

**Living as a Covenant Community**  
**PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE**

elmira Nazombe



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## Introduction

“Our covenant agreement with God can be summarized as learning to love God with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength.” (*Living as a Covenant Community*, Introduction).

“Together these covenants . . . Tell the story of how God cares for us, acts with and through us, and will continue to unveil ways to live as God’s people.” (*Living as a Covenant Community*, Chapter 4).

This spiritual growth study offers to each of us an opportunity to pause and take time to look deeply at who God is and at our experiences living as a people of God. The covenants demonstrate aspects of God’s unfailing loving-kindness and create and sustain God’s relationship with humanity. We will learn about God, but we will also be learning about ourselves. A covenant community is complex and characterized by faith, trust, doubt, obedience—even backsliding—and always struggling to be the covenant partner that God intended, especially in times of crisis.

This study will be an opportunity to think about God’s covenant activity in three ways:

- God as the covenant maker, who initiates out of love a relationship with humanity.
- God as the covenant keeper, who never turns away from the covenant people no matter how often they stray from faithfulness.
- God as the covenant equipper, who provides the guidance that the covenant community needs in order to live as God’s people and take responsibility for the whole of God’s creation and just relationships with their neighbors.

We will have an opportunity to see ourselves in the lives of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jonathan as they act and receive the covenants of Grace, Redemption and Safety, Blessing, Guidance and Law, Eternal Rule, and finally the Everlasting Covenant. As Christians, we will come to understand that we are the covenant community, inheritors of the promises made by God to the covenant communities of the First Testament, commonly called the Old Testament. We will see how Jesus represents the fulfillment of the covenants and God's everlasting promise. We will see how we can be a part of this covenant if we are willing to answer the call to be the covenant community that takes responsibility for the whole of creation and for the life of justice that God intended.

When we enter into a spiritual growth study such as this, we must commit ourselves to being serious about our learning process. We may be doing this study with others, or we may be working on our own. In either case, we need to follow John Wesley's guidance for learning: Bible study—prayerful listening again to the Biblical texts, understanding the traditions of the church, using our own reasoning, and taking into account present realities in the light of our own experience. We will need all of these as we embark upon the task of understanding the covenants and their meaning for our lives. A spiritual growth study is meant to shake us up, to disturb us, to challenge our understandings, and to push us to new and more wonderful places where God will reveal God's truth.

Each of us has a special way in which we learn best. For some of us, journaling is a helpful way to remember; we write down things that challenge us and questions that we have. For others, it may be notes in the margin or pictures that we draw or poems that we write. Whatever methodology helps you dig deeper in your understanding of the covenants, please use it. This participant's guide will have many different tools that will help you with this study. But the final outcome depends upon you.

The author, Evy McDonald, asks us to take special care in our understanding of the biblical texts. We need to remember that different parts of the Bible were written at different times by different people and were meant to speak to different historical contexts. She suggests that we need to seek to discern the truth of the passages.

The Participant's Guide is organized into four lessons that cover many of the main points of *Living as a Covenant Community*. Each session includes:

- Hearing again the familiar Bible stories that tell of the developing relationship between God and the covenant community.
- Ways to think about how the covenant speaks to realities today, including examples of the work of United Methodist Women.
- Prayers and worship that provide a space to name the opportunities and challenges for Christian discipleship and covenant living before God and our covenant communities.

If you are doing this study with others, you will want to take full advantage of the opportunity to dialogue and struggle together to deepen your understanding of what these covenants mean for you individually and as a wider community.

If you are doing this study on your own, you will want to individualize the group exercises, entering into dialogue with yourself about the questions that you have. Or you may want to correspond with others to share the ideas and questions. Covenant community participation is a collective process. It is very difficult to develop a covenant relationship alone. Community is the implication of covenant. We need God and we need each other.

Consider creating a prayer and worship space while you are doing this study, a place where you can withdraw to in quiet. You might want to include a candle, the Bible, and a small pitcher that you can add water to during each lesson as you learn about a new covenant and add to your insights.

## **SESSION 1**

# **God as Covenant Maker: The Covenant of Care and Grace**

## **Preparation**

Read the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2 of *Living as a Covenant Community*, Appendix B, and Genesis 1, 3.

## **Goals**

- To develop an understanding of the meaning of “covenant” from our personal understanding, the Hebrew words, and from traditional and contemporary Jewish community understandings.
- To explore covenant making as God’s way of establishing a relationship with humanity through the biblical accounts of God, creation, and Adam and Eve.

## **Words to Remember**

“God created human beings; made them godlike, reflecting God’s nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill the earth! Take charge!” (Genesis 1:27, *The Message*).

## Opening Song

*Sing one of the following:*

“Amen Sikudumisa,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2067

“Our God is an Awesome God,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2040

## Defining Covenant

*Review the section titled “Overview of Covenants” in Chapter 1 of the text as well as the Hebrew terms in the section below it, and then ask the following questions:*

- What is your definition of the word “covenant”? Is it about legal agreements or marriage? Does it mean something positive or something negative to you?
- Consider the Hebrew words *berîth* and *hesed* in light of the material in Appendix B, which reads: “The Hebrew word *berîth* traditionally referred to covenant that signified an agreement between two parties. But the word *hesed*, which is used less frequently, gives us the deeper meaning of covenant as the kindness or graciousness of God toward humanity in establishing a relationship.”

