and prosperity often have
the benefit of a rigorous curriculum, highly trained teachers, textbooks and science labs and sports facilities in clean, healthy surroundings. Yet too many children of color and those in families living in poverty attend schools with crumbling facilities, outdated textbooks, and no computer or science labs. These children are not afforded the opportunities that would allow their God-given potential to flourish.

In the Pastoral Letter, the member communions of the National Council of Churches of Christ call on the President “. . . to expand educational opportunity by providing additional support for the schools that serve our nation's poorest children.” The letter names what is rarely addressed, the cavernous resource opportunity gaps underneath the achievement gaps so often referenced today. Only when all children are guaranteed a quality early childhood education, highly qualified teachers, a curriculum that will prepare them for college, work and community, and equitable instructional resources as well as access to health care and enrichment programs like after school and summer programs, can we truly say that we have opened the door of opportunity for all. It is up to us to open ourselves to God’s working in and through us to make it so.

Questions for Reflection

- What disparities in resources exist within my school district? Where are teachers, administrators, and children and families in need of the action and advocacy of the faith community?
- How are schools in my state funded? Am I willing to take on a larger tax burden in order to ensure resources for the schools that need them?
- What enrichment activities are available for all children in my district, not just some? What preschool experiences are available?

Day 8 Perceive – Lament – Confess

Poverty and segregation by race and ethnicity are wound together today across America’s big cities. “Schools remain highly unequal, sometimes in terms of dollars and very frequently in terms of teachers, curriculum, peer groups, connections with colleges and jobs, and other key aspects of schooling… Segregated nonwhite schools usually are segregated by poverty as well as race… These schools have the most students with chronic health and developmental problems, the most disruptive neighborhood conditions.” — Gary Orfield, “Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21st Century Challenge,” The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA, January 2009, pp. 15-16.

Prayer

Gracious God, from whom all good things come, we know that even in a time of economic scarcity, resources are not lacking. For some children, there is an abundance, but for far too many, there is a tragic void in what is needed in order to reach their God-given potential. We pray that you will work in and through us so that we can be the means by which the muted impulse toward the common good is released and given voice. By your Holy Spirit, stir us up and galvanize the political and community and personal will to tap the resources all children need so that they might freely flow. Amen.
Day 9  Love

Think about the school teacher who made the most difference in your life or in your child’s or grandchild’s life. Is this teacher alive and do you have an address where you can contact her or him? If so, write and mail a note to share your appreciation. If not, make a point of telling the story of this teacher to someone in your family or your church.

Day 10  Attend

“Our schools cannot be improved by those who say that money does not matter . . . Ample resources do not guarantee success, but it is certainly more difficult for schools to succeed without them . . . If we are serious about narrowing and closing the achievement gap, then we will make sure that the schools attended by our neediest students have well-educated teachers, small classes, beautiful facilities, and a curriculum rich in the arts and sciences . . . Our schools cannot be improved if we ignore the disadvantages associated with poverty that affect children’s ability to learn.” — Diane Ravitch, The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education, pp. 228-220.

Day 11  Do

Print out the bulletin insert the National Council of Church Committee on Public Education and Literacy has created about unequal opportunity at school, http://www.ncccusa.org/elmcootl.pdf. Share the link with your pastor and inquire about when this resource can be inserted into your congregation’s Sunday bulletin.

Day 12  Invitation to Pray

- Pray that you will be open to God’s working in and through you on behalf of the millions of children in the public schools.
- Ask that your consciousness be raised about disparities in your district and state between better resourced schools and those that lack the basics needed for children to thrive. Pray that your ears be receptive to hearing the situations that cry out for a just response.
- Spend some time in quiet reflection, seeking to discern where the Holy Spirit is moving you to respond.
Third Week, Day 13  
Reflect
Scripture: John 4: 1-30
In Spirit and in Truth – Race, Class, Gender Aside
Ms. Julie Taylor, Women’s Division, United Methodist Church

Centering Prayer

Help me, O God, in these moments of reflection, to focus on You and You alone. Let my heart be still from the worries of today so that I can hear your Spirit’s voice speaking to my heart. Thank you for your grace and peace. Amen.

