

Voices of Our Sisters

Leader's Guide

by

Kathy Manis Findley

Pen and Ink Interpretations by Marvin A. Black

This *Leader's Guide* provides suggestions for guiding a group study of *Voices of Our Sisters* by Kathy Manis Findley. The book is available from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., by calling **1-800-568-1248** or by visiting our on-line bookstore at **www.helwys.com/online.html**

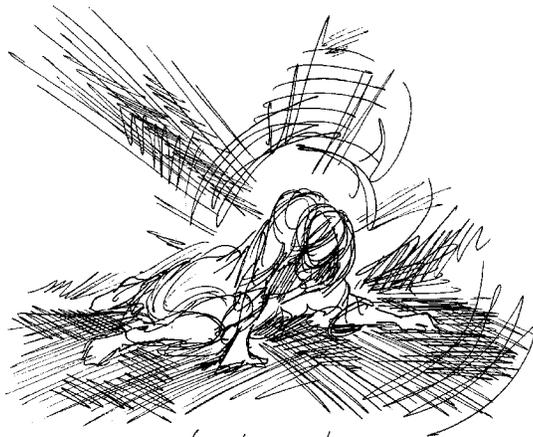
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For use in grief groups, support and recovery groups, self-reflection groups, Bible study groups. Each chapter may be used for each session of a twelve-week study, or chapters may be selected for shorter studies. Single chapters may also be used in multiple sessions for more intensive reflection and support in neonatal loss, domestic violence and abuse, organ donation, biomedical ethics, death and dying.

Chapter 1

The Song of Despair

The God of Hope's Music;
The Virgin Daughter of Jephthah



*My dancing has
turned to mourning.*

I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 1—“The Song of Despair” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.

- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *My dancing has turned to mourning*.
- 4) Ask a female dancer to interpret the text using appropriate taped or CD music.
- 5) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 6) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on pages 5-6.
- 7) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.
- 8) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Despair” (Judges 11:1-11, 29-40, paraphrased) found on page 1 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Tell the story of Jephthah’s daughter.

Questions for discussion:

- Jephthah’s vow to sacrifice his daughter meant that she would enter into anticipatory grief, mourning the loss of her life. Discuss other losses she might grieve.
- She asks her father’s permission to go up into the hills for two months with her sisters. Discuss the role of the “sisters.” What need will they fulfill for Jephthah’s daughter?
- If you were in the place of Jephthah’s daughter, what feelings do you think you would have during your two months in the hills?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) When the congregation of St. Andrew’s Church in Jinja, Uganda, gathered for worship, what did they hope worship would do for them?
- 2) What emotions did they express during worship? In what ways?
- 3) Would you be comfortable expressing your emotions in your congregation’s time of worship? Why or why not?

4) Where was God in the midst of this congregation's despair?

NOTES

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on pages 5-6.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as the dancer interprets the biblical text and the music.
- 3) Sister Macrina Wiederkehr wrote these words: "To mourn is to join the song of the dying and to be healed by the song and the death." Reflect on the significance of those words in your own life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

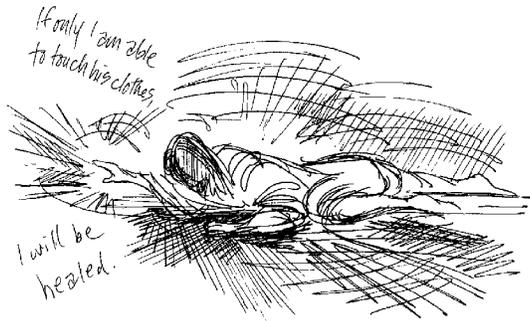
- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 2—"The Song of Anguish" on pages 7-12.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 2

The Song of Anguish

Daughters and Sons of Grace;

The Woman with the Flow of Blood



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 2—“The Song of Anguish” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *If only I am able to touch his clothes, I will be healed.*
- 4) Ask a female to do a dramatic monologue of the text from the perspective of the woman with the flow of blood.
- 5) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 6) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on pages 5-6.
- 7) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.
- 8) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Anguish” (Mark 5:25-34, paraphrased) found on page 7 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Retell the story through the dramatic monologue.

