

Southern Asia Initiative

Together in Hope



Worship

Worship service to introduce the Southern Asia Initiative to your church community

Introduction

Play the Southern Asia Initiative Video, available at:
www.globalministries.org/southernasiainitiative

Call to Worship

Leader: Creator God, we are here, together in hope!

Community: With community and creation

Leader: With neighbors near and far

Community: With those known and new

All: Together in hope!

Hymn: Colorful Creator (CH 457) (NCH 30)

Children's Moment

[Optional Children's Moment](#)

Prayer of the People

Holy One, we lift up our sisters and brothers in Southern Asia. We have heard their cries for justice and peace as they face the challenges of human trafficking, religious persecution, human rights abuses, and damage to creation. We know that there are many obstacles to addressing these challenges. But we also know that you are greater and that your love for your people is deeper than we could ever imagine. Cover your people in Southern Asia with your love, O God. May they feel your presence walking with them each day. Guide us, O God, that we may also walk beside our neighbors in Southern Asia in prayer, partnership, and presence. May we listen to you and our partners as we consider what we might do to share in ministry with Asian sisters and brothers.

Weave us together in hope, O God, that we may recognize that we are all part of your great tapestry. All of our threads are needed and necessary for your beautiful design.

Strengthen us and nourish us for the journey, as you strengthen and nourish those in Southern Asia as well.

In your holy name we pray, Amen.

Scripture and Reflection

Scripture: Psalm 133, Romans 1:12

Hymn: Called as Partners in Christ's Service (CH 453) (NCH 495)

Sermon

Optional Video: People of Mumbai <https://vimeo.com/140517454>

[Optional Sermon](#)

Hymn: [Weave \(CH 495\)](#)

Call to Offering

[Suggested Call to Offering](#)

Communion

[Suggested Communion Meditation](#)

Hymn: O for a World (CH 683) (NCH 575)

Benediction

Give us, God, transformed minds
to pray honestly for those whom we don't understand,
to find compassion more powerful than pity,
to create the relationships which break through the barriers
of class, tribe, language, caste and culture.

Amen

(Benediction from Deenabandhu Manchala, Southern Asia Area Executive, Global Ministries)

Children's Moment

Good morning!

One of today's scriptures is a psalm – can you all say that? “Psalm” *(Give them time to repeat it, maybe even try saying it in silly voices)* A psalm is kind of like a song or a poem. The one today starts off by saying, “How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard...”

Wow! That probably seems kind of silly to pour oil on someone's head. But in Bible times, precious oil was very special. So it's kind of trying to say that when God's people live together in unity – loving each other, helping each other, respecting each other - it's really, really good. Maybe today, we might say, “How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! It is like a trip to Disney World, or eating s'mores around a campfire, or going sledding with your friends, or telling a joke that makes everyone laugh.” That's pretty good!

Today we are also learning about people who live in Southern Asia. Does anyone know where Southern Asia is on this map? *(Point out Southern Asia on a map – if you need a good map, contact Mission Engagement for some placemaps that you can use!)* They live pretty far away from us. Some of them may look differently from us, or worship God differently from us, or speak different languages from us. But, as the scripture tells us this morning – it's really good when we all live together in unity! That's why we're taking some time this morning to learn more about them and the things that they care about. Because they are a part of God's family, too.

So, this week, I want to give you a challenge. I want to challenge you to pray for people in Southern Asia every single night this week. It can be something really simple, just a few words if you like, but to do it every single night this week. Do you think you can do that? I bet you can!

Let's pray together.

God, thank you for our neighbors in Southern Asia. Help us to do an even better job of living together in unity. Amen.

Call to Offering

As we immerse ourselves in the stories from church leaders in Southern Asia, from Global Ministries co-workers, and grassroots partner members participating in the healing and unifying ministries of Global Ministries church and program partners, a common theme is noticeable: hope lost, hope found, hope restored. We hear this from the young women who participate in educational programs of partner Pravaham in India; we hear this from mission co-worker Tom Liddle in East Timor; we hear it from the declarations of church partners in Bangladesh.

Today's scripture from Psalm 133 emphasizes the role of unity in restoring hope: *How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!* The Global Ministries core value of Community – building interdependence and unity among all God's children – calls us to live out God's abundance despite realities of diversity, distance, and difference. The common thread of hope brings us together with God's people of Southern Asia.

The scripture today from Romans now calls us out to action: I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. One unifying and consequential action we all can participate in is generosity. No matter the gift, no matter the amount of the gift, we are called to participate in our shared journey together in hope.

