

Challenging Empire

THE EMPIRE LENS, PART 2: THE CHURCH'S STORY

A supplementary workshop that may be used
in conjunction with *Challenging Empire: Stories
and Activities to Transform Your Community*
(The United Church of Canada, 2007).



THE EMPIRE LENS, PART 2: THE CHURCH'S STORY (2½ hours)

In the process of understanding and naming the net of empire that encompasses our world today, it is important to know our own story. How are we affected by empire? How do we benefit from it, and how are we complicit in its impact on other people and all of creation?

This workshop enables congregations to examine how our lives and the practice of our faith is challenged by forms of empire in our churches and communities. It is part of a series of materials developed to respond to the request of the 39th General Council 2006 for educational resources for the report *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire*. In particular, it complements the materials found in *Challenging Empire: Stories and Activities to Transform your Community*, especially “The Empire Lens—Your Community’s Story” (pp. 18–25), which helps groups identify the ways that forms of empire affect their community and emerging alternatives.

As with a real lens in one of our eyes, the tools in the Empire Lens will become less effective if we use them over and over again without adapting to new situations, new partners, and new learnings that emerge through our engagement with justice. The context of our world is always changing, so the lens needs to adjust to the changing reality. The lens also needs to be guided by our neighbours who experience the world differently than we do. It is only able to focus when it is held with care and intent by these muscles that guide it.

The report *Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire* outlines areas where the communities of faith will need to challenge empire thinking with persistence, open hearts, and humility. These include

- our education and faith formation methods and models
- our mission and social action agendas
- our interfaith assumptions
- our expectations for lay and ordered ministry training
- the emphasis of our youth and children’s ministries
- our pension and investment fund portfolios
- our spending, consumption, and budgeting habits
- our environmental standards
- our stewardship patterns
- our methods of governance and decision-making
- our means of conflict resolution
- our forms of worship

and a host of other practices in faith communities.

Goals

- To deepen an understanding and analysis of empire
- To identify and analyze forms of empire that exist within our church communities as a basis for seeking transformation

Ahead of Time

You will need

- copies of “Telling Our Church Community’s Story of Empire” (p. 5) and “Questions to Build Your Church Community’s Story of Empire” (p. 6) for participants
- a candle and matches

Welcome (5 minutes)

Introduce yourself, the agenda, and the goals for the gathering. Read the scripture passage and opening prayer.

Scripture Passage

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
(Psalm 1:1–3)

Prayer

Loving God,
we do delight in your law,
the law of love and justice for all.
Help us to put roots deep into our community,
so that we may prosper in your care and guidance,
nourishing communities that are loving and respectful.
May our happiness always be bound to your heart, your way, your love.
Amen.

Our Church Community's Story

Introduction (25 minutes)

Ask participants to silently think about their favourite tree. Where is it? What does it look like? What qualities attract them to it? Then ask them to share one of the qualities of their favourite tree. Alternatively, ask participants to silently think of images of trees that come to mind when thinking of biblical stories, and to share one of their favourite images.

The image of the tree is useful to help us tell our story of how we experience and participate in empire and how we are involved in creating alternatives to the impact of empire in our communities and congregations. There are three parts of the tree that will help with the analysis of our church. Hand out photocopies of the “Telling Our Church Community's Story of Empire” (p. 5), explaining what the different parts of the tree represent:

- The **roots** will help tell the biblical story. The roots represent biblical passages that tell the story of how empire affected the Jewish and surrounding Gentile communities, Jesus, and the disciples. They also represent God's desire for justice-making and of Jesus' experience of justice-making.
- The **trunk** will help tell the story of how our church is organized. It represents the structure and organization of The United Church of Canada at different levels.
- The **leaves** will help tell the story of how we practice and live our faith. They represent the ministry of the local faith community.

Explain that the task is to analyze the impact of forms of empire in each of these areas and to name examples of how empire is being challenged.

It may be helpful with the group to reflect on the roles that different parts of the tree play. For example, the roots provide nourishment from the soil and a foundation that is critical to the life of the tree, the trunk transports the food to the rest of the tree, and the leaves breathe in oxygen and produce fruit and flowers, which could be understood as signs of the “life of the community.” It is important to realize that all of these categories are not distinct or separated from one another—just like a real tree where the roots, trunk, and leaves are all connected to and rely on one another.