Questions for discussion:

- The woman in the story was in deep anguish on the day she sought Jesus in the crowd. Other than her physical condition, what might have been other sources of her anguish?
- What do you think the woman expected when she touched Jesus’ clothes?
- If you were in the place of this woman, what feelings do you think you would have when Jesus said to you, “Your faith has made you well. Go live in peace.”

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Can you personally identify in any way with Amy’s story? In what ways? If you cannot identify with her life, why not?
- 2) Discuss the significance of Amy’s words, “...now I have been touched by God who called out my name.”
- 3) Has God called out your name? If so, how did you perceive it?
- 4) Discuss Amy’s near-death experience. What was its significance in the rest of her life?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on pages 11-12.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The Psalmist wrote that God has kept count of our “tossings” and saves our tears in a bottle. (See Psalm 56:8 NRSV) Reflect on the significance of those words in your own life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 3—“The Song of Fear” on pages 13-20.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 3

The Song of Fear

Finding Home Again • Rahab



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 3—“The Song of Fear” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *My heart melted with fear of you.*

- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped of CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on page 20.
- 6) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere. On a small table place a burlap cloth, modeling it with several soft folds on the table. Place a tall candelabra with scarlet candles on the table. Use 2 yards of red satin drapery cording to make a pleasing arrangement, entwined on the tall candelabra and hanging down on to the table. (Symbolizing Rahab's scarlet cord hanging in the window.)
- 7) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Fear” (Joshua 2, paraphrased) on page 13 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants' attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Retell the story of Rahab with some detail.

Questions for discussion:

- Why did Rahab take the risk of protecting the Israelite spies?
- Discuss the significance of the scarlet cord hanging in Rahab's window.
- If you can imagine yourself living the life Rahab lived and living the details of this story, what feelings do you think you would have?
- In Rahab's story, we might see themes of reconciliation and restoration. In what ways can you discern these themes in the story?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Can you personally identify in any way with Lisa's story? In what ways? If you cannot identify with her life, why not?
- 2) Discuss the significance of Lisa's words, “I have no home...even God can't forgive someone like me...”

- 3) Lisa found herself an outcast in her sister's church. Discuss the significance of this event in Lisa's life. Discuss your own congregation and its acceptance of persons "looking for home."
- 4) What might you have offered Lisa in terms of friendship and compassion? Could it have made any difference in her life?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on page 20.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) In the story of Don Wanderhope and his young daughter, Carol, the author writes: "Carol's leukemia ravages her body while her father curses a God who doesn't seem to care, and damns the church that doesn't know how to help." Reflect on those words in your own experience.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 4—"The Song of Shame" on pages 21-27.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 4

The Song of Shame

Drawing in the Dust;
The Adulterous Woman



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 4—"The Song of Shame" in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *No one condemns me teacher—my accusers have gone.*
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on page 27.
- 6) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere. On a small table, place an arrangement of large rocks and/or clumps of dirt. Spread a layer of reddish dirt on the table, and place a few small sticks among the rocks. Place the candles on this

table among the dirt, preferably using pottery candleholders and candles in earthtone colors, i.e. brown candle holders and rust colored candles.

- 7) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Shame” (John 8:1-11, paraphrased) on page 21 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Retell the story of woman accused of adultery. As you tell the story, go over to the table and with one of the sticks, draw something in the dust.

Questions for discussion:

- Why do you suppose the scribes and Pharisees brought this woman before Jesus in such a public manner?
- How would you interpret the action of Jesus when he bent down to draw in the dust? What do you suppose he inscribed there?
- If you can imagine yourself living the life of the woman in John’s story and being seized by these men accusing you of sin, what emotions do you think you would have?
- In this story of the adulterous woman, what theological themes seem obvious to you?
- In *Voices of Our Sisters* the author writes: “I suppose the woman walks away a bit confused, perplexed, and very ready to accept this unexpected redemption, this new beginning, this freedom she has never known before.” In your own life, what are the areas in which you desire unexpected redemption, a new beginning, and freedom?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Can you personally identify in any way with Mr. Willie’s fear of death? In what ways? If you cannot identify with his fear, why not?
- 2) Discuss the significance of Mr. Willie’s experience.
- 3) Mr. Willie said: “I wanted to pray to God, but I never learned how.” Can you identify with his statement?

