



Understanding Our Sisterhood

Christmas Program

By Claudia Grant

Purpose:

To find new ways to connect, support, and understand our sisters in Christ through the witness of Mary and Elizabeth.

Suggestions for the Leader

- ☞ Recruit two women, one young and one older, to read the parts of Mary and Elizabeth.
- ☞ You may want to read aloud Luke 1:39-56 before the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth.
- ☞ Decide whether you will include as part of the program a plan for pairing women as sisters in faith to support one another through the Christmas season.

Introduction

We wring our hands about the hustle and bustle of the season: too many parties, too little time, and too much food. Our children often confuse Santa with Jesus, sentimental traditions with joyful celebration. The heritage of the winter solstice observances from our European forbearers was valuable, but it too easily co-opted the celebrations of Christmas, until we have forgotten the distinctions.

When we follow the culture's lead, we wrongly accept that Christmas ends on December 25. According to the church's calendar, however, the season of Christmas **begins** on December 25. Remember the twelve days of Christmas? Those twelve days begin on December 25 and end on January 5. Epiphany Day celebrates the coming of the three kings, or magi.

Even when we know these facts about the Christian calendar it is still difficult to resist observing Christmas during the Advent season. The purple or blue of Advent is covered quickly by the red and green of Christmas. When Christmas brings the baby to the manger, we take a deep breath and allow the new year to eclipse the star of Bethlehem instead of opening the skies to show us the journey forward from the stable.

We women are often pulled at cross-purposes as we try to tend family, faith, and festivals that seem to compete with rather than complement one another. We will not escape this bind by ourselves. The pressures are too great and the traditions too powerful to swim against the tide alone. Sisters in the faith can together create new traditions, find new ways to connect, and support one another. Thus this Christmas program is about sisterhood.

When it comes to understanding sisterhood, we have no better mentors than Mary and Elizabeth. Their story, often overshadowed by babies and angels, can teach us about the life-giving nature of sisterhood. So, this Christmas program centers on these two women and suggests ways that Disciple women can discover faith mentors in their midst.

Women of Age, Women of Youth

Mary and Elizabeth remind us that sisterhood is not determined by the length of years one has lived or generational or blood ties. Cultural pressures may distance the generations, driving wedges between old and young women. Rather than looking for support and encouragement from one another, we are tempted to disdain older women or envy younger women. There are few contemporary forums where the generations come together as sisters. A notable exception rife with possibilities is the church.

One of the most valuable but neglected resources of the church is women of age. Often the graying of the church is noted with despair rather than hope. A kind of "widows and orphans" mentality gives us an image that doesn't fit the vitality of contemporary aging women. Among the reasons to affirm the wisdom of older women of the church are:

Society is also aging. The fastest growing segment of the population is the generation over 80. The church can have a ministry to and with older women that uses their gifts rather than adding to their sense of being less useful to the world. Younger women need wise mentors and role models. Older women who have found

meaning and purpose through life's ups and downs have a different perspective and can offer encouragement to younger women. The church can be a place where the gifts of older women are freely shared. In a society where extended families are spread all over the map, the church can provide opportunities for young and old to share life in important ways.

Older women often have more freedom to use their time, energy, and resources for the common good. Wisdom, vitality, and stability are part of the priceless wealth of women (and men) of age.

These qualities need to be affirmed, nurtured, and put to good use. Watching our elders gracefully and gratefully living their faith is a source of hope and help for those who follow and an important resource for evangelism and witness.

Likewise, women of youth have wonderful gifts that are often overlooked by stereotypes and unflattering cultural images. Among the many reasons to affirm the gifts of younger women are:

1. They search for a depth of meaning to life. This quest for an authentic faith calls the church to its theological vocation as a teaching community, a community that crosses generations. Glib, easy answers are unacceptable to women who live with the realities of a world that demands so much of their time and energy for career and family. These young women challenge the church to engage in meaningful theological conversation.
2. They call for new expressions of faith. Young women bring new eyes and ears to the community of faith. "We've never done it that way" is not an acceptable reason to these women when they ask why things are done the way they are. Creative conflict brings new life to the church and gives birth to new traditions as well as breathing new life into old ones.
3. They bring hope for the future that is unfolding in their midst. Younger women embody the future, even as they struggle in the present. As women of all ages look toward that future, they discover that God is the God of all generations, and that God will continue to work new miracles far beyond our current VISION.