## The First Covenant: God as Covenant Maker and God’s Covenant People—the Covenant of Care and Grace

### LISTENING TO THE SCRIPTURE, GENESIS 1 AND 3

As you listen to the scripture, put yourself in an attitude of prayer. You may want to use the *Lectio Divina* process as you read and listen to the passages.

It is a prayerful way of Bible study that encourages reading, meditation, prayer, and what is called “rest in the word of God.” Read the passages aloud slowly and carefully perhaps two or three times, pausing between each reading.

## GENESIS 1:26–28: THE CREATION OF HUMANKIND

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish . . . birds . . . cattle . . . over all the wild animals . . . over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26).

God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish . . . birds . . . cattle, and, yes, Earth itself” (Genesis 1:26, *The Message*).

By God’s grace, a relationship is established in which humanity is to be like God, carrying forth God’s intention for the world. The text points to the communal nature of God, a recognition of the inner community within God—Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. The author further defines this communal nature of God as an egalitarian and harmonious relationship in “The Call to Be a Covenantal Community” in Chapter 1.

- What aspects of God do “in our likeness” or “reflecting God’s nature” bring to mind? What is the relationship between God’s loving and creative nature and God’s intention for the community?
- What demand/responsibility does it place on the covenant community (Adam and Eve) in relationship to the rest of creation? Is that what reflecting God’s nature means?

## GENESIS 3:1–13

Read the second part of the story relating to the Covenant of Care and Grace in Genesis 3:1–13. The story continues with Adam and Eve’s encounter with

the tree of knowledge and the serpent. God established the covenant through the creation process and gave humanity responsibility. Now we see the first action of the covenant community, which reveals something about us all.

Listen to the serpent's conversation with Eve: "God knows that the moment you eat from that tree, you'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil" (Genesis 3:4–5, *The Message*). Does something about this sound familiar? Consider the following questions:

- What do you think was going through the minds of Adam and Eve (the community), when they were in the midst of this wonderful creation?
- What is the difference between being created, "reflecting God's nature," and the voice of temptation saying, "You'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God." What does the experience tell us about human nature? Did Adam and Eve create a crisis where there did not have to be one?
- Imagine being a part of that first covenant community: Put yourself in the mind of Adam ("she gave it to me") and Eve ("the serpent seduced me"). Can you develop some additional justifications for their response to the serpent? Why did they choose to eat from the tree of knowledge? Why did they want to be just like God? Does anything like that ever happen to us as a community or as individuals?

## WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE COVENANT FOR OUR LIVES/THE COVENANT COMMUNITY TODAY?

Review the author's story of her personal health crisis in Chapter 1, "How Does This Covenant Inform Our Christian Discipleship?" where she reflects on God's guidance and her own stubbornness in finding her path.

Compare the experience of Adam and Eve to our own faith journeys, the gift of God's caring and moments of crisis and temptation when we want to depend upon ourselves rather than upon the promises of God.

Take time to think alone or with a partner about your own faith journey and its moments of crisis. How did you respond? Was it with your own insights or did you depend upon the insights of faith? Were you tempted to listen to the voices of privilege or greed or selfishness? Write down your responses for yourself or share them with a friend.

Using Appendix A as a starting place, develop a short list that shows examples of faith responses to current crises like climate change, such as the 13 Steps to Sustainability or congregational efforts like Be Just. Be Green.

Develop a second list using Appendix A to identify moments of opportunity for the covenant community that may reflect the difficulty of the task of obedience in the midst of fear and crisis, like a contemporary version of the temptation that is recorded in Genesis 3. Such is the temptation to follow our own knowledge or popular opinion or corporate justifications rather than listening for the guidance of God and resisting what our author calls “God nudges.”

## PREPARING FOR CLOSING PRAYERS: WRITING A PSALM FOR TODAY

The writers of the Psalms understood the rhythm of the covenant relationship as one of praise, followed by complaint and worry and ending with praise again.<sup>1</sup>

Using your own experience complete the following prayer modeled from Psalm 40:

(Praise) **I waited patiently for God . . .**

(Praise for the care and the grace of the covenant God in the life of the community. *Name your own examples of blessings, personal and communal.*)

(Complaint) **Troubles surround us . . .**

(*Name the temptations and challenges of the covenant community that you identified.*)

**Save us God, come quickly. We are needy and need help.**

*(Add a second praise about the joy of the responsibility for the care of creation and the work for social justice.)*

**God you are my guide; God you are my God. Please act right away. Help us.**

## **Closing Prayers**

*Light the covenant candle and add a small amount of water to the covenant pitcher to symbolize the gift of the Covenant of Care and Grace.*

Ask participants who are willing to offer their Psalms for today as the closing prayers.

## **Closing Song**

“Our God is an Awesome God,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2040

## **Endnotes**

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 6–8.

## **SESSION 2**

# **Covenant-Keeper God and Faithful and Obedient Covenant People: The Covenant of Redemption & Safety and the Covenant of Blessing**

## **Preparation**

Read the Introduction and Chapters 2 and 3 in *Living as a Covenant Community*.

