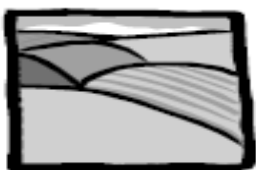


Sowing the Seeds

*A journey of acting on God's dream for
rural America
Six session adult study*





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Facilitator's Guide

Background

In March of 2003, a small group of rural Nebraska United Methodists, under the auspices of Peace with Justice Ministries-UMC, formed the *Sowing the Seeds* covenant group. It has grown into an ecumenical witness.

Our goal is to pray, study, and act for God's shalom in rural America. Out of many conversations, we decided that the design of a Christian-based adult study could be helpful in fostering healthy discussions about God's dream for rural peoples, their communities and the land.

Six sessions and class size: This adult curriculum is designed for six-60 minute class sessions but your group may wish to adapt it for a longer study. To enhance discussion, we suggest a maximum class size of twelve. If you have more people, you may wish to form small groups for discussion.

Leadership: We recommend that a pastor and lay person co-facilitate this study.



Session One

The Story of Bountiful Prairie

Materials needed: Bible, masking tape, newsprint with discussion guides, newsprint with session goals, newsprint and markers for group responses, copies of Session One hand-out of *The Story of Bountiful Prairie*, copies of Session Two hand-out of the Bruggemann article, and a small bell. Optional: music playing as folks come in, pictures on the walls which illustrate the vision in Isaiah 65:21-22.

Guides for constructive discussion: Anytime there are complex realities to face, there will be a multitude of varying viewpoints of what should be done. There will be many opportunities, during this six session course, for folks to speak their minds and also to listen respectfully to other perspectives and ideals. Indeed, the Holy Spirit may be most active when there is struggle and disagreement. God works in our most uncomfortable moments to help us stretch and grow. A few guidelines will help us foster a healthy environment for discussion.

Optional model for sharing: Every person has four to six chips. When he or she wishes to speak they toss one chip in a basket. This approach helps give equal time to those who speak easily and often and those who may wish to speak, but find it hard to “jump in.” After the chips have been used, the person will simply listen for the rest of the class period. Another model to enhance sharing is to use an egg timer.

The following are suggested guidelines. Post these on newsprint so all can see and keep them up for all sessions.

How to Talk About Difficult Issues

Adapted by the NE Synod, ELCA from an Alban Institute publication

- ✠ **TRY TO ESTABLISH AN ATMOSPHERE OF FAIRNESS.** For the leader: You will have your own opinions, but try to lead impartially. Communicate the process that will be followed.
- ✠ **THERE SHOULD BE NO KIND OF THREAT HANGING OVER THE DISCUSSION.** Take no votes, offer no ultimatums.

- ✘ **TRY TO IDENTIFY AREAS OF AGREEMENT.** People will be on a continuum on controversial issues; there may be more than two sides to an issue.
- ✘ **AVOID THE USE OF SLOGANS.**
- ✘ **REPRESENT OPPOSING POSITIONS ACCURATELY & FAIRLY.** Practice active listening skills of summarizing and paraphrasing what people are saying.
- ✘ **TRY TO IDENTIFY THE CORE OR CENTRAL ISSUES AT STAKE.** Which issues are most important? Are some largely beside the point?
- ✘ **ADMIT WEAKNESS IN ONE'S OWN POSITION.** If the issues were crystal clear and self-evident, there would not be a controversy.
- ✘ **DISTINGUISH MORALITY FROM PUBLIC POLICY.**
- ✘ **INCLUDE PERSPECTIVES OF ALL CONCERNED.**
- ✘ **LET A GOOD DISCUSSION BE AN END IN ITSELF.** There is no need for consensus or conclusion.

Goals for the sessions: (post on newsprint and read aloud)

- 1) Create space to hear the voice of God and be open to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Encourage discussion about trends in rural America communities.
- 3) Explore biblical understandings of land management.
- 4) Discuss how public policy shapes our future.
- 5) Discuss the pros and cons of policy proposals for a better future.
- 6) Things YOU can DO to help create a better rural future.

Space for God's Voice

Where there is no vision, the people perish. (Proverbs 29:18) Part of these sessions will have to do with listening, imaging, and responding to God's vision for us. We are going to do a lot of talking, but we're also going to have spaces of silence where we can each listen to the voice of God.

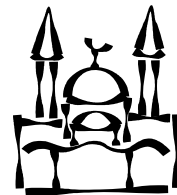
We are a very verbal society so this may seem strange at first, but we hope that you will learn to enjoy the silence and open yourself to God in those moments. A bell will be used to bring you into a period of silence and the facilitator will invite you to be mindful of your breathing as a prayer practice. At the end of the period of silence the bell will sound again and class discussion will resume.

You are invited to relax, take a few deep slow breaths and listen to the words of Isaiah 65:21-22. Each phrase can be an *in breath* or an *out breath*. As I read the first line “They shall build houses and inhabit them” you breathe in and as I read the next line “they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit” you breathe out.

So with each line you are aware of the breath of God in you. This is a time for slowing down, for opening yourself to the vision of God. (Sound a bell. Facilitator reads this slowly three times and allows silence at the end, then gently sounds the bell. Option: Refer to pictures around the room of images that reflect this vision of Isaiah.)