Go over each section of the tree in detail explaining the areas listed and asking if there are any new areas to be added. Once all the sections of the tree have been reviewed, ask if there are any changes where participants would place the areas or if there are things they would take away or add.

Explain that

- it is okay to add new categories to each part of the tree—it is important that the analysis fits your context
- it is okay to leave out some of the categories

Discuss the tool and adapt it according to your context. Your group can also decide to work on the image of the tree as a whole or to have small groups work specifically on either the trunk, leaves, or roots. Once you have explained the tool and adapted it to your particular context, begin the process of having the large group or small groups do the analysis by discussing the questions for each section (pp. 6–7). Fill in the learnings and insights that emerge from the discussion under the categories of Empire Story.

Telling Our Church Community's Story of Empire

Empire Story: Impact of Empire

Leaves (faith practice)

Trunk (organization)

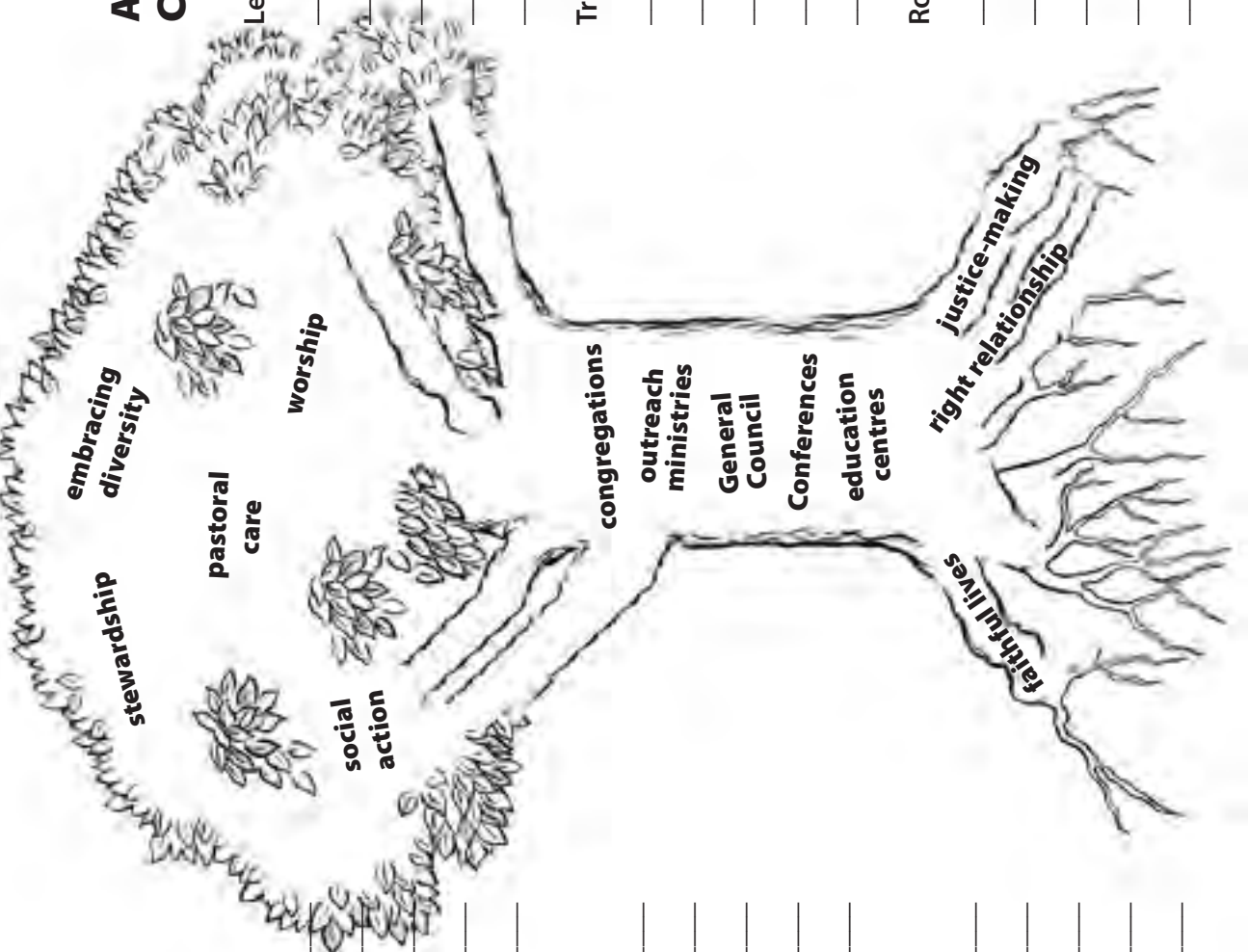
Roots (biblical story)

