

Renew, Respond, Rejoice!

A RESOURCE FROM WOMEN OF THE ELCA



Renew, Respond, Rejoice!



⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:4-9

About this Resource

The theme for the 2011 Triennial Gathering in Spokane, July 14-17, 2011, is **Renew, Respond, Rejoice!** The inspiration for this theme is drawn from Philippians 4:4-9.

This resource is intended not only as an introduction to the theme, but also as an introduction to some of the concepts that will be explored at the gathering. By working through the sections that follow, participants will have the opportunity to lay a foundation of understanding for the gathering theme as well as the opportunity to view themselves and others anew as expressions of God's goodness in human form. When we adopt this perspective, we can begin living more fully into the potential in which we were created.

This resource contains material that is intended for both large and small group discussion and contains one activity that can be done independently. Depending on the time available, you should be able to complete the entire resource in one day. However, the material can also be divided over several shorter meetings with independent activities in between sessions. The best way to use it is the way that meets the needs of your group. There is no wrong way to engage in the topic.

You will need silver and/or gold paper stars, dark blue poster board or fabric and a way to affix the stars on the board or fabric.

Introduction

As humans, we are parts that together make a whole being. While the Western mind—so helpful for analysis of separate parts—separates us into body, mind, and spirit or (more biblically) body, spirit, and soul, God’s grace and life flows into and through our entire beings. In this first section, we contemplate the text from Philippians from beginning to end, breaking it into bite-size sections to better examine the contents of the message.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

The Apostle Paul provides a sequence in these verses, which he wrote at the end of his letter to the saints in Philippi. He begins with the admonition to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” This starting point pulls us into the current moment. Paul does not speak of joy as a past experience or as a future event. It is in this moment that we are to rejoice in all that God is and all that God has provided. Now is the appropriate time to rejoice in the Lord.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

From this joy, Paul moves into community conduct. We are to be so gentle that people know us for our gentleness. Gentleness is not weakness or failure to act. On the contrary, gentleness is using only the pressure required to keep the way focused or clear. We can be gentle because we are not anxious to prove a point or win an argument. We can be gentle because God’s way is not our way. Our prayers acknowledge God’s faithfulness to us in all things with thanksgiving. The peace that passes understanding is often one result of prayer because prayer reminds us (and the entire universe) that we are in God’s hands.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Being positioned and entirely secure in Christ, we can focus on being nurturing and caring with one another

and the world. Paul told the saints of Philippi that rather than focus on their suffering, they were to focus on God’s blessings. If there was anything positive to say, they were to say it. If there was anything good or pleasing to dwell upon, to consider, or to speak about, they were to do that, too. By themselves, these verses lack little for directing a large part of our individual lives.

These selected Bible verses were chosen as the foundation for the 2011 Triennial Gathering. During our contemplation and meditation on the message of these verses, we took apart the message from Paul to the Philippians. This process of analysis brought us our theme: **Renew, Respond, Rejoice!**

Looking at these verses in this way gives us a logical progression. Now that we have set the table with the underpinnings of the verses from Philippians, let’s dig in and start exploring each of these elements individually so we can better understand what they mean for us in our individual and collective lives. In other words, how can we apply the messages from 2000 years ago to our lives today?



Renew

4:8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Do you remember the commercial tagline for the bath beads that promised instant transportation to a better place? Calgon®, take me away! The message was clear: a good soak in the tub with this product will make you feel renewed. We can identify with the restorative benefits of such an experience.

How do we renew our spirits?

One way to achieve a renewal of spirit is to come together with others of shared faith and intention. As an organization of women that serves, organizes and carries out life-changing ministries and relief efforts, Women of

the ELCA participants will always return to a time when what is needed is to renew.

Earlier in this same letter, Paul reminded the saints of Philippi that God was the one that was doing a great work in them. Acknowledging how God has used us to bless others may not come easy for all of us. Yet, there is a sense of recognition of each other tucked into this verse. When we are able to acknowledge that we are instruments of God's work, we are open to accepting the energy, enthusiasm and encouragement that comes with this acknowledgement.

The practices St. Paul gave to the saints in Philippi are things that renew body, soul and spirit. Just recalling God's faithfulness provides faith and boldness for renewed action. And looking for evidence of God's presence—summarizing Paul's list of things to think and talk about—is another great way to be renewed.

A marvelous way to live out this verse as an individual or group within our congregations is by observing Bold Women's Day. This event, held on the fourth Sunday of each February, is designed to be as unique as you. If you have not already done so, we encourage you to seriously consider observing this day. Once you try it, you will appreciate how renewing the practice encouraged by this particular verse can be for yourself and your community. (A new resource, with ideas for individual and group observances of Bold Women's Day, is available at www.womenoftheelca.org/bwd.)