## **Goals**

- To learn how God expands the covenant relationship in periods of crisis and fear for the covenant community.
- To consider the importance of great trust and acts of faithfulness by the covenant community.

## **Words to Remember**

“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

“God remembered Noah... His remembering is an act of gracious engagement with his covenant partner, an act of committed compassion. It asserts that God is not preoccupied with himself but with his covenant partner, creation.”<sup>1</sup>

## Opening Song

*Sing a favorite song such as one of the hymns listed below:*

- “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 140 (one verse)
- “My Heavenly Father Watches Over Me,” *African-American Heritage Hymnal*, no. 391
- “God Will Take Care of You,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 130

## Listening to the Biblical Texts: Considering the Experiences of Noah and Abraham

In this session, we will identify the fears and uncertainties of Noah and Abraham and their communities and consider how they overcame the moments of doubt with trust and faithfulness.

*Review “Understanding the Story” in Chapter 2 for the context of the story of Noah and the building of the ark.*

### CONSIDERING THE EXPERIENCES OF NOAH— THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION AND SAFETY

- **Genesis 6:5–13** The earth was filled with violence and corruption. God vowed to destroy the earth. But Noah found favor with God.
- **Genesis 8:20–22** When the rain stopped, Noah built an altar and made a burnt offering. God vowed to never again destroy the earth.
- **Genesis 9:1–17** The terms of the Covenant of Redemption and Safety are established. The rainbow is a symbol of the covenant.

*Review “Understanding the Story” in Chapter 3 for the context of the story of Abraham and Sarah.*

## CONSIDERING THE EXPERIENCES OF ABRAHAM— THE COVENANT OF BLESSING

- **Genesis 12:1–7** God directs Abram to a new land and promises to make him a great nation.
- **Genesis 15:1–6** God promises Abram offspring and countless descendants even though Sarai is barren. Abram believed God’s promise.
- **Genesis 16** Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands to ensure Abram has descendants.
- **Genesis 17** God’s covenant with Abram promises he will be the father of many nations and circumcision is the covenant symbol and requirement for future generations.

After reading the texts, try to imagine what Noah and Abraham may have been thinking during these experiences. You might want to create a monologue or a dialogue that expresses their thoughts, the difficulties of obedience and faithfulness, and their responses to God’s covenant blessings. For example: Noah—I know God promised to save me and my family, but I began to think it was never going to stop raining and I didn’t know what we were going to do if we never saw land again; after all God promised to destroy the earth. Abraham—The number of family and friends is really quite small, how can we possibly take over a whole land? Is God going to fight against the Canaanites?

## THE COVENANT COMMUNITY TODAY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A FAITHFUL COVENANT COMMUNITY?

Consider individually or share with a partner your personal crises of faith that may have been similar to the experiences of Noah (the storms of our lives)

and Abraham (at the edge of the unknown in our personal and communal lives) where we needed to walk by faith rather than by sight.

Read about the author's experience with her church's decision about a needle exchange program at the beginning of Chapter 3.

In your journal, record personal and community experiences in which members of the covenant community have been challenged to step out into the unknown as they try to be faithful.

You might want to think about this using the covenant symbol of the rainbow:

- Rainbow experiences in which the covenant community has been led by the Spirit to new ways to live out their faith—like the author's experience with the needle exchange program at the beginning of Chapter 3.
- Ways in which the covenant community can be a rainbow or an ark on behalf of justice for others (see Appendix A for examples).

## Closing Prayers

*Light the covenant candle and add water to the covenant pitcher, symbolizing how each covenant adds to the ones before it.*

Use the situations that you have named in today's session as the basis for prayers of thanksgiving to close today. At the end of each thought repeat the response, "God, your servants are listening." The response indicates that the prayer has not ended and affirms the openness of the community to hear God's messages for us; we are learning to be faithful in the best and worst of times.

## Endnotes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 85.

## **SESSION 3**

# **God the Equipper and God’s Covenant Nation: The Covenant of Guidance and Law**

### **Preparation**

Read the following:

- **Chapter 4:** *Living as a Covenant Community*, “Understanding the Story,” “What Does Making the Covenant Say About Moses?,” and “Understanding the Covenant, Its Blessings and Conditions”
- **Exodus 19** Moses and the covenant community at Mount Sinai
- **Exodus 20:1–17** The Ten Commandments
- **Deuteronomy 5–6** The Ten Commandments
- **Deuteronomy 10:12–22** Justice for widows and orphans and strangers
- **Leviticus 25:1–7** The Sabbatical Year

### **Goals**

- To increase your understanding of the laws handed down by Moses as a detailed articulation of the elements of the covenant for the community/nation.
- To ponder the relevance of the commandments and laws to our lives today.

## Words to Remember

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3).

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’” (Mark 12:30–32).

## Opening Song

“What Does the Lord Require of You?” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2174

## Considering the Commandments

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

McDonald has suggested that the commandments are about three things: defending the oppressed; doing what’s right, even if it means criticizing your own people; and remaining faithful wherever you are. The commandments gave structure to the spiritual, social, and political life of the Israelites.

