

HOPE IS HERE!

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR PURSUING JUSTICE AND BELOVED COMMUNITY

BY LUTHER E. SMITH JR.

CONGREGATIONAL GUIDE FOR LEADERSHIP TEAMS & GROUPS

Hope, says Luther Smith Jr., is essential to the needed personal and social transformations that prepare us for sacred opportunities to live into God's dream of justice and beloved community. Interpreting five spiritual practices for individuals and congregations, *Hope Is Here!* prepares us to engage racism, mass incarceration, environmental crises, divisive politics, and indifference that imperil justice and beloved community. Each chapter in the book ends with questions that can be used by leadership teams and adult groups as a framework for conversation and study.

This congregational guide goes a step further to assist clergy in their sermon and worship preparation and Christian educators in the creation of group Bible study or leadership meetings. Each session of this congregational guide was written so that users can see that HOPE is Here! The framework of the four primary sections of each session spells out "hope" in order to keep this ideal at the top of mind when you are teaching, leading, or preaching.

- **HEAR THE WORDS.** This section connects the book's chapters to actions. There is a Scripture reference associated with the action along with at least three points that can be used to prepare sermons or to teach a class.
- **OFFER THE WISDOM OF SCRIPTURE.** This section provides a Hebrew Bible reference and a New Testament reference, which also appear together in the Revised Common Lectionary. These additional references allow for options when preparing sermons or classes.
- **PRAY WITH EACH OTHER.** This section offers two prayers. One prayer is rhyming prose and can be memorized by especially younger participants. The second prayer is the lyrics to a song found online at Hymnary.org. These prayers can be used in worship or to open and/or close a group meeting. You can also incorporate the full song referenced in the second prayer in your meeting and worship times (links to full hymn on Hymnary.org are included).
- **ENACT SPIRITUAL PRACTICES.** This section offers a practical application of the spiritual practices found in the book that can empower your congregation to work toward action.



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After utilizing the H.O.P.E. concepts, each session ends with a congregational commitments section that lets your group know how *hope* “Is Here” in your community. Your leadership and study groups can use this section to agree to one congregational commitment related to the content of the session that exemplifies how, as an organization, you will pursue justice and beloved community. This process can also be reflected upon during weekly worship. At the end of this resource is a longer, guided prompt where your congregation can decide on one commitment you will make as a community and provides space so you can begin planning your action steps.

We encourage you to take time with this book and this guide. While this is broken out into six sessions, you can take multiple weeks with each session both in group study and in worship, using the multiple Scripture references to build your sermon series. During week one you can discuss the chapter(s), engage with the end-of-chapter questions, and pray together. Week two can focus the activities for enacting the spiritual practice and on the work of creating the congregational commitments. The final resource in this packet will likely be something your group works on for multiple weeks as you create your plan that carries you toward a hope-filled future.

If you are using this book in a group or congregational setting and want to save money on a bulk purchase, note that most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com.

“Hope is here to empower us to live life more fully.”

—from chapter 1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE CONGREGATIONAL GUIDE

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CHAPTERS 1-2

Hope Is Here!

Hear the Words

Our author shares with us that hope is with us now and available for the transformations needed in the world and our personal lives. If we are to become a people of hope for the beloved communities where we are, then we must recall the past, embrace the present, and acknowledge a future that is to come. Spiritual practices help us to foster these challenges. In recalling the past to pursue hope, contemplative praying and prophetic remembering are necessary disciplines (chs. 3-4). In embracing the present to pursue hope, crossing identity boundaries and transforming conflict are necessary disciplines (chs. 5-6). In acknowledging a future that is to come through the pursuit of hope, celebrating community is a necessary discipline (ch. 7). **Jeremiah 29:11** tells us that God is accountable and knows the plans based on God's track record of the past. God offers plans for welfare and not for harm, which are both current activities of the justice work expected of believers. God promises in this text a future filled with hope.

Offer the Wisdom of Scripture

Psalms 8 invites us to honor God through the acknowledgement of all creation. There is an invitation in creation that empowers us to seek hope in places, relationships, causes, and other ways of coming alive. There is affirmation in the text that reminds us that God gives us responsibility to continue stewardship through the pursuit of hope and justice.

