

Respect for the Human Dignity

Session Focus

This session explores the dignity of human life, the profound belief that every person is created in the image of God and every person is precious. Human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society. Belief in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all the principles of our social teaching. Every person is precious, people are more important than things, and the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person. As Scripture says, "God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:27)

Learning Objectives

The session on Dignity of Human Life guides learners of all ages to . . .

- comprehend the ways that human life and dignity are threatened in our society and world
- value and appreciate the significance of the Bible's teaching on the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the human person, and the responsibilities of Christians to respect the sanctity of life
- protect and respect the dignity of human life and work to create a just world which enhances the life and dignity of the human person

Session Overview

Part 1. (5-10 minutes) Gathering & Opening Prayer Service

Part 2. (20-25 minutes) All Ages Learning Experience: Created in God's Image

Part 3. (75-90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: Dignity of Human Life

- Option 1. Whole Group Format: All participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Groups Format : Participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.

Part 4. (20 minutes) Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (5 minutes) Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners
- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of leaders who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leaders to have one leader work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for this Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there are a large number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.

- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while small group leaders move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Opening Prayer Service
- Bible

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Equipment for visual presentation: multimedia projector and screen
- Bible

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Handouts
- For name tags: one sheet of construction paper and one piece of string or yarn for each person, washable marking pens and crayons for each table group, variety of stickers (see companies like Oriental Trading Company)
- Newsprint, markers, and masking tape
- 11x22 paper
- News magazines with lots of pictures
- Glue sticks
- Pens and pencils for each table group
- Bibles or selected Gospel stories copied onto a handout for each family and group of adolescents and adults
- Bible

Closing

- Bible

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering and Opening Prayer (5-10 minutes)

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Distribute any handouts participants will need for the session. (You can also distribute handouts for the In Depth Learning program at the beginning of each Learning Experience.)
- Invite people to share a meal. (Depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal.)

Welcome the participants to the program and introduce the theme of the session, in your own words, using the following text:

This session explores the dignity of human life—every person is created in the image of God; every person is precious. As the first book of the Bible proclaims, “God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. The dignity of the human person is the foundation of the Christian vision for society. We believe in the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person, that every person is unique and worthwhile, that people are more important than things.

In this program we will explore many of the ways that human life and dignity is threatened in our nation and world. We are going to look at what our Christian faith teaches us about the sacredness of all human life. And we are going to find ways to take responsibility as individuals, families, and as a church community for protecting and respecting the dignity of human life

1. Group Formation

Organize people into small groups. For the All Ages Experience participants need to be organized into intergenerational groups of eight people (children and parents, teens, adults, older adults). If a participating family has all three generations present (children, parents, and grandparents), they become one intergenerational group. Each group needs to have at least three generations present: children, teens, and adults.

For the In Depth Learning Experience organize participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults.

2. Opening Prayer Service

The opening prayer for this session is incorporated into the All Ages Learning Experience.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Created in God's Image (25-30 minutes)

Involvement Phase of the Pastoral Circle Process

The All Ages Learning Experience is designed to help the participants feel and understand how a particular social issue affects the lives of people and their own lives. The first step in the Pastoral Circle process—and the basis for any action—is Involvement. Through learning activities, we connect the participants with the social issue to be explored, helping them “feel” the issue being analyzed and exposing them to what is happening in their local community or world. This helps the participants “hear” and “think” from a broader perspective. Once people are connected with an issue or situation, they are ready to move to analysis, to ask the “why” questions from a first-hand perspective.

In this session the All Ages Learning Experience is the opening prayer service. Participants should be in intergenerational small groups. Here is a guide to preparing and celebrating the prayer experience. There are a variety of options included with the outline below. Use the outline below to prepare the prayer service. Customize the handout, “Prayer Service: Dignity of the Human Person,” with the prayers and readings.

Preparation

Prepare a five-minute photo meditation using PowerPoint or other presentation program to present photos of the participants in the learning program or church activities. Intersperse the photos with several slides that say: “Created in God's Image” or similar phrases. This will be a reminder to the group that every person is created in God's image. Take pictures of people of all ages, as well as families and individuals.