Reflecting the author’s discussion in Chapter 4, we will consider the commandments and laws in three parts: loving God, developing a caring community, and the praxis of economic and environmental justice.

## PART 1: LOVING GOD: COMMANDMENTS 1–3

Prepare yourself and your space for prayerful reflection on the covenants and laws. If you are alone, slowly speak out loud a commandment three times, pausing for at least one minute of silence between each reading to encourage yourself to deepen your understanding of the commandment. If you are in a group, ask each member to speak aloud the words of the commandments.

- “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:2–3).
- “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5).
- “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name” (Exodus 20:7).

After meditatively reading the commandments, ask yourself the following questions:

- What are some examples of my experience of loving God?
- How well am I doing at loving God?

## PART 2: BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR: COMMANDMENTS 4–10

These commandments cover the topics of work, slavery, and rest (Exodus 20:8–11); honoring parents (Exodus 20:12); murder (Exodus 20:13); adultery (Exodus 20:14); stealing (Exodus 20:15); false witness (Exodus 20:16); and coveting the spouse of a neighbor and the property of others (Exodus 20:17).

Read the text of these commandments slowly and carefully out loud, again pausing to give yourself and your spirit time to listen for their meaning.

After meditatively reading the commandments, ask yourself the following questions:

- What do these commandments mean for the community?
- How could a community, a nation, or a neighborhood see these as collective rules for matters of wages or loans or use of political power rather than rules for personal behavior?

### PART 3: THE PRAXIS OF ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOR A NATION

Next, we will look at God’s instruction for the sabbatical year and jubilee year. Following the same pattern, read the text slowly.

**Leviticus 25:1–7** The Sabbatical Year

**Leviticus 25:8–9** The Jubilee Year

After meditatively reading the commandments, ask yourself:

- How do these laws build economic and environmental justice?

## Covenant Living Today

“God called the Israelites, and us today, to not blindly obey, but to listen to God, and let our love for God lead us to do what is right in God’s eyes” (Chapter 4, “The Blessings for Keeping the Covenant and Curses (Consequences) for Breaking It”).

Read McDonald’s account in Chapter 4 of *Living as a Covenant Community* about her encounter with two boys at Best Buy. Hear her regret at her failure to respond to their moment of need and her lost opportunity to be a blessing to them.

Take a few moments to think about contemporary examples of the work of the covenant community in individual and collective crises through the

lens of the Ten Commandments. Use the examples in Appendix A to start your thinking.

## Closing Prayers

*Use the insights from your prayerful consideration of the covenants and laws to complete the prayer below, adapted from Psalm 106.*

Praise the Lord! Give thanks to God for God is good; still, God heard the troubles we were in—the destruction of the planet, and the persistence of racism, the growth of economic injustice and \_\_\_\_\_, heard our cries even when we were feeling exiled from God’s purpose.

God showed us how to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

Thanks be to God, the Covenant Equipper, who showed us how to strive to be a faithful and just community.

## Closing Song

“What Does the Lord Require of You?” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2174



## SESSION 4

# **Covenant-Fulfilling God and Grace-Filled Covenant Community: The Covenants of Eternal Rule, Everlasting Friendship, and the Everlasting Covenant**

### **Preparation**

Read the following:

- **2 Samuel 7:1–17** God's covenant promises
- **1 Chronicles 17** God's covenant with David
- **Psalms 89:3–4** God's covenant with David
- **1 Samuel 18–20** Jonathan's covenant of friendship with David
- **Jeremiah 31** Foretelling of the return from exile and the new covenant
- **Acts 10:34–43** Good news is for all people
- **Philippians 2:1–5** Disciplines for the covenant community
- **Chapters 5 and 6** in *Living as a Covenant Community*

### **Goals**

- To understand God's Covenant of Eternal Rule with David as an elaboration of the covenant promises to Abraham and Moses for the development of the nation and its implications for modern church structures.

- To review the Covenant of Everlasting Friendship between David and Jonathan as a model for human relationships and a foretaste of the sacrifice of Jesus.
- To consider how the ministry and life of Jesus represent the fullest articulation of God’s relationship with the covenant community/humanity in the Everlasting Covenant.

## **Words to Remember**

“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 . . . this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel . . . says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:31, 33).

“ . . . be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:2–5).

## **Opening Song**

*Sing one of the following from The Faith We Sing:*

- “Lord I Lift Your Name on High,” no. 2088
- “Siyahamba,” no. 2235

## **Considering the Covenant of Eternal Rule—God’s Covenant with David**

Review 2 Samuel 7 and *Living as a Covenant Community*, Chapter 5, “Understanding the Story.”

In 2 Samuel 7:1–17 we learn of the four elements of the covenant between God and David: everlasting reign, rest from his enemies, a home to live in, and the land for his people. But David wanted to build a temple to house the ark of the covenant (2 Samuel 7:18–29), which for many years had been a movable worship place, as a sign of his gratitude to God. However, God told David that this temple would only be built by his son.

Let's consider for a moment David's failure to meet his personal goal and build the temple in light of our own experiences. How important are the buildings and structures of the church?

