

Study Guide – Just Women, Spring 2018

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Introduction

Welcome to the tenth anniversary issue of *Just Women*! While the very popular annual Bible Study will continue to be published, due to decreasing subscriptions this will be the last issue of the quarterly magazine, and thus the study guide. Throughout its history, *Just Women* has been committed to celebrating women's voices and inviting its readers into difficult and challenging conversations as perspectives different from our own have been considered and voices from the margins have taken center stage. This concluding issue continues this focus, as we are invited into a conversation on "Sexuality, Gender and the Church."

Each of the study sessions will begin with the invitation to participate in praying with one's hands. In the sixteenth century Isaac the Syrian wrote, "Enter eagerly into the treasure house that lies within you, and so you will see the treasure house of heaven... The ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within you."¹ In this he recognizes that while the majority of our prayers include word, prayer is not limited to words. Our bodies can embody prayer and our actions can be prayer as we communicate with God and create meaning through our motions.

The four study sessions will feature the following articles: "*God Gave Us Sexuality: And it is Good.*" by Chesla Nickelson; "*Reproductive Justice: Reclaiming Sacred Human Sexuality*" by Toni M. Bond Leonard; "*Faith Trust Institute: Ending Sexual and Domestic Violence*" by Selys Rivera; and, "*Generation to Generation: A Conversation on Gender Roles and Identity in the Church*" by Katie Hays and Nathan Berry. Each of these articles invite us into conversations about topics and subjects that "the church too often avoids yet are a part of our lives and challenge us to work for justice." (Pat Donahoo, 'Looking Back and Looking Ahead.' *Just Women*, Spring, 2018. p. 1)

We hope this leader's guide will help you plan meaningful study sessions using the Spring 2018 issue of the magazine. We hope that you will continue to utilize the annual *Just Women* Bible Study by purchasing it for yourself and as gifts and encouraging others to do the same.

¹ Jon M. Sweeney. *Praying with Our Hands: 21 Practices of Embodied Prayer*, Woodstock, VT: Skylights Paths Publishing, 2013. Kindle Electronic Location 119 of 695

Preparation

In preparing for the study sessions outlined here, have an individual subscription for each woman in your group. Read through the Spring 2018 edition and familiarize yourself with how the theme is developed in the articles. Ask your group members to read the article that you will be focusing on *before* your meetings so everyone will be prepared to participate in the study.

Session 1

Supplies

- Copies of “*God Gave Us Sexuality: And it is Good.*” by Chesla Nickelson found on pages 4 – 6 and in Spanish on pages 7 – 9.

Opening Prayer

Ask each person to select a partner and invite them to sit facing each other. Instruct the women to look at each other, note the expression on the face of one’s partner. What feelings and thoughts arise as you look deeply at your partner. After a minute or two, invite the women to hold hands while they continue in silence. Ask the women to note the position of their hands and bodies as they hold hands. Ask them to consider what feelings arise as they hold the other woman’s hands. After a moment or two, ask the women to silently pray for the other person. After a moment or two, conclude by having the women share prayer requests with their partner and offer specific prayers for each other. Conclude with each woman offering a blessing for her partner.

Icebreaker

Pass out sheets of paper and ask the women to respond to the following questions:

1. When I think about sex I
2. When I consider myself as a sexual person, I
3. God created me as a sexual person so....
4. Knowing that we are going to talk about sexuality I

Invite the women to share about their early teachings about sex and sexuality. Did these conversations include topics other than sexual reproduction? Did they have formal or informal conversations with parents? What were the messages of those conversations? What did they learn from informal conversations with peers? Was sexuality a topic that was addressed in their faith experiences? What are the messages that they have received from society about sexuality? How are those messages given? What feelings or thoughts do you associate with sexuality? How would you describe the general attitude in your congregation about sexuality? The attitude in your community? The attitude in the United States?

Questions

- Chesla Nickelson, Program Director and Merger Staff for International Disciples Women’s Ministries, states that mission for Disciples’ Women is to be a conduit for diverse connections empowering each woman to find her voice and live out her call. What does this mean to you? How have you done this?

