

## WRITE ON OUR HEARTS PRAYER RETREAT

Prepared by Lent 2006 Worship Resource Team (Central Plains Conference, Mennonite Church USA), and coordinated with Lent worship resource materials in *Leader*, Winter 2005/06. To order, go to [www.leaderonline.org](http://www.leaderonline.org).

Though Jeremiah 31:33 is the theme verse for the Lent 2006 worship materials, it is not used explicitly until the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday. The theme lingers in the background for several Sundays, always there, but not coming into focus until almost the end of Lent. Therefore, it seems that a retreat earlier in Lent might be a good way to begin addressing the theme more deeply, going inward to explore the condition of our hearts, to learn what God may have already inscribed on our hearts, and to learn what God is continuing to write on our hearts.

This retreat model is adaptable to many different settings, time frames, or types of groups. Retreat leaders are invited to use whatever seems to work in their setting, adjusting times and activities for the specific group they will be leading. The suggested schedule is for a seven hour retreat, with plenty of time for personal reflection, prayer, and journaling. These times may be shortened or lengthened, depending on the group's experience with quiet retreats and the size of the group. The day is divided into two sections that can stand alone or be used together, accommodating groups that cannot meet for a full day.

### **Suggested Schedule:**

8:30 – 9:00am	Arrival, registration, personal quiet
9:00 – 9:30am	Gathering, introductions, getting settled
9:30 – 10:00 am	Worship – “Harden Not Your Hearts”
10:00 – 11:00am	Personal Reflection/ Pray With Clay
11:00 – 11:30am	Journaling/prayer/reflection
11:30 – Noon	Gathering for shared reflections/Benediction/meal prayer
Noon – 1:00pm	Lunch
1:00 – 1:30pm	Worship – “Write on Our Hearts”
1:30 – 2:30pm	Personal Reflection/Imaging Prayer
2:30 – 3:00pm	Journaling/prayer/reflection
3:00 – 3:30pm	Gathering for shared reflections/closing prayer/benediction

### **Visuals**

For a central focus, a worship table can be prepared with a purple or red cloth. Place on it a Bleeding Heart plant, soft balls of clay (if you choose to do the “Pray with clay” exercise), heart shaped clay pieces – both hardened and soft, a stylus or quill for writing on the clay.

### **Arrival/Registration**

When participants arrive, a continental breakfast might be made available, especially if some have driven a long distance. This is the time for registration and payment of any fees to cover the costs of the retreat. If there will be a large group, or if some participants may not be acquainted, nametags are recommended. The room where the group will gather for worship and shared reflections can be reserved for quiet as participants wait for the group to gather.

### **Gathering/Introductions**

If the room accommodates this, invite the group to sit in a circle. Before getting started, be sure everyone knows where the restrooms are and where to get snacks/beverages during the day. Give permission to use the day in whatever way God leads them (walking, sleeping, journaling, etc.), while respecting the quiet of other participants. Ask the participants to introduce themselves and express one hope or desire for the

day. Hand out a schedule for the day and give a brief explanation of what will be happening in each session.

## **Worship I – “Harden Not Your Hearts”**

Hebrews 3: 7-14

Introduction of theme – see introductory materials from *Leader*

Prayer – Opening prayer and blessing on the day

Song – Theme song - HWB #161 – “*We give thanks unto you*” Vs. 1-3

Scripture – Heb. 3:7-14

Reflections on the theme

Song – HWB #474 – “*I hunger and I thirst*”

Prayer for God to prepare our hearts

Benediction & dismiss to personal reflection time or move into Pray with Clay

## **Personal Reflection/Pray with Clay**

The retreat leader may decide to provide one or both of these methods for focusing on the condition of the heart.

### **Personal Reflection Questions**

Read through the following questions and focus on those that stand out for you.