- Might David have had what the author described as “the dark night of the soul”—a sense of frustration at not being able to complete the temple himself? Have you ever felt that way?
- “As a people, the church is really not a place to which we go but the dynamic community that actively reaches out in Christ's love to the needy and underprivileged of our society” (Chapter 5). What, from your own experiences might reflect the truth of this statement?

## **Considering David's Covenant of Everlasting Friendship with Jonathan**

Review 1 Samuel 18–20 and *Living as a Covenant Community*, Chapter 5, “Understanding the Covenant Between Jonathan and David” and “The Covenant of Everlasting Friendship.”

The covenant between David and Jonathan represents an important picture of ideal human relationships. The sacrifices they needed to make often involved deep understanding of the love of neighbor, especially with its relationship to injustice and issues of power. The covenant also can inform our relationship with God and Jesus as well as with our neighbor. “A sacred covenant relationship meant you did not make decisions without taking into

account how your actions or choices would affect your covenant partner” (Chapter 5, “The Elements of the Covenant”). From the relationship between David and Jonathan, we learn that a covenant can transcend cultural and family loyalties, encouraging us to embrace the stranger and the alien.

- What can we learn from the elements that symbolized the friendship between David and Jonathan—the exchange of armor, the exchange of names, and the willingness to sacrifice?
- Can you think about a time when you have been asked to enter into such a radical friendship?

## **Considering Jesus and the Everlasting Covenant**

To understand the context for the coming of Jesus as the Everlasting Covenant, it is important to first read Jeremiah 31:31–34. The Jeremiah text was written in the context of the Israelite exile with the promise that a new covenant will be given. Take some time to think about the historical context into which Jesus was born—a period of colonialism and a period of crisis marked by conflicting political and religious values. Does this seem like ripe conditions for another development of God’s covenantal relationship with the covenant community?

### **WHAT DOES JESUS HAVE TO DO WITH THE COVENANT?**

It’s helpful to recall the elements of the covenants that we have learned about in this study so far: care, grace, redemption, safety, blessing, guidance, and eternal rule. We can make a list about each characteristic and then recall from our knowledge of the ministry of Jesus those occasions when each of these characteristics of the covenant were integral to his ministry:

- Care—e.g., the healing of the blind man
- Grace—e.g., the promise of grace in the gift of the Holy Spirit
- Redemption—e.g., woman possessed by demons
- Safety—e.g., calming the storm
- Blessing—e.g., creating a new social order that overturns the oppression of the money changers in the Temple
- Guidance—e.g., Beatitudes
- Eternal rule—e.g., a new understanding of power in relationships: the tax collector and the rich, young ruler

Once the lists are made, they can be used to proclaim as a group or individually the covenant-fulfilling activity of Jesus by recalling each of the activities beginning with the phrase “I am a witness to the goodness of God . . .” For example: “I am a witness to the goodness of God as we experienced the revitalization of our church when we thought we would have to close the doors.”

## **The Meaning of the Covenant Today: Exploring the Power of Living in the Covenant**

In his book *The Covenanted Self*, Theologian and Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has suggested that “we are bound to a God for whom the neighbor comes first.”<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann’s interpretation of the apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians is that Paul believed that the church was not to conduct business or settle disputes in the same way as other communities. Different disciplines and ways of being in relationship must be practiced because of the covenantal relationship between the community and God.

It is important that we attempt to affirm for ourselves what it means for our way of living to be a covenant community that is bound to a God for whom the neighbor comes first (Chapter 6). In Philippians 2:1 Paul recommends using the following disciplines:

- Encouragement in Christ
- Consolation from love
- Sharing in the Spirit
- Compassion
- Sympathy

Using Appendix A as a starting point, review and name concrete examples of action by the covenant community that demonstrate each of these disciplines.

A yardstick for measuring the actions of the covenant community might be Philippians 2:3–4:

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

One final question we need to ask ourselves is if we practice all of these disciplines found in Philippians 2, could we say to ourselves that we understand what it means to, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus?”

## Time for Commitment

The end of our spiritual growth study on the covenants is an opportunity to use all that we have learned to declare for ourselves our personal commitments to covenant community. We need to ask ourselves what specifically we will do (and how often) as a result of this study. We can name our commitments in four areas:

- **Prayer:** Conversation—even debate—with God to deepen our relationship with our creator and covenant maker. Consider how often and how long you will commit to pray.
- **Advocacy:** Action on behalf of God’s just kin-dom. Consider how and where you are called to serve.

- **Intentional growth:** Seeking ways to grow spiritually, emotionally, and mentally and using weekly disciplines to foster that growth as individuals and in community. Consider what disciplines you will use and how often you will employ them.
- **Community life:** Learning how we are to live in community and take seriously the commandments and laws in our life together. Consider who you need to reach out to and how you can deepen your community life.

If you are doing this study in a group, you will have the opportunity for each person to share their commitment. If you are doing this study individually, you might want to record your commitments and post them somewhere in your home in order to keep track of your progress. You will also want to share your commitments with others in your covenant community. Covenant is a community process.