We will now receive our offerings, dedicated to God's unifying hope.

Communion Meditation

In worship today, we've been speaking about unity as well as learning from our partners around the world, particularly in Southern Asia. May we remember that this table is the ultimate symbol of unity. A table where all of God's children are welcome. A table where all of God's children receive grace, love, and hope. A table that is not just celebrated here in this place, but all around the world.

Let us pray this prayer from Bangladesh:

O Savior Christ,

in whose way of life lies the secret of all life,
and the hopes of all the people,
we pray for quiet courage to meet this hour.
We did not choose to be born or to live in such an age.
But let its problems challenge us,
its discoveries exhilarate us,
its injustice anger us,
its possibilities inspire us,
and its vigor renew us,
for your Kingdom's sake.

Bless this cup and this bread,
That it may nourish us for the journey
Together in hope.

Amen.

(Bangladesh. *A Procession of Prayers: Meditations and Prayers from around the World*, comp. John Carden, WCC, and Cassell, London, UK, 1998, p.179, Additional communion language added by Global Ministries.)

Optional Sermon

Eight years ago, I accompanied a team of social activists to a suburb in Manila, Philippines to meet families who were evicted from their homes to make space a multistoried building. A community of catholic sisters accommodated them in their small residence while they continued their agitation for rehabilitation. After a couple hours of conversation about their experiences, concerns, and plans, it was time for lunch. The visitors, including me, received our food packets first and then the residents received theirs while standing in line. But there were more people than the food packets. A young pregnant woman received the last packet. When she turned back to leave, she saw a frail old woman behind her. The young woman at once thrust her food packet into the hands of the old woman and walked away gracefully. That young woman taught me something that day. In fact, I felt evangelized by her. Her act announced that generosity does not originate from positions of power and privilege but from the abundance of the heart and a deep sense of empathy and responsibility toward others.

In spite of all the privileges that his religious and cultural identities had bestowed, Paul gives us some sharp insights about his understanding of faith in these opening lines of his letter to the gentile church in Rome: 'I am longing to see youso that we may mutually be encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.'

Paul seems to say that faith is neither a belief system nor a rigid dogma but a profound self-awareness that constantly grows and evolves as people meet to share and receive experiences of God's grace in concrete life situations. Such experience of mutual enrichment is possible only with attitudes of humility and openness to embrace the promptings of the Spirit in God's vast and diverse world. It also implies that faith is not a mere inward feeling but an experience of hope amidst despair, and a force that dares to hope however insurmountable the forces of doom and death might be.

Encounters are necessary for our faith to be an instrument of witness to God's grace

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32), the two disciples recalled in their encounter with the stranger on the road to Emmaus. Faith in the Risen Lord is an expression of exuberance of life amidst hopelessness and despair. It cannot be set and driven by rigid dogma. In fact such entrapments inhibit the liberating and transformative fervor of God's grace. Many of us are tutored to believe that our own religious convictions are absolute truths and that our own experiences of faith are truly genuine, and that our expressions of engagement with the world are the most appropriate ways. Consequently, while looking at the outside world as a domain for our privileged interventions, we fail to see God already present and at work in unexpected places, people and ways. The contemporary culture of hatred, derision, and fear of others seems to draw on such narrowly conceived religious conceptions. Most world religions, including Christianity, while furthering their self-perpetuating missions, have played a major role in this process of 'othering.' Operating alongside narrow concepts of nationhood, ethnicity, racism, patriarchy, and casteism in my own Indian experience, religions have always encouraged people to nurture inflated self-understandings and detrimental understandings of those who do not belong to their fold. In fact, this common but often ignored trait of 'othering' has been the source of most evils. Colonialism and neo-colonialism, slavery and modern forms of slavery, violence against women, child labor, environmental exploitation and consequent destruction, corruption and abuse of power – all have their roots in this dynamics of 'othering.' 'I am more important than you; my needs and wants, my comforts and luxuries, my dreams and fantasies, my safety and security, my health and wealth are more important than yours because I am special and even ontologically superior to you,' is an attitude that makes some violate, exclude, and

exploit many. Such attitudes have denied us the opportunities of being taught and enriched. Furthermore, such attitudes, as history tells, have made many religious expressions – institutions and belief systems – demonic and destructive.

Paul tells us of the need to move out of our comfort zones and familiar circles to ‘comprehend the length and width and height and depth of God’s love’ (Eph.3:18), transforming lives and situations. He tells the gentile church in Rome, ‘Just as I tell you about my experience of faith, I also want to hear yours so that my own faith may be enriched by yours.’ It is in such encounters we learn afresh about ourselves, and find our convictions about our personal relationship with God validated.