Alternative Story: Challenging Empire

Leaves

Trunk

Roots



Questions to Build Your Church Community's Story of Empire

Roots

The roots represent biblical passages that tell the story of God's desire for justice-making and of Jesus' experience of justice-making. Some of the passages are clear messages of how we should live faithful lives and others are descriptions of how people relate to one another.

Questions to Consider

- Can you think of some examples of the way in which empires affected the Jewish and Gentile communities? In which empires affected Jesus and his disciples?
- Can you think of examples of resistance to empire in the Hebrew and New Testament scriptures?
- What is your image of justice that the biblical passages are calling us to?
- What meaning do these texts have for us today in our faith community?
- What meaning do these texts have for us today in the wider community beyond our faith community?

Trunk

The trunk represents the structure and organization of The United Church of Canada at different levels:

- congregations
- Conferences/districts
- chaplaincies
- theological schools
- presbyteries
- General Council
- community outreach ministries
- education centres

Depending on the experience and interest of your group, you may choose to focus more on one level of the church than another.

Questions to Consider

- How does the church structure at its different levels support justice-making within our church communities and the wider community?
- How does the church structure at its different levels hinder justice-making within our church communities and the wider community?
- Who has power within the various structures? How is this power shared or not shared? Who is marginalized within the various structures?
- How are people encouraged to participate in the church structure? How are people discouraged from participation?
- Who makes decisions about finances, policy direction, and resource production?

Name some areas where you see empire operating.

Leaves

The leaves represent the ministry of the local faith community—Christian education, stewardship, faith formation, worship, pastoral care, social action, finances, and how the community embraces diversity.

Questions to Consider

- Is there common understanding and commitment among all areas of ministry of the faith community to seek justice and right relationship? Who makes decisions in these areas of ministry?
- How are members of the committees or groups chosen? Are there informal powerbrokers in the faith community who control decisions outside of the committee structure?
- How diverse is your faith community? Is diversity represented in your decision-making structure?
- How are new ideas and suggestions for change received?
- How do finances influence your faith community's ministry/mission? Who makes decisions about finances?

Name some areas where you see empire operating.

Writing the Story (45 minutes)

Have the whole group or small groups discuss the questions for each area of the tree (pp. 6–7). Fill in the learnings and insights that emerge from the discussion under the categories on the diagram “Telling Our Church Community’s Story of Empire.”

If small groups are used, you may need to shorten the time used for writing the story to leave adequate time for small group reports.

Story Reflection (20 minutes)

Once the Church Community’s Story of Empire is recorded, reflect with the group on how empire is connected and grows in our church:

- Did you learn anything new from looking at your faith community from this perspective?
- How is empire connected in the different parts of the tree? For example, how is lack of diversity in a local church related to diminishing funding, lack of new church school leaders, or anti-racism training resources from General Council?
- From your experience, does empire need to continuously grow? If so, what effect does this continuous growth model have on a faith community?
- From your experience, do empires amass power? Has your community experienced power and resources being controlled by fewer and fewer people?

Lament (20 minutes)

The following process is suggested for raising awareness and allowing individuals to name how they participate in empire-related actions in their church community. Introduce this time by lighting a candle and saying the following:

Through examining our church community and using the story tree, it may have become clear to some of us that we participate in an empire agenda in our church community, while to others it may have become clear that we have been victimized by it. One can both be negatively affected by empire and also have participated in it. We may have feelings of complicity and co-optation or of victimization. Our story may reveal how we as individuals and members of groups have participated in the marginalization of other people or abuse of creation, or uncover the pain of past experiences. We may also feel helpless in the face of larger forces and powerful groups.

