

THIS BAND OF
SISTERHOOD

Black Women Bishops

ON RACE, FAITH, AND THE CHURCH

DISCUSSION
GUIDE

Edited by

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CONTENTS

About This Guide 3

Foreword and Introduction 4

CHAPTER 1. Gird Up My Loins 7

CHAPTER 2. Growing Up Black in the Church 9

CHAPTER 3. The Dual Pandemic 12

CHAPTER 4. Discerning the Call 14

CHAPTER 5. Living into the Call 16

CHAPTER 6. We Are the Church and the *Afterword* 18

For Facilitators 21

References 23

The Contributors 24

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Band of Sisterhood brings together the first five Black women to be elected diocesan bishops within the Episcopal Church for a candid conversation on race and the future of the Church. Guided by Westina Matthews, Bishops Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows (The Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis), Carlye J. Hughes (The Episcopal Diocese of Newark), Kimberly Lucas (The Episcopal Diocese of Colorado), Shannon MacVean-Brown (The Episcopal Diocese of Vermont), and Phoebe A. Roaf (The Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee) offer honest wisdom and experiences relevant to this complex time in American life. Their faith journeys have been informed by history, yet they pioneer new territory for Black women—and for all people of faith with their vision for the future.

The purpose of this discussion guide is to provide a suggested format to facilitate discussion by individuals or small groups. Edited by Westina Matthews, seventeen individuals representing eleven dioceses joined together to create this discussion guide. It is our hope that by reflecting on the ways in which these five women have grown into their leadership among the Episcopal dioceses they serve, we may all begin to answer the call to create a Beloved Community by answering the question: Who is “we” when we say that “We are the Church”?

FOREWORD

and

INTRODUCTION

Preparation

Spend a few minutes silently thinking about your perception of women—particularly Black women—in leadership roles within the Church.

Opening Prayer

21. For Social Justice

Almighty God, who created us in your own image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (BCP, 260)

For our bishops, particularly those whose stories we shall hear:

O God, our heavenly Father, who raised up in your Church such faithful servants as:

Barbara (of blessed memory)
Gayle
Jennifer
Carlye
Kimberly
Shannon
Phoebe
Paula
Ketlan

To be a bishop and pastor in your Church and to feed your flock: Give abundantly to these women and to all pastors the gifts of your Holy Spirit, that they may minister in your household as true servants of Christ and stewards of your divine mysteries; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Opening Questions

1. Beyond fellowship, why did you want to participate in this discussion group?
2. Why might God have brought you to this discussion?

Summary

At the time of the writing of this book, *This Band of Sisterhood*, five Black females had been elected within three years to the office of diocesan bishop in the Episcopal Church, and to date there are seven Black females who have been elected as diocesan bishop in the Episcopal Church. In the foreword, Catherine Meeks shares how the resistor tradition of Black women—exemplified by Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Ida B. Wells—continued with this “band of bishops.” In the introduction, the editor describes how the book came about, their first brief meeting, and the format for the succeeding chapters in capsulizing the bishops’ six conversations that occurred over nine months in 2020.

Suggested Scriptures: Genesis 1:26–31; Colossians 3:10–11; Ephesians 4:1–16

Hymns/Music Suggestions

Bridge Over Troubled Waters, Songwriter: Paul Simon

They Know We Are Christians, Songwriter: Peter Scholtes

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of other examples of women of any race or ethnicity who represent the resistor tradition of Black women?
2. Women were not elected bishops in the Episcopal Church until 1988; yet the first Black woman was not elected diocesan bishop until 2016. Why do you think it took so long?

Preparation for the Next Gathering

Reflecting on the past several years, has your perception of women, especially Black women, in leadership roles in the Church changed? If so, how; if not, why not?

How can we change our attitudes to begin to be more welcoming Christians?

Closing Collect

3. For the Human Family

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us, unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 815)

Chapter 1

GIRD UP MY LOINS

Preparation

Think about your own church experience. Do you have a sense of belonging within your church family? How do you think your church or parish is perceived within your community?

Opening Prayer

Karakia before a Meeting

God our Creator,
when you speak there is light and life,
when you act there is justice and love;
grant that your love may be present in our gathering,
so that what we say and what we do
may be filled with your Holy Spirit.
(A New Zealand Prayer Book, 141)

Opening Questions

1. Beyond fellowship, what might be the greater purpose for your group in sharing this experience?
2. Who do you consider “us” and who do you consider “them”?

