

A Packet for Use in
CELEBRATING A PUBLIC EDUCATION SABBATH
 and
SUPPORTING PUBLIC EDUCATION

Sponsored by: The North Carolina Council of Churches Committee on Public Education

Purpose: The purposes of Public Education Sabbath are:

- To affirm all who learn and labor in all our schools.
- To call attention to the importance of public education in our state.
- To pledge ourselves to increased activity on behalf of public education.

Call to Action: Why are religious/faith communities called to support public education? Two North Carolina leaders have provided us with these insights:

- “The North Carolina PTA recognizes the enormous benefits of faith communities joining hands with parents, teachers, businesses and schools to ensure children have the highest opportunities for academic success.” *Tannis Nelson, former president of the North Carolina PTA*
- “One of my favorite sermons is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ‘Drum Major’ sermon. . . He urged us to be drum majors for peace, for justice, to be servant leaders. Kids have the capacity to serve. They can develop the drum major spirit Dr. King called on us to demonstrate. One of the best ways I can think of for our schools and churches to be partners is by creating opportunities in which youngsters can act on the instinct to serve.” *Mike Ward, former State Superintendent of Schools, NC Department of Instruction, in a sermon during Public Education Sabbath Service 2002, St. Luke AME Zion, Wilmington*

Invitation: We invite every religious and faith community in North Carolina to join us in celebrating a Public Education Sabbath on their day of worship before the 2007-2008 school year begins or at another appropriate time during the school year. Please join us in:

- **Asking God’s blessings on our public schools.**
- **Praying for all children, parents, teachers, staff, administrators, and school boards.** (Worship Packet, pages 3–11.)
- **Reflecting on scripture and holy teachings about education.** (Worship Packet, page 3-11.)
- **Planning ways that your religious/faith community can support public education in your area.** (Doing and Learning Packet, pages 12-23)

Steps for Your Congregation to Take to Celebrate Public Education Sabbath, 2007

1. **Read through the material in the Packet.**
2. **Identify several persons in your congregation who are known for their commitment to supporting public education – teachers, parents, young people. share the Packet with them. Ask them to lead the congregation in celebrating Public Education Sabbath.**
3. **The Public Education Sabbath group chooses from the Packet specific ideas that will be useful to the congregation in fulfilling the purposes of Public Education Sabbath.**
4. **Plan for a service of worship on the Sabbath day closest to the opening of schools in your community. – or –
Discuss with other religious/faith communities in your area the possibility of holding an interdenominational or interfaith service.**
5. **Develop plans for taking one or more next steps in your congregation for fulfilling your responsibility toward public education.**

See Part II of the Packet for suggestions of ways you might try.

PART I: WORSHIP PACKET

PUBLIC EDUCATION SABBATH WORSHIP RESOURCES

In worship, God's people are formed and re-formed in faith, hope, and love. God's people are sent forth from worship to express God's love for the world in acts of service to neighbor.

We recognize that faith communities worship God in diverse forms and styles. Thus, these resources are meant to be suggestive, not determinative or exhaustive. We hope worship leaders and planners will adapt these materials as best suit their local contexts.

Also we acknowledge that the resources offered here are predominantly Christian. We all need to enlarge our store of worship materials that represent the diversity of religious traditions in North Carolina today. We hope that those suggested here will remind you of appropriate resources in your own tradition. We ask you to share your traditions with other religious and faith communities in your own area and to send them to us to use for future Public Education Sabbaths.

Scripture Resources:

(All Biblical quotations in this Packet are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.)

Psalm 19: 7 – 10

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Proverbs 4: 10 – 13

Hear, my child, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many.
I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness.
When you walk, your step will not be hampered;
and if you run, you will not stumble.
Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life.

Proverbs 22: 6

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.

II Timothy 1: 13 – 14; 3:14 – 17

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. . .

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you have learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God, and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Prayers***For the Spirit of Truth***

From the cowardice that dares not face new truth,
From the laziness that is content with half-truth,
From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth,
Good Lord, Deliver me. Amen

Prayer from Kenya

Prayer of Ignatius of Loyola

Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve; to give and not count the cost; to fight and not heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labor and not ask for any reward, except that knowing that we do your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Ignatius of Loyola, Spain, 16th cent.

Come, Divine Interpreter

Come, divine Interpreter, bring me eyes thy book to read, ears thy mystic words to hear, words which from thee proceed, words that endless bliss impart, kept in an obedient heart.

All who read, or hear, are blessed, if thy plain command we do; of thy kingdom here possessed, thee we shall in glory view when thou comest on earth to abide, reign triumphant at thy side.

Charles Wesley, 1762

For the Care of Children

Almighty God, you have blessed us with the joy and care of children: Give us calm strength and patient wisdom as we bring them up, that we may teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Book of Common Prayer

Congregational Prayer for Children

Loving Parent, we praise You for Your watchful eye of Mercy that protects Your children from the evil one. We thank You that You have blessed us to be loved by You, even when we fail to be obedient. Please, we pray, continue to keep Your children of all ages, in the Hollow of Your Holy Hand. This we ask in the name of Jesus, Our Redeemer. Amen

African Methodist Episcopal Zion Book of Worship

For Patience and Discernment

Dear Lord, in the midst of everyday joy and pain, struggles and opportunities, grant us the patience to learn discernment. Teach us to listen with the “third ear” to You and Your Word. Amen

African-American Devotional Bible, p. 649

For Guidance

Direct us, O God, in all our doings with your most gracious favor, and further us with your continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in you, we may glorify your holy Name, and finally, by your mercy, obtain everlasting life. Amen.

Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer

A Responsive Prayer for Public Education in North Carolina

Leader: We give you thanks, O God:

For the splendor of your creation and the amazing beauty of our world.

Response: *We thank you, Lord.*

L: For the wonder of life; for minds to think and hearts to love and hands to serve.

R: *We thank you, Lord.*

L: For our parents and grandparents, for teachers, for friends, for all who have helped us to grow and learn to love whatever is just and true and good.

R: *We thank you, Lord.*

L: For the gift of all children today in our family and in our community and the blessing and joy of caring for them and bringing them up.

R: *We thank you, Lord.*

L: Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings:

R: *Guide us and help us, O Lord.*

L: In our homes that we may have calm strength and patient wisdom to bring up our children,

R: *Guide us and help us, O Lord.*

L: In our communities of North Carolina as we “offer all children the quality and varieties of education and other services they need to participate fully in the creation of a just and peaceful society.” *

R: *Guide us and help us, O Lord.*

L: In giving our ideas, talents, and support to our public schools, to local and state school boards and legislative bodies which are responsible for educating 90% of the children of North Carolina, so that we may ensure quality education for all

R: *Guide us and help us, O Lord.*

L: In finding ways to assist teachers and staff and administrators of our public schools so that they may be renewed continually in their chosen vocation to help all your children to develop their gifts fully – “physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual” *

R: *Guide us and help us, O Lord.*

L: That our children and young people may be inspired and mentored and grow in their will and the vision to learn.

R: *Guide us and help us, O Lord.*

All: Loving God, we are beginning a new school year. We will learn more about your creation and what we can do to make it a good place for all. We will make new friends and be with old friends. We do not expect it to be easy. Still we know you will be with us every step of the way, to guide us, to give us understanding and strength, to pick us up if we fall, and help us to make new beginnings. We promise we will do all we can to find ways to serve you and all whom you have made and love. Amen.

* These quotations are taken from Final Report of the Joint Public Education Task Force of the American Missionary Association and the Commission for Racial Justice of the United Church of Christ, 2001.

Other available prayers:

A Litany for Education and Schools is provided by the National Council of Churches. A copy of this litany, suitable for printing for congregational use, is available, free, on the NCCC’s website: www.ncccusa.org/gifs/Litanyhandout.pdf

Hold My Hand: Prayers for Building a Movement to Leave No Child Behind, by Marion Wright Edelman, available through the online bookstore of Children’s Defense Fund website. <http://www.childrensdefense.org>. A print copy of the catalogue is available by calling 202-662-3652.

Hymns

“O Master, Let me Walk With Thee”

Teach me the wayward feet to stay, and guide them in the homeward way.
Teach me thy patience; still with thee in closer, dearer company,
in work that keeps faith sweet and strong, in trust that triumphs over
wrong.

“This Little Light of Mine”

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine.

“Bless Thou the Gifts”

Bless thou the gifts our hands have brought; bless thou the work our hearts have
planned. Ours is the faith, the will, the thought; the rest, O God, is in thy hand.

“Lift Every Voice and Sing

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

“His Eye Is on the Sparrow”

I sing because I'm happy; I sing because I'm free.
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.

“Blessed Assurance”

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long

“Gladness” (a traditional hymn for children)

I am so glad that our Father in heaven
Tells of his love in the Book he has given:
Wonderful things in the Bible I see:
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.

I am so glad that Jesus loves me,
Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me,
I am so glad that Jesus loves me,
Jesus loves even me.

“Be Thou My Vision”

Stanza 2 begins, “Be thou my wisdom and thou my true word.”

“Forth in Thy Name, O Lord”

Written by Charles Wesley, this hymn can serve to commission or to strengthen those
who serve in difficult fields of labor.

Some Ideas for Preparing to Preach on Public Education Sabbath

The following inquiries into these passages of scripture are not intended for use verbatim in your worship, but rather are given as examples of how Biblical passages might be used to introduce issues concerning Public Education. It is hoped that you will use these suggestions as a springboard for your own spiritual discernment as you prepare to share with your congregation.

From the Bible

- Deuteronomy contains a strong emphasis on teaching God’s law to God’s people as a way of continuing the covenant.
 - For example, Deut. 4:1 where God is the teacher. “So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you.”
- In Judaism, Moses is traditionally known as “The Teacher.”
 - One of Moses’ most important functions for the newly-freed Israelites was to teach them the statutes and ordinances given to them by God.
- In the Gospel of John, Jesus is addressed six times as “Rabbi” or “Teacher.”
 - Nicodemus calls Jesus “Rabbi” (3:2)
 - Mary Magdalene’s first word to Jesus by the empty tomb is “Rabbouni!” (20:16)
- One of the purposes of the Holy Spirit is to teach.
 - **John 16:13:** the Holy Spirit is described by Jesus as “the spirit of truth.”
 - **I Cor. 2:13:** “And we speak of these things in words not taught by human Wisdom but taught by the Spirit.”
- God’s people are to teach.
 - **Ezra and Nehemiah** record the discovery of the Book of the Law after the exiled Israelites return to Jerusalem. Ezra and the Levites begin to teach the Israelites.
 - **Nehemiah 8:1-18:** All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. . . He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday. . . and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.
- One of the most important functions of the church is to teach.