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. (v. 22)

The “Samaritan Woman” is one of the most well-known and told biblical stories. The conversation between her and Jesus is an interesting contrast in behavior. First, we must understand that women in that day were considered less than men, more like property. Second, we must understand that Samaritans were hated by Jews and vice versa because they remained in Israel during the time when Israel was overthrown and many of them intermarried with the “foreigners” during this time.

As we read this account, we can discern the realities of the situation. The woman herself notes two distinct hesitations Jesus should have about talking with her. She asks him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” Later, in verse 27, the author notes the disciples’ puzzlement that Jesus was speaking to a woman and even speculates about their unspoken questions.

It was a pattern of Jesus to reach out to and recognize the marginalized and despised – Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors, poor, women, mentally ill, demon possessed, and so forth. Jesus reached across the Jewish prejudice against race and gender and ability and religion to engage human beings. Acts 1:8 follows Jesus’ story with some of his last words that power will be sent to his disciples so they can be his witnesses to “Jerusalem, Judea, SAMARIA and the uttermost parts of the earth.” In this Jesus is covering more than just the typical Jewish understanding of “where” the good news was to be shared; it was with those they knew, those familiar, those far away but also those they despised. The story of Acts relays the response of the early disciples to truly follow Jesus’ intention in 9:31. It says, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up …” We know that this new Christian faith opened itself as Jesus did. Christians reached out to the marginalized with the love of God.

The conversation between Jesus and this woman is a bit cryptic but she is direct and clear in what she asks. On his part, Jesus is pushing her to a much deeper truth. He is getting to the
heart of the matter and to her own heart. His language is spiritual and revelatory. She cannot hide the truth about her own life from him as she admits she has no husband and he follows her admission with his own knowledge that she has had five husbands and is with someone now who is not her husband. But this is not the point of this conversation. He is moving her to a deeper dialogue about the worship of God, the nature of God and who Jesus really is. In spirit and in truth – she got it! Do we?

Too many students in today's public education system are missing the mark in their educational development simply because they are being marginalized by their race or economic status. Much of school funding is dependent on property taxes, a system that leaves some children receiving the best teachers, facilities and supplies while other children have inadequate teachers, dilapidated facilities and insufficient supplies to provide the most effective learning environment. Add to that those students who come from impoverished homes who have hunger, transportation, housing and other support issues. Even if our own children's educational situation is a good one, too many on the margins are not served in the current system.

In the recent Pastoral Letter from the NCCC, one of the concerns listed is that of resource opportunity gaps. The letter calls for a “comparable opportunity to learn that includes a quality early childhood education, highly qualified teachers, a curriculum that will prepare students for college, work and community, and equitable instructional resources.”

Questions for Reflection

- In what ways are people marginalized from the church today?
- In what ways are children/students marginalized from our schools today? How does Jesus’ example call us to do better?
- In what ways can you as an individual help to insist that the good news be extended to all the people in your community? In what ways can you as a church create an environment in which everyone is welcome?
- In what ways can you, as an individual, help to insist that every child in your community/state has an equal opportunity to learn? In what ways can you, as a church, help to influence your community/state to provide an equal opportunity to learn for every child?

Day 14 Perceive – Lament – Confess

Scholar of education and culture James A. Banks believes that although many in our society have traditionally assumed that schools can best help students cherish our national identity by Americanizing them in the melting pot, schools can instead help most by welcoming the stranger and making children feel their own culture is appreciated at school: “Individuals can develop a … commitment … to their nation state and the national culture only when they believe that they are a meaningful part of the nation state and that it acknowledges, reflects, and values their cultural group and them as individuals.” “A significant challenge facing educators … is how to respect and acknowledge community cultures… while at the same time helping to construct a democratic public community with an overarching set of values to which all students will have a commitment and with which all will identify.” — James A. Banks, “Introduction,” in Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives, 2006.
Prayer

Dear Jesus, Help us to receive others as you did, without any prejudice, judgment or preconceptions. Let us extend the hand of fellowship as you did, recognizing that there are those who do not have the same access, privilege, opportunity as others. Inspire us to do all we can to support our local public schools so that every child will be free to learn and learn well. May we follow your model of love and care. Amen.