Summary

Chapter 1 is a conversation held among the five bishops during a time of great unrest in the country, due to both the pressures of the growing global pandemic as well as racial protests in response to police shootings of Blacks. This, their second conversation, touched on ways those experiences were weighing on them, both in their personal lives and as leaders of a diocese. Each bishop felt pressure to respond—to offer some sense of hope—even while feeling personally shaken by the events of late spring 2020. The bishops raise the question of who is “we” when we say, “We are the Church.”

Suggested Scriptures: Romans 12:1–2; Romans 14:10–12

Hymns/Music Suggestions

Lead Me, Guide Me (Doris Akers)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLpB-dE2DHM&ab_channel=GaitherVEVO

Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning (Spiritual)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHG1HcJK4f4&ab_channel=FirstUniversitySDA

The Lord Is My Light (Lillian Bouknight)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omlDH7vaAew&ab_channel=MiddleChurch

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt pressure to respond to a challenge “immediately”? What did you do? As you reflect on that experience, are there lessons learned? Did this conversation make you more aware of the pressures that leaders feel in the face of large public challenges?
2. Can you name a time when you felt underprepared for an upcoming challenge? How did your faith influence how you handled the situation?
3. How do you think knowing the struggles of these women diocesan bishops in leading during such a tumultuous year could be helpful for moving the Church forward to becoming Beloved Community?

Preparing for the Next Gathering

This conversation among the five women sets the stage to some degree for the conversations to follow. Can you identify themes in this early conversation that you'd like to reconsider later?

Closing Collect

7. Of a Prophetic Witness for the Church

Gracious God, we pray for your holy Catholic Church. For You to cleanse and renew your Church by the witness of your saints, calling people in every age, race, gender, and orientation to holiness of life through the indwelling of your Holy Spirit. Sustain your Church, that it may be filled with all truth, in all truth, with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and forever. Amen. (BCP, 816)

Chapter 2

GROWING UP BLACK IN THE CHURCH

Preparation

What have you realized about yourself based on the last discussion? What lingers? What questions have arisen?

Opening Prayer

Inspired by Psalm 139

God of love, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways. For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. You welcomed me home into you through the body of your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us the strength and mercy to know others as you have known us; to lift others in unconditional love as you have lifted us; to accompany others in their journeys and in their resting places as you have accompanied us; and to welcome others home as you welcome us. Through the one who is love and All Love, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Opening Questions

1. What was your first experience of having a woman in a clerical leadership position in the Church? A Black woman in a clerical leadership position?

Summary

In chapter 2, the bishops share stories about their early experiences with faith and church. While each bishop's story is unique, some remarkable similarities emerged from their conversations about their childhood experiences with church and faith traditions. Several of them were greatly impressed and influenced by the practices and traditions of the Black Christian Church. Almost all

of them began honing their leadership skills as teenagers in church. Yet these early experiences with church highlighted for all of them what they saw as the church's limitations. The bishops share their journey to discover where, within the Christian Church, they could be affirmed and accepted and where they could contribute to the work of its advancement and growth.

Suggested Scriptures: Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50; John 12:1–8

Hymns/Music Suggestions

Come Sunday (Duke Ellington featuring Mahalia Jackson)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0PlS8nuceA&ab_channel=billK

I Don't Feel No Ways Tired (possible versions)

(*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, p. 199)

Rev. James Cleveland, new lyrics by Rev. Cleveland

https://youtu.be/_Cw75v2uqts

Peter Collins and Infinity Song, original lyrics

<https://youtu.be/NQj1ZfSjpEg>

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. If you are White and grew up in a White church, what was it like for you? If you are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) and grew up in a BIPOC church, what was it like for you?
2. Have you ever worshiped in a church of a different denomination than your own? What was that like?
3. What do all five women have in common in their growing up years? How do their struggles match those of our country?

Preparing for the Next Gathering

Reflect on a time and place in your life when you felt truly welcome, truly known, and lifted up for all you are and all the gifts you brought; where you were nurtured and loved into being all God made you to be. We call this Beloved Community.

