



JOIN THE MOVEMENT



LOVE IS
LOUDER
Love Your Neighbor OUT LOUD

Banned Books Blessing

“Although there are those who wish to ban my books because I have used language that is painful, I have chosen to use the language that was spoken during the period, for I refuse to whitewash history. The language was painful and life was painful for many African Americans, including my family. I remember the pain.” — Mildred D. Taylor

“The main issue I have with this is that these bannings and challenges send a clear message to queer kids and kids of color: We would rather not think about you, learn about you, or accept you.” — Mark Oshiro

Why a Blessing of Banned Books?

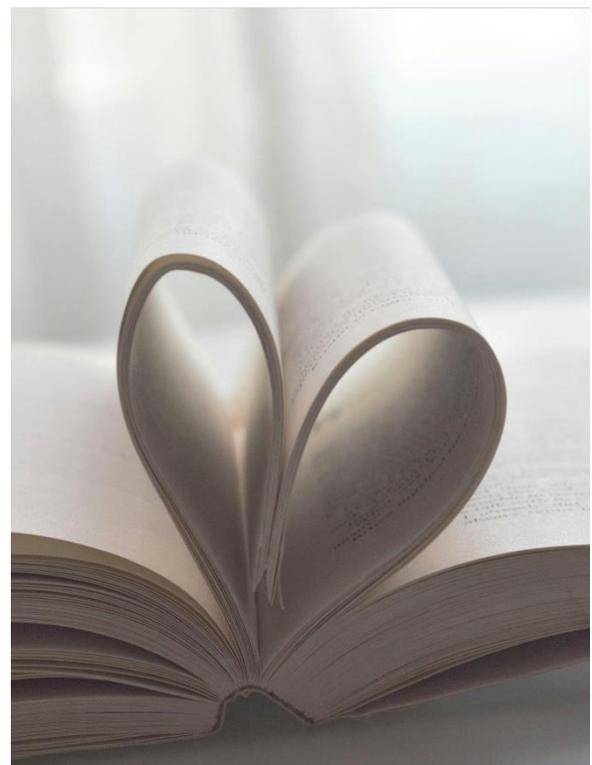
Despite decades of activism aimed at desegregation, the statistics all tell us that in the United States, we still largely live in a segregated society. In our daily lives, we are most likely to cross paths with and be in relationship with people with whom we share experiences and identities. Social media algorithms, search engines, and web platforms conspire to keep us in echo chambers, encountering the lives of people who look like us, think like us, agree with us. For many of us, books have been one way to expand our horizons. What and who we read opens us to new worlds, diverse ideas, different experiences beyond our own. We rely on books to educate and inform us and expand our imaginations, so that we can be better siblings in Christ. As a people of sacred stories, we know that stories have the power to inform and transform us, to show us both who we are and who we can become.

In a time of intense political polarization, we are facing an unprecedented number of attempts to ban books. Books by authors of color, by LGBTQ+ authors, by women and books about racism, sexuality, gender, history are the ones most often targeted by bans. When some seek to police access to some experiences, some histories, some understandings, some ideas, the image of God is dimmed. Without these books, our encounters with the amazing diversity of creation are incomplete, and our capacity for compassion across difference is stymied. Our love of God is limited because we do not have the chance to recognize all the ways the divine image is manifest in our world.

In the United Church of Christ, we know that as people called to build a just world for all, we need each other's stories and experiences to live into the fullness of the Body of Christ. We believe that banned books have a special vocation, a particular calling in our faith communities: to help expand and enliven the image of God and empower us to reckon with truths that demand our loving accountability. So the Love is Louder Campaign and Join the Movement toward Racial Justice join together to invite us to bless banned books, so that they might live out their calling and empower us to continue becoming God's kindom of justice and love, on earth as it is in heaven.



**So God created
humankind in God's own
image, in the Divine
image, God created
them. Genesis 1:27**



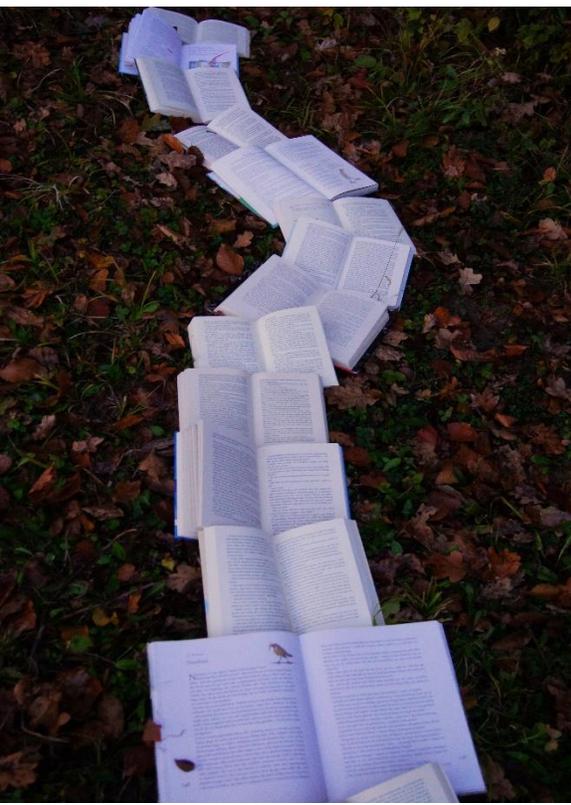


*Few things are more dangerous
than bowing to someone else's
definition of you. In a world that
would be content to have us
forget our own names, we must
keep them on our tongues.
Inhale: We know our own name.
Exhale: It sounds like dignity.*

Cole Arthur Riley, Black Liturgies



Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. - John 21:25



Ways to Collect Books to Bless

In order to have a Banned Book Blessing, you'll want to have books to bless! So here are some ideas about ways to engage your community in preparing for this blessing.

