

2016 World Activity Kit - Christian Outreach

MORNING WATCH

On a typical morning, I wake up quickly, do my morning errands, run to the bus, and go to work. Most of the time, this happens in darkness or around dawn. At work, I start with *Coram Deo* - in front of God! My mind is blank, even weary. Many of us battle with these same sentiments. Anyone can become worn out and depressed. We have to beware. In Job 33:28 we are reminded: *He redeemed my soul from going down to the pit, and I will live to enjoy the light.* We must learn from the adversity in our lives.

At times it is appropriate for us to lead a quiet life and do our work. The key to learning the right attitude towards life is to learn not to expect too much from it. In Isaiah we are counselled: *In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength. But you would have none of it (Isaiah 30:15).*

Our best approach to life is a quiet trust in God's help. Matthew writes: *Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." (Matthew 20:25-26).* It is difficult to live in the spirit of service and at the same time, be assertive and when necessary, even relentless. How can I be a true servant of Christ without letting people take advantage of me?

Psalm 17: 8 pleads: *Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.* What a rich and comforting metaphor: apple of His eye, in the shadow of His wings. We must live **in** the world. We may not hide in loneliness. We were created to belong to a community. Even when no one gives us thanks, we must do the work that we believe to be important. We must not follow the wishes and requests of others. In Genesis 26:24 God makes a promise: *Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bless you.* We can lay our lives on that promise.

It would be best for us to complete our work in small portions. We should not worry about more than the current day. Matthew 6:34 teaches: *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.* Life and health should not be taken for granted. They are gifts that can be taken away from us at any time. We have received many reminders about that in these past months. "Theologia viatorum" – we need theology for wayfarers. It is time for us to go about our journey and make an effort.

I think of the late Margaret Jackson who came to visit us in Finland in August 2003. I vividly remember the discussions I had with her at our kitchen table. We also visited a nearby Christian bookstore where we saw some beautifully painted icons. Now Margaret is with God. I pray that her close ones may be comforted. Blessings to the life and work of every one of you! May our journey together continue each day.

Irja Eskelinen

Christian Outreach Director

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GOD IS IN OUR MIDST

Matt.18:20; *For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*

God's presence is not tied to buildings, rituals, or even to great emotions, but to the connection between people. When people pray together, God can manifest Himself in an unexpected way.

I discussed the topic of prayer circles in my Christian Outreach workshop in Stavanger. We can pray for the problems of others, but it is essential to be reverent and respectful towards all people. A prayer circle can become a gossip club coated with prayer. We don't need to mention names because God knows the stillest desires of our hearts and He knows the people and concerns we have in our prayers. A prayer circle should not be too large. Two or three people is a good number. Time should be limited according to the life situations of the members. Someone might come in between work or child care. Half an hour is a long time when it is filled with prayer. When time is limited, casual conversations and refreshments can be eliminated to focus on the essential.

In order to help set up a spirit of reverence, the group could begin with a Bible verse or a spiritual hymn or song followed by a Bible passage about Jesus. It could be any passage that helps us visualize Him amidst people. This will help us connect with the living Jesus in our hearts. After that we can begin by praying for each one of the members of the circle and have each person express her need for God's help. Each member can pray in silence on behalf of each other and then the circle can be extended to other people, your congregation and church, society, the nation. Each person can bring up appropriate prayer topics. The joint silent prayers can be ended with a prayer to Jesus: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners. Lord, hear our prayers.

A prayer session can be ended with a common prayer of *Our Father who art in heaven*, a moment of silence and a blessing pronounced in closing. It is difficult for us modern people to spend time together in silence, but silence can be the key to experiencing a great closeness with others and with God. Silence in the presence of God is comfortable, and it can give us a feeling of resting in our Heavenly Father's arms.

A common prayer session brings God's care amidst us. Our God is the God of presence.

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PROTECTED BY GOD'S WORD AND PRAYER

We live our lives in the battlefield between good and evil. At times, evil, pain, and trials seem to overwhelm us. Prayer is a way not to give in to the darkness, to hold on to God and to His goodness despite of the opposites around us. Psalm 23 reminds us; *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.*

God is with us, but not as an on-looker or a life coach who observes how much adversity we can handle. No, God walks with us and bears our burdens together with us, just like Jesus wavered under the weight of the heavy cross He carried. Jesus presents to us a God who suffers with us, the same God whom we approach in prayer.

Luke 11:10 holds a promise; *For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

Jesus showed us how to pray to please God; not in empty words but seeking meaning. Jesus prayed a lot and his prayers led Him closer to people and their problems. Prayer also led Him to those who were shunned and excluded. Prayer taught Jesus to see beyond superficial judgment and prejudice. It taught Him to understand backgrounds and reasons. Who asks, receives. Looking at Jesus, we notice that He was given a new way to see those who were different. This meant trouble with the religious and earthly authorities of His time. They wanted to set strict boundaries to God's Kingdom and determine whom God loves. Prayer opens our eyes. When we expect our environment to change in answer to our prayers, we may ignore the fact that God has already created a change and He needs our hands and feet to make it grow and expand.