Day 15  Love

Talk with your pastor about a way your congregation could express thanks to the teachers at a school near you. Perhaps you could set in place a plan where members of your congregation could take breakfast one morning, something simple like fresh bagels and cream cheese or a coffee cake, to the educators at a local school near your church. It could be for a special occasion or just to start the week off well on a Monday morning. Be sure you take a thank you note to the teachers along with your goodies.

Day 16  Attend

Jonathan Kozol writes a tribute to the late Fred Rogers, television friend of children and ordained Presbyterian minister, who did his best to make his television neighborhood inclusive like God’s neighborhood. Kozol writes about visiting with Mr. Rogers an elementary school and a day care center in a very poor neighborhood of New York City, where a child greeted Mr. Rogers, “wrapped his arms around his head and gave him a big kiss right in the middle of his forehead, then looked him in the eyes and told him, ‘Welcome to my neighborhood!’” Kozol worries that, “Mr. Rogers’ legacy is viewed as ‘soft’ and ‘too impressionistic’ in an age when very hard and measurable outcomes have been stringently demanded by the overseers of public education, whose certitude about the practices that they enforce seems nearly absolute. I pray that teachers of all ages will reject the cheap rewards of overstated absolutes and honor instead the self effacing virtues of the kindest man and wisest friend of children we may have the opportunity to know for many years.” — Jonathan Kozol, Letters to a Young Teacher, 2007, pp. 231-236.

Day 17  Do

Make a phone call to a public school teacher or administrator who is a member of your congregation. Ask this expert how this year’s state budget may affect the staffing patterns or course offerings at the school where this person works. Are classes likely to grow larger? Will elective offerings or co-curricular activities be affected like sports or music or debate? Ask this expert whether the school has gained programs and services during this person’s tenure, or whether funding constraints have limited the school’s offerings. Ask this expert whether surrounding districts are faring similarly to your own district financially or whether there are significant disparities in the Opportunity to Learn.
Day 18  Invitation to Pray

- Take time to pray about whether your church is open to everyone. Offer prayers of thanksgiving for those who made you welcome.
- Pray that your public schools make all families feel welcome and have adequate resources to create the conditions that will enable all children to look for a bright future.
- Pray that your public schools can be made more welcoming and that your state can find a way even in these difficult times to provide Opportunity to Learn for all children.
- Pray for discernment as you try to learn about the real challenges for public schools and pray for the words to advocate for change.
Fourth Week, Day 19  Reflect
Scripture: Matthew 25:31-45
When Did We Seek You?
When Did We Perceive You?
Ms. Julie Taylor, Women’s Division, United Methodist Church

Centering Prayer

In these moments, help me, O Holy One, to understand as you understand.
Amen.

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (v. 40)

This is a passage used most often to justify all the works of charity. It is the measurement of how the church does mission and ministry. What church has not utilized this Scripture for a youth work project or missions emphasis? It is the basis for any social justice emphasis embraced by the church. Jesus provides a long teaching segment in this part of Matthew, and here he is providing one of the key elements of the nature of God – that the Spirit lives in “the least of these.”

As the judgment of this passage unfolds, Jesus is dividing people into two groups. When the questions are asked, they have the same criteria – what did you do for the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned? Both groups respond that they did not recognize Jesus that way. Mother Teresa once offered this prayer,

“Mary, Mother of Jesus, give me your heart so beautiful, so pure, so immaculate, so full of love and humility that I may be able to receive Jesus in the Bread of Life, love Him as You loved Him, and serve Him as You served Him, in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor. Amen.”
(http://home.comcast.net/-motherteresasite/prayers.html)

But Jesus does not seem at all concerned with whether He was recognized by either of these groups. His focus is on what they did or did not do. When we encounter others, how deeply do we search and what do we do?

I have always been touched by these responses. At times I have asked this question of myself – when have I encountered Jesus? Do I encounter Him in the face of the homeless, the hungry, the sick, the prisoner, the stranger? Search deeper, I tell myself. Get to the essence of a person who might be bruised, drunk, asleep, depressed, angry, complacent, lethargic, fidgety, ignorant or defiant. What is deep within the person I encounter? What is really there? This teaching of Jesus is reminding us of the importance of really valuing what God perceives in others. Jesus tells us to search deeper than the outside of a person. The truth is deeper than the surface and this judgment in this passage demonstrates that well.