- 4) The nurse reported that Mr. Willie had been “crying most of the day.” What did Mr. Willie really need from the minister?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on page 27.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The author writes: “One man, perhaps more honest than the rest, realizes he cannot avoid the memory of his own sins. He walks away...the crowd becomes smaller and smaller. In the end, nobody wants to be left alone with Jesus—and with the accused woman who still stands in their midst.” Reflect on those words in your own experience.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss the reflections they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 5—“The Song of Resentment” on pages 30-35.
- 3) End with each participant coming to the altar table and writing one word in the dust, representing something in their lives they need to let go or perhaps a sin they are confessing to God. You may play music as they do this.

Chapter 5

The Song of Resentment

We've Seen Too Much to Go Back • Miriam



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 5—“The Song of Resentment” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *Why have I been afflicted and cast out from my people?*
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on pages 34-35
- 6) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.
- 7) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Resentment” (Exodus 15:19-21; Numbers 12:1-16; 20:1, paraphrased) on page 29 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Retell the story of Miriam.

Questions for discussion:

- Do you suppose Miriam felt like *just the sister* of Moses with no divine mission of her own? Why or why not?
- Miriam and Aaron apparently felt some resentment: “Has God spoken only through Moses? Has God not also spoken through us?” Miriam was punished for what the Scripture calls a “foolish sin” (Numbers 12:11). Discuss what feelings Miriam might have experienced when she was punished.
- The author writes, “In my imagination, I see Miriam resting quietly at Kadesh, with some mourning songs in her soul, thinking of the journey toward the land of promise as a wondrous time in her life. Her life now could never compare to the past.” Can you identify in any way with these words? How? Or why not?
- On the way to the promised land, Miriam saw signs and wonders. Of what significance were these miraculous occurrences in Miriam’s life?
- Edwin Muir wrote: “If it had lasted but another moment it might have held forever! But the world rolled back into its place, and we are here. And all that radiance lies forlorn, as if it had never stirred.” Discuss whether or not you can identify with Muir’s words.

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) What exactly happened in Debra’s life and why did it change her?
- 2) What was Debra’s life-giving vision all about?
- 3) Discuss Debra’s comment, “I was embraced.”
- 4) Think about the word “transfiguration.” What does it mean in your life? What could it mean in your life?

- 5) If you can imagine yourself in Debra's situation, describe some of the emotions you might be dealing with. Why would these emotions be unique to you?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on pages 34-35.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The author writes: "We wait with our eyes fixed on the heavens, knowing—*just knowing*—that we will see a theophany, if only for a moment." Reflect on those words.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 6—"The Song of Emptiness" on pages 37-41.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 6

The Song of Emptiness

God Hears in the Wildernesses • Hagar



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 6—“The Song of Emptiness” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *I cannot watch the boy die*.
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on page 41
- 6) Ask someone to prepare a dramatic monologue expressing Hagar’s life and another person to prepare a dramatic monologue of the events in Molly’s life.

Option: Instead of the dramatic monologue of Molly’s life, you may wish to ask a chaplain, social worker, or an obstetrics nurse or physician to speak on neo-natal loss. Your local hospital’s labor

and delivery personnel will be able to suggest an appropriate speaker. Often there is a person on staff who holds grief groups for those who have lost newborns. **Important note: If there is a person in your group who has experienced neo-natal loss, have an experienced pastoral counselor on hand to assist with this session. If this is the case, or if you have other women in your congregation who have experienced this unique grief—even in years past—you may make this chapter a three or four session grief recovery experience.*

- 7) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.
- 8) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Emptiness” (Genesis 21:1-21, paraphrased) on page 37 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Present the dramatic monologue of Hagar’s life.