1. Create your own Banned Books Library or shelf/section of your church library by curating banned books you already have and purchasing books from a list of banned books (here's [one index of banned books](#) to consult from PEN America).

2. In the weeks prior to the blessing, invite congregation members to bring and donate banned books for the church's Banned Books Library or shelf/section or for another library or book exchange. To help, provide them with a list of targeted books. Here are some places to start:

- [American Library Association's Top 10 Most Challenged Books by Year](#)
- [NY Public Library's Banned Books Reading List](#)
- [Harper's Bazaar Banned Books List](#)
- [ACLU Interactive Banned Books Shelf](#)
- [8 Books to Add to Your Faith and Justice Reading List](#)

Make it even easier and [create a Wish List on Bookshop.org](#) where folks can buy books from independent bookstores and have them shipped directly to church!

3. Invite worship participants to bring their favorite or most influential banned book to worship with them. After the books have been blessed, you can:
 - invite folks to return them to their home libraries,
 - invite them to exchange books with someone sitting near them, or
 - invite folks to donate those books to the church's Banned Book Library, or to another library or book exchange to expand their use!

Sample Message for All Ages/Children's Sermon

Developed by Rev. Amy Johnson,
Minister for Sexuality Education and Justice, UCC National Ministries

Theme: Everyone Belongs in the Kingdom of God

Materials:

- Neither* by Airlie Anderson
- Questions below
- Prayer

Preparation:

- Become familiar with and practice reading *Neither* by Airlie Anderson
- Review this lesson to be prepared with questions to ask and a prayer to say at the end

Time: 5-10 minutes

Procedure:

1. Gather the young and young at heart for the Message for All Ages.
2. Welcome them to the space, saying that everyone is welcome here.
3. Ask: "Where is your favorite place to be, where you feel really welcome?" Listen and affirm responses.
4. Ask: "Have you ever had a time when you didn't feel like you were welcome? Or you didn't feel like you belonged there?" Listen and affirm responses.
5. I am going to read you a story about someone who didn't feel welcome where they were, and see what they did about it and what happened.
6. Read *Neither* by Airlie Anderson. Answer questions if they are asked as you are reading.
7. After finishing the story, process by asking:
 - a. "What did you think about that story?"
 - b. "What were some of the ways that "Neither" knew they didn't belong? (Possible responses: they were called names, told they couldn't play games, told them to find somewhere else to go)
 - c. "How did Neither know they were welcome in the Land of All?" (Possible responses (told they would fit in, invited to play, welcomed for being who they were)
 - d. "Is there somewhere in your life that feels like the Land of All?" (If yes, where? If no, how could you help build somewhere like that? Who and what would you need?)
 - e. "Who do you know who needs to know about the Land of All?" Listen and affirm responses.
8. Close with this prayer or something similar:

Dear God,

We are gathered here today in the warmth of your love for each and every one of us. Help us remember that no matter who we are, what our name is, what clothes we wear, what color our skin is, what body parts we have and how they work, how big or small we are, what pronouns we use (or what our gender is), whom we love, and how our family has come together, we are always welcome in your kin-dom. Help us make this space a space where everyone knows they are welcome, just as they are. Show us how to do that here in our church, in our schools, in our neighborhoods, and everywhere we go. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who taught us that everyone—every single person—is precious to you. Amen.





For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

- Hebrews 4:12

Sermon Seeds

- [We Need Each Other](#) by Rev. Dr. Velda Love
- [Fear of Knowledge...Love of Books](#) by Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay
- [How Banned Books Hurt Kids and Hinder the Gospel](#) from Sojourners
- [Banning Books Restricts the Image of God](#) from Faith and Leadership
- [Why Books Get Banned](#) from The Christian Century
- [8 Books to Add to Your Faith and Justice Reading List](#) from Sojourners
- [Banning Books, Banning Brains](#) from University of Chicago Divinity School

Blessing of Banned Books

Created by Dr. Sharon R. Fennema, Join the Movement toward Racial Justice Curator

There are many theologically meaningful places to offer this blessing in the context of your regular worship service. Here are some suggestions:

- Offer the blessing before the reading of scripture, making the connection between the life-giving, good news bringing, world-expanding potential of these banned books, and the life-giving, Good News bringing, world-expanding scriptures we hold at the center of our spiritual lives.
- Engage in the blessing after the sermon, using the proclamation moment to help people think about the role of books like these in the lives of faith seeking understanding and justice. Then the blessing offers participants a way to respond to that proclamation.
- Make the blessing your offering that week, collecting books (instead of or in addition to money), using the ritual and/or blessing as you would a Prayer of Dedication, and a Song of Celebration as a kind of Doxology.