- **Matthew 28:20:** “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing. . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
- God provides Mentors – I Samuel 1 –3. The story of Eli and Samuel.
 - Although the human family is the basic instrument God has ordained for the nurture of children, the scripture also gives us examples of people mentoring children. Eli had a family of grown children when Samuel was placed in his care. Elkanah and Hannah appeared to have been good and loving parents, but God’s plan for Samuel included Eli’s involvement as well as theirs. It may have been tempting to Eli to say, “I raised my children, this boy is not my concern,” but Eli’s obedience to God’s leading helped Samuel “to grow both in stature and favor with the Lord and with the people” (I Samuel 2:26). Likewise God leads us to understand that the growth and development of all children, (not just “our” children), should be of concern to us.
- Justice in Your Own Backyard: Micah 6:8. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice.” . .
 - There are three requirements from God listed in this passage from Micah. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. Of the three, it is easy to see how we can love kindness and walk humbly in our ordinary lives, but it may seem like “doing justice” requires a scope of action denied to many who feel caught up in the everyday reality of living. But getting involved in the concerns of our local schools can give one a chance to “do justice” in a meaningful way in our own backyard.
- A Snapshot of Creation – The Eager Learner: Luke 2:29 – 46. The boy Jesus learning in the temple.
 - Luke paints a picture of the twelve-year-old Jesus listening to the teachers, “asking them questions,” and, no doubt, answering those that they proposed. It is a picture of a lively, curious, and learning young man whose ability to grasp ideas amazed his teachers. Maybe the artist’s work should be called *The Boy Jesus Learning in the Temple*.
 - This is the only story in the gospels that tells of Jesus’ childhood, or, indeed, illuminates any of the time between the infancy stories and Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan that was the beginning of his public ministry. The birth story and this childhood story remind us that Jesus started life like the rest of us – small, weak, vulnerable. It was part of God’s plan that Jesus experience babyhood, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood. That this story, above all other possible stories, is the one that Luke shares suggests that learning and growing are an integral part of God’s plan for humankind, even for Jesus who was called the Christ. The progress he made in this growth is summed up by the gospel writer in the passage, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and

man.” (Luke 2:52.) A picture of learning and growth – exactly what we pray is life’s outcome for every one of God’s children.

- Every child that comes into the world is created in the image of God. To develop the unique blend of gifts and abilities that comprise each child, it is a necessary part of God’s creation process that the child continue through childhood an eager learner, developing his or her mind, body, and spirit. That this is not happening for many children in our society should be of deep concern to the communities of faith.
- Over the past few years, religious communities across North Carolina have undertaken responsibilities toward public education in their towns and cities. *[Here you might want to look at material summarized in PART II, pages 12-23 of this Packet. Choose suggestions for responsibilities that might speak to your specific congregation. You will want to consider clarifying the current consensus of thought as to what kinds of support from religious communities are legitimate in the public schools.]*
- We have been given an opportunity to be workers in the on-going story of God’s creation. The parents, teachers, and educators amongst us are already immersed in this work. We can support them through the school year with our prayers and concern; we should also consider whether we are called into more active involvement. Paul reminds us that there are varieties of gifts, services, activities that can be used for the common good (I Corinthians 12:4 – 5). In our fellowship there may be those who can take up the ministry of intercessory prayer for our schools, others who are called to be a child’s mentor, and still others who are gifted to work for justice issues, so all children in our community can live into the fullness of life for which God created them. Seek your hearts and see where God’s leading takes you.

From the Holy Qu’ran

- Surah 016 (AN-NAHL): Ayah 078. It is He who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; And He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections; that ye may give thanks (to God).

A story from the Jewish tradition:

Each morning, God looks down upon the world and sees so many people being unkind to one another, and doing evil contrary to God’s word. So God sends forth an angel to destroy the world and all its wickedness. But then God looks down again and sees the schoolchildren studying with their teachers and learning from their parents, and God moves from the Throne of Justice to the Seat of Mercy, and recalls the angel of destruction for the sake of the schoolchildren. So the world endures because of schoolchildren. No one is more precious or more worthy of our attention.

Sermon by Molly Shivers:

Counter Culture Jesus

Mark 10: 2 – 16

Orange United Methodist Church, October 8, 2000

I like to drink Counter Culture coffee. And if you are a regular patron of gourmet coffee shops, like I am, you might know about Counter Culture Coffee. The Counter Culture Coffee sold at these coffee bars is environmentally responsible. Counter Culture sells only coffee that is shade grown in order to combat the rapid deforestation of the mountainsides in South America where the economy depends on coffee. In order to grow more coffee beans and make more money, coffee growers are clearing large areas of trees in fragile mountainside eco-systems. In contrast, Counter Culture Coffee buys and sells coffee beans grown only in areas where trees are retained and protected.

So I like to drink Counter Culture Coffee because the company is environmentally responsible. I also like to drink Counter Culture Coffee because it tastes good. This coffee is smooth and rich and dark, just the way coffee should be.

I like Counter Culture Coffee. But how do I feel about a Counter Culture Jesus? Today's passage from the Gospel of Mark contains teachings from Jesus that are supremely countercultural. Jesus teaches us about a person's worth. And the message he sends about a person's worth flies in the face of his hearers' culture both then and now.