Questions for discussion:

- The author says, “Hagar is nameless and voiceless.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Discuss how Hagar must have felt in the wilderness. Identify some of the emotions you would have felt if you were in her place.
- Discuss the stark contrasts in this story—from laughter and celebration to weeping and desolation.
- What happened in the wilderness of Beersheba?
- The author wrote: “In wilderness places one experiences both the presence and the absence of God.” Can you identify with this statement? How?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Present the dramatic monologue of Molly’s life.
Option: Have the neo-natal loss specialist present the aspects of grief as experienced by new or expectant mothers. After this presentation, briefly tell Molly’s story.

- 2) Encourage each participant to speak a one-word description of what they think Molly might have felt.
- 3) How would you have comforted Molly? Be specific.
- 4) In the death of Molly's child was God absent or present? Discuss your responses.
- 5) Think about Molly's words, "My arms literally ache." Why did she say that?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on page 41.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The author writes: "See the promise of life that overcomes death." Reflect on the significance of those words in your own life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 7—"The Song of Regret" on pages 43-48.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 7

The Song of Regret

Great Words for Our Tombstones; The Woman of Samaria



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 7—“The Song of Regret” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *Sir, give me this water so that I will never thirst again*.
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on page 48.
- 6) Ask someone to prepare a dramatic monologue based on the Samaritan woman’s thoughts on pages 45-46 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 7) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere. Cover

a small table with a piece of burlap arranged in soft folds. Place on it an old earthen vessel that could have been used for carrying water. This may be used as a focal point for reflection and as a prop for the dramatic monologue. You may also incorporate a tabletop water fountain into the arrangement. In times of silence and contemplation, the sound of the water will create a restful atmosphere.

- 8) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Regret” (John 4: 4-28, paraphrased) on page 43 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and the pottery and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Present the dramatic monologue of the Samaritan woman’s life.

Questions for discussion:

- Jesus spoke to the woman about “living water.” Why do you suppose he used such a nebulous term? What was this “living water?”
- What exactly did Jesus do in his encounter with this woman? How might she have felt when he spoke to her in public?
- Did Jesus pry into the woman’s personal life? How? Why? What was her reaction to his words?
- The author speculates on thoughts the Samaritan woman might have had with these words: “I ran to Sychar as fast as I could run and told everyone about him. I left my water pot behind. It’s just as well—it’s a reminder of things I need to forget.” Why was it significant to say that she left behind her water pot?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Tell Janet and Tim’s story.
- 2) Encourage each participant to identify some of what was happening to Janet.
- 3) Why was Janet’s grief reaction so intense and prolonged? Why was it so difficult for Janet to say “good-bye” to Tim?

- 4) What is your description of what happened within Janet to enable her to go on with life?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on page 48.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The author writes: “We want nice words carved on our tombstones... ‘No regrets! Those are the words I want to describe my life.’” What words would you want carved on your tombstone?
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

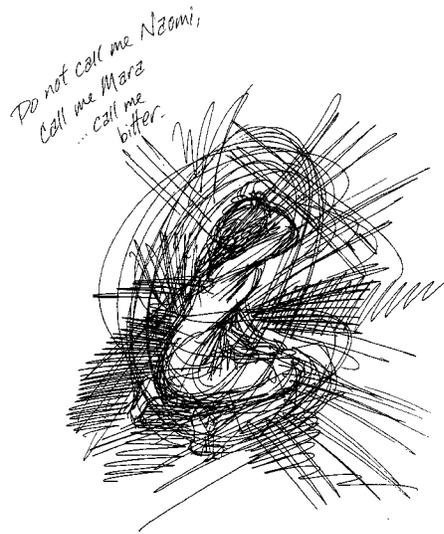
V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss the words they would like inscribed on their tombstones.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 8—“The Song of Bitterness” on pages 49-55.
- 3) As participants leave, invite them to come to “the living water” offering their personal prayer and placing their hands in the water of the fountain as a reminder of the grace that cleanses us. You may play music as they do this, perhaps “Grace Greater than Our Sin,” “Amazing Grace,” “Whiter than Snow.” You may also give each one a personal “benediction” as they depart, offering them a cup of water and saying words like, “Those who drink of the living water will never thirst again.”