Today there is a plethora of information about public education available. It is mentioned in campaign speeches, though perhaps more for effect and seldom with any real effort to
address the real problems and meaningful solutions that exist. What is the truth about public education? More than sound bytes and tag lines, the truth about public education can be swallowed by a rush for results and an ignorance of the context in which schools/students operate. The Scripture for today calls us carefully to examine public education – past the outer decorations and distractions and to search deeper into what is really happening. The pastoral letter on public education is emphatic that public education is not a business. The language we use to describe children’s development and educational advancement needs to reflect the true nature of what public education is meant to accomplish. While accountability is a valid word when applied to public education, it cannot overshadow the true nature of what is deeply rooted in human diversity and the reality that measurements need to portray the variety of learning styles our children have. One size fits all is for socks, not for tests. This letter presses decision-makers to look deeper and do more.

Questions for Reflection

- Who are the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned in your community? Where might you see them? How do you/your church respond to the needs of these persons? Beyond their obvious needs, are there underlying conditions/situations that contribute to these factors?
- In relation to public education, how is this portrayed in the media – television or newspaper? Are you involved in public schools in any way? Are there church members who are involved with the public schools? Think about, ask or explore what is really going on the local schools?

Day 20 Perceive – Lament – Confess

“We are in the midst of huge intergenerational changes that are operating with a force and depth and speed that makes them very difficult to understand … In the last half century we have built a civilization unique in world history—a vast predominantly suburban society in which each little suburb has the right (and the incentives) to try to extract resources from the city and other communities and to screen out through zoning and housing policies not only poor people but anyone who does not have a relatively high income. The wealthy suburbs are almost always white. It is a society in which location in certain sectors of suburbia and certain high schools and colleges confers enormous advantages, but where those are rarely available to the growing Latino and African American populations.” — Gary Orfield, “Conclusion,” in Andrew Grant-Thomas and Gary Orfield editors, Twenty-First Century Color Lines, p. 288.

Prayer

Dear God, do not let us get to the judgment and be surprised by our own inaction. Help us really to search and, whether or not we recognize you, help us to act in such a way that true discipleship is expressed. May we be advocates for public education for every child in all their wonderful and created uniqueness. Your kingdom come, your will be done. Amen.

Day 21 Love

Invite your congregation’s knitting ministry to knit hats, scarves, and mittens for children who need them to keep warm. If your church has a partner school, provide mittens and scarves for one class or ask the principal to find the children who need them. Choose yarn in fun
colors the children will enjoy. If your church doesn’t partner with a public school in your 
area, talk with your pastor about whether a partnership would be a possibility. There are 
a good resources with ideas for school church partnerships on the website of One Church 
onechurchoneschool.org/. There are also good ideas listed for school-church partnership 
activities on the website of the United Church of Christ http://www.ucc.org/justice/public-
education/pdfs/what-can-your-church-do.pdf.

Day 22  Attend

What is the meaning of the term, Opportunity To Learn? Read the resource posted on the 
National Council of Churches web page, “Opportunity Gaps in Public Education Must Be 
Closed” http://www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/elmcoportunitygaps.pdf. After you read this short 
resource, think about the conditions at your school that meant the most to you or to your 
children or neighbor children. Was it the presence of an orchestra room? Was it the football 
or soccer playing field? Was it an advanced Calculus class? Did you have an opportunity 
to learn to sew in middle school? Children learn about possibility through the conditions 
in their schools. What possibilities opened up for you or your children just because those 
conditions were present in the school?

Day 23  Do

The NCC Pastoral Letter http://www.ncccusa.org/elmc/pastoralletter.pdf asks us to look closely 
at the human connectedness of teaching and to appreciate teaching as a human endeavor 
of caring. The letter decries the scapegoating of public school teachers that is embedded in 
much of the policy being advocated by the federal Department of Education—policy that is 
critical of teacher credentialing, teacher performance, and teacher pay. Make a phone call to 
a public school teacher you know. Express concern about widespread criticism about public 
school teachers. Ask this teacher about how she or he is feeling in this climate. Listen actively 
without commenting or judging, just supporting this teacher. As your conversation moves 
toward its conclusion, share with this teacher one or two of his or her gifts that you appreciate 
personally. Thank this teacher for supporting the young people in your community.