In **Romans 5:1-5**, Paul encourages us to extend gratitude to our Creator who, by the presence of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, continues to let us learn about faith, hope, and love through our distresses as we continue to step into the future with a sense of hope without shame. It is through the presence of the Triune God that we have a blessed assurance in our pursuit of hope.

Pray with Each Other

O God of Hope,

There is always room for growth when depending on You
There is always room for growth with what we say and do
There is always room for growth when learning new things
There is always room for growth when on You we lean

“[May the God of Hope Go With Us](#)” (“Song of Hope/Canto de esperanza”)

May the God of hope go with us every day, filling all our lives with love and joy and peace.
May the God of justice speed us on our way, bringing light and hope to every land and race.
Praying, let us work for peace; singing, share our joy with all;
working for a world that's new; faithful when we hear Christ's call.



Enact Spiritual Practices

Breath prayers can be written by every person to internalize the information that **HOPE IS HERE!** The goal of this spiritual practice is to write one sentence that expresses a thought learned or a desired learning outcome as God will continue to offer guidance through the Holy Spirit. When writing the breath prayer, consider the first portion of the sentence as the opportunity to inhale. The second portion of the sentence should be used to exhale. The sentences written by the participants should be collected. Depending on the level of confidence of the facilitator and participants, the breath prayers can be listed anonymously or with the names of the writers. The list of breath prayers can be used to open each session for the duration of the study, or may be used individually between sessions.

IS HERE! Creating Congregational Commitments

Think about and discuss a past intentional action taken by your congregation that was intended to bring vitality to your church or the wider community.

How is that action affecting your present moment?

What is needed to transform that action in the here and now in order to create a more hopeful future for your congregation or community?

Whose talents are needed and what resources do they need to make this a reality?



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CHAPTER 3

Contemplative Praying

Hear the Words

Contemplative praying is an action plan that encourages hope. The listening heart, the discerning heart, and the engaging heart are active responses to an ongoing communication with God. When proclaiming the Word of God that gives the congregation instructions to act, there may be stories told about asking that requires listening, searching that requires discernment, and knocking that requires opened doors. In **Luke 11:5-10**, Jesus invites readers to listen, discern, and to engage with the beloved community by reminding those who hear to persevere in prayer. Jesus tells the disciples to ask. There is an expectation of listening to receive what is being given. Jesus tells the disciples to search. There is an invitation to discern what God has in store. Jesus tells the disciples to knock. There is a response to be engaged since there is an opened door.

Offer the Wisdom of Scripture

Psalm 67 prompts us to praise God, the One from whom we receive all things. God has saving power—the ability to judge—and created an earth that yields at God’s command. Our responsibility is to hear God, to discern what God is expecting of us, and to engage all God’s creation in our praise.

In **Acts, 16:9-15**, we meet the mysterious Lydia who rises from the text as a woman whose heart listened while she was quite busy with everyday life. We do not know much about Lydia other than she is a dealer in purple cloth, and is a worshiper of God. Yet, in listening, discerning, and engaging her heart, she was able to open her home.

Pray with Each Other

O God of Hope,

Teach our hearts to listen for Your command
Lead our thoughts through discerning Your plan
Guide our actions as we engage one another and You
Remind us daily of what You have called us to do

[“Be Thou My Vision”](#)

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.



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Enact Spiritual Practices

Labyrinths are special places for prayer used by many different faiths for spiritual centering, contemplation, and prayer. As a congregation, build a labyrinth on the property either outside with bricks, stones, and/or plants. You can also have one painted on the floor of an indoor space or use chalk to draw one on an outdoor space. Once the labyrinth is complete, develop a meditative prayer guide for walking the labyrinth using the congregational commitments section below. These prompts and questions will invoke the walker to listen for God, discern God's will, and prepare the walker to engage in God's call for work in the world.

IS HERE! Creating Congregational Commitments

In conjunction with using the labyrinth practice, ask participants to spend their time walking to the center of the labyrinth thinking about conversations they've had with others (within and outside the church) about the congregation: its goals, hopes, mission, and so forth. Encourage them to really listen to the words they've heard others say. Then, as they begin their journey back out of the labyrinth, ask them to discern what doors have been kept closed, which keep those goals and hopes from being realized.