Just as Bold Women's Day is renewing for both individuals and congregations, the triennial gathering allows women from all over to unite in order to amplify the process and the response. The gatherings are the implementation of new as well as tried and true ways to renew, respond and rejoice. If you have never attended a gathering, this year is a great time to start a new tradition. Double your fun and come with a friend, sister, niece or daughter. The experience is something that can positively impact your life in so many ways.

Small Group Activity

Note: If every participant will not have a copy of this resource, consider listing the following items on a board or poster. Also, ask each small group to keep an informal tally of all items that are shared so they know how many stars they will place in the sky.

Within the time allowed, make small groups of two or three and share as many of the following as possible:

- **a thing that is true**
- **a thing that is honorable**
- **a thing that reflects God's justice**
- **a thing that shows God's purity**
- **a thing that is pleasing or commendable**

Conclude the small group discussion with each group choosing one excellent example that is worthy of praise to share with the larger group.

Large Group Debrief and Activity

Ask each small group to report out. Visually share all examples of God's renewing presence by placing silver and/or gold stars on a field of dark blue poster board or fabric.

Place one star for each item that is shared out loud in the small group reporting. Also include a star for each item shared in small groups. (Use the small group tallies to determine the number of stars for each small group.)

Close this part of the workshop with a statement such as: *As numerous as the stars in the sky are God's many gifts to us. We are renewed by the promise that God continues to be revealed in our world today.*

Optional Independent Activity: Make Your Blessing List

Oprah calls this her gratitude list but this exercise goes one step further. To begin your list, first think of your responses to these questions:

- **What makes you feel blessed?**
- **What makes you smile?**

Write those things down.

Next, consider this question:

Who—when you really think about this person—makes your heart smile and your spirit light?

Write down that person's name.

Keep this list close so you can add to it as additional responses come to you. Use this list as a reflection of that which renews you.

On the flip side of this list, write down the things you enjoy doing most. Start with the activities that cost no or very little money.

This list will inform and give greater life to Paul's admonition in Philippians 4:8 that reads: *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*



Respond

4:6-7, 9 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Have you seen the newer two-in-one washer/dryer combo? It's one machine that does both the washing AND the drying. This concept seems to defy logic and any preconceived notion of doing laundry. What is it? A washer? A dryer? Doesn't it have to be one or the other? I just don't get it.

Within the Christ's church, we hear discussion and even debate as to just what the response of God's people should be to this issue or that concern. Not only the issues are discussed, but even the approaches we are to take are debated. Some say we need to pray and fight for this. Others say we need to serve and fight for that. There are times when the issues (or responses to them) seem diametrically opposed to one another. Can we do two seemingly different or contrasting actions at once?

Consider again the two-in-one washer/dryer, then re-read verses six and nine. Both verses are features of God's one call: as God's people we do both. We even, sometimes, do them both at the same time: consider prayer shawls, the making of quilts and prayer vigils. When we engage in these kinds of activities, we are simultaneously praying and involved in activity.

We live in response to God. Our response to God's love and grace fills every moment of our lives. While some moments may look like we are doing just that, other moments look more like we're lost. Others still find us looking for better ways to respond. Thank God for grace that covers all of our moments and calls us deeper into God's way.

Perhaps the most touching and most subtle part of what we are to be doing in our response to God's grace is what we are not to do. The first item listed in verse six tells us that we are not to worry. God's people are not to be troubled with worry. Worry cuts us off from our life source. Worry robs us of the anticipation of God's grace, which is often manifested as the peace that passes all understanding.

It is impossible to worry when being held by the peace that passes understanding. Worry appears as the phantom liar that it truly is when we are given a dose of the peace that passes understanding. We all learn this even if we do not always celebrate it.

Small Group Discussion

Make small groups of two or three. Ask each person to share a time when they experienced the peace of God that passes understanding. (This would be a time when nearly everything or everyone is falling apart around you but you had an inexplicable peace and calm.)

Share as many of these experiences as time allows but be prepared to share just one example with the larger group. Have each small group keep a tally of all items that are shared so they know how many stars they will place in the sky.

Large Group Debrief and Activity

Ask each small group for one example of "the peace that passes understanding." Place one star for each item that is shared out loud. Also include a star for each item shared in small groups from the tallies. The sky that is reflecting the points of your shared expressions should be filling up with bright stars.