Closing Collect

Of a Theologian and Teacher

O God, by your Holy Spirit you give to some the word of wisdom, to others the word of knowledge, and to others the word of faith: We praise your Name for

the gifts of grace manifested in your servants Gayle, Jennifer, Carlye, Phoebe, Kimberly, Shannon, Paula, Ketlan, and we pray that your Church may never be destitute of such gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (BCP, 248)

Chapter 3

THE DUAL PANDEMIC

Preparation

Spend five minutes in silence thinking about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected you personally. Spend another five minutes thinking about how the racial tension following George Floyd's murder affected you personally. Spend another five minutes in silence thinking about how these dual pandemics may have affected someone who looks differently from you.

Opening Prayer

28. In Times of Conflict

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 824)

Opening Questions

1. How can you find the energy to make something good from awful situations?
2. How can the Church connect racial healing with protecting the most vulnerable among us?

Summary

Throughout chapter 3, one thing became clear: all of the bishops believe that the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and rampant racism and violence against Blacks have shortened the timeline for the Church to take action. Each bishop found herself embracing her authenticity and unapologetically speaking truth as she perceived it. Given the urgency of current events, they had no time to entertain slow progress in these areas. The chapter concludes with agreement that the Church needs to (and hopes that it will) focus on the understanding of how adults may follow their baptismal covenants and the importance of their formation.

Suggested Scriptures: Psalm 18:25–30; 1 Peter 4:12–19

Hymns/Music Suggestions

Any of the selections from the Concert for the Human Family, Episcopal
Diocese of Philadelphia

<https://youtu.be/TD9GEQuW3CA>

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What does your experience in 2020 have in common with what the bishops have shared? How has the dual pandemic affected you?
2. After the death of George Floyd, had you considered violence and racism to be a pandemic?
3. What steps do you think the Church can undertake to begin the work revealed by the dual pandemics that can result in systemic change?

Preparing for the Next Gathering

How can you focus on creating love and goodness from difficult and painful situations in order to become a Beloved Community?

Closing Collect

14. For the Unity of the Church

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify *thee*; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 818)

Chapter 4

DISCERNING THE CALL

Preparation

What is so worth doing to keep your heart singing that you would do in the face of adversity or even if others told you your song was out of touch or out of tune?

Opening Prayer

9. For Clergy and People

Almighty and everlasting God, from whom cometh every good and perfect gift: Send down upon our bishops, and other clergy, and upon the congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace: and, that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing. Grant this, O Lord, for the honor of our Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. Amen (BCP, 817)

Opening Questions

1. What does it mean to be called?
2. How do you discern calling from desire or wishful thinking?

Summary

In chapter 4, the bishops discuss the discernment process for entering the priesthood and then for a diocesan bishop search, frequently crediting Bishop Jennifer for being both a trailblazing role model and a mentor. The bishops all came from different backgrounds, faith traditions, church experiences, and with different career interests and experiences, yet all ended up as diocesan bishops in the Episcopal Church, which none of them ever imagined as even a possibility. The bishops also expressed gratitude for the white women clergy who mentored and supported them in their discernment and preparation for the bishop search process.

Suggested Scriptures: Esther 4:1–16; Jeremiah 1:4–9; 1 Samuel 3:1–10; Matthew 4:18–22

Hymns/Music Suggestions

Spirit of the Living God (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, p. 115)

Here Am I Send Me (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, p. 126)

I Am Thine, O Lord (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, p. 129)

I Surrender All (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, p. 133)

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. How was the Holy Spirit's work evidenced in each bishop's discernment of call?
2. Has the Holy Spirit ever helped you in hearing or discerning God's desire for you to do a certain task or be part of a particular ministry? How do you listen for the Holy Spirit?

Preparing for the Next Gathering

Is there a time in your life when you found yourself doing something you never could have imagined, or in a place that, by God's grace, you never would have expected? And in either of these situations, were you able to experience joy and fulfillment in a way you would never have anticipated? Could this be an example of being called and living into the call?

Closing Collect

Almighty God,
you anointed Jesus at his baptism
with the Holy Spirit,
and revealed him as your beloved Son;
grant that we who are baptized into his name
may give up our lives to your service,
and be found worthy of our calling;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(A New Zealand Prayer Book, 561)

Chapter 5

LIVING INTO THE CALL

Preparation

Consider ways that the Holy Spirit has surprised you with new opportunities to encourage a sense of call in others. What expressions of joy or other practices (i.e., music, meditation) have helped you navigate difficult spaces as you follow Jesus's call to you?