Conversation between Mary and Elizabeth

Mary: I'm not really certain why I came this long distance, Elizabeth, but I knew I needed to be with you. Somehow I knew you wouldn't judge me or give me advice. I've had enough of both to last a lifetime.

Elizabeth: You are always welcome in my home, Mary. You bring me much joy just being here. God is full of surprises for both of us!

Mary: I feel so alone. The world goes on working and playing, but nothing is the same for me. It is as though I am standing outside watching, going through the motions of my usual life, but not really connecting with anyone else's reality. I know my family is worried about me. They mean well, but they don't really know what to do or say. I'm not the same young girl they knew, and I'm searching for myself. I can sense God's call to me, but I don't really understand who I am to be now, with this new life growing within me.

Elizabeth: I thought the questions you are asking were long behind me. Now here I am, at my age, also seeking to understand God's call and who I am to be now. My life was settled and secure and now look at me. God surely must have a sense of humor!

Mary: I wasn't able to smile or feel the joy until I saw you and was embraced with your blessing.

Elizabeth: And I knew the moment I saw you that the new life in me was reaching out to the new life in you. I am overwhelmed that God has sent you to be with me. I can't believe it sometimes when I look at you and see your body swelling with life. You give me courage to bear the growing life within me.

Mary: I feel safe with you. Here I can think more clearly about what God is doing with me. I don't have to weigh my words or hold back my feelings.

Elizabeth: As wonderful as Zechariah is, and as close as we have been since he came

from the Temple unable to speak, you have brought me unspeakable joy that I could not have known.

Mary: My soul has been set free to praise God and to claim the promises God has made to our ancestors. Our time together has gone too quickly. I wish I could stay here with you forever.

Elizabeth: As much as I would long to keep you here with me, I know you have other roads to travel. My prayers and blessing go with you, Mary.

Mary: May the joy that we share empower us to go with faith on our journeys ahead.

Resources of Faithful Sisters

"The friendship of Elizabeth and Mary is a story of tenderness and wonder. But most of all, it is a story of *JOY*.

"I remember one evening sitting around a bonfire during a service of welcome to Salvadoran refugees who had made it safely to the United States. A woman who had witnessed the murder of her husband and three sons sat on a log next to me. She clapped as we sang a hymn of praise. Then she jumped up, the first to begin a dance around the bright flames shooting toward the sky. She encouraged others, grabbing hands, widening the circle. I was in awe of her capacity for *JOY*.

"In times of suffering such as the world faces today, despair can easily threaten to take up residence in our hearts. But those who suffer most remind us of how tragic and arrogant it would be for us to lose hope on behalf of people who have not lost theirs. They are teachers of *JOY*. Like Elizabeth, they believe the promises of God. They pour their love into their children with a hope that the world will be better for them. And like the infant John in the womb, they have learned to leap and swirl and dance in the presence of God."¹

Group Discussion

1. Turn to someone sitting near you, preferably someone of a different generation. Tell about your experiences finding joy in the midst of sorrow and what enables such a celebration.
2. Have the group come together again. Ask, "As the season of Christmas approaches, how can the relationship of Mary and Elizabeth empower you to move into it and then into a new year?"

Service/Action Suggestions

Select one of these ideas or modify one to fit your Disciples Women's group:

- ☞ Match older women with younger women to be faith sisters during the Christmas season.
- ☞ Sponsor a party for younger or older women at church or in someone's home and exchange fantasy gifts. Fantasy gifts are things you wish for them, that is, a box of hugs they can draw on when needed, a magic carpet that can take them any place they dream of going, a special mirror that will help them see how beautiful they really are.
- ☞ Get a list of women who are confined to their homes for members of the group to visit during Christmastide (December 25 through January 5).