- Finding her voice and living out her call has led Nickelson to use her voice to help initiate, navigate and resource healthy sexuality and faith conversations in churches. She advocates for comprehensive sexuality education in the church. How do you define sexuality? How does Nickelson define sexuality? How is sexuality education different than sex education? How does your congregation engage in healthy sexuality and faith conversations? What needs to be different for your church to engage in healthy sexuality and faith conversations?
- Reverend Lacette Cross views sexuality into three intersecting components. What are they?
- Nickelson writes, "... one's sexuality is not limited to one's genitals. Sexuality is an interconnecting set of identities that are a gift from God and should be cherished, known and taught about comprehensively with great care and intentionality." What does this mean to you? Do you agree or disagree? How does this affirm or conflict with messages about sexuality that you have received from the church? What questions are raised by this understanding of sexuality? How can the church be intentional in teaching about this gift from God?
- Nickelson writes: "we are created whole, and sexuality is a part of that whole." What are the implications of this? What is at risk when the church does not engage in healthy conversations about sexuality? What is at risk when the church engages in unhealthy conversations about sexuality?
- What do you think that Nickelson means when she states "God is sex positive." Is the church sex positive? How does Nickelson define sexuality and faith education?
- What suggestions does Nickelson give so that we may become more comfortable in talking about sex? What other topics beside sex must we become more comfortable talking about if we are to foster a positive and healthy understanding of sexuality?

Going Deeper

Consider hosting a book study on one of the following:

1. De La Torre, Miguel A. *Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016.
2. McCleneghan, Bromleigh. *Good Christian Sex; Why Chastity Isn't the Only Option the Bible Says About Sex*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016.

Closing Prayer

Close with Disciples Women's Benediction or have one of the group members close with prayer.

Session 2

Supplies

- Copies of “*Reproductive Justice: Reclaiming Sacred Human Sexuality*” by Toni M. Bond Leonard pages 10 – 12.

Opening Prayer

Let us pray:

Icebreaker

Invite the women in your group to sit comfortably. Instruct them that the following questions are for their private reflection. They will not be asked to share any of their answers unless they want to share.

Provide a minute or two for reflection between questions.

1. Consider your first sexual encounter. How were you prepared for this experience. If you are have not had a sexual encounter how prepared are you for a future encounter?
2. What feelings did you experience after your first sexual encounter? Did you share your feelings with anyone?
3. For those of you who have given birth... how prepared were you for this experience? What helped? What was not helpful?
4. What birth stories have others shared with you? What have you learned from these birth stories?
5. Do you believe that you have agency over your body? Are there any limitations on this?
6. How is human sexuality sacred?

As you conclude this portion of your meeting, ask if anyone would like to share what it was like to think about these things. Again reassure them that they can share about their feeling and not the content of their reflections and that they need not share at all if they so choose.

Questions

- How was the sacredness of Toni M. Bond Leonard’s reproduction and human sexuality disrupted? What does she mean when she states that she knows what it means to “lack agency and to feel like one’s entire body is more akin to a wretched curse”?
- Leonard states, “Religion has attempted to dictate human sexuality by proscribing sex before marriage, same gender sex, abortion, and in Catholicism and some Christian denominations, even contraception. The religious message is that any sexual activity that is outside of the confines of marriage between a man and a

women, which does not result in reproduction, is shameful and dirty.” Do you agree with her assessment of the religious message? Do you agree or disagree with the message? What has been your experience? What is safeguarded by this message? What is the danger, what is at risk, with this message?

- Review the statistics from the Centers for Disease Control. What are your reactions/ response to those statistics.
- Define Reproductive Justice. What provides the framework for reproductive justice theory? What are the three core principles of reproductive rights theory? Do you agree with these core principles? Why or why not? Do you have concerns about these core principles? What are they?
- How is agency defined? How is agency at the heart of reproductive justice theory? Why is it important for a woman to have agency?
- How is the principles of liberation theory affirmed through reproductive justice theory?
- It is stated, “The culture of silence around reproduction and sexuality is not life affirming but rather is ignorance promoting.” Do you agree or disagree? What is at risk with this silence?
- It is concluded, “When the church shuns its responsibility to be a resource for reproductive and sexual health information, it eschews the will of God through its refusal to provide lifesaving information.” Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? What must be changed in church culture to create a context where resources regarding reproductive and sexual health information are openly provided? What steps can your congregation take?

Closing Prayer

Ask a member of your group to pray or conclude with the Disciples Women’s Benediction.

Session 3

Supplies

Copies of “*Faith Trust Institute: Ending Sexual and Domestic Violence*” by Selys Rivera pages 13 – 15.