After participants have had the opportunity to walk through the labyrinth, come back together as a group. Allow those who wish to share the conversations they thought about and the doors they've discerned may be closed. Remind everyone to listen with an open mind and heart.

Once everyone has had a chance to speak, decide as a group which door is being knocked on the loudest and what it will take to open that door.

Whose talents are needed and what resources do they need to make this a reality?



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CHAPTER 4

Prophetic Remembering

Hear the Words

Prophetic remembering is an act that inspires hope. This act recalls the past, acknowledges the present, and anticipates a future while providing ample space for hope. When proclaiming the Word of God, we have opportunities to tell stories of God's deliverance that promote God's current, transformative action, and God's motives for a makeover that may be a form of a revolution. In **Micah 6:8**, the prophet reminds us that we have been given a mandate to prophetically remember. We can recall our past since we are to walk humbly with God who has never left us nor forsaken us. We can acknowledge our present since we are to love kindness through the mercy ministries in which our congregations engage. We can anticipate a future since we are to do justice, which requires taking an active role in creating a just society for those who will remain after we are long gone.

Offer the Wisdom of Scripture

In **Jeremiah 33:14-16**, the prophet offers a reminder of God's provision. It is an act of prophetic remembering of a promise from God for a Savior to come with hope for a future. The prophet declares that God promised faithfulness to the people even in a time of defeat. Surely the end will be wonderful because God promised just that to the people of God.

Luke 21:25-36 opens our eyes to a future of hope even during trying times. Christ is coming, which means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us. The lesson of the fig tree is the precursor to a new day. Luke tells us to be on guard so that our hearts are not weighted down but full of hope to make all things better. This text leads us to action that will impact the future by accepting our responsibility for it.

Pray with Each Other

O God of Hope,

Remembering what You have already done is music to our ears
Remembering what You are doing right now will impact us for years
Remembering now for a future to come is a task not easily done
Yet, help us God to do the job before Your Son returns

["Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord"](#)

Take thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray;
give us the mind of Christ each passing day;
Teach us to know the truth that sets us free;
grant us in all our thoughts to honor thee.



Enact Spiritual Practices

Have 3-5 volunteers read aloud the lesson of the fig tree from Luke 21:29-33, asking your group to listen closely as they ponder the following question: what are the leaves on our congregation's tree? That is, what will be the signs we can look for that will let us know that our pursuit of justice and beloved community are being realized? Once everyone has had time to reflect, engage in an activity that concretizes these signs in a way that's fitting for your group. This could include anything from making a list to writing them down on leaves cut from construction paper and glued to a large drawing or cut-out of a tree. After this is complete, encourage group members to pair off and discuss their contribution with one another, allowing time to ask questions and hear stories.

IS HERE! Creating Congregational Commitments

There are several faith-based justice organizations located in every community. Take time to research the ones in your area, noting their name, contact information, and causes or populations they support. Discuss as a group which organization is most attuned to what your congregation is seeking in the pursuit of justice and the beloved community.

Which organization do you believe would be the most suitable choice for your congregation to pledge their commitment? Whose talents are needed and what resources do they need to make this a reality?

If there is not an organization already in the area or if a population or cause is not being addressed, the congregation may consider creating a taskforce who will seek to create a network of faith-based congregations that are culturally, economically, geographically and religiously diverse and who covenant together to make the area a more just place to live, work, and do business. Whose talents are needed and what resources do they need to make this a reality?



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CHAPTER 5

Crossing Identity Boundaries

Hear the Words

Crossing identity boundaries is a physical action toward embodying hope. Identity can be influenced by personal or cultural attributes that require a physical move through words, action, or deeds. In **Luke 10:25**, Jesus allows the lawyer to reveal the necessities of hope. To love the Lord with all your mind, your body, and your soul requires love to be an action word. To love your neighbor as yourself pushes the believer to let their work be an expression of active love. When the parable of the Good Samaritan is told, Jesus expects us to acknowledge the bodily actions of the three individuals who passed the one in the ditch. Each one physically did something, which more than likely had something to do with their own identity.