Day 24  Invitation to Pray

• Reflect on the “least of these” – especially those in our local schools.
• Lift up the names of students you know who are currently in public school.
• Offer thanks for all children who come to school filled with hope. Pray that children’s 
experiences at school expand their horizons and help them dream.
• Offer thanksgiving for those who are teachers, educators, and any other helping 
professions who support public schools. Offer thanks for those who give their time to 
ensure that schools are democratically governed as they serve on the school board.
• Remember and name your favorite educators.
• Open your heart to ways you can promote the local public school(s) in your 
community.
Fifth Week, Day 25  
Reflect
Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:1-13
Are All Your Sons Here?
Rev. Andrea Hargett, African Methodist Episcopal Church

Centering Prayer

God, come and awaken my spirit that I may perceive as you perceive. Amen.

Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” (1Sam. 16: 11a)

King Saul was rejected by God (1 Samuel 15:10) and Samuel is commanded to anoint his replacement. This narrative tells the story of David’s anointing, the anointing of one who would be considered the unexpected choice to replace the King who was the people’s choice. Samuel is less than enthusiastic; he expresses his reluctance to go to Jesse’s home to anoint one of his sons. Even though the same God commands Samuel to anoint Saul, Samuel has serious reservations about following new divine orders. At Jesse’s house Samuel’s mindset and assessment reflect limited understanding about God’s plan. One by one the sons come and the prophet Samuel is sure the son before him is “the one.” Each time God responds in the negative until all have been presented. Samuel is then challenged by the outcome and asks; “Are all your sons here?”

The story contains an unexpected conclusion. People are surprised. What might the reasons be for their shock? Why are we surprised when the “least likely are chosen?”

The naked truth is that even when we have been endowed with power from on high, well educated, elected to high political offices, appointed as church or community leaders, given authority and power to create pathways to successful futures, we have difficulty perceiving as God perceives.

Our systems of public education insist on assessing students without digging deeper to understand the potential hidden by current means of evaluation. The value and worth of collaborative parental and community engagement in developing effective funding policies and learning strategies for all of our children is poorly understood. Consequently, many children have been left behind or passed over as unworthy of the blessing an equitable opportunity to learn provides. Are all your sons here? No.

The concern to bring all of our children forward is reflected in the NCC Pastoral Letter, which calls on President Obama and the members of Congress to respond to the current misguided direction of education reform. “We are concerned today when we hear the civil right to education being redefined as the right to school choice, for we know that equitable access to opportunity is more difficult to ensure in a mass of privatized alternatives to traditional public schools or in school districts being carved apart into small schools of choice.” “As a people called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we seek the optimal way to balance the needs of each particular child and family with the need to create a system that secures the rights and addresses the needs of all children.”
Questions for Reflection

- How have we been unable to understand the needs of students and families in addressing the challenge to provide every child the opportunity to receive the blessing of a good quality education? What can we do to enhance our perception of the potential destinies of sons and daughters who remain marginalized?
- What happens to children who are excluded by our limited understanding and perception? What happens to their hidden potential? How do we remedy systems of thinking that perpetuate their marginalization? What blessings are we missing because we have ignored their worth?

Day 26  Perceive — Lament — Confess

In July of 2010, seven prominent civil rights organizations released a major statement that questions the school “turnaround” plans that the U.S. Department of Education proposes to include in the reauthorization of the federal education law. These changes include imposing a very punitive regimen for “turnaround” on schools with persistently low test scores by closing the school and/or firing the principal and a large percentage of the staff, or privatizing or chartering the school. Here is part of the response of the civil rights organizations: “Because public schools are critical community institutions… they should be closed only as a measure of last resort… We fear that the administration’s Blueprint places too much emphasis on school closure, as well as the reconstitution of school staff, in its proposed turnaround models… Research has found that widespread use of these strategies has increased disruption but has not improved achievement for the students in these communities. And in some communities, the new schools created do not admit or retain the most educationally needy students… Low-performing schools will not improve unless we also change the resources, conditions, and approaches to teaching and learning within the schools or their replacements… Schools are more than buildings; they are social institutions whose closure could threaten the organized provision of necessary health and social services to their communities.”— Civil Rights Framework for Providing All Students an Opportunity to Learn through Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, (pp. 8-9) http://www.otlcampaign.org/resources/civil-rights-framework-providing-all-students-opportunity-learn-through-reauthorization-el.