In Preparation for Your Meeting

Familiarize yourself with the resources available on the FaithTrustInstitute website at <http://faithtrustinstitute.org>. Be prepared to summarize what you have found for your group,

Opening Prayer

Invite the women in your group to stand. Ask them to bend their arms with their palms up and their fingertips touching in front of their stomachs as a symbol of openness to God for healing and wholeness in their lives and in the lives of others. (adapted from *Body Prayer: The Posture of Intimacy with God*, Colorado Springs, Co; Waterbook Press, 2005, Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 339 of 968.)

Let us pray

Gracious God, you heard the call of the slaves from Egypt and the refugees from Babylon. Loving God, you heard the cries of the oppressed and the persecuted, the lost and the lonely. Powerful God, you shook the world with acts of hope and promise of transformation on Easter morn. We open ourselves to you and ready ourselves for the ongoing transformation of all of creation.

We pray that all may be reconciled through your power so that there may be an end to oppression, domination, and abuses of power. We pray that through your power all may come to a place of wholeness where all experience your shalom. Amen.

Questions

- Provide an overview of what you saw when you visited the FaithTrustInstitute website or provide an opportunity for your group to explore this website together.
- Rivera states, “Regrettably, sexual violence and faith have a complicated relationship throughout the history, intersecting in issues ranging from domestic violence, child abuse, clergy miss conduct and boundary violations, and more.’ Do you agree or disagree? Why? How have you experienced this complicated relationship? What is FaithTrustInstitute? Why is this institution important in the life of the church?
- How have faith leaders been complicit in issues of domestic violence? How has religion been used to facilitate abusive relationships? How does this article define the role of faith leaders in addressing domestic violence?

- The article recognizes the importance of healthy boundaries and clergy ethics materials and trainings to prevent and address clergy misconduct and boundary violations. What resources are available through your region for your clergy? What resources are available for your congregation so that they may encourage and facilitate healthy boundaries and recognize clergy misconduct?
- Title IX (1972) is a comprehensive federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity and the #metoomovement (2006) is a movement against sexual abuse and harassment. Consider exploring the history of Title IX and #metoomovement and be prepared to share this history with your group. How have these made a difference? Despite movements and laws such as this, Fortune believes that there is still much to be done. What does she suggest has not changed? What changes does she call for? Do you agree or disagree? How does this apply to your community? Place of work? Congregation?
- Fortune states: “We have to create a context in which people feel very free to come forward and ask for the support from their faith communities.” What is needed to facilitate such a context? What can your congregation do to help create this context?
- Consider adding your names to the National Declaration by Religious and Spiritual Leaders to Address Violence Against Women found at <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/take-action/declaration>
- April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month and Child Abuse Prevention Month. How did your congregation provide resources or engage in conversations regarding these important issues? What might you plan for next year?

Going Deeper

Consider hosting a book discussion of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ re-spins Genesis. And that’s scary. by Jeffrey Salkin (Religion News Service, 5/4/17): <http://religionnews.com/2017/05/04/handmaids-tale-genesis-bible-judaism/>

Closing Prayer

Ask a member of your group to pray or conclude with the Disciples Women’s Benediction.

Session 4

Supplies

Copies of *Generation to Generation: A Conversation on Gender Roles and Identity in the Church* by Katie Hays and Nathan Berry.

Note: Perhaps there will be individuals in your group who are unfamiliar with terms and language associated with the LGBTQ+ community. A helpful resource that includes a glossary of terms is Mardell, Ashley. *The ABC's of LGBTQ+*. Mango Media, 2016.

Opening Prayer

Doug Pagitt and Kathryn Prill (*Body Prayer: The Posture of Intimacy with God*, Colorado Springs, Co; Waterbrook Press, 2005, Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 471 of 968.) write: “The life of faith is not intended to be lived in isolation or even in the near vicinity of other people. It is meant to be lived in deep connection with people. As the people of God we are called to look out for the interests of others and let others look out for us. So we pray and live to allow others into our lives and with a readiness to be a redemptive presence in the lives of others.”

As we pray this prayer for vulnerability invite the women to sit comfortably. Invite them to extend their necks in a symbolic posture of vulnerability and submission. Invite them to extend their necks forward and bow their heads. Ask them to feel the stretch in the back of their necks as they face the floor.

As each assume this posture, pause briefly and then pray.

Covenant-making God,

Let me not harden my heart towards others.

Let me not harden my heart towards who I truly am.

Let me put into practice what I have learned from you for

Lord, you have examined me.

You know me when I sit down and when I stand up....

You are the one who created my innermost parts;

You knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb.

I will give you thanks that I was marvelously set apart.