In today's passage, Jesus has traveled to the region of Judea. Crowds are following him wherever he goes. He and the assembled crowd are within easy walking distance of Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Temple. Their proximity to Jerusalem makes the Pharisees nervous. They meet him with a challenge: Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Now the Pharisees already know the answer to the question. They are rigorous and faithful scholars of the Law. They know and observe every minute detail of the Law of Moses and its interpretation. So the Pharisees are trying to trick Jesus, trying to incite him to say something contrary to the Jewish law, in which event they can charge him with blasphemy, or to say something that will get him in hot water with Herod, who had just married his brother's wife. Remember John the Baptist has just lost his head for speaking out against Herod's marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife.

The stakes are high, cultural forces swirling, as Jesus answers the Pharisees' question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" As he so often does, Jesus cleverly turns the question back on the questioners, "What did Moses command you?" The Pharisees answer, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and divorce her."

The Pharisees are referring to a provision in Deuteronomy 24: 1 – 4 where divorce is left up to the husband's discretion. The only stipulated grounds for divorce are if the wife "does not please" the husband or if there is "something objectionable" about her. The Mosaic Law protected a woman from divorce in certain narrow instances where she was a virgin improperly defiled by a man. In that case, the man had to marry her and could not divorce her.

In almost any other circumstance, however, the Law of Moses allowed for divorce. Jewish men could—and did—divorce women for a variety of reasons. Notice that the law did not allow for a woman to divorce a man.

Jesus knows what is happening under the Jewish law. He knows the inequities and abuses of divorce as it was currently being practiced. Jesus blasts the Pharisees, who

is many ways are symbols of contemporary Jewish religious and legal culture, for their lack of love, justice, and compassion. “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses wrote this commandment for you.”

Jesus then jumps over Deuteronomy back to first part of Torah: the Book of Genesis. He refers to God’s original creative intention for men and women stated in Genesis 1:27, “From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female’.” Male and female, both made in the image of God. The created and creative equality of man and woman is God’s status quo and intention for humanity.

Within the context of God’s radical act of creation, Jesus adds the gloss of Genesis 2:24, “For this reason, a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife and become one flesh.” As if the Pharisees did not get the point, Jesus repeats, “So they are no longer two but one flesh.”

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, and to us, that women are not property to be discarded. Jesus is saying to men, your wife is a part of you.

And Jesus is saying the same thing to women; your husband is a part of you. In the Greco-Roman world, women were also divorcing men. So Jesus is saying to men and women that marriage is a covenant where two become one. And when that marriage covenant is broken or dissolved, it is like a limb being wrenched off your own body. Each partner in marriage is just that extremely important and valuable.

Divorce is like a tearing, a wrenching in the fabric of a person’s life. I think it is no accident that we call the first stages of divorce “separation.” By picturing divorce as a tearing, a separating of two that had become one, Jesus challenges any kind of casual cultural attitude towards divorce, then and now. A failed marriage—whatever the reason—represents a human tragedy for all persons involved. The betrayal, the loss, the anger, and the sadness cut deep.

One of the most devastating consequences of divorce, both then and now, is that the divorced woman or man can feel like a non-person. In Jesus’ time, a divorced woman was left without the protection and legitimization of a husband. With certificate of divorce in hand, the woman had to return to her father’s house to await the next best thing. Now, questions of self-worth and belonging still press the human heart. “Who am I now?” echoes the voice of the soul. Am I still a person of worth?

As if he knew that we need assurance of our worth to him and to God, Jesus delivers the clincher in the next episode in today’s passage. The setting shifts to a house. Women, most likely, are trying to bring children to Jesus and the disciples angrily are trying to stop this inappropriate interference. Women and children should not be allowed to disturb the teacher and his students. Women and children are not worthy of our Rabbi’s time and attention!

Before we really start to criticize the disciples, we need to remember that they are just behaving according to contemporary social mores. The ancients did not share the romanticized visions of childhood innocence, sanctity, and purity that we have inherited from the nineteenth century. In Jesus’ time, children were basically chattel, property. They were useful really only for their work that helped the family to survive. And with a roughly 50% infant mortality rate, what was the use of getting attached?

Thus, the women’s action in bringing the children to Jesus was totally out of bounds. The disciples were observing social custom in turning them away. And again,

Jesus issues a countercultural challenge by saying indignantly, “Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them.”

Jesus further defies custom by picking up each child, laying his hands on each child, and saying a blessing. Now you know that Jesus’ acts of touching, hugging, and blessing took time. We remember that, at this point in Mark’s story, huge crowds of people followed Jesus wherever he went. And remember that blessings in the ancient world carried the force of prophecy and fulfillment. Blessings were important! I can just imagine the disciples’ astonishment, discomfort, and impatience as their Teacher lavished his time on chattel, on non-persons.

The children could not sit and debate the finer points of the Law with Jesus. The children could not put money into the disciples’ coffer. The children could not take up weapons and fight to liberate the Jewish people. They had no power, status, or influence. All the children had to give to Jesus was their love and their radical dependence on his love.

I think this re-orienting to love is the heart of what Jesus is trying to tell us when he says, “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” The children were brought to Jesus by those who believed in Jesus as the source of hope and healing. Jesus defied custom and convention and—by the power of his voice—cleared a path through the crowd for each child to come to him. Each little child went to Jesus and trustingly allowed him or herself to be gathered into his waiting arms, to be loved, touched, and blessed.