Opening Prayer

61. A Prayer of Self-Dedication

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. (BCP, 832)

Opening Question

Do you have a person or methodology to keep you spiritually accountable for being fully and authentically yourself?

Summary

In chapter 5, the bishops begin by focusing on how their early thinking about the ministry paths that were open to them were influenced by who they saw at the altar and/or in the pulpit in their childhood churches. They then shared their memories of being some of the first Black women to go through discernment for ordination in their dioceses, to attend their seminaries, and to serve as rectors in their parishes. For these bishops, gender and race were inseparable to their experience within the Church. The bishops concluded the session with a discussion of what it will take for Black women to be equal in the Church.

Suggested Scriptures: Genesis 21:8–20; Exodus 2:1–10, 15:20–21; Matthew 28:1–10

Hymns/Music Suggestions

God of the Women (*Voices Found: Women in the Church's Song*, p. 21)

Be Thou My Vision, O Lord of My Heart (*The Hymnal 1982*, p. 488)

I, the Lord of Sea and Sky (*Wonder, Love and Praise*, p. 812)

Saint Patrick's Breastplate (*The Hymnal 1982*, p. 370)

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Name a time when you or someone you know was a trailblazer. What were the costs of this kind of leadership?
2. What do you see as particular about the experience of Black women in leadership that is necessary for the Church during this time?
3. Whom do you see as being denied a seat at the table by today's Church?

Preparing for the Next Gathering

As a member of the body of Christ, committed to furthering God's Beloved Community, what change in society is God calling you to work toward, and what might the Holy Spirit be nudging you to change within yourself and your relationships?

Closing Collect

God our Creator, whose love has produced a wondrous diversity in your people, help us to see the particularities in ourselves and others as necessary for your Church, that, guided by the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ may be complete and a true reflection of your care for all of your children. We ask this in the name of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter 6

WE ARE THE CHURCH

and the

AFTERWORD

Preparation

We invite you to spend time taking yourself back in time to December 2020. You may wish to journal, go for a walk, or sit in prayer as you reflect. Whom do you see as being denied a seat at your own parish or church table? What does that exclusion communicate about Beloved Community to those excluded and to those who practice exclusion?

Opening Prayer

A Nontraditional Blessing

May God bless you with discontent with easy answers, half-truths, superficial relationships, so that you will live from deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, abuse, and exploitation of people, so that you will work for justice, equality, and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and to change their pain to joy.

May God bless you with the foolishness to think you can make a difference in this world, so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

If you have the courage to accept these blessings, then God will also bless you with:
happiness—because you will know that you have made life better for others
inner peace—because you will have worked to secure an outer peace for
others
laughter—because your heart will be light
faithful friends—because they will recognize your worth as a person.

These blessings are yours—not for the asking, but for the giving—from One who wants to be your companion, our God, who lives and reigns, forever and ever. Amen.

Sister Ruth Fox, OSB

Opening Question

Thinking back to the presidential election followed by lawsuits and protests, continued racial violence, and more deaths from the pandemic—what did you grieve, and for what are you grateful?

Summary

Gathering for one final meeting, in chapter 6, the bishops were asked to reflect on how the Church might help bridge the deep political and philosophical divides within the country and enlarge the “sacred space” for debate. As they talked, the bishops all felt that the series of conversations had given them strength and further resolve to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to show the Church how to model love, healing, and hope in a time of great turmoil and pain. Dr. Matthews concludes that “there is a vision and a deep commitment for the Episcopal Church to become a welcoming place for authentic, vulnerable, inclusive, spirit-filled, truth-telling people who can join together to say, ‘We are the Church’” (p. 92).

In the afterword, Bishop-Elect Paula Clark adds her voice, sharing her own journey and recalling poet Amanda Gorman’s words that seem prophetic for the now-seven Black women diocesan bishops: “For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it. If only we’re brave enough to be it” (p. 98).

Suggested Scriptures: Mark 1:3–5; Isaiah 11:1–9

Hymns/ Music Suggestions

Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation (*The Hymnal* 1982, p. 518)

All My Hope on God Is Founded (*The Hymnal* 1982, p. 65)

God Has Smiled on Me (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, p. 109)

Lord You Give the Great Commission (*The Hymnal* 1982, p. 528)

Suggested Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a situation while working on behalf of a church, a parish, or any ecclesial institution where you were expected to comply without a voice? Identify the power dynamics at work in your experience.
2. What is the Church's and/or our individual responsibility as Christians to name and address the various manifestations of evil that exist in the world? What does the Church's accountability to the "least of these" look like?
3. Can you think of a time when the bridge between "us" and "them" enabled us to become "we"?