## Closing Worship

*Light the covenant candle and add water to the covenant pitcher, leaving room at the top, affirming God's ongoing revelation to the covenant community and affirming our commitments to covenant community.*

If you are in a group allow each person to take the opportunity if they wish to share their covenant commitments with the group.

### CLOSING LITANY: WESLEY'S COVENANT PRAYER (ADAPTED)

*Read in unison.*

We are no longer our own, but yours.  
Put us to what you will,

Place us with whom you will.  
Put us to doing, put us to suffering.  
Let us be put to work for you or set aside for you,  
Praised for you or criticized for you.  
Let us be full, let us be empty.  
Let us have all things, let us have nothing.  
We freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and sacrifice.  
And now, a wonderful and holy God, COVENANT MAKER, COVENANT  
KEEPER, AND COVENANT EQUIPPER, you are ours, and we are yours.  
So be it. And the covenant, which we have made on earth, let it also be  
made in heaven. Amen.

## **Closing Song**

“The Summons,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2130

## **Benediction (unison)**

“Now to [God] who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20–21).



## APPENDIX A

# United Methodist Women as a Covenant Community

## Session 1: Faith Responses and Moments of Opportunity

### ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- Five United Methodist Women members have been trained to act as jurisdictional guides to implement the 13 Steps to Sustainability in the life of conferences and communities.
- The jurisdictional guide in the Rocky Mountain Conference is studying and working to address toxic flooding of the southern Ute tribe.
- A Be Just. Be Green. team in the Holston Conference has started intentional sharing and working to implement the 13 Steps to Sustainability across the annual conference.
- United Methodist Women has partnered with young women (21–38 years old) and formed the New Generation Climate Justice Group. They began a five-month home study of climate change issues in order to begin working more intentionally on these issues with the support of their local communities.
- The United Methodist Women Be Just. Be Green. initiative encourages United Methodist Women members to actively resist prevailing popular and public opinion and corporate power justifications, and challenge our own economic and social power in order to listen to the voice of God, using intentional decisions and lifestyle changes to begin the movement towards a new way of life.

## RACIAL JUSTICE/ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- United Methodist Women actively engaged in advocacy efforts in regards to the crisis in Flint, Michigan. The organization and its members called out injustices such as popular calls for tax breaks, particularly for the wealthy, which meant austerity programs for everyone else; state government authority for emergency management strategies that neglected and silenced the voice of the people; higher utility rates to cover the problems created by corporate polluters; and structural racism that perpetuates injustices as seen in underfunded schools, lack of public transportation, high rates of maternal and child mortality, and now lead poisoning.

## MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

- Community Development for All People, a National Mission Institution in Columbus, Ohio, is working to honor the creation of new life and address issues of infant mortality by hosting a “first birthday party” to engage women who are pregnant or mothers of infants with the goal of connecting them to resources and support that will hopefully reduce infant deaths.
- Neighborhood Services Organization, a National Mission Institution in Oklahoma City runs a WIC center that coaches pregnant and new mothers on nursing, pregnancy, nutrition, etc. It is strategically located next door to a private market that has WIC-approved foods.

## **Session 2: Stepping Out in Faith: Covenant Community as a Rainbow or Ark for Justice**

### **MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH**

- National Seminar participants aware of racial disparities in birth outcomes joined in a protest to save the neonatal intensive care unit at one of Chicago's hospitals that serves the underserved. Local units also joined the coalition for ongoing work to save the hospital's pediatric unit.
- Young women from the New York Limitless group participated in a Days for Girls advocacy training sponsored by United Methodist Women during the 2016 United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. As a result they began raising money for Days for Girls reusable hygiene kits.

### **ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

- New York Annual Conference President joined the Coalition of Immokalee Workers calling for the fast food chain Wendy's to sign a fair food agreement to support a wage increase by paying an additional penny per pound for the tomatoes it purchases and require a human rights-based code of conduct to be implemented on the farms that grow their tomatoes.
- Several United Methodist Women leaders, inspired by the 2015 National Seminar, are now leading a workshop with United for a Fair Economy titled "Overworked and Undervalued: Women, Race and the Economy" to spur more United Methodist Women members into action.
- A local United Methodist Women leader in the Northern Illinois Conference has been active in efforts to increase the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, including a focus on the fast food industry.

## RACIAL AND GENDER JUSTICE

- Gordon Memorial United Methodist Church in Nashville partnered with the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom School® Program. Freedom Schools® are free summer programs that focus on reading and provide other summer experiences for low-income and at-risk children. The six-week program also has a strong focus on advocacy, encouraging parents to work for change in their public schools and communities.
- United Methodist Women called for justice in communities and re-committed itself to continuing work to end systemic racism. The call for action included expanding conversations on racial justice by using the Showing up for Racial Justice Police Brutality Action Kit; regularly reexamining United Methodist Women obligations under the Charter for Racial Justice; viewing media through a social justice and racial justice lens; and using the Reading Program and annual studies to deepen understanding of other people’s experience of injustice.

### **Session 3: The Work of the Covenant Community in Individual and Collective Crises**

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE

*You shall not steal.*

- El Pueblo Immigration Services, a mission of the Seashore District in Mississippi, received a Call to Prayer and Self-Denial Grant in 2014 from United Methodist Women to help unbanked and underserved Hispanic immigrants handle their financial affairs and consumer needs, protecting themselves from fees, predatory lending practices, and high interest rates through a financial literacy program.

*Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy . . . Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out . . . With a mighty hand.*

- United Methodist Women is encouraging members to tell Congress it's time for a moral and just minimum wage and advocate for increasing the minimum wage in their community or state to \$15 per hour.
- United Methodist Women members are encouraged to join Arise Chicago, an advocacy and education partnership between faith communities and workers, and learn how faith groups are engaged in supporting workers and fighting wage theft.

## RACIAL JUSTICE

*You shall not murder.*

- United Methodists are joining other faith groups in the national religious campaign against torture. The campaign seeks to make torture visible and also to ban its use by signing the National Religious Campaign against Solitary Confinement statement and joining state and local campaigns.
- United Methodist Women from the Great Plains and Rio Grande conferences have been active in local campaigns to end the death penalty. In Nebraska, a United Methodist Women leader participated in a vigil to try and stop the governor from reinstating the death penalty.

*Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

- Following the 2008 General Conference Resolution, "Healing Relationships with Indigenous Persons," United Methodist Women of the Yellowstone Conference pioneered reconciliation efforts with the Northern Cheyenne tribe in light of the 1864 participation of Methodist minister Col. John Chivington in the attack on the unarmed encampment at Sand Creek.

- Across the United States, twenty United Methodist annual conferences are engaging in healing relationships with indigenous people groups, including work in Oklahoma and in Alabama.

## MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

*Honor your father and your mother.*

- Three women die each day in the United States from childbirth, disproportionately affecting women of color, low-income, and rural families—this is the highest maternal mortality rate among industrialized nations. United Methodist Women is advocating for Maternal Death Review Panels in the nineteen states that do not have them.
- In many parts of the world, women are reluctant to seek care because of negative experiences. In this quadrennium, United Methodist Women will be joining an international movement advocating for respectful maternity care to eliminate disrespect and abuse and encourage women to receive the care they need before, during, and after giving birth.

## Session 4: Covenant Community Actions

### ECONOMIC JUSTICE

- United Methodist Women members are encouraged to read *The Age of Dignity: Preparing for the Elder Boom in a Changing America*. Also consider making a pledge to commit to fair workplace standards and joining the Hand-To-Hand Network of Caring across America.
- United Methodist Women members are encouraged to read *Forked!*, a book about women restaurant workers. They can also download the Diner's Guide to Ethical Eating app to help determine which

restaurants they should frequent. The app highlights restaurants that pay workers fair wages and benefits, and allow patrons to rate them on racially equality through Yelp!.

## RACIAL JUSTICE/ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- United Methodist Women members are urged to join the Color of Change campaign to restore funding to the Center for Disease Control's Healthy Homes/Lead Poisoning Prevention Program for fiscal year 2017.
- United Methodist Women members are urged to look at safe drinking water issues in their own community and how they may disproportionately impact communities of color and call for state and federal accountability for communities facing toxic drinking water.

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE/RACIAL JUSTICE

- In response to the unfair practices of family detention centers and United Methodist Women's Campaign to End Family Detention, 250 Texan United Methodist Women members went to Dilly, Texas, in May 2015 to join a protest outside of the family detention center there to call for an end to family detentions.

## MATERNAL HEALTH/GENDER JUSTICE

- The Neighborhood Center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is a United Methodist Women-supported National Mission Institution with programs for children and support activities for young mothers. The summertime free and reduced-price lunch program is staffed by United Methodist Women members from the Susquehanna Conference.

- A grant from United Methodist Women in 2011 to the Nyadire United Methodist hospital in Zimbabwe helped fund the establishment of the School of Midwifery, where one hundred midwives graduate each year with emergency training in obstetric and newborn care.
- United Methodist Women members in Huntington, West Virginia, are assisting with HER Place, an educational center founded in 2013 by a United Methodist Women member. It serves drug-addicted women and their children in the community through educational and support programs as well as other services.

## ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE/GENDER JUSTICE

- A United Methodist Women Call to Prayer and Self-Denial Grant has enabled women's groups in rural Uganda to purchase seeds and tools and learn new methods to improve women's status in their communities.



## APPENDIX B

### **Conversation Between Maharat Rori Picker Neiss and Kathleen Stone**

This is an excerpt of a conversation between Maharat Rori Picker Neiss, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis, Missouri, and Kathleen Stone, former United Methodist Women executive and current pastor at Wharton United Community Church at St. John in Wharton, New Jersey.

#### **On the Meaning of the Covenant**

On the most basic level we see it as being the relationship, a relationship that involves a requirement from both parties. . . . But the crucial difference when we start talking about a religious covenant, we recognize it as something of an absurd statement to say that we can be in covenant with God to the extent that there is no way that there can be equity in this covenant. . . . So within the covenant there is a sudden sense of generosity. The covenant is not some kind of business deal. It is really an act of graciousness on the part of God in the exchange.