The Hand in Hand Project conveys Jesus’ countercultural message of love into public schools. Hand in Hand is a joint ministry of the North Carolina and Western North Carolina Conferences of the United Methodist Church, the Duke Endowment, and Communities in Schools. Through Hand in Hand, local faith communities are linked to local schools in order to reach at-risk children and youth. Congregation members volunteer as mentors, tutors, and reading buddies for the children, and as prayer partners for the staff. Some faith communities have been led to initiate or support after-school programs. Most faith communities serve the school staff a meal a few times a year to show their support. In the North Carolina Conference, 123 churches are participating in the Hand in Hand Project, obeying Jesus’ command to love the children.

Jesus’ countercultural challenge remains as potent for us today as it was for the Pharisees and the disciples. In a culture where the pornography industry is larger than the entire commercial recording and movie industries, where about 1 out of 5 or 6 boys is sexually assaulted by the age of 18, where 1/3 of homicides of women are committed by a husband or intimate partner (compared to 4% of homicides of men), we need to hear of God in Christ’s love for each one of us: man, woman, and child. The power of God’s love denies any message that would make anyone—man, woman, or child—into a non-person.

In our present age, Jesus’ countercultural challenge remains as strong, honest, and robust as coffee. Together we can feed on the strength of Jesus’ love and inhale the aroma of his grace. Together let us sing: “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so . . .”

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, we remember you came to us as a baby, and lived among us as a child. You needed the care and attention of your family and community to grow and to learn according to God's plan. You understand what this is like.

Today we pray for the children who have the task of growing and learning in our day. They are both blessed with opportunities and challenged by obstacles. We pray that you open our eyes. In what ways are you calling your people to help? How can we work toward assuring that all children get the chance to "increase in wisdom and stature" and to grow into the persons you would have them be? Guide us individually and as a congregation. In your leading, we place our hope.

Amen.

Other Ways to Explore the Relationship Between Faith Communities and Public Education During Worship

Invite:

- Several families in the congregation, both children and parents, to share their reflections on the importance of public education in their lives and suggest ways we all can support our public schools;
- Several teachers to tell about the way their calling to be teachers is fulfilled in their teaching and ways in which they need the support of the community;
- Members of the school board, the superintendent, or other administrators to share their vision of how religious and faith communities and schools might work together for the sake of the children.

PART II: DOING AND LEARNING PACKET: RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES UNDERTAKE THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD PUBLIC EDUCATION

In 1998 the North Carolina Council of Churches Task Force on Religion and Public Education sent a questionnaire to church leaders in all its member bodies asking what support for public education was currently being given in churches. At the time only a third of the respondents reported any ways this support was being given. However, there was one respondent who gave encouragement to the Task Force's work and said, "Give us some ideas!" Another wrote, "I would appreciate a packet of suggestions of ways we could take the initiative as a church. Right now the efforts are made by individual church members who because of their faith serve as teachers and administrators, or who are parents." This packet responds to that need, offering suggestions of actions your congregation might take and resources that may be helpful.

Also you will want to read **Congregations and the Public Schools**, A Statement of the Committee on Public Education of the North Carolina Council of Churches. You will find it on the Council's web site,

http://www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/issues/public_education/RecommendationsRegarding%20RoleOfReligionInPublic%20Education.htm

Partnerships Between Schools and Religious Communities

The number of religious communities exceeds the number of public schools in many of our neighborhoods. Every school in our nation should have the benefit of multiple congregational partners. What would it look like for your faith community to partner with a school?

- **Tutoring:**
 - What we have learned about some religious community/school partnership projects in North Carolina:
 - "Members serve as tutors for elementary school children through the Blue Ridge Reading Team, teach classes for a GED program, serve as tutors and mentors to high school students."
 - "Our Women's Missions Group goes out to a rural school once a month to tutor."
 - "Members serve as 'community partners'; we work with one of the counselors who assigns students who have need of special time with a caring adults. We also work with the child's teacher."
 - **Note:** Two important guidelines for tutoring:

- Tutoring is not “baby sitting.” Tutoring needs to include careful instruction as well as enrichment.
 - Tutoring programs sponsored by religious/faith communities need to be for all children in the neighborhood, not just for that community’s members.
- **Other types of partnership**
 - New religious communities are springing up in many of our cities. Many of them undertake some kind of partnership with a near-by school.
 - One partnership supports an after-school tutorial program and a weekly mentoring program. Also the church gives financial support and school supplies and arranges a career day.
 - Another church is sponsoring a minority child in the local public school system’s “support a scholar” program.
 - A Jewish synagogue and a Muslim mosque became partners to enter into partnership with a local school.
 - **African-American Churches Supporting Closing the Achievement Gap in Durham.** This is a consortium of local churches working with local schools and the nonprofit, Durham Public Education Network, sharing their resources and their access to resources from outside partnerships to “identify student needs on a kid-by-kid basis to help the children get where they need to be.” Also the consortium focuses on helping parents to support their children’s education. The consortium has created a parents’ guide to resources available in local African-American churches. For more information call the Durham Public Education Network, 919-683-6503.
- **Resources for Partnering with Public Schools**
 - Wake County Public School System has produced a brochure addressed to “*Churches, Synagogues, and Places of Worship...Find out how you can make a difference between a child’s passing or failing.*” It contains many ideas of how your congregation can be involved.
 - For further information contact: Toni Cooper, Family Involvement and Outreach Services, Wake County Public School System, P. O. Box 28041, Raleigh, NC 27611-8041. Telephone: 919-858-3239.
 - The *Hand in Hand* Project is a collaborative effort of the Duke Endowment, United Methodist Conference of North Carolina and Western North Carolina, the Methodist Homes for Children, Communities in Schools of North Carolina, and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. This Project’s goal is to strengthen community support for education by bringing communities of faith and their resources to the educators, students and families in local schools.
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- Training includes:
 - How the partnerships may look in your community/in your school
 - How to engage the community of faith
 - Steps to initiate the project
 - Maintaining the partnership/Expanding the partnership
 - How to recruit and retain volunteers
 - Religion and education
 - Contacts:
 - Western North Carolina: Sandra Honeycutt, 1-800-849-4433, Ext. 302.
 - Eastern North Carolina: Susan Pennock, 1-800-849-4433, Ext. 301
- **Resources on the separation of church and state and partnerships between public schools and religious communities.**
 - Some faith communities will be concerned about where the line is between appropriate involvement in the public schools and an inappropriate violation of the First Amendment guarantee of a separation between church and state. The following are resources that **inform the debate**. *The views expressed in these materials are not necessarily those of the NC Council of Churches, The Public Education Committee, or any of its members.*
 - Public Schools and Religious Communities: A First Amendment Guide. Published jointly by the American Jewish Congress, the Christian Legal Society, and the First Amendment Center.
 - Available on the AJCongress website: www.ajcongress.org
 - Also: American Jewish Congress, 15 East 84th St., New York, NY 10028, 212-879-4500.
 - *A Teacher's Guide to Religion in the Public Schools*. First Amendment Center, 1207 18th Ave., South, Nashville, TN 37212. (615)727-1600. www.freedomforum.org, First Amendment Publications. Request Publication No. 99-F02 A.
 - Two Pieces on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools:
 - 1) Letter from the Secretary of Education, February 7, 2003 http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/letter_2003_0207.html
 - 2) Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html
 - *How Faith Communities Support Children's Learning in Public Schools*. Prepared by the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education and distributed by the U.S. Department of Education. Available on the Department's website:

www.ed.gov/inits/religionandschools/faith-support.html

Prayer for all God's Children

“What is the responsibility of God's people in the world of public education?”

You can pray for all God's children. Pray for the little ones as they struggle to survive and achieve. Pray that they escape the dangers and distractions that can, and do, befall them. Pray that they have the strength to resist the forces of discouragement and self-doubt that sap their imagination and will to succeed. And pray for us older of God's children across the nation in our roles as Governor, Mayor, legislative leader and Superintendent, as teachers and preachers, as corporate leaders and ordinary citizens. Pray that we exercise vision, judgment, compassion and courage as we take actions, daily, that literally determine life and death for the little ones.”

From an address by David W. Hornbeck, former Superintendent of Schools in Philadelphia before the General Assembly, National Council of Churches, Chicago, Illinois. November 11, 1998

- At the beginning of each school year one superintendent writes to local clergy asking congregations to pray for all the school system's students and employees. He sends a flier giving suggestions for volunteering in schools and a prayer to go into a bulletin.
- Commitment to pray for the partnership school, the staff, the children and their families is a major part of the *Hand in Hand* project described under **Partnerships**.
- One congregation includes its local and county schools as part of its intercessory prayer list at every service of worship.

Strengthening Children, Parents, Teachers

Many religious communities believe that every person is created in God's image. Each child is born with unique gifts of mind, body, and spirit. “It takes families, the schools, and the community to teach children.” To waste even one of God's unique creations is to turn against what we believe most deeply.

What can we do as people of God who believe God wants every person to fulfill the potential of God's creation?

Strengthening children

- Tutoring, mentoring, counseling are all important in strengthening children's learning and self-esteem being done now by religious communities in schools in their neighborhoods. (See **Partnerships**, above.)

- A large city parish has a literacy-based program of support for a local school. For 15 to 20 years a grant called Seeds of Hope has provided books for 4-year-olds and makes it possible for books to go home with students every night.
- One religious community adds a week's enrichment program as a second week of its Vacation Bible School to which all the neighborhood children are invited.
- Search Institute has identified 40 critical factors for young people's growth and development. The assets show important roles that families, schools, congregations and others in communities play in shaping young people's lives. The first 20 focus on positive experiences that young people receive from the people and institutions in their lives. The four categories of external assets are: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time. The four categories of the 20 internal assets that need to be nurtured are: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity. For further information see www.search-institute.org/assets

Strengthening parents

- Because so many members of religious communities are parents of school children, these communities are important places to encourage parents to be involved in the education of their children and to encourage their relatives, neighbors, and friends to take their part in supporting the schools.
- Religious/faith communities can help public officials restore parental confidence in the public education system. Plan special guest preachers who focus on education. Hold seminars for parents to help them with ways to help their children develop study habits. Sponsor Community Education Days bringing in personnel from the schools to meet with the congregation.
- Probably one of the most intimidating times for a parent is to be summoned to the school for Individual Educational Planning. The parent can feel overwhelmed by school professionals and confused by education laws and regulations. Religious communities can create a Parents Companion group which can provide a person to accompany the parent. These Companions need to be informed about school regulations and trained as mediators so that the teacher and the parent can come together to work for what is best for the child.

Strengthening teachers

- A congregation in partnership with a school arranges to take responsibility for all the children of one class or a group of classes several days a year so that all the teachers can take part in continuing education programs. The congregational committee develops a plan with the teachers for the day to be an enrichment time.
- Teacher Appreciation days. One faith community has a special Sunday when every secondary school teacher in their county is invited. Both superintendents and deputy superintendents have attended and participated as liturgists and speakers.
- A school-partner congregation provides refreshments for the teachers' room in "their" school.
- Offer opportunities for retreat and renewal. Make a place for teachers to voice their anger and frustration, to experience covenant and forgiveness.