Pray

God of justice, we give thanks for public education as the core of our communities and as the foundation of democracy in the United States. We confess that we have permitted our public schools to serve some children better than others and we confess we have not worked hard enough to ensure justice in these institutions. We ask you to help us understand how to preserve our vast system of public schools that offers so much promise to help repair the lives of individuals and communities who have been left out. Help us see how to keep the blessing of public education even as we work to help public schools serve all children more fairly. Amen.
Day 27  Love

So often we are encouraged to think of education reform in terms of one or two heroic teachers or individual schools that demonstrate best practices. The heroic efforts of individuals are to be admired and we need exemplars of schools that work. But we also need to remember that justice in public education is a characteristic of the way huge systems—school districts, state funding systems, the federal Title I program that provides additional funding to serve poor children at school—distribute opportunity among students. As an expression of your love for justice, think about and make a list of individuals during your own lifetime who have worked for systemic justice in public education. Give thanks for these individuals by name.

Day 28  Attend

“Privatization is a kind of reverse social contract: it dissolves the bonds that tie us together into free communities and democratic republics. It puts us back in the state of nature where we possess a natural right to get whatever we can on our own, but at the same time lose any real ability to secure that to which we have a right. Private choices rest on individual power (brute force), personal skills (randomly distributed), and personal luck. Public choices rest on civic rights and common responsibilities, and presume equal rights for all. Public liberty is what the power of common endeavor establishes, and hence presupposes that we have constituted ourselves as public citizens by opting into the social contract.

—Benjamin Barber, Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole, pp. 143-144.

Day 29  Do


Day 30  Invitation to Pray

- Thank God for knowing and loving all of our children as you think of children, name by name, not considered worthy of attention.
- Pray to bring attention to the worth, potential, and needs of all children within your reach.
- Commit yourself in prayer to work locally for education solutions that include all of your community’s children.
Sixth Week, Day 31

Reflect

Scripture: John 9: 1-41

A Limited Vision

Ms. Martha Bettis Gee, Presbyterian Church, USA

Centering Prayer

“Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth Thou hast for me. . . Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit Divine!” Amen.

(from “Open My Eyes, that I May See”, Clara H. Scott)

“Surely we are not blind, are we?” (John 9: 40b)

Such a miraculous event as the healing by Jesus of the man blind from birth should spark only awe and thanksgiving in those who observed it. Why, then, did this amazing good news engender such doubt and skepticism in so many people? The neighbors seemed only interested in what they couldn’t see- the healer himself. The Pharisees, experts in the law, were focused on just how the law has been broken and the dilemma of how one who broke the law could heal. Rather than admit that their traditional assumptions about the law might need to be changed, they preferred to deny that God could act through such a one. The healed man’s parents were frozen by a fear of the establishment that kept them from testifying to the truth. And in the face of this miracle, the authorities in the end kicked the poor man out rather than acknowledge the evidence that should have been clear to them.

Today, our vision for public education is limited by the language and values of the marketplace, an approach that may work for producing and marketing products but not for the nurturing of a child to achieve his or her full potential. Like those whose lives were circumscribed by adhering to the letter of the law, our policy makers have adopted practices and measures more appropriate to shaping a product than the forming of citizens who value the common good. And having adopted so wholeheartedly largely unvalidated measures to improve public education, there is a danger our policy makers may be unwilling to see if these approaches fail our children.

In the words of the NCC Pastoral Letter “… the language of business accountability is used to talk about education, a human endeavor of caring… As people of faith we do not view our children as products to be tested and managed but instead as unique human beings, created in the image of God, to be nurtured and educated.” We—and our policy makers—have a tendency to look for quick fixes and for self-styled visionaries who claim to have all the answers. The reality is that complex problems require a concerted community effort where schools that are succeeding willingly share models that can lead to success. Competition where some schools win and others fail stifles the collaboration that benefits all children. Meanwhile places where there is good news about education—public schools where children are thriving and good teaching is the hallmark—go unnoticed and unheralded.
Questions for Reflection

- How and in what ways is our way of understanding the public education system limited?
- Like the first-century neighbors, are we focused on identifying some miracle maker rather than working at real solutions that can solve our complex problems?
- Are we, like the Pharisees, bent on fixing blame for the state of public education?
- Like the man’s parents, does our anxiety cause us to keep silent when the truth needs to be spoken about some proposed solutions that will not make things better?