When presenting your selection to the group, ask them to watch for what God is saying to them through the women they befriend and those who befriend them. Encourage them to memorize these words:

"And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (Luke 1:45).

Worship

Invitation to Worship

As we wait for God, so God waits for us. Are we ready to welcome a holy presence into our midst? Are we able to open our lives to the One who comes in such a lowly state, hardly noticed in our preoccupation with ourselves and the agendas we have adopted? Are we willing to have our minds opened, our hearts broken, and our lives turned inside out by the One we cannot control or limit?

These are questions this holy season asks of us. In this moment of worship we invite God to move into the manger of our hearts and reassure us that we need not be afraid of the changes the Child will bring. As did Mary and Elizabeth, let us pray and praise with joy and abandon.

Prayer

Leader: When I say, "Loving God, open our hearts to make room for you," please respond with "Be born us anew."

Leader: Loving God, open our hearts to make room for you.

All: **Be born in us anew.**

Leader: Hear our prayers, Holy God, those we speak and those that remain unspoken. Meet us in the deepest places of our beings and help us prepare for your coming to dwell with us there. Loving God, open our hearts to make room for you.

All: **Be born in us anew.**

Leader: We confess that we are often busy when we need to be still and are still when you call us to labors of love. Help us discern when we need to listen and when we are summoned to speak your prophetic and healing word. Loving God, open our hearts to make room for you.

All: **Be born in us anew.**

Leader: We remember the women in our lives who, as Elizabeth did, reached out to us in our youth to meet our pain and uncertainty with joy and hope. We name those wise women and give thanks that they touched us and helped us sing God's song. I thank you for (name an older spiritual friend and the hope! she nurtured in you). In the next few moments, let us name aloud those Elizabeths in our lives.
(A time of naming and giving thanks)
Loving God, open our hearts to make room for you.

All: **Be born in us anew.**

Leader: We remember Mary who received you in the center of her being. With thanksgiving we think of those younger women and girls in our lives who reach out to us with expectation and hopefulness. I especially thank you for (name a younger woman or girl in your life who invites you to celebrate life). In the next few moments let us name those younger women in our lives who bring life to us.
(A time of naming and giving thanks)
Loving God, open our hearts to make room for you.

All: **Be born in us anew.**

Leader: We rejoice in the expansive family of faith that gathers us up from manglers and mansions to make a new home where all are welcome

to share at your bountiful table. Thank you for making room for us all. Loving God, open our hearts to make room for you.

All: Be born in us anew

Leader: Amen.

Sing Mary's Song

"My Soul Gives Glory to My God" (*Chalice Hymnal*, no. 130)



Invitation to Offering

Giving and receiving holds together the fabric of relationships that are real and life affirming. Advent and Christmas are times to experience the joy of releasing both our abundance and our poverty into the care of God. Whether we have much or little is not as important as our willingness to give generously from what has been given to us. We are not asked to tip God for some blessing or desire we have received. We are called to open the storehouses of our treasures to bring to the stable. (*Gather the offering.*)

Offering Prayer

Thank you. Gracias. Merci. Danke. We pray that these gifts will be a sign of our deep gratitude. May our souls give glory to our God and reach out through these dollars to connect with our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Amen.

Offering Response:

"Song of Mary" (*Chalice Hymnal*, no. 131) (May be solo, in unison, spoken, or lined.)

Blessing

May the One who brings hope to weary and burdened souls come to us and the world anew. May we take the good news of Jesus into a world that does not know God's face so that once again the Word will become flesh and dwell among us. God bless you and be born in the manger of your heart. Amen.

Resources used:

From "Clothed With the Sun, Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us" by Joyce Hollyday, Westminster John Knox Press; 1994, pp. 224-225. Used by Permission.

About the author:

Claudia Grant, an ordained minister, has accepted the call to serve as the coordinator for the Mix in '06, A Women's Event joining the Disciples of Christ Quadrennial Assembly and the United Church of Christ National Women's Meeting. She was the coordinator for the 1998 International Christian Women's Fellowship (ICWF) Quadrennial Assembly.