Ways to encourage college/university students to pursue a career in public education

- Faith communities and campus ministries can help by:
 - Developing ways for people to engage vocational discernment. Talk in terms of “calling” rather than “career.”
 - Identifying teachers within faith communities and devising a pilot mentor program for them with those considering a vocation in teaching.
 - Offering support specifically to teachers in their first year.

Ensuring Equity of Resources

Increasingly we recognize that to work toward providing quality education for every child in our state requires the provision of resources that will support that education – classrooms, well-trained teachers and counselors, supplies, materials, media, technology. We all have heard of teachers themselves having to buy basic supplies, such as crayons, books, and media.

A North Carolina judge has ruled that “school systems and the State must first put in place programs that provide all children with the equal opportunity to obtain a sound basic education and that if the funding that is appropriated from whatever source is being used for any other educational purpose other than to meet the constitutional mandate, then those funds must be reallocated to satisfy the constitution.” (*Leandro vs. North Carolina*). (See <http://www.ncjustice.org/cms/index.php?pid=78> for more news on the *Leandro* case.)

How can people of faith work toward making sure the schools in their district have fair and sufficient resources for educating all their children?

- A member of a Piedmont city school board would like religious communities to come together to help place much needed well-trained counselors in schools.
- Religious communities offer space in their buildings for after-school classes, workshop sites for Teacher Work Days, County Association of Guidance Counselors, and special programs such as a Cued Speech Program and English as a Second Language for grammar school students.
- Religious communities do an audit of resources available to children and teachers in their partner school and supply the basic resources that are needed.

Congregational Dialogue on Our Responsibility Toward Public Education

“The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America encourages its congregations to be communities of moral deliberation. Congregations enjoy unique opportunities to deliberate together on the relationship of their faith and the issues of daily life, and people with diverse callings and perspectives find their unity in a common faith.”

How can we deliberate together about our congregation’s responsibility toward public education in our town or city?

- Some examples of congregational dialogues:
 - A number of programs have been sponsored by a particular Sunday School as well as by our summer Sunday School class. One example was a forum on the character education curriculum of Wake County.
 - We have held forums to meet school board candidates and to discuss school issues.
 - Our regular Adult Forum on Sunday mornings has discussed many issues related to the public schools with participation from school board members and teachers.

- Possible models for Congregational Dialogue
 - Model One:
 - 1. Opening prayer for parents and children and teachers and administrators and our congregation and our community.
 - 2. Make a list (on blackboard or newsprint) of all the ways in which members of our congregation, as a whole and as individuals, are supporting public education in our community now.
 - 3. Does our congregation’s support for public education make a difference in the life of our congregation? What are some of the differences it might make?
 - 4. List some possible next steps for our congregation to take in supporting public education in our community now.

 - Model Two:
 - 1. Opening prayer for all children in our community and our state.
 - 2. Have written on a large sheet of paper these words: “The goal of public education in North Carolina is to provide a quality education for every child.”
 - 3. How would we define “quality education”?
 - a. Make as full a list as possible of what “quality education” might mean.

- b. What guidance do we have from our scriptures of the meaning of “quality education”?
 - c. Dr. Ruth Simmons, a prominent educator, has said, “Education does not exist to provide everyone with a job. Education is here to nourish your soul. Education transforms your life.” Do we agree or disagree?
 - d. What stories can we tell of life with/without “quality education”?
 - 4. What particular contributions do religious institutions have to make to achieving quality education for every child in our community/in our state?
 - 5. Identify 2 –3 contributions our congregation could make to achieving quality education for every child in our community.
- Here are some resources available to help members of our religious communities discuss public education and make decisions about our responsibility toward helping all children receive a good education.
 - The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has produced “Educational Choice: A Discussion Guide.” The section on public schools is designed “to encourage and assist your group to discuss public schools and the education they offer today.”
 - The web site for the public education section: www.elca.org/socialstatements/education/choice/public.html
 - The Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, Task Force on the Church and Education published *Presbyterian Churches Supporting Public Education, A Workbook for Improving Quality and Equality in our Public Schools, June 1996.*
 - For a copy of the Workbook (cost \$4.50 each) and for information contact: Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, Task Force on the Church and Education, 700 S. Boston, Suite 200, Tulsa, OK 74119. Phone: 800-533-1324.

Congregational Dialogue on the Role of Religion in Public Schools

There continues to be conflict regarding the place of religion in public schools. What is often not appreciated, however, is the extent to which consensus has been reached, at least on the national level, regarding many of the issues over which battles have been fought in our culture wars. This “New Consensus” is reflected in a growing number of documents that have been endorsed by a wide range of religious, educational, and civil liberties organizations.

How can our congregation promote civic peace and understanding by discussing the role of religion in public education?

- One cluster of issues relates to religious liberty and the rights of student and teachers to express their religious convictions in public schools (questions involving school prayer, posting the Ten Commandments, religious clubs, religious speech, etc.). An excellent source book on these issues is: *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education*, edited by Charles C. Haynes, Published by the Freedom Forum’s First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University.
 - It can be ordered or downloaded from the Forum’s web-site: www.freedomforum.org/first/ (Click on “First Amendment Publications”). The Freedom Forum’s web-site is also an excellent source of information about recent developments regarding religion and public education.

