



## RELIGION & RACE

General Commission on Religion and Race

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### Session 3: I Dream of a Church

*I dream of a church where everyone is welcome  
I dream of a place we all can call home.  
I dream of a world where justice is flowing  
With hope and peace growing  
Where God's will is done.*

By Mark A. Miller

#### Watch the Video Clip (5 – 7 minutes)

Listen to Mark's words of introduction and listen to the song. Listen to the song a second time. Feel free to sing along, joining in with "Make it so, make it so! We pray for that day, make it so.". *If you have purchased the songbook Roll Down, Justice!, a reproducible congregational box of the song is found on page 89 [may make copies for the group].*

#### Mark Miller's Reflection

"Truly I tell you, whenever you did it to the least of these you did it to me."

A few years back I visited a church in the Chicago area. I was there as a guest musician and as I sat in a pew preparing myself before the opening hymn, the minister moved to the front of the sanctuary to welcome us. I have heard greetings from different pastors many times over the years and didn't pay her too much attention. Until I heard who she was welcoming.

"We welcome you here to this place if you are gay. We welcome you to this church if you are lesbian. You are most welcome here if you are transgender. We welcome you even if you are straight! You are welcome here!!"

Unrehearsed tears welled up and starting falling down my face. For over 30 years of music ministry, week in and week out, I realized I had never heard a Methodist preacher offer such a heartfelt, emphatic, intentional welcome to so many of us who have felt outside the love of the institutional church.

I wonder how many of us in our faith communities go through our lives never hearing the words of welcome that stir our hearts - that make us feel as if we belong. "You are most welcome here if you have rolled here in a wheelchair - the differing able are welcome here. Welcome if you find yourself on the autistic spectrum."

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said love your neighbors and hate your enemies. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Jesus is asking us to reach out to the stranger—those we have been taught are our enemy, maybe because their language and culture are different from ours, maybe because they are younger or older, or come from a different part of the world, or dress differently or have a different political affiliation. Jesus is trying to reconcile all people, making enemies into neighbors and strangers into friends.

My dream is for people of all races, cultures, sexual identities, abilities, ages, economic circumstances, and beliefs to be deeply welcomed and honored by the church.

### **Moment of Meditation (10 minutes)**

Using a notebook or a sheet of paper, respond individually and silently – to the video, the song, and Mark’s introduction. Jot down responses to this statement “I dream of a church.” Write or draw thoughts and images that come to mind. Recall a time when you felt most welcomed and loved in church, most rejected. What did you hear from Mark’s song and introduction that was affirming?

Provide an opportunity for two or three persons to give a “one minute reflection” to feeling welcomed or feeling rejected. Acknowledge that person’s gift to the group by inviting all to respond “thank you for sharing – we hear you.”

### **Discuss the Scripture - Matthew 25:31 – 46 (10 minutes)**

Have the scripture read aloud in two or three translations. Invite members to partner with another member of the group, discussing any experience they have with the texts. For example, this passage may remind someone of a childhood Sunday school lesson.

### **Connect with the Justice Challenges: “Enter the Conversation” (20 minutes)**

Watch the video a second time. Challenge the group to listen deeply to Mark Miller’s words and deeply to the words of the song.

Point the groups to signs that you have placed around the room. (Alternately, you may create signs and have persons hold up a sign to invite others to join her or him in a conversation on a justice challenge). Make signs for at least three naming the following “challenges”:

- Autistic Children of God
- Immigrant Children of God
- Transgender Children of God
- Gay and Lesbian Children of God
- Homeless Children of God
- Differently-abled Children of God

Ask members to select a topic for which they welcome being part of the conversation – even if it is to listen (not to argue). [An individual is free to be the only one in the conversation, but ask that person to be prepared to share.] In the conversation, discuss the fears and concerns (known, unspoken)? Name the opportunities, i.e., “What gifts do people in these categories bring to the church?”

Ask for a summary statement from each conversation which begins with the phrase: “I dream of a church\_\_\_\_\_.”

### Confession (2 – 3 minutes)

Encourage the group to observe a moment of silence as they remember the words of the Scripture, the song, and Mark's introduction [consider playing the video a third time], and their conversation. Invite them during the time of confession to speak aloud a sentence of confession of how they (their family, church, or community) have "fallen short of the glory of God" in being a welcoming church.

Lead the group in this prayer:

Lord Jesus, you have shown us the way to be your people. Yet we draw circles that does not include everyone. Forgive us. In this moment, we confess that we have not been all that you want us to be. Forgive us. Please hear our confessions at this time (silently or aloud):

\_\_\_\_\_

### Prayer of Intercession (2 – 3 minutes)

Lead the group in this prayer (or one from the heart):

God, we name the names of those who have not felt your welcoming love in our churches, in our homes, and in our hearts. God we lift up ourselves that we may continue to grow as your people, to be more loving, to be more welcoming.

### Closing (2 - 3 minutes)

Play the video (song) one more time and sing along. Offer a prayer of benediction and an invitation to live a more welcoming life in the coming week.

### Extending the Study

Ask the pastor if there is an opportunity to meet with a leader or member of a reconciling congregation.

Enter into a time of prayer for General Conference, for decisions that need to be made for us to be an even more welcoming church.

Invite the Stewardship, Evangelism, or Administrative Council Chair to lead a time of reflection for the congregation by completing the phrase "I dream of a church where \_\_\_\_\_."

Use the song as a prayer chant or prayer response on World Communion Sunday or a Family and Friends Day.