Responding from the heart is important during these times. Being open to others’ pain and anger, acknowledging complicity in the creation of these feelings, and realizing that we do not know what to do with them are responses we can all feel. Experiencing these responses helps us to open ourselves to God’s grace.

After the time of silence, ask the following question, explaining that it is okay for people to pass and not speak:

- How is your heart responding to the story of being told today?

Explain to the group that time will now be given for people to name their own personal lamentations. Explain that it is okay to name these lamentations in silence and to pass and not speak. Ask the question:

- What are the personal lamentations we name in the telling of this story?

Close this process of lament with the following reading:

When our tears are spent through the process of lament, we come in time to a place of quiet, an empty stillness. In this apparent void, there is also a clarity. This is a place where we can let go of old ways of seeing and doing things. We do not leave the past behind, but do, perhaps, see past, present, and future from a new perspective. This is a place where we can turn and set out in a new direction. We open ourselves to the grace of repentance.

In the Greek texts of the New Testament, the word used for repentance is *metanoia*. At its heart is the idea of turning, or reorienting our perceptions, our thinking, and our way of living.

Justice and Reconciliation: The Legacy of Indian Residential Schools and the Journey Toward Reconciliation (The United Church of Canada, 2001), p. 41.

Alternative Story (20 minutes)

Based on the concept of *metanoia* (the idea that repentance is the turning and reorienting of our perceptions, thinking, and way of living), it is now time to look at how people and faith communities are reorienting and rethinking how they live in community with one another—of how faith communities are turning toward God and away from empire. Either in the large group or in small groups, ask participants to name examples of where they see alternatives in each of the areas—the leaves, roots, and the trunk. List these under the title Alternative Story on the Church Community’s Story of Empire handout.

Naming the Themes of Our Story (15 minutes)

Ask participants to take five minutes in silence to think about what they have generated in their analysis of their faith community. Then in small groups ask them to name the themes that are present in the story. What insights and learnings can we take from this time of storytelling? Have the group list some of the challenges that are before them as they make this turning toward God.

Closing Prayer (5 minutes)

Read the prayer “Another World Is Possible” responsively or invite two people to alternate verses.

Prayers of the People: Another World Is Possible

God, source of love, creator of the cosmos, we are caught up in a net of greed, injustice, and cruelty—a net cleverly woven to prevent us from living your love in the world. A net woven by empire that seeks to stifle all difference and diversity.

And yet you give us prophetic voices that say “another world is possible.”

Holy One, you bless us in our relationships with global partners in the South, who, from their own experiences of oppression and marginalization, encourage us to create spaces for hope and transformation in the places we work, worship, and live. Spaces that fray the net of empire so that new ways of living and being in community emerge.

Within those spaces, we hear “another world is possible.”

In breakfast programs for hungry kids, in homeless shelters, in the long lines in hospital corridors, in detention centres for those held without trial, in homes where abuse and violence prevail, in the places where people have given up hope of meaningful, adequately paid work, it is difficult to see how we can loosen this stifling net that empire has wrought.

We lose heart. And yet your ever-present love reassures us “another world is possible.”

Our relationships with groups, partners, and movements in Canada who experience oppression and marginalization within a “rich” country encourage us to create spaces of hope and transformation in the places we work, worship, and live.

Holy One, you bless us through those close to us who say “another world is possible.”

In our forests and by our oceans, in the soil and sand and bedrock of this world, we see the powerful changes that are caused by our misuse and abuse of creation. We mourn the loss of disappearing species, of habitat, and of respectful relations with the earth and with all who live here.

And yet, Creator, the wind, the rain, and the eagle whisper to us “another world is possible.”

You bless us with hearts that have the capacity to carry both joy and pain, hearts that can live your transforming love in the communities we belong to, hearts that no net can hold.

In our hearts we hear your voice singing “another world is possible.” We give you thanks, O God.