Day 32  Perceive – Lament – Confess

The Consortium on Chicago School Research, in a 20 year longitudinal study, identifies five essential supports that have been shown to improve academic achievement in public schools—the presence of a principal who is strategic and focused on instruction; a hospitable and connected environment for families; professional and highly skilled teachers with support through quality, embedded staff development; a safe, stimulating and nurturing school setting for children; and a high quality, academically challenging curriculum—all of which must be supported by attention to building a stable climate of relational trust among the staff. (Anthony Bryk, *Organizing Schools for Improvement*, p. 82). These reforms have been successful in all kinds of public schools. And yet, these are not the kind of school reforms we read about in the press today.

Prayer

Creator God who knows all and perceives all, we pray that we may be open to receive the good news of the public schools that are educating children well, the teachers doing heroic work in difficult circumstances, the children and families who work hard to make their dreams reality. By Your sustaining power, sharpen our discernment and help us understand solid solutions, and mobilize us to be advocates for those solutions. Amen.

Day 33  Love

With your pastor, choose a Sunday soon when your congregation will honor public school educators. Plan to use the litany available on the website of the National Council of Churches, [http://www.ncccusa.org/elmc/litanyforeducationandschools.pdf](http://www.ncccusa.org/elmc/litanyforeducationandschools.pdf).

Day 34  Attend

“The Civil Rights Project has been studying the results of NCLB (the No Child Left Behind Act) in six states since it was passed and has previously issued 12 reports, as well as two books and a number of articles, on its implementation and the results… Now, as the country thinks about what to do next, it is important to focus on some fundamental design problems with the NCLB… The first is that it was not designed around real educational experience, nor does it utilize what research has shown about the sources of educational inequality or the possibilities and conditions necessary for reform to work. Instead, NCLB is based on the dual assumptions that children are falling behind very largely because educators don’t care enough and that deadlines and strong sanctions imposed by the federal government can cure the problem so that all subgroups of children will become proficient by 2014… The dominant
rhetoric has ignored the reality—reflected in countless studies over the past four decades—that poverty, low parent education, poor health, and inferior segregated schools all contribute powerfully to unequal outcomes, and that those conditions can only partially be addressed inside the schools.” — Gary Orfield, “Forward,” in Heinrich Mintrop and Gail Sunderman, “Why High Stakes Accountability Sounds Good But Doesn’t Work—And Why We Keep on Doing It Anyway,” The Civil Rights Project: Proyecto Derechos Civiles, pp. 3-5.

Day 35  Do

Prepare to propose to others in your study group that you will find a way to invite your Congressional Representative or one or both of your U.S. Senators to discuss concerns that have arisen during your study about the No Child Left Behind Act, the name given to the most recent version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and what Congress needs to do to change the law when it is reauthorized.

Day 36  Invitation to Pray

- Pray that our policy makers and those in positions of power will consider the development of the whole child, not just the production of successful test takers.
- Pray for the courage to speak the truth to decision makers about untested policies and quick fixes.
- Ask for the discernment to seek out the good news about public education.
Seventh Week, Day 37  Reflect
Scripture: Isaiah 50:4-9
The Tongue of a Teacher

Rev. Garland Pierce, Associate General Secretary,
National Council of Churches, African Methodist Episcopal Church

Centering Prayer

Gracious and giving God, you have gifted everyone. Please show me how to use the gift(s) given to me to work toward your justice and encourage those in need. Open now your revelation to me. Cause me to go deeper in your word. Make clear your call. In the name of the Master Teacher, Jesus, Amen.