A faith that is rooted in foolishness!

In opting to learn and be enriched by the gentile community in Rome, Paul seems to say that neither the perspectives nor the preferences of the powerful and the privileged can restrict the freedom of the Spirit. Paul makes an important assertion about the distinctness of Christian faith in his letter to the church in Corinth. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (I Cor 1: 27-30)

Unfortunately, traditional Christian theologies and practices, as they evolved in powerful political and economic contexts, have shaped Christian expressions of social engagement to be motivated by attitudes of arrogance and certainty that power and privilege bestow and have nurtured and sustained such power relationships. Consequently, while we affirm the need to be sensitive and compassionate, we tend to believe that the poor and those on the margins have no good news to share or nothing to offer but only to be taught and to receive. In the process, we become and operate as the ideological allies of the contemporary political and economic powers who objectify the poor and those on the margins. We fail to acknowledge and learn from their witness in their own life-worlds. In our eagerness to teach and reach out to those in need, we fail to be taught by them and to learn from their capacities to live out their hope, from their resilience and acts of resistance to systemic evil, human greed and bondage, and in their aspirations of another world, a new world that ensures life in all its fullness of life to all.

We must realize we belong to a faith tradition that has evolved around the memory of the one who defied the power and glory of the contemporary political and religious establishments and instead embraced the identities and resources of the marginalized people and communities. Jesus asserted that the act of a widow who gave only two small copper coins was greater than those who gave huge sums. He applauded the prayer of the scorned tax collector as more acceptable than that of the glorified Pharisee. He valued the faith of the despised gentile more than the faith of those of his own centuries-old religious tradition. He rewarded poor Lazarus with a seat next to Abraham in his parable while the arrogant rich man was left to thirst forever. He defied the protocols and traditions of rituals and propriety for the sake of the healing of the sick. And he taught his disciples that to have and wield power is to be a servant and even goes to the extent of being one by washing their feet on the night before he was killed. In fact, much of the biblical tradition itself is so much of this, unveiling the locale of God’s presence and power among the Last, the Lost and the Least. So, it is time we test our faith through such encounters lest our faith claims cause more harm and more damage to the earth and its people.

Faith, a well-spring of hope that transforms

Such an understanding of faith expands its scope, and we receive it as an inner energy that seeks transformation within and of lives and situations. It is the source of a spirituality of active hope, and a spirituality of engagement with God's world for the celebration of life. Paul, in the following chapters of his letter to the Romans, exhorts them: "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (12:2) In many places around the world, there are intense struggles for political freedom, economic justice, human rights and human dignity. These movements and initiatives bring together thousands of people across religious, ethnic and linguistic boundaries to struggle for justice, peace, and life for all. People forge alliances not because of any religious motivation or ideological orientations but because of their belief in and commitment for values of justice and equity. In all such struggles and movements, spirituality is implied. If we believe that the imperatives to seek justice, love, freedom, and peace are divine, we must then hold that at the basis of every struggle and every move for liberation and for life and dignity, there is a divine force, there is a profound spirituality. The point here is that encounters in faith are not limited to religious convictions and conversations, but go beyond to find God in these struggles for the triumph of life amidst the forces of death and destruction.

The people who were unjustly and mercilessly evicted and struggled for shelter, the group of activists who accompanied the small community of catholic sisters who welcomed those made homeless, the young woman who shared a bounty of goodness amidst her own depravation, and the old woman who had an experience of grace in that Manila community amply testify to the presence of God at work and hope made alive through their choices and actions. We, as individuals and communities, are called to join such partnerships of hope as an expression of our faith in God who desires life, in all its fullness to all.

Global Ministries' Southern Asia Initiative is a space for such encounters with people, communities and churches that are distinct and different in many ways. Despite being small and many in multicultural contexts, and, in most cases, on the margins of the society, these strive to give an account of their hope through their engagement with people at the risk of being trafficked or forced to migrate, with religious and ethnic minorities whose lives are violated in the name of God, with those disempowered and dehumanized by the evils of caste system, patriarchy, and with those victimized or exposed to disasters caused by climate change. These categories of people are not found only in the Southern Asia region but also in the US and, in fact, in many places around the world. We hope that these encounters may inspire creative expressions of witness together in the hope that is ours through Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord. Amen.

(Sermon from Deenabandhu Manchala, Southern Asia Area Executive, Global Ministries)