Offer the Wisdom of Scripture

In **Genesis 12:1-9**, Abram is physically sent from what is familiar into a land that is not known to him. God promises Abram to not only bless him with making him a great nation, but also grant him to be a blessing to those he encounters. God's promise happens regardless of Abram's identity boundaries including age, culture, or religious affiliation.

Matthew 9:18-26 reminds us that everyone needs Jesus. The public official who should not be associating with Jesus needs Jesus. The woman with the issue of blood who has been banned from society needs Jesus. The girl who is dead when Jesus arrives needs Jesus. Christ crosses all boundaries and offers hope for those who have a need.

Pray with Each Other

O God of Hope,

Walk with us on this journey to places we've never been
Help us to see Your hand even in a strange land
Show us how to be representatives of Your hands and feet
Teach us how to serve You in every person that we meet

“[We Are One in the Spirit](#)” (“They’ll Know We Are Christians”)

We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord;
we are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord,
and we pray that all unity may one day be restored:
And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love;
yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.



Enact Spiritual Practices

Photography is a way to see God's unique touches on all creation. Find pictures of the congregation over the years that display the congregation being the hands and feet of Christ. Create teams of 2-3 group members, provide each team with a few photos, and have them recreate the old pictures with new individuals who are not members of the congregation. This will be a visual representation of changing the landscape, acknowledging the crossing of boundaries necessary to recreate the picture. Instead of only working with friends and family members, spend the effort to engage with strangers to recreate the pictures, and ask them about their hopes for the community.

IS HERE! Creating Congregational Commitments

After you've recreated all the pictures in the "Enact Spiritual Practices" activity, invite those in the new pictures to a big reveal of the church having crossed the boundaries of where they once were to where they would like to be in a hoped-for future.

What are the questions you want to ask in order to engage in meaningful conversation with the guests you invite? How will you plan to listen to their stories and concerns about the community?

Whose talents are needed and what resources do they need to make this a reality?



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CHAPTER 6

Transforming Conflict

Hear the Words

Transforming conflict is internal work for external hope. This is like training for a journey ahead. **Matthew 18:15-20** gives a template for the training. Actions associated with training for the journey ahead with hope include: acknowledging a conflict, admitting the need for transformation, and advancing the situation through forgiveness. The one-on-one encounter with a person is acknowledging that there is a conflict. Including another companion on the quest to pursue change is an admission that transformation is needed. Involving the congregation is to openly pursue forgiveness. The goal is to not let the conflict impede the pursuit of hope for something better.

Offer the Wisdom of Scripture

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16 is the reminder we need that God will not leave or forsake us in our efforts to transform. When conflict is present, so is God, who has placed angels to guard us. God's promise to believers is that God will be with us in trouble and will rescue us and honor us. God will satisfy us with long life and show us God's salvation.

In **Luke 4:1-13**, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was tempted by the devil. Temptations are merely conflicts that require internal work for external hope. Although there are several ways to interpret the temptations of Christ, here are a few challenges that seem to face congregations who pursue hope and are met with temptations that hamper the pursuit. The first challenge is to feed the hungry. The second challenge is to rule the world with justice. The final challenge is to serve God faithfully.

Pray with Each Other

O God of Hope,

Conflict is real and a distraction to all
Help us to overcome with a clarion call
Call us to love in the midst of needed change
Call us to love when things are real strange
Call us to love while we need to transform
Call us to love and to forgive with no harm

[“When Peace like a River \(It is Well with My Soul\)”](#)

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed his own blood for my soul
It is well with my soul; it is well; it is well with my soul.



Enact Spiritual Practices

Jesus quoted Scripture embedded in His heart when faced with temptation or conflict. The act of committing Scripture to your heart will allow you to resist temptation and befriend conflict, transformation, and forgiveness. This practice can be aided by writing in journals, which provides a way to capture current feelings for future review. Consider the following Scriptures and use them for meditation throughout a week (Monday through Friday). Choose to either memorize these five Scriptures or journal your responses to each passage: Colossians 3:16; Psalm 51:10; 2 Timothy 2:15; Psalm 23:2-3; and Romans 8:38-39.

IS HERE! Creating Congregational Commitments

Begin with a conversation about how each member of the group relates to conflict—how ready are each of you to befriend conflict?