Many times we stare at the sky waiting for our prayers to be answered, not noticing that the answers are right there at our feet on this earth. I think to pray for someone who is ill. When I visit her I don't see her getting any better. I think with dismay that God has not heard my prayers. Yet I fail to notice how peacefully this person endures her illness and how much love surrounds her in her family and nursing staff taking care of her. It is an answer to my prayer, sent through caring hands and loving words. It is an answer to my prayer that the person is not in despair with her illness but has found peace and hope from God in her heart.

Whenever one who is tired is comforted and strengthened, where one who is angry begins to smile, prayers are answered. It is God's miracle to have so much goodness, beauty, and love in this world. I believe it is an answer to the prayers spoken in silence or aloud, in solitude, prayer circles, or church services.

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THOUGHTS ON AGING

The Bible tells us how Abraham *died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people* (Genesis 25:8). Psalm 92:14-15 beautifully describes good aging: *They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, The LORD is upright.* In Psalm 71:9 an elderly person touchingly pleads in prayer: *Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone.*

Ecclesiastes discusses youth and old age side by side in 12:6-7: *Remember him--before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

In White Ribbon work we often encounter heartbreaking issues concerning the shortness of our life span. There are increasing numbers of elderly people in Western society who live alone in nursing homes, relatives far away and visiting only when they have time from their busy lives. We often hear news of one of our elderly White Ribbon sisters passing away. The limitations of life are also present in the lives of younger generations. Even strong and able-bodied people end up facing illness and fear of death. As Psalm 90:12 so truthfully states: *Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

In order to pass on our heritage, we need to care for the aging White Ribbon sisters who need our help. Many of them are burdened with concerns about younger generations. Many carry a heavy load of substance abuse and consequent problems in their children's and grandchildren's lives.

As we encounter these aged sisters, our priority should not be in enlightening them about the fears and problems we face in modern society. That is not the time nor the place. We as White Ribbon sisters can actively bring some joy and mercy into the lives of elderly people. We all have some of them around us and live close to a nursing or retirement home where there is a dire need for humanity, common prayer, and moments of worship.

As White Ribbon sisters we have the means to provide moments of reminiscence and an oasis of spirituality as we approach the elderly. It is our challenge to prepare ourselves to have the courage to face any issues brought up for discussion. Spiritual life is not something marginal that can be pushed aside but a central resource in life. This should not be forgotten in our White Ribbon work, and it is especially important as we encounter elderly people with substance abuse and mental health problems, people from different cultural backgrounds, and loneliness.

I have experienced that those who need our attention the most are the elderly in nursing homes or living alone at home. They need someone who has the time to be present, listen, partake of their joys and sorrows, sing some songs, and read a blessing. Could this be a crusade against loneliness, fear of death, and helplessness that we could start in our neighborhood? White Ribbon work embraces our entire life span. It sees us to the final gate where we must go on unaccompanied- but not alone, as we are carried by the love of Christ.

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CHRIST IS THE TREE OF LIFE

During the Fall Reunion of the Finnish White Ribbon Union, we spent some time with our members reflecting on the values of our Union. We pondered whether our values are present in our daily lives or whether they are declared values only.

We face this question every day as we do our work based on Christian values. In daily life, we wake up in the morning with the mission of that day ahead of us and at night, we give it away with its victories and defeats.

Many of you carry on your shoulders the responsibility for the advancement or at least the survival of local White Ribbon work. What kind of leadership do our Christian values bring to our organization? In my opinion, Christian leadership looks into the future, even when our efforts seem to go in vain. One cannot lead a Christian organization without speaking the name of Jesus Christ, or emphasizing His death on the cross, and His resurrection.

When someone approaches us in need, the most insulting way to receive that person is with a chilly attitude. Sometimes the tragedy of White Ribbon work is in facing such difficult topics. People come to us in great need, looking for our encouragement and a message of the grace and forgiveness of God. Many times they are disappointed in us. They are dismayed because we are distant and cool, because we protect ourselves from disappointment.

One of the most disappointing groups of people are those with a substance abuse problem. Substance addiction makes a person deceitful, irresponsible and evasive. Still, none of us can help such people or their close ones without entering their recovery process with genuine willingness to help and a committed attitude. We cannot feel their pain without losing our own peace of mind at times.

In our yard there is a pine tree. As I have observed this mighty old tree, I have noticed how it tries to disperse its cones as far from its trunk as possible. This is a sign of life- just like the White Ribbon work we do. This is our aim, to be faithful to the basis of Christian values in our work to the ends of the earth, keeping and strengthening our connection to the Tree of Life, Christ. It is important to remember that our purpose is not to build a comfortable oasis for ourselves. It is to make room for the Tree of Life, Christ, to grow. The foundation is laid with the principles of White Ribbon work: the Golden Rule of Jesus, the principle to Do Everything, and the motto, for God, home, and every land. Thanks to these principles, an increasing number of people are partaking or about to partake of the Tree of Life. In Revelation 2:7 we read: *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

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