

ELCA WORLD HUNGER'S 40 DAYS OF GIVING

Educational Series

Over the next six weeks, we will journey together through the season of Lent, reflecting on hunger, hope and God's love in a world of both abundance and need. Each weekly session is based on a devotion from ELCA World Hunger's 40 Days of Giving, a special 40-day devotional for your congregation to use as you take up the challenge of responding to hunger through ELCA World Hunger together.

Each weekly session will have: an opening prayer, a Scripture reading, a devotion from a leader in the ELCA that introduces the session's theme, instructions for a group activity, a story from a ministry supported by ELCA World Hunger, questions for discussion and a closing prayer. You are welcome to adapt these sessions to fit your needs, perhaps by adding a hymn or writing your own discussion questions.

Weekly Session Four: POWER AND POWERLESSNESS (Luke 13:1-5)

Devotion from Pastor John Cummings, Grace in Action, Detroit, Mich.

LEADER'S GUIDE

Instructions for Leader:

Welcome the participants and introduce the session's theme: POWER AND POWERLESSNESS. This week, we will read the words of Pastor John Cummings of Grace in Action, a new congregation in Detroit, Mich., and reflect on how God responds with power in the midst of our powerlessness.

Invite the group to join in a brief moment of silence before continuing with the opening prayer.

Materials needed:

- Pens
- 3x5 cards (about two per person)
- One large piece of paper with "Hunger" written on it



Prayer (adapted from Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 26)

Lord God, our strength, the struggle between good and evil rages within and around us, and all the forces that defy you tempt us with empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your word, that we may trust in your power to create and to restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



Read or invite someone to read Luke 13:1-5

¹ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Read or invite someone to read Pastor John Cummings' reflection on this verse:

In Detroit, less than half of students graduate from high school. The schools are also among the lowest ranked in the state. I was having lunch at the home of a mother from our congregation, talking about her son and his plans after high school. I brought up the graduation rate to her. "Well," she said, "if these parents around here would get their act together and start taking care of their kids, things would be different."

How quickly we blame the victim of injustice, like the followers of Jesus in today's gospel. The Galileans were murdered by Pilate because they were sinners, right? Jesus redirects the conversation. In telling them to "repent," literally to "turn", he is urging them to re-orient their way of seeing the world. He asks them to stop pointing fingers at each other, and look instead at the Roman empire and its acts of repression as the culprit, before they also become the victims of violence. We too, must recognize the lies that blame the victims of poverty, and ask the question, "Who is really responsible for this injustice? And how can we together build the power to change it?"

What has happened to the people Jesus is describing?

Who was at fault for their suffering?

(Galileans were murdered by Pilate and the Romans; the 18 were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – one group murdered, the other killed in an accident)

Pastor Cummings writes that Jesus urges the people "to repent, literally to turn."

What sort of repentance does Pastor Cummings hear Jesus urging?

(seeing the world in a new way; no longer blaming the victims)

Ask

Pastor Cummings writes that we are often quick to blame victims of injustice, or those who face hunger and poverty, as though their sin is great enough to merit their suffering. Another way of saying this is to say that they have the power to change their circumstances, but often they do not.

Let's read together the following story and think about the things the people in it can change, and the things they cannot.

Read or invite someone to read the following story:

Those who know her are familiar with Verdell's ever-present smile. She brings warmth and welcome to her community, which might be surprising given the challenges she has faced. When her mother lost her home in the 2008 mortgage crisis, Verdell took her in. As her mother's Alzheimer's progressed, Verdell continued to care for her. Then she lost her job when her employer outsourced the department. This allowed Verdell to care for her mother full-time, but it also meant they would both need help to pay their bills and put food on the table. In a city like Chicago, where Verdell lives, this can be especially difficult. Chicago, like other large U.S. cities, has a lot of "food deserts," communities that lack a supermarket to buy fresh fruits, vegetables and meat. This can make prices higher or commutes longer when trying to get food. Public transportation can help some, but riding the train means carrying all of your groceries by hand. On the other hand, owning a car means paying for gas, parking, insurance, and a host of other fees.

Verdell is not alone. In the United States in 2014, more than 48 million Americans experienced the challenge of not knowing where their next meal might come from. More than 900,000 children lived in households where hunger was a common experience.

Pass out the 3x5 cards to each person. Show them the large paper with "Hunger" written on it. This large paper should be put in a central place, perhaps on a table. Invite everyone to think of one cause for Verdell's hunger from the story. Give them one moment to think and then invite them to write the cause on one of their 3x5 cards.

What cause of hunger did you hear in Verdell's story?

How might this make it difficult to get enough food for her and her mother?

(examples might include unemployment, transportation, food deserts, health care and so on)

Invite the group to place their cards around the large piece of paper with "Hunger" on it. Give the group a moment to think about the causes you have identified. Then, invite them to think of one more possible cause of hunger and write that on their second 3x5 card. Ask them to share their second cause and, like before, invite them to place their cards around the large piece of paper.

It's okay if people say the same thing! You may want to prompt them, if there are too few. You can suggest things like drought that kills crops, lack of access to clean water for irrigation, job loss, lack of transportation and so on.

Ask

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Which of these things do individuals have power over?

Which things can an individual control?

Which of these things have to be shaped by a whole community or a government in order to change?

What circumstances might make a person feel powerless?

Read or invite someone to read the following story:

The Oak Park River Forest Food Pantry Verdell and her mother visit monthly is a big help. "It's harder and harder to get out with mother, but the people here always make us welcome," she says. The pantry offers comprehensive services and programs, including food, to thousands of families on Chicago's West Side and near-west suburbs. It is supported in part by gifts to ELCA World Hunger and many local congregations. Staff at the pantry offer benefits counseling to help visitors access benefits that may help them feed their families, as well as nutrition education. With this support, Verdell and her mother are able to get the help they need.

Ask

Where do you see the church at work in Verdell's story?

What are some other causes the church is addressing?

How does God exercise power, even in the face of things that make us feel powerless?

How does the repentance Pastor Cummings describes help us see where God is at work?



Closing prayer

Lord God, in your power and wisdom you created a world in which all can be fed. Bless us and our neighbors that we may respond to the forces that oppose you and leave so many people hungry in our communities. Keep us steadfast in our trust in you and your plan for your creation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.