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens-wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.  Isaiah 50:4

The message shared in this beginning of a servant’s song of Second Isaiah had to be quite powerful to a dislocated, disinherited people, trying to exist in exile. It offers meaning to their suffering as well as offers the challenge of deep discipleship. We all are gifted by God. Here the servant notes the gift of “the tongue of a teacher” (NRSV) or “an instructed tongue” (NIV). The powerful gifts to God’s disciples are hearing and speech. To be certain these gifts are not solely the physical abilities of hearing and speech but the deeper gifts of perception and knowing in one’s being and the ability to express truth as revealed. These gifts are given not for our well being alone but “to sustain the weary with a word.” The dislocated and disinherited are to be lifted up. The “over the counter” children and the “throw aways” must be counted.

As disciples, our teaching and instructed tongues must speak truth to power in an effort to lift not to tear down. The insight which we gain which equips us to witness to the truth is not necessarily a quick or easy process. The servant’s wisdom came through suffering. Ours may come through deep examination of complex issues and concerns. Ours may come from sitting with suffering for a little while.

Present conversation about public education often dangerously oversimplifies the problems and the proposed solutions. In the NCC Pastoral Letter, this warning and invitation is offered, “We ask you to partner with us to challenge the unfair and detrimental language of the current discourse in educational reform, to re-examine untested assumptions about public education policy, and to ensure that untested models of school reform are not imposed from above in our nation’s most fragile school districts. Too often criticism of the public schools fails to reflect our present societal complexity. At a moment when childhood poverty is shamefully widespread, when many families are under constant stress, and when schools are often limited by lack of funds or resources, we know that public schools cannot be improved by concentrating on public schools alone.”
Isaiah does not promise an easy or pain-free process but one of integrity, fully and ably accompanied and supported by God, the compassionate giver of all good gifts.

Questions for Reflection

• What gifts do you have? How have you used those gifts to work for justice and speak truth? How might you use these gifts to work toward equal access to quality public education for all children?
• As you think about the school-age children in your midst, what gifts do you see evident in them? How are those gifts being nurtured and/or stifled in your community of faith and in their schools? How might you address this?

Day 38    Perceive – Lament – Confess

Stanford University Professor, Linda Darling-Hammond writes of two of the most serious injustices for children in our nation today. Serious social injustices limit children’s opportunity: “The United States not only has the highest poverty rates for children among industrialized nations, but it also provides fewer social supports for their well-being…” (Linda Darling-Hammond, The Flat World and Education, p. 31) And inequalities at school magnify the unequal circumstances children face in their lives outside school: “Enormous energy is devoted in the United States to discussions of the achievement gap. Much less attention, however, is paid to the opportunity gap—the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources—expert teachers, personalized attention, high-quality curriculum opportunities, good educational materials and plentiful information resources—that support learning at home and at school. Compounded inequalities in all of these resources, reinforced over generations, have created what Gloria Ladson-Billings has called an “educational debt,” owed to those who have been denied access to quality education for hundreds of years.” — Linda Darling Hammond, The Flat World and Education, p. 28

Prayer

Gracious and giving God, thank you for the gifts you have given to me. Thank you for the gift of the teacher’s tongue that encouraged and nurtured me in my development. Show me how I can be a source of encouragement and uplift for others. Through your Holy Spirit, give me the wisdom to go deeper in your word of truth and deeper into the complexities of our society so that in some small way I may effect change for your beloved children. In the name of the Great Teacher, Christ, I ask and commit. Amen.

Day 39    Love

Tell someone about this study you have undertaken including one of the ways you believe public schools are important to our society as part of the common good. In a natural way find a way to tell about a positive experience you, your child, or your neighbor or grandchild recently had in a public school. Begin a habit of saying good things about your local public schools and also about the role of public education in our democracy.
As you conclude your study, reflect on the words of Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon that in the churches, “we do stand united in our conviction that the church is called to speak for justice in public education. We affirm that each life is infinitely precious, created in the image of God, and therefore, that every child should be given opportunity for fullness of life, including a quality and affordable education.” The inequities in our public education system are one of the ways society distributes opportunity to some children and denies opportunity for others. Pray for forgiveness on behalf of our society for the injustices we have placed as stumbling blocks before children. Pray also for forgiveness that we have turned away from our teachers as they work each day to discover and nurture the gifts children bring to school. Pray for our leaders and pray for us as citizens that we may together find a better way.