Incarnational God

Let me not harden my heart towards others.

Let me proclaim that they too are wonderfully made.

Let me celebrate the wonder of all your children.

Let me not harden my heart towards who I truly am.

For you have known me, called me and proclaimed me a part of all that is good. Amen.

Icebreaker

Discuss the following:

As a child what toys did you play with? Were there toys you were discouraged from playing with? What were your favorite childhood games and activities? What games and activities were you not allowed to play or participate in? What did your parents, teachers, ministers and church leaders say to you about being a girl? A boy? What nicknames or pet names do you associate with girls? With boys? How were you encouraged to express your emotions? How were the boys around you encouraged to express their emotions?

What was your earliest understanding of what it means to be a girl or a boy? What did you learn from these experiences? How are these messages the same or different from the ones that you give/ gave your children or your grandchildren? How do these experiences affirm or challenge the understanding of binary gender identity?

Questions

- Were there terms in this article that were unfamiliar to you? Define these terms.
- Have you ever thought of gender identities as existing on a continuum rather than as binary forms? What does it mean for gender identities to exist on a continuum? How have you experienced this?
- What does it mean that Katie Hays self identifies as cisgender? What does it mean that Nathan Berry self identifies as genderqueer? How do you understand this statement about Nathan Berry, “She is a genderqueer person who also grew up in the Church of Christ...”? What is suggested when we use pronouns for a person based on gender self-identification?
- Describe the early church experiences of Katie and Nathan. How are these experiences similar? How are they different? How did these experiences shape their faith experiences and relationship with the church? Why did they stay in the church? How did the messages change over time? Whose experience is it easier for you to understand? Why?
- What messages are you receiving from your congregation about the roles of women and men in church? In society? Who do these messages include? Who do they exclude? How do these messages reflect the early messages given to Hays and Berry? How are they different?
- Katie states, “I was angry at the church, at the men who ran it, at the women who accepted it, at the historical power structure that ensured the status quo and at God. I began to accuse God: “Why did you make me this way if I’m not supposed to be this way?” Have you had similar feelings? Have you ever felt “less than” because of the power structure of the church? Have you known others who have felt “less than” because of the power structure of the church? Has this changed over your lifetime? What do you believe needs to change so that all may claim wholeness and appreciate themselves as a beloved child of God?
- Nathan states, “The message I received from the church was this; “You are a problem. Your existence is a burden, not a blessing. Leave who you are and what you care about at the door: they don’t have a place in God’s house.” What would

- it be like to believe that this is what the church and God thinks about you? How would you evaluate this message in light of Jesus' ministry and Jesus's teachings?
- Hays states, "I recognized that it's not normal to be in a church that thinks you are a "problem" to be dealt with." It is not unusual to hear the saying, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." How does the message of "love the sinner, hate the sin" communicate that some people are a problem to be dealt with? What does this mean to you?
 - After reading this conversation, what is your understanding of the work of justice regarding LGBTQ+ people? How has this changed or remained the same since reading this article?
 - What are concrete steps that would allow us to empower and encourage people to "be the people - not the roles, not the binary identities - but the people God made us to be"?
 - Take a few moments to reflect on today's discussion. Pause a minute or two between questions to allow time for reflection. As the women sit silently ask the following: What has made you uncomfortable today? What has challenged strongly held beliefs? What has affirmed beliefs that I had primary to this discussion? What do I need to do differently because of this discussion? What does my congregation need to do differently? What steps am I willing to take?
 - Conclude by asking if anyone has anything they would like to share.

Going Deeper

Consider hosting a book study on Taylor, Sonya Renee. *The Body is Not An Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2018.

Closing Prayer

Ask a member of your group to pray or conclude with the Disciples Women's Benediction.

About the Author

The Reverend Dr. Beth Rupe has served congregations in Kentucky and Illinois. She currently lives in Bloomington, IL and serves as Interim Minister of Women's Ministries for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in IL and WI, Regional Elder to the McLean Livingston congregations for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in IL and WI, and co-facilitator of the CCIW Pro-Reconciliation and Anti-Racism Team. She writes *Prayer Stations* and the quarterly study guides for *Just Women*. She has written congregational resources for Disciples Home Ministries, including for Laity Sunday, 2017 and book reviews that have been published in the *Lexington Theological Quarterly*. Beth practices contemplative prayer forms. She is married to Mark. They enjoy traveling and spending time with family and friends. They have two adult children and two granddaughters.