- Re-read Heb. 3:7-14. What caused the hearts of the Israelites to be hardened?
- The story referred to in this passage is found in Exodus 17: 1-7 and continues into Numbers 14: 20-23. Read these passages and imagine what the Israelites were experiencing. Why were they complaining? Who and what were they challenging? How were their hearts hardened? What were the results of their hardened hearts?
- What “complaints” do you have against God? Are you open to see God at work in your life, even when everything seems to be going wrong? What is at work in your life that attempts to harden your heart?
- What changes in attitude or obedience might you need to make in order for your heart to be softened enough for God to write on it? If your heart is softened like soft clay, how might you experience God’s writing? Might the writing cause some pain?
- Journal about a time you have experienced a “hard heart” either in yourself or in someone else. How did it feel? How did it affect your relationship?

### **Pray with Clay**

If you choose to use this centering method, it would be helpful to read the book *Reflections in Clay* by Sister Marianne McGriffin S.P. This book explains praying with clay and gives detailed instructions on how to prepare for and lead such an experience. (It is available online at [www.authorhouse.com](http://www.authorhouse.com) for a cost of \$11.95 plus \$5.95 shipping and handling.)

After you hand out the clay, suggest that the participants ask God to show them the condition of their hearts as they work with the clay. How soft and pliable is your heart? What is God saying to you through the clay? Allow God to speak to you through the clay. What is happening to the clay? What is being called out from within the clay and within you?

Give enough time to meet the needs of the participants before moving in to a time of sharing about the pieces they have made. Participants should be given the option to pass if they are not comfortable sharing.

## **Sharing Reflections**

Gather together in the group for sharing of reflections. This should be voluntary sharing, as participants feel led. Read together Ps. 51: 10-17. Close with a brief prayer of thanks for God’s mercy and grace, for preparing our hearts, for insights gained and for the meal.

## **Worship II – “Write it on our hearts”**

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Prayer – inviting God to write on our hearts

Song – Theme song - HWB #161 – “We give thanks unto you” - Alternate verses

Scripture – Jeremiah 31:31-34

Reflections on the theme

Song – HWB #483 – “O God, who gives us life”

Benediction and dismissal to personal reflection or move to Imaging prayer

## **Personal Reflection/Imaging Prayer**

### **Personal Reflection Questions:**

Read one or more of the following Bible stories slowly and contemplatively. Reread the story several times. What stands out for you as you read this story? What is God’s promise to the people in the story? How is God speaking to you – “writing on your heart” – in this passage? What is the purpose of God’s writing on our hearts?

- Genesis 9: 8 – 17 - The story of God’s covenant rainbow with Noah
- Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 – The story of God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah
- Exodus 20: 1-17 – The gift of law to the people of Israel
- Numbers 21:4-9 – Sin and salvation in the wilderness – the bronze serpent
- Jeremiah 31: 31-34 – God’s promise to write on our hearts

How has God been at work in your life in the past or present? What is already written on your heart? What is God writing on your heart through your scripture reading and your life experiences?

### **Imaging Prayer**

*This can be done as a group, with the leader reading the prayer image slowly, pausing between sentences, so that participants can close their eyes and focus within. It may also be used as an individual exercise. Before beginning, encourage participants to find a comfortable position to sit.*

Imagine that you are on a long journey. You are walking on a path. Is the path rocky or smooth, level or steep? Is your path through luxuriant green trees and foliage or through a barren desert? Suddenly, you are aware of someone walking behind you. He catches up with you and it becomes clear to you that he is not going to hurt you. He walks beside you silently. When you stumble, he reaches out a hand to help. When you must climb a steep embankment, he pulls you up. Finally, you ask him who he is. “I am Jesus,” he says. You come to a peaceful spot where there is a good resting place. Jesus says, “Come and rest with me for a while.” You sit down. What is this place like for you? What does it look like, smell like, feel like? How do you feel as you sit in Jesus’ presence? What would you like to say? What would you like to ask him? Jesus asks, “What is your heart’s desire?” You answer ... (You may want to write your conversation in a journal or simply stay in your imagination.) Carry on your conversation with Jesus until you are ready to resume your journey. As you start out again on your journey, remember that Jesus is with you, beside you, always.

Spend a few minutes reflecting on your experience before returning to the group.

## **Gathering for Shared reflections**

Return to the group setting and invite sharing of reflections on this session and on the day as a whole.

Close the sharing time with a song and a prayer of thanksgiving for the day. Ask God to go with each one as they continue their journey with God through the Lenten season.