- A second cluster of issues relates to the role of religion in the curriculum. The New Consensus documents mentioned above affirm that it is both educationally and constitutionally appropriate to teach about religion in public schools when done in a neutral or non-proselytizing way. (The North Carolina Standard Course of Study requires some study of religion, and many North Carolina high schools now offer Bible or world religions courses.) We hope congregations will discuss the proper role of religion in the curriculum.
 - These resources will be helpful:
 - *Finding Common Ground*. James Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in A Multicultural America* (1999, paperback).
 - A good history of religion and public education in America, told with considerable multicultural sensitivity.
 - Martin Marty, *Education, Religion and the Common Good* (2000)
 - Warren A. Nord and Charles C. Haynes, *Taking Religion Seriously Across the Curriculum* (1998, paperback).

- This book builds on the New Consensus, develops civic, constitutional, and educational frameworks for dealing with religion, and explores how some study of religion might be incorporated into various domains of the curriculum.
- “The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide” develops national guidelines for Bible courses in public schools (endorsed by a variety of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim organizations as well as by the major educational organizations and People for the American Way).
 - Available on First Amendment Center web site: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/>

Advocacy of Justice for All

For religious persons and communities, the principle of justice for all is a basic guide for conduct. It has also been an important element in building our Constitution and Bill of Rights. However, too often we forget these principles when we are struggling with complex questions of public policy.

The basis of this principle is the great commandment of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and might, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (See Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:37-40)

How does this commandment guide us in working on issues of public education that face us in North Carolina now?

There are two issues in public education in North Carolina in this twenty-first century that need careful attention and advocacy from the people of faith.

Supporting all our schools in this new age of No Child Left Behind

2003 marked a major turn-around year for public education in the USA as the federal education program, No Child Left Behind, came into operation. In North Carolina by 2004-2005 all schools had to have 76.6% of all children in Grades 3 to 8 testing at grade level in math and reading. Schools which have not reached this level will be considered “failing” and will be sanctioned. Future goals are 84.4% in 2007-08, 92.2% in 2010, and 100% in 2013-14.

Many of North Carolina schools will “fail” due to the manner in which students are grouped to assess results. It is a very important time for faith communities to be communities of understanding and support to children, parents, teachers, and administrators.

Right now we need to learn and try to understand all we can about No Child Left Behind. Here are places to obtain information:

- www.ncpublicschools.org/nclb North Carolina program
- www.nclb.gov Federal program
- www.publiceducation.org Interpretation of NCLB by Public Education Network
- www.ncforum.org Interpretation of NCLB by North Carolina Public Education Forum
- The Swann Fellowship, 1510 E. 7th St., Charlotte, NC 28204, published a helpful report on No Child Left Behind in its May 1, 2003, edition of *Educate!*, pp. 1, 3-7. *Educate!* Continues to provide updates for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools specifically.

The debate about vouchers to religious and non-religious schools

Much of this debate has centered around the First Amendment of our Constitution: *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*

In 2002 the United States Supreme Court upheld the Cleveland, Ohio, public school System's use of state-funded educational vouchers to pay for education at religious schools. "The Court said that vouchers for religious schools can sometimes be LEGAL but the Court cannot tell us whether such vouchers are MORAL." People of faith must consider vouchers according to our understanding of the religious liberty that allows us to worship our God according to our conscience.

"People of faith may also want to consider whether public funds should be used to support vouchers to non-religious private schools." What is the best method to provide quality education for all God's children?

The debate in North Carolina: As North Carolina engages in major reforms to provide quality education to all our children, the debate about vouchers is surely close at hand. People of faith come down on both sides of the voucher issue. So we can be responsible to our children and our neighbors of all faiths, our faith communities must educate themselves about all sides of the debate."

Discussion about vouchers involves questions about education policy and about religious liberty. Here are some questions to consider in this discussion:

Educational Policy:

- What are the educational needs of the larger community?
- Are there children that are not receiving a quality education?
- Is free public education a right worth protecting?
- How is God calling our faith community to respond to these educational needs?

Religious Liberty:

- Is our faith community comfortable with our tax money supporting the teachings of local religious schools?

- How would federal regulations against discrimination in hiring and accepting students affect the religious schools that we support?

For more information:

- For information opposing vouchers to religious schools, see Issues section of the Baptist Joint Committee web page, www.bjcpa.org.
- For information supporting vouchers, including those at religious schools, see the Institute for Justice web page, www.ij.org/index.shtml. Search the web page for “vouchers.”
- Also see a statement concerning Educational Vouchers from The Committee on Public Education of the North Carolina Council of Churches on the Council’s web site: www.nccouncilofchurches.org/resources/downloads/vouchers_brochure.pdf

Other issues in public education about which religious communities need to become advocates:

- Closing the achievement gap between students in our schools.
- Putting an end to re-segregation of public education in North Carolina.
- Educating voters about local funding ballot issues.
- Structuring class size to the best advantage of all children, paying particular attention to reducing class size in the elementary grades.
- Honoring teachers as role models for young people.
- Redefining some of the assumptions about what is success in your community.

For information about these issues contact:

- Common Sense Foundation, P. O. Box 10808, Raleigh, N. C. 27605. 919-821-9270. www.common-sense.org. e-mail: info@common-sense.org
- Public Education Network, 601 13th Street NW, Suite 900 North, Washington, DC 20005. 202-628-7460. www.publiceducation.org