As a group, create a list of skills that are useful during times of conflict. Using this list, discuss who in your group has one or more of these skills, focusing not on yourself but on other members of the group.

With these skills and people in mind, how can your group formalize these skills so that when conflict arises, these individuals can step in to embrace and transform the conflict?

Who is able to support those identified as the primary mediators and what does their support look like?



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CHAPTER 7

Celebrating Community

Hear the Words

Celebration is an act of the whole community. Each activity acknowledging that **HOPE IS HERE** is a reason for the collective to celebrate. **Psalm 150** calls for everything that has breath to praise the Lord. The call is for every living creature to sing with gratitude and trust, displaying the true image of community that is ever changing in pursuit of hope. Celebration is the continuum of the work necessary for the heart, mind, body, and soul. **Philippians 4:8-9** encourages us to consider what needs to be celebrated and how we should keep doing those things so that the God of peace (and hope) will be with us.

Offer the Wisdom of Scripture

Zephaniah 3:14-20 offers several ways to celebrate. The bulk of the celebrations include singing, shouting, dancing, and praise. However, this text also encourages celebration in acts of justice. God, through us, can save the hurt, gather the outcast, and assist with changing shame into praise. Although it is God who saves, gathers, and changes, God's people can be the conduit for God's work and the catalyst for celebration when the act is done.

In **Philippians 4:4-7** Paul speaks to the Philippians and to us by giving us concrete ways to celebrate. Rejoicing in the Lord is a continuous command that can be done by letting gentleness be known. Rejoicing in the Lord always can be done in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. Rejoicing in the Lord as a daily practice can be done by letting God know any requests. God's presence will help to guard hearts and minds, which is yet another celebration.

Pray with Each Other

O God of Hope,

Rejoicing is difficult when we overlook the little things
Help us to continue the pursuit to let freedom ring
Show us how even the little things can add up
As we empty ourselves in service, please refill our cup

“[God Is Here!](#)”

God is here! As we your people meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure what it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us, all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of the Spirit into open minds and hearts.



Enact Spiritual Practices

Celebrate the creative work of your community. Have group members bring to a meeting the work of local artists: music recordings; paintings or pictures of paintings; craftworks such as quilts, pottery, jewelry, and so forth; playbills from local theaters; and other similar examples. Let each group member do a show-and-tell, explaining the piece, who the artist is, and how they represent hope in your community. If possible, invite these local artists to come and join in on the celebration. Discuss as a group how celebrating the work of those in your community can enliven your conversations and plans in your pursuit of justice and beloved community.

IS HERE! Creating Congregational Commitments

Plan a multifaith community fair. Provide a booth for each faith entity so they can display how they celebrate being in community with others and how they engage in outreach and justice ministry. Allow each faith group to bring fine arts and creative crafts to display and teach others. Offering food from local restaurants will not only be an attraction for non-church members to attend, but also foster additional relationships in the community. The goal of the gathering should be to spark conversations and encourage building relationships for the collective work of justice for the community. As you and the other communities work toward your goals, this event would benefit from taking place twice a year. One celebration would be to introduce the community to one another and expose the justice issues that need to be addressed and the second celebration would be to highlight the victories since the previous celebration.

Whose talents are needed and what resources do they need to make this a reality?



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HOPE IS HERE! Creating a Long-Term Congregational Commitment

Begin by reviewing the congregational commitments your group has created throughout this study. Use this work to create a large-scale, long-term plan that your congregation can enact in order realize the hope of justice and beloved community.

Chapters 1-3—Taking into account your revelations of past actions taken by the congregation and current understandings of what doors need to be opened, discern what core issue and/or community population your congregation hopes to serve.

Chapters 4-5—Who can you connect with in the community (organizations and strangers who've helped you cross boundaries) to help plan, fund, and enact your commitment?

Chapter 6—What is the role of each member of your group? Who are the conflict mediators? Who are your organizers? Who provides emotional support? Who are you missing and where can you find them?

Chapter 7—Return to your initial plan of creating a community fair now that you have a firm idea of what your congregation's commitment will be. When will your group be ready to present your initial plan to the community for feedback? When do you hope to celebrate the victories once you've begun to put your plan into action?



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