Chapter 8

The Song of Bitterness

Call me Mara...Call Me Bitter • Naomi



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 8—“The Song of Bitterness” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara...call me bitter.*
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on page 55
- 6) Ask someone to prepare a dramatic monologue expressing Naomi’s life. Have an infant (or a doll) wrapped in a blanket for “Naomi” to hold at the end of her story.
- 7) You may also invite a chaplain, social worker, or Hospice worker to speak on grief and friendship as it relates to the author’s relationship with Helen.

**Important note: If the congregation has experienced a recent death, especially one that involved the congregation in a long period of anticipatory grief and ministry toward a dying friend, this may also become a prolonged session in three or four parts.*

8) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.

9) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Bitterness” (Ruth 1:1-21; 4:13-17, paraphrased) on pages 49-50 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Present the dramatic monologue of Naomi’s life.

Questions for discussion:

- Discuss the friendship of Ruth and Naomi? What was its strength? How did the friendship become so significant and enduring?
- Do you find it difficult to form enduring friendships? Do you feel that in our day, such friendships are easily forged? Why or why not?
- The author speculates that the shared grief Ruth and Naomi experienced developed a depth of tenderness between them and an uncommon bond. Do you agree? Discuss your thoughts on this.
- What happened when the townspeople placed baby Obed in Naomi’s arms? What was the significance of that act for Naomi?
- What do think baby Obed represented in Naomi’s life?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Retell the story of the author’s relationship with Helen and the events surrounding Helen’s death.
- 2) What do you think the author meant when she wrote these words, “...one day—not so long ago—I forgave myself for being human?”
- 3) *Option:* Have the grief counselor present the aspects of anticipatory grief in the process of a close friend’s death.

- 4) Encourage each participant to speak a one-word description of what the author experienced in the process of her friend's death.
- 5) How would you have been a friend to Helen? Be specific.
- 6) Think about the final words Helen spoke to her friend, "You have been a good friend, my best friend." What do you think those words meant to Helen's best friend?
- 7) Years after Helen's death, someone asked the author what she describes as unsettling questions: "When will you feel you have done enough penance for not staying with her? When will you forgive yourself?" Can you identify with the author's inability to forgive herself for not being fully present with her dying friend?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on page 55.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The author writes: "That winter's lesson—a grief shared with my dear friend, Helen—was a harsh lesson that would disquiet me for years to come." Reflect on the significance of those words in your own life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 9—"The Song of Sorrows" on pages 57-62.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 9

The Song of Sorrows

Her Lullaby of Mourning • Rizpah



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 9—“The Song of Sorrows” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *I cannot leave my sons here alone*.
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on pages 61-62.
- 6) Ask someone to prepare to tell the story of Rizpah.
- 7) *Option:* Invite a speaker from your regional organ recovery agency to speak about organ donation from the perspectives of both the donor families and recipient families.

- 8) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.
- 9) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Sorrows” (2 Samuel 3:6-11; 21:1-14, paraphrased) on page 57 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Ask your prepared storyteller to retell the story of Rizpah.

Questions for discussion:

- Discuss whether or not the description “mother of sorrows” fits Rizpah.
- In your life experience, was there a time you would describe as a time when “keeping vigil” was all you could do? Encourage sharing among the participants.
- The author makes an observation about the Biblical text saying that the text reveals that Rizpah’s sons were murdered “in the presence of God.” Discuss other instances where something horrific occurs in the presence of God. Discuss how this makes you feel.
- Who was Rizpah? Describe her from the titles she was given: *concubine, mother, widow, violated woman*.
- Why do you think the Biblical writer included the story of Rizpah in the account?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Retell the story of the Anna Mary.
- 2) Do you think Anna Mary felt betrayed by God? Why or why not?
- 3) Encourage participants to express what they think Anna Mary experienced in the hours she sat with her sons in the emergency room.
- 4) *Option:* Have a speaker from a regional organ recovery agency to give a brief presentation on the decision to donate organs.

- 5) If you can imagine yourself in Anna Mary's situation, how would you feel about considering organ donation?
- 6) The author quotes these words: "Mothers keep vigil when their babies are born and when they die, pulling them from the arms of God to hold them close until it is time." Share your personal reflections of those words.

