



BENDING TOWARD JUSTICE



A COMMUNITY CELEBRATION FOR THE MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. HOLIDAY

Martin Luther King Jr. Day is an important occasion for community-wide worship in ecumenical and interfaith settings. These are opportunities when Dr. King is remembered for his significant work to end segregation, racism, and poverty, and hopefully, an opportunity to name publicly the contemporary realities of racial and economic justice among us. This worship service is a suggested design for an ecumenical Christian worship gathering. It should, however, be remembered that true collaboration in the planning of the service is an important ingredient in building lasting relationships between congregations. If your service includes those of other religious faiths, modify this service by incorporating readings, prayers, and hymns that reflect those traditions.

Centering Reflection

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

—Theodore Parker, quoted by Martin Luther King Jr.

Welcome and Introduction

One: Welcome to this service of worship. We gather as a community of love in remembrance of a dreamer, a person of great faith and determination, a courageous witness for justice. We have come to honor the legacy of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister who preached, taught, and embodied the philosophy of nonviolent direct action in order to mobilize organized resistance to the segregation, systemic racism, and gnawing poverty of his day. So, too, we are here to be inspired and encouraged so we might take on the mantle of justice and peace in our time, the work for which he lived and died.

Dr. King questioned the conscience of a nation and contributed significantly to dramatic changes in societal attitudes and public policies. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 and was assassinated in April 1968 while working in Memphis, Tennessee, in support of striking sanitation workers.

Although Dr. King symbolizes this nation’s long and continuing journey to make real its mantra of liberty and justice for all, we are bold to believe that his teachings are not beyond our reach, but within our grasp. His extraordinary achievements are the clear result of faith’s ordinary demands. Each of us is called to do justice, love kindness, seek peace, and build community, just as God requires. Together let us worship God so that we might be renewed and transformed by the high calling now set before us.

Call to Worship (based on Luke 1:46–55)

One: God’s mercy reveals God’s formidable strength!

People: Each generation discovers how God is at work!

One: The proud are being scattered! The rich are not smiling!

People: The thrones of the haughty are tumbling down!

One: The lowly, instead, are lifting their voices!

People: The hungry are being fed with all that is right and good!

One: Come and experience what God is doing!

People: God’s new day of justice is here!

Hymn

“In Egypt Under Pharaoh”

TNCH 574

Call to Confession

One: Dr. King once said, “Nothing is more tragic than to sleep through a revolution.” Truly, the work of justice begins with a proper recognition that injustice is real. Let us confess the stronghold of sin that would consume us. And let us be awakened by the movement of the spirit that gives us life. Let us pray:

Unison Prayer of Confession

God of Justice, whenever we settle for the way things are instead of the way you would have them to be, forgive us. Whenever we are paralyzed by fear or limited in vision, increase our trust in you. Whenever we offer charity, but fail to work for justice, show us the more excellent way that your love requires. Whenever we tire of the struggle and tomorrow feels overwhelming, restore our hope. Whenever we forget those who have gone before us or act as if we were the first to follow in the Way, allow us to recognize our arrogance. May the witness of our brother Martin encourage us to be dreamers for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

(This prayer may be followed with a time of silence and for naming particular issues of concern in your community.)

The Assurance of God’s Pardon

One: If, by reflection, analysis, and prayer, we are freed to acknowledge the wrongs around us, the pain among us, the sin within us, and the work before us, God’s mission of peace with justice is being revealed in our midst. Always remember and never forget: Your burden has been lifted! The liberating love of God is at work within you!

Passing of the Peace

(As a sign of reconciliation with God and each other, all may greet those around them with an embrace or a handshake, accompanied by such words as: "The peace of God be with you," and the response: "And also with you.")

Selected Readings from Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament

Selected Passages from the works of Martin Luther King Jr.

Sermon

A Litany of Selected Writings

Cantor 1: *(Four singers or cantors may sing the first verse in Spanish or English of "Profetiza, Pueblo mío (You Shall Prophesy, All My People!)," TNCH 578, throughout the litany. The verse may also be read throughout the litany.)*

*You shall prophesy, all my people, you shall prophesy once more,
That your voice may echo all the cries of the people who are oppressed.
You shall prophesy, my people, you shall prophesy once more,
to the poor announce the coming of a new society.*

Reader 1: The ultimate measure of humankind, according to Martin Luther King Jr., is not where we stand in moments of comfort and convenience, but where we stand in times of challenge and controversy. (pause) O God, we pray, give us courage to be counted among those who will work for justice.

Reader 2: In 1963, in his challenging letter to complacent white clergy in the South, Dr. King wrote, "We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. In the end," he said, "we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." (pause) O God, we pray, transform our stillness into action, our fear into courage.

Cantor 2: *(A different voice repeats the musical refrain from another location in the sanctuary.)*

Reader 3: Inspired by the nonviolent teachings of Jesus, Thoreau, and Gandhi, King taught that nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon because it "cuts without wounding and ennobles the one who wields it. Nonviolence is a sword that heals." (pause) O God, we pray, heal this nation through the work of our hands.

Reader 4: In 1964, in accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, he said that "unarmed truth and unconditional love *will* have the final word in reality. Right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant." (pause) O God, we pray, may we always trust in the strength of your goodness.

Cantor 3: *(A different voice repeats the refrain from another location in the sanctuary.)*

Reader 5: In 1967, King wrote that, in the wealthiest nation in the world, the solution to poverty is simply this: “We must abolish it!” (pause) O God, we pray, rearrange the priorities of peoples and nations so that all will receive in equal measure.

Reader 6: And on the day before his death, Dr. King described his ministry succinctly: “I just want to do God’s will.” (pause) O God, we pray, raise up prophets among us who will lead us in your ways.

Cantor 3: *(A different voice repeats the musical refrain from another location in the sanctuary.)*

Offering

(An offering may be received to support the work of justice in your community.)

Hymn

“O for a World”

TNCH 575

Benediction

One: Jesus said, “You ought always to pray and not to faint.” Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger women and men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, but for power equal to your tasks. Then, the doing of your work will be no miracle—you will be the miracle. Each day you will wonder at yourself and the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God. Amen.

Sending Forth

(After the service, provide an opportunity for persons to learn more about the issues and to become advocates for justice. Educational materials on a wide range of topics are available in quantity by contacting Justice and Witness Ministries at 216.736.3704 or <jwm@ucc.org>. Advocacy opportunities such as a coordinated letter-writing table—or even a candlelight vigil or public witness—would be quite appropriate.)

TNCH refers to hymns or resources from *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995). Similar resources may be found in other hymnals.



This liturgy was written by J. Bennett Guess, editor of *United Church News*, and the former minister for communication and mission education with Justice and Witness Ministries: A Covenanted Ministry of the United Church of Christ, Cleveland, Ohio. For more information about ministries of justice and peace, contact Justice and Witness Ministries at <jwm@ucc.org>; at 216.736.3700; or at 700 Prospect Avenue East, Cleveland, Ohio 44115-1100.

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