Introduction

Offer brief words of explanation about why you are engaging in this blessing and how it is connected to the mission and values of your church. This could be a great moment to hear from a librarian or educator in your community, your church librarian or library volunteers, a Sunday School teacher or Youth Group leader, book group leaders, or other book worms in your congregation. Use some of the comments in our introduction above if you need more ideas!

Ritual

Option 1: If folks have brought books with them to be collected and blessed...

Leader: As we prepare to bless these books as a whole community,
we also want to take a moment for each of us
to connect and imagine with these books.
So I invite you to take the book you have brought with you
and hold it in your hands.
As you hold it, imagine a person for whom this book could be
the life-giving words they need,
the good news they have been waiting for,
the story that reminds them of the sacred truth of their own story.
For that person, and all the people who might read it,
pray a silent prayer into the pages of that book.
Let's take time now to imagine, connect and pray.

[time of silent prayer]

When you've finished your prayers,
pass the books to the aisle so that they can be collected
and blessed by our community as a whole.

Option 2: If you have assembled a collection of books ahead of time to be blessed...

Leader: As we prepare to bless these books as a whole community,
we also want to take a moment for each of us
to connect and imagine with these books.
So in a moment,
we are going to pass around some of the books that we are blessing.
When you receive a book,
I invite you to hold it in your hands for a moment.
As you hold it, imagine a person for whom this book could be
the life-giving words they need,
the good news they have been waiting for,
the story that reminds them of the sacred truth of their own story.
For that person, and all the people who might read it,
pray a silent prayer into the pages of that book.
Then pass it along to the person next to or near you.

Let's take time now to imagine, connect and pray with these books.

[time of silent prayer]

As we conclude this time of prayer,
if you are holding a book, I invite you to pass or bring it forward
so that they can be blessed by our community as a whole.

Litany of Blessing

Leader 1: As we pray over these books,
I invite you to hold out your hands in a gesture of blessing.

Let us join our hearts and voices in prayer.
Source of all knowledge and understanding,
Storyteller of Creation,
Life-giving Word made flesh,
pour out your Spirit on us and on these books.

Leader 2: Where minds are closed and hearts are hard,
bless these books to be a blessing.

Assembly: May these books bring life, spread justice, and teach love.

Leader 1: Where uncomfortable realities and challenging histories
are feared, avoided, and silenced,
bless these books to be a blessing.

Assembly: May these books bring life, spread justice, and teach love.

Leader 2: Where the desire to protect privilege and shield some from distress
outweighs the need to hear truth and love justice,
bless these books to be a blessing.

Assembly: May these books bring life, spread justice, and teach love.

Leader 1: For those who need to know they are not alone,
who cannot imagine a future for themselves,
bless these books to be a blessing.

Assembly: May these books bring life, spread justice, and teach love.

Leader 2: For those who cannot find their divine image reflected anywhere else,
bless these books to be a blessing.

Assembly: May these books bring life, spread justice, and teach love.

Leader 1: For those whose flourishing depends on learning all the histories,
hearing all the stories, asking all the questions,
bless these books to be a blessing.

Assembly: May these books bring life, spread justice, and teach love.

Leader 2: Source of all knowledge and understanding,
Storyteller of Creation,
Life-giving Word made flesh,
use these books to expand our hearts,
ignite our imaginations,
and draw us closer to you,
that we might journey courageously and compassionately
toward your dream of freedom and justice, mercy and love. Amen.

Song of Celebration

Suggestions:

- Sing Them Over Again to Me (Wonderful Words of Life), New Century Hymnal #319
- I Love to Tell the Story, New Century Hymnal #522
- Praise the Source of Faith and Learning, New Century Hymnal #411
- Ground and Source of All That Is, Sing! Prayer and Praise #89
- Listening Now, Sing! Prayer and Praise #160
- Open Our Eyes/Abres Mis Ojos, Sing! Prayer and Praise #161



Let the message of Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom Love gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

- Colossians 3:16

Ways to Continue Your Journey

Now that you've blessed your books, where do you go from here? Here are some ideas for how you can continue to engage in this important work of justice:

- Once a month, read a banned book or excerpt from one at your fellowship time/coffee hour after worship.
- Start a Banned Books Club. Invite folks to share with the community how their image of God and their understanding of “a just world for all” is changing and expanding based on what they are reading.
- Feature a banned book in your newsletters or weekly emails.
- Invite a banned book author to speak to your community or view one of the many videos of banned book authors talking about their work and discuss it as a community.
- Consider other ways to take action:
 - From the [American Library Association](#)
 - From [PEN America](#)
 - From the [National Coalition Against Censorship](#)
 - From [Unite Against Book Bans](#)



For more information contact:

Sharon R. Fennema, Join the Movement Curator fennemas@ucc.org

Velda Love, Minister for Racial Justice lovemv@ucc.org

Rachael Ward, Minister for Gender and Sexuality Justice wardr@ucc.org