(breathing in)	They shall build houses and inhabit them:
(breathing out)	They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit;
(breathing in)	They shall not build and another inhabit;
(breathing out)	They shall not plant and another eat;
(breathing in)	For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
(breathing out)	And my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hand.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus...



JESUS CLEARS THE TEMPLE

A guided meditation

Mark 11:15-19, Matthew 15:12-17, Luke 19:45-48, John 2: 13-17

Ask the participants to sit straight in their chairs, with feet flat on the floor, placing hands in their laps or on their knees. Invite them to close their eyes and to begin relaxing through their breathing. Let them know that through a guided meditation, they will travel to a place where time and distance are not barriers. Ask them to “go” with an open heart.

Please close your eyes now that you are comfortably seated. Begin by taking in a deep breath. Then slowly let it out. Take another deep breath, and slowly let it out. Notice how you are beginning to relax. Be conscious of your breathing. As you quiet yourself, continue to relax by being aware of the rhythm of your breathing. You realize that you are slowly approaching a new place. As you get closer, you realize that this is the time and place of Jesus. You are aware that you are now in the Jerusalem of Jesus. In the distance you see the great Temple. Even at this distance you are impressed with its beauty. Now as you stand before the gates of the Temple

you are in awe of its majesty. You drink in its beauty and awe and wonder. As the grandeur of the Temple settles in, you become aware of sounds that seem out of place. Your eyes gradually shift toward the sound. You see the money changers at their tables. But what really gets your attention is the commotion around them. It looks like the market place instead of the Temple with all of the buying and selling of sheep, oxen, doves, and pigeons. As you listen more closely, you hear complaints and arguments. You see injustices unfold: exorbitant commissions as money is exchanged. Inflated prices for the animals sold. Weights are rigged for cereal offerings. Widows are cheated. You feel your insides stirring. Your emotions are aroused. Can you name them?

Suddenly, out of the corner of your eye, you see something swirling in the air. A rope? No, a whip! A flock of doves swoops by your face. Sheep run by you. You have to run for cover as oxen stampede. Hundreds of coins roll by your feet as you watch the man upset the money changers' tables. Above the commotion you hear a voice speaking with authority saying, "Get them out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a marketplace!" (John 2:16 NAB)

"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples, but you have turned it into a den of thieves." (Mark 11:17 NAB) You realize that it is Jesus who has done this.

As the whirlwind of fury dies down, you notice that Jesus is on the other side of the Temple area. You see him touching people. You realize that Jesus is healing them, restoring their sight and curing them. (see Luke 21:14) A calmness overtakes you. You realize that Jesus is not just a great miracle worker but also a great advocate of justice. You are aware that the courage of Jesus is your courage as well.

With this new-found comfort, you find yourself slowly drifting away from that time and place of Jesus. A prayer for continued courage in the face of conflict and controversy is said. A prayer of thanksgiving is offered for the opportunity to be a disciple of Jesus.

Distribute the hand-out of *The Story of Bountiful Prairie*

Purpose: The purpose of this exercise is to engage participants in discussion about trends in the rural economy and their community. It will lay the groundwork for subsequent sessions on biblical statements on these issues, the root forces driving current trends and practical options for creating a better future for rural communities and family farming and ranching in the 21st century. While this story is historical in content, many identify with it as the beginning of the downfall of agriculture in rural America.

Directions: Read aloud the purpose statement above. Then read the story and discuss the following questions as a group: 1) How is it similar to your community?

2) How is it different from what is happening in your community? and 3) What are the key forces driving trends in your community?

Between each of the three questions, pause and sound the bell for a moment of silence, sound the bell again to proceed to next question. Designate a recorder to write brief responses of the group on newsprint.

Distribute Session Two handout and ask class members to read it before the next session.

Close with responsive reading from a paraphrase of Genesis 1. Group responds with **God saw it was good.**

Leader: God spoke “Light” and light appeared. And God separated the light from the dark. God named the light day and the dark night. And it was day one.

Group response: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke “Sky in the middle of the waters; separate water from water.” God separated the water under the sky from the water above the sky. God named sky the heavens. And it was day two.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke, “Land, appear.” God named the land earth, the pooled water ocean. God spoke “Earth grow all varieties of seed-bearing plants, and every fruit-bearing tree. “ And it was evening and morning. And it was day three.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke “Lights! Come out... Shine in the heaven’s sky. Separate the day and night. Mark the seasons and days and years.” God made two big lights; God placed them in the heavenly sky to light up the earth. And it was day four.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke, “Swarm, Ocean, with fish and all sea life! Birds, fly through the sky over the earth. Prosper, reproduce, fill the ocean, and reproduce on earth.” And it was the fifth day.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: God spoke and Earth generated life of every sort and kind; cattle, reptiles and wild animals. Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image.” God created them male and female. God blessed them. “Prosper and reproduce.” Then God said, “I’ve given you every sort of seed-bearing plant for food.” God looked over everything God had made. And it was the sixth day.

Group: God saw it was good.

Leader: On the seventh day God rested from all God's work. God blessed the seventh day and made it a Holy Day. Because on that day God rested from God's work and this is the story of how it all started.

Group: And God saw it was all good.