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on pages 61-62.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The author writes: "She wrapped her wounded spirit in a cloak of sackcloth and mourned as only a mother mourns." Reflect on the significance of those words in your own life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 10—"The Song of Suffering" on pages 63-68.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 10

The Song of Suffering

Until the Miracle Comes;
The Shunammite Woman



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 10—“The Song of Suffering” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *As God lives and as you live, I will not leave here without you.*
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on page 68.
- 6) Ask someone to prepare to tell the story of the Shunammite woman.
- 7) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.

- 8) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Suffering” (2 Kings 4:8-37, paraphrased) on pages 63-64 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Retell the story of the Shunammite woman.

Questions for discussion:

- Elisha had granted to the Shunammite woman the miracle of conceiving a child. When her child died, she desperately needed another miracle. Discuss her actions in prevailing upon Elisha. What in her personality enabled her to persuade him? What emotions gave her strength?
- In your life experience, was there a time you would describe as a time when you felt such an intense need for a miracle? Encourage sharing among the participants.
- Do you find any anger in the woman’s words to Elisha? If so, what role did her anger play?
- Can you identify with the anguish the Shunammite woman felt?
- In response to this story, the author writes: “Pleading to God for miracles...does not always mean we get our miracle. Those we love *do* die, in spite of our most fervent prayers.” Discuss this thought in light of your own experience. What do you think of miracles?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Retell the story of the woman at the hospital.
- 2) What did this woman possess in terms of personal strength? Talk about her personality traits and what they reveal about her.
- 3) Do you think she felt betrayed by God? Why or why not?
- 4) What do you think this mother might have experienced in the hours she waited for word of her son’s prognosis?
- 5) If you can imagine yourself in her place, how would you approach God in a similar situation?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on page 68.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) The author writes: “The Shunammite woman and the woman in the hospital chapel found within themselves the strength to look straight into the face of God and ask for a miracle.” Reflect on the significance of those words in your life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 11—“The Song of Sadness” on pages 69-74.
- 3) End with prayer.

Chapter 11

The Song of Sadness

Now, Go and Sing! • Mary Magdalene



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) Ask participants to read Chapter 12—“The Song of Anger” in *Voices of Our Sisters* before the beginning of this session. Ask participants to bring a book or notebook for journaling during the sessions.
- 2) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 3) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *They have taken the Master from the tomb, and I do not know where they have laid Him*.
- 4) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 5) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on page 74.
- 6) Ask someone to prepare to tell the story of Mary Magdalene, or to present her story in the form of a dramatic monologue.
- 7) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful contemplative atmosphere.

- 8) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Sadness” (John 20:1-18, paraphrased) on pages 69-70 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Retell the story of Mary Magdalene or present the dramatic monologue.

Questions for discussion:

- The author writes these words to describe Mary Magdalene’s emotions: “These had been horrible days, days that raise up in her a song of mourning.” Discuss her emotions as you imagine she might have experienced them.
- In your life experience, was there a time you would describe as a time when you felt such intense emotion? What was it like? Describe your feelings and your actions.
- Just as Mary Magdalene was making peace with death; life made a shocking display before her eyes. How did she deal with such a shift in her emotional state? Get into her skin, if you can. How would you feel in such a situation?
- Respond to these words: “We can know deep joy only by walking straight into sorrow, through the dryness of the desert...through the valley of death. This is the pathway to incomparable joy that transcends every life tragedy.”

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Retell the story of Mamma Ginnie.
- 2) The author observes that Mamma Ginnie’s joy *was* her healing. Reflect on and discuss that statement.
- 3) Do you think Mamma Ginnie felt betrayed by God? Why or why not?
- 4) Contrast the fact that “it was almost Easter” with the reality that Mamma Ginnie and her family faced.
- 5) Wendy Anderson spoke these words: “In a place where death and disease reigned supreme, there was more laughter, more

love, more healing than I have ever experienced anywhere. The laughter coexisted with the tears. The tears coexisted with the suffering. The suffering coexisted with the joy. Joy coexisted with life.” What did she mean? Do you understand what she was trying to express?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on page 74.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.
- 3) Wendy Anderson describes her last night in Calcutta with these words: “I cried and cried throughout the silent time and into the period of singing. I could not find a songbook, so I listened, weeping. Mother Teresa motioned me over to her while the singing continued. She handed me her songbook, looked into my eyes, and said, ‘Now, go and sing.’” Reflect on the significance of those words in your life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