Close this part of the workshop by saying:

Surely, the numerous responses of women of faith over the ages would make all blue disappear from our sky but for this program, we will see only what this group has shared. And, still, the sky is getting covered.

Isn't it amazing? The women gathered together on this day have an incredible array of stars in the sky. It is easy to see how to be renewed by simply celebrating the many times God's peace has made us able to respond. Perhaps we can remember to consider the depth of such experiences the next time we pass the peace of God in worship.



Rejoice

4:4, 8b Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. . . if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

The third word of the 2011 Triennial Gathering theme is the first word of the selected scripture text. We end our theme with it in great anticipation of the exciting synergy of joy that will be part of the mobilization for renewal, response and rejoicing that will be in Spokane.

We also ended our theme with Rejoice because we see our joy based in our experiences with God and each other. Imagine the exponential results when women of faith come together to lift up their voices and hearts to God to renew, respond and rejoice together. What follows is certain joy.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. Joy precedes and follows all in our selected text. Without the joy of the Lord, how difficult these instructions can sound. We all have family and friends facing hard times. People have lost their jobs and the prospect of new employment seems bleak. Relationships and lives end. Life brings blessings but life also brings suffering and loss. Who among us has not learned these things are true?

Yet, Paul encourages us to rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS. This text makes a great argument against any curmudgeonly idea that Christians should not be engaged in positive thinking. But then again, is this positive thinking or is Paul simply reminding us that we are each and at all times and in all situations in a saving relationship with God? This alone, Paul writes, is cause for celebration.

Rejoice! Sometimes this joy cascades like a waterfall. At other times this joy bubbles up slowly like a hidden fountain. These verses can be a joyful reminder when hard times or any spiritual heaviness threaten to hold us down.

Are we easily discouraged? Do we surrender to suffering? Who or what has drawn across our hearts the idea that there is nobility in unnecessary suffering? It is God who has justified us and accepts us in the Beloved. Who has told us that we are naked? We are clothed in Christ's righteousness.

Where have we learned otherwise? Have those who taught us know more than us? Has another's arrogance caused us to falter? Has our family of origin conveyed a sense of failure to us? Has cultural tradition laid a load of unnecessary suffering upon us? Well, rejoice. Because if any among us is bothered by such ideas, the admonitions of these verses bring us into acknowledgment of God's saving grace. The spiritual practices of Philippians 4:4-9 help us recognize the good in even the worst of situations and the most difficult of people.

Rejoice! We are loved by God. Rejoice! We can ask God for anything we need. Rejoice! We have been blessed by God. In God's grace the body of Christ can rejoice, always.

What brings us joy? How can we use these verses to remind ourselves to have and hold the joy of the Lord, which can be our strength? This next activity will help us tie together the lessons of this exercise.

Small Group Discussion

In small groups of two or three, share what brings you joy or feeds your joy in the Lord. Once you have a good list, share ideas for how to create additional opportunities for these things that bring you joy to come into your life. In other words, how will you open windows to allow more of these joyful breezes to enter into your life? (Again each

small group keeps a tally of all items that are shared so they know how many stars they will place in the sky.)

Large Group Debrief and Activity

Ask each small group for one example of what brings them joy. Place one star for each item that is shared out loud. Also include a star for each item shared in small groups from the tallies. Continue to fill the dark blue sky of the poster board. It should be nearly brimming with stars at this point.

Close this part of the workshop with something such as:

Being able to always rejoice in God's love is the priceless gift God has given to all. May we boldly take possession of this gift.

CONCLUSION

Renew, Respond, Rejoice! is our 2011 Triennial Gathering theme but, more importantly, it is a wonderful circle of faith experiences that we have each enjoyed and will continue to grow into as we step further into our call as God's people here on earth.

Women of the ELCA is a community of women created in the image of God, called to discipleship in Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. We commit ourselves to grow in faith, affirm our gifts, support one another in our callings, engage in ministry and action, and promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world. Part of our support of each other and God's church is coming together for times of learning, sharing and serving.

Look at the numerous stars on this blue sky. Imagine multiplying this number by hundreds, by thousands and then by hundreds of thousands. Still we would only have a glimpse of the grace that is given to us in Christ Jesus. Such a marvelous testimony gives us strength as we experience what it means to Renew, Respond, Rejoice!

Let us Pray:

Precious Lord, we acknowledge you as a loving and generous Savior incapable of leaving us in suffering because you are always present with us. You bring us the peace that passes understanding when joy appears far, and you bring to our hearts and lives joy and gratitude when our lives appear full. May we practice our faith in growing ways and may we be able to say with Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again we will say, Rejoice!" In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.