#### **The Meaning of *Berith* and *Hesed***

*Berith* is the word that we often use when we are talking about covenants. In the Torah, we talk about Abraham, we talk about *berith*—the covenant

between parties. And that we understand as a kind of business deal. We talk about the ritual of circumcision, we talk about *berith*. . . . *hesed* we would not typically use in relationship to covenant. *Hesed* we really understand meaning kindness . . . (covenant). Yes, this is a kindness of God. This is God's *hesed*, God's kindness. *Hesed* is really unidirectional.

## **About the Covenant Relationship**

God creates the world and the relationship starts to evolve as people are given autonomy. . . . And so the relationship between us has to change. That's one way to look at God's promises to Adam and Eve, but what God promises to Noah is going to be different after sin has overtaken the world. . . . We don't see covenants replacing the prior ones, but the covenant that begins with Abraham and then with Moses is very much a particular covenant whereas the covenant with Adam and Noah are universal.

## **The Jewish Covenant Community**

God has a covenant with humanity, but God also has a unique role for the Jewish people in the world. That unique role doesn't replace the relationship of others. But we very much see ourselves as having a responsibility in the world. . . . It's really not my real concern to figure out your role but it is my concern to try to figure out my role. And I need to be focused on what it is I have responsibility for in this world.

It seems like God is saying: I'm going to give you all these things and in exchange I want you to walk my path. . . . But a very crucial part of the Jewish faith, when we don't follow the path, God is able to rescind some of the gifts but never break the covenant. So we get kicked out of the land of Israel but we never lose the covenant with God.

## **The Covenant and Daily Life**

It worked its way into my life in the everyday ritual. The way I choose to honor the Sabbath, and the holidays. All of those are going to be reflected in this relationship that I feel that I have. . . . But I very much believe that all those rituals are meant to push us to think about what they mean in the broader world. That's where we have a responsibility as Jews to be asking questions about things like Syrian refugees, climate change, hunger, poverty. . . . When I choose to eat matzos on Sabbath. . . . I need to ask myself what that means that we were slaves in Egypt. That freedom doesn't exist everywhere in the world. That is something that is a personal question for me. To me the law is love. Love towards God; it is love towards others.

### **Land**

A big part of the promise of the covenant, especially with Abraham, is not only the land, but becoming a people. And so what does it mean to become a people? So people seem to be tied to land. . . . In the modern context: what does it mean to be a people and what does it mean to be a people without a land? Where is our identity? So some will say for the context of the time that in that context of becoming a people was the promise of growing as a people and then having a land. And that's what made them a people.

### **The Special Responsibility and the Covenant**

There is another challenge to the covenant equation, which is that historically for the Jewish community it has come to mean a covenant of suffering.

Somehow what it meant to be chosen as Jewish people meant to be persecuted throughout history. . . . Because you're trying to reconcile what is my special role that I am given with the land and what is my responsibility to protect myself when historically every culture seems to want to exterminate the Jewish people?

## **Brueggemann's Interpretation of Canaan**

Typically, we talk about Canaan as a literal place, what became the precursor to the land of Israel. So, it's interesting to understand because we do understand the Canaanites as not being a righteous people. . . . And so it becomes one way for us to justify what has transpired. It also becomes a beautiful way of universalizing some of the message. So, it is not about conquering this one land but about combating exploitation in all lands. I don't think that goes against Jewish thought but it is not traditionally how we have understood it. We have understood it in a very literal sense.

## **Israel**

It's one of my favorite topics how in the second [exile] the rabbis kept Judaism alive when it should have died out, given that so many of our rituals were about the holy Temple and Jerusalem. And so it's fascinating the way in which that happens and so within that talking about Israel within the prayers was about talking about some sort of lofty goal. And not necessarily in a literal land. . . . But, when we talk about Israel we talk about restoration of the Temple, of the kingdom, of the peoplehood that we had. . . . And so, when it started to become a possibility in the land of Israel . . . many Jews felt . . . that only God could bring the people back. It was really only after 1967 after this Six-Day War . . . that we start to see a shift into what we call religious Zionism. Yes, [God] goes back to the covenant. Yes, the idea that God gave us this land and then kicked us out of this land. But it was always meant to

be our land. Now we're seeing a budding up of this religious worldview with the political movement. . . . Everything in our prayers talked about this ideal futuristic perception and then all of a sudden we have the United Nations saying sure there can be a country called Israel.

*Maharat Rori Picker Neiss is executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of St. Louis, Missouri. Maharat is the title given to Orthodox Jewish women who are trained in the Torah and spiritual leadership.*

## **About the Author**

**elmira Nazombe** has worked in the areas of social and economic justice and human rights for over five decades. She was an executive secretary for racial justice for United Methodist Women for seven years. She has worked for a variety of ecumenical organizations including Church World Service, All Africa Conference of Churches, and National Christian Council of Kenya. She has been active for the last twenty years as a social justice educator. She is the author of the mission study *Globalization and Its Impact on People's Lives*; co-author of the leader's guide for the mission study *God's People in an Urban Culture*. She was part of the team of writers for *A Mission Journey: A Handbook for Volunteers*. She is trained as both an educator and an urban planner. She holds a doctorate in education, focused on using education to work for social and economic transformation. She currently teaches social justice courses at Rutgers University in New Jersey, hoping to nurture a new generation of social justice activists.