Going Forward

What is one way you feel called to commit to a "transformed Church of authentic, vulnerable, inclusive, spirit-filled, truth-telling people"? What are you hoping will be born out of the brokenness made painfully visible amid the dual pandemic?

As you think about all of the discussion questions, develop a plan of action for yourself to ensure that an excluded group has an equal place at your parish or church's table.

Closing Collect

Holy gracious God, we give you thanks that you have given us this day, another opportunity to be all who you have called us to be, each one of us wonderfully and marvelously made. We pray that you would help us to grow into who you are calling us to be, blessing us, holding us through our mistakes, helping us to see that there's nothing that we can do wrong if we are living authentically and following you faithfully.

We thank you for the opportunity to serve you in times of uncertainty, disorientation, and upheaval and we focus our faith on You alone to heal our souls, our bodies, our nation, and the world. Do not let us be afraid, but grant us the blessing of being brave as we seek to do your will in our ministries, our communities, and our Church. May we see your light, bear your light, embody your light, and carry your light as we go forth to spread the light and love of Jesus in the midst of all whom we live, and move, and have our being. Amen.

Suggested Closing Hymns/Music Selections

Here I Am Lord (*Lift Every Voice and Sing II*, p. 256)

Jesu, Jesu (*The Hymnal 1982*, p. 602)

Come Labor On (*The Hymnal 1982*, p. 541)

FOR FACILITATORS

Role of Facilitator

Allow yourself to be a part of the discovery that will be revealed within your group. One of the most important roles of a facilitator is to hold the space for the group. Facilitators nurture and encourage conversation, drawing out the group's wisdom. It is the facilitator's role to make certain that the group remains on task while allowing for exploration of related issues. The facilitator also ensures that all group members have an opportunity to be heard.

Target Audience

This discussion guide may be used either by individuals for self-study or in small or larger groups of adults. Sessions may be in person, virtual, or a hybrid of the two. Racial, ethnic, and gender diversity is encouraged.

Timing

The contents may be delivered in workshops, seminars, one-day or weekend retreats, or as adult forums (one to six sessions). You may wish to introduce the discussion guide and offer it as independent self- or group study over several weeks, then reconvene after a two-week break for the final session.

Preparation

We suggest that the reading schedule be distributed in advance, so that participants will know what is expected.

Design and Flow

Supplies on hand may include a flipchart with markers, as well as paper, pencils, and pens. Because participants will be invited to journal or take notes, you may wish, if meeting in person, to seat them at small round tables. Another seating possibility is to have chairs arranged in a semicircle, allowing easy movement for participants to break out into smaller group discussions or to separate themselves from the group to journal alone.

To Begin

A critical role of a facilitator is to set the mood for contemplation, discussion, and prayer. Discussions may begin with an opening prayer or meditation. Poems, music, and art also are excellent centering practices.

Scriptural References

Be prepared to share a passage of scripture that speaks to the issues/questions raised by the chapters assigned for the week. Encourage others to offer their own passages as well.

Music

The Hymnal 1982, Lift Every Voice and Sing II, and Wonder, Love, and Praise can be used as starting points, but musical references need not be sacred. We offer musical selections only as suggestions. Participants may prefer to listen to music rather than to sing.

Discussion Questions

To encourage participants to share their personal perspectives, insights, and beliefs, be prepared to ask one to three questions to get the discussion started. Questions should be open-ended to encourage multiple responses and exchange of ideas.

Encouraging Discussion

The Kaleidoscope Institute has developed a toolbox for how to engage all members of the group. Included in the “KI Toolbox” are guidelines for respectful conversations and the process of mutual invitation. The toolbox can be found here: <https://www.kscopeinstitute.org/free-resources>.

Concluding Each Session

Each session can conclude with an open-ended question to prepare for the next session, followed by prayer. Encourage the participants to begin developing their own personal statement on what it means to be a Beloved Community and how they might commit to developing action steps to draw them closer to their own vision of a Beloved Community.

Final Wrap-Up

However you decide to deliver the content (four- or six-week sessions, workshop, retreats, etc.), we encourage you to have each participant develop an action plan to bring about their personal Beloved Community vision. A suggested closing collect and hymns are also provided.

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