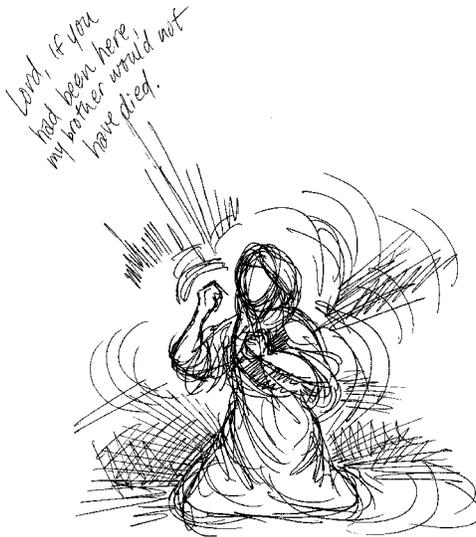
- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) In preparation for the next session, ask participants to read Chapter 12—“The Song of Anger” on pages 75-81.
- 3) Read the words Mother Teresa spoke to Wendy Anderson as a benediction, then end with joyful singing.

Chapter 12

The Song of Anger

Finding Silenced Music;

Martha of Bethany



I. Preparing for the Session

- 1) To encourage a sense of privacy for personal introspection, arrange chairs in a scattered arrangement around the room, leaving some distance between participants.
- 2) In a central location, feature a poster-sized copy of the illustration, *Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*
- 3) Provide a CD or tape player and taped or CD music.
- 4) Ask a reader to be prepared to read the Prayer on pages 80-81.
- 5) Ask someone to prepare to tell the story of Martha, or to present her story in the form of a dramatic monologue. The monologue may include two persons, Martha *and* Mary.
- 6) At the focal point of the room near the large illustration, use candlelight to create a restful, contemplative atmosphere.
- 7) Candles may be lit as participants enter the room and take their seats. Room lights should be on, but not too bright.

II. The Ancient Witness—Living with the Text

- 1) Read “The Song of Anger” (John 11:1-44, paraphrased) on page 75 of *Voices of Our Sisters*.
- 2) After the reading, call the participants’ attention to the illustration and ask them to spend a few moments contemplating the story.
- 3) Retell the story of Martha or present the dramatic monologue.

Questions for discussion:

- What emotions do you think Martha might have experienced when she sent for Jesus and he did not come immediately?
- In your life experience, was there a time you would describe as a time when you felt anger toward God? What was it like? Describe your feelings and your actions.
- Paul Duke wrote, “Behind Martha’s fury, there’s faith.” Discuss the implications of that statement. Step into Martha’s shoes and try to imagine her emotions. Can you describe them?
- Would you display the kind of honesty and candor that Martha displayed when questioning Jesus? Why or why not? What do you think made Martha comfortable enough to be honest with Jesus?

III. The Contemporary Witness—Putting Yourself in the Story

- 1) Retell the story of the fifteen-year-old girl whose father had died.
- 2) The young girl spoke very strong words: “Why did God let my Daddy die? I asked God. I prayed. I tried to be good. God didn’t hear me or care. I hate God.” Can you understand her response? Discuss some of the emotions she might have felt.
- 3) How would you have dealt with this girl’s grief response?
- 4) In talking to this young girl about her father’s death, would you feel the need to defend God? Why or why not?

IV. A Time of Reflection

- 1) Listen to the reading of the Prayer on pages 80-81.
- 2) Contemplate the thoughts of the prayer as music is played.

- 3) The author makes this observation: “All of us who have called out to God for healing and help have likely known the silence of an absent God.” Reflect on the significance of these words in your life.
- 4) Write your thoughts in your journal.

V. A Time of Closure

- 1) Encourage participants to discuss their reflections and the thoughts they recorded in their journals.
- 2) End with the singing of the hymn “Lord of the Dance.” (You will find this hymn in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, Copyright 1989 by The United Methodist Publishing House.)