Materials Needed

- Construction paper—one piece for each person
- String or yarn cut in 24-inch pieces—one for each person
- Hole punches
- Markers
- Crayons
- Stickers—variety
- Instrumental music

Gather

Share the photo meditation with background instrumental music.

Listen

The first words of the Bible make it clear to us that we are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27):

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.”

Psalm 139 reminds each of us that we were created by God:

“For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.”

Christianity proclaims that human life is sacred because every human person is created in the image and likeness of God. Every person is precious. Each person’s life and dignity must be respected. The human person is the clearest reflection of God’s presence in the world. All of the church’s work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person.

Respond

As a response to the readings, invite each participant to make a “Created in God’s Image” name tag. Give the following instructions:

In the middle of a piece of construction paper, write your name and underneath your name write: “Created in God’s Image,” “Made in God’s Image” or a similar phrase. Write large enough for people to read your name.

Add symbols, pictures, or words which describe who you are, using markers and crayons to draw or write. If you know the meaning of your first name, add this to your name tag.

Tie a piece of string or yarn on your name tag and wear it around your neck.

Invite table groups to faith-share, using the following questions:

- What if everyone always wore a sign that said, “Created in God’s Image”? How would we treat each other (e.g., our family members, our friends, our co-workers, people we meet throughout the day) differently?
- How does it feel when other people treat us with respect, care, and dignity? Share an example or two.
- What if everyone in the world treated each other as if they were actually created in God’s image—with respect, care, and dignity? What would our world look like?

Closing Prayer

Father and maker of all,
you adorn all creation with splendor and beauty,
and fashion human lives in your image and likeness.
Awaken in every heart
reverence for the work of your hands,
and renew among your people
a readiness to nurture and sustain
your precious gift of life.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Part 3. In Depth Learning Experiences (90 minutes)

Families with Children

Activity 1. What Are the Threats to Human Life? Treated with or without Dignity

Pastoral Circle Process: Exploration-Analysis

Exploration or analysis, the second phase of the Pastoral Circle Process, helps the participants ask *why* in the face of human suffering and injustice. Why do these conditions exist? What role do politics or economics or cultural values play in perpetuating the problem?

Exploration broadens the participants' thinking by helping them look for the causes of the injustice; examine the relationships among politics, economics, and cultural values in our world that perpetuate the injustice; and analyze the social or structural realities that keep the situation from changing. Exploration helps the participants understand the social issue more thoroughly so they can envision ways to be involved in working for justice.

Materials Needed

- Magazines
- Scissors
- 11x17 paper or newsprint
- Glue sticks

Activity

Ask family members to discuss the following question with their table group of families, beginning with the children, if possible.

How does it feel when other people do not treat us with respect, care, and dignity? Share an example or two.

Guide each table group of families in identifying people who are not treated with dignity. If needed, give an example to the group: the sick, the elderly in nursing homes, the poor, those who are lonely, people with disabilities, immigrants. Use the following questions.

- Can you identify people in our world who are often not treated with respect and dignity or whom the world tends to forget because we don't notice them?
- Why do you think these people are not treated with respect or seem to be forgotten?

Instruct each family to create a poster on newsprint or an 11x17 piece of paper entitled, "We Are Also Created in God's Image!" Have them draw or find magazine pictures of the people who are not treated with respect. Ask them to write a caption under each picture or drawing to indicate who the people are.

Invite families to share their posters with everyone in the table group. Then post them on the wall for all to see. If possible, give all of the families time to view the posters on the wall.

Activity 2. What Do the Scriptures Say about the Dignity of Human Life?

Pastoral Circle Process: Reflection

Reflection, the third phase of the Pastoral Circle process, engages the participants in exploring the social issue from the perspective of faith—the Bible and the living response of the Christian community to the issue—locally, nationally, and globally. This step involves the participants in examining what the Christian faith says about a particular social issue. They explore what the Christian community is doing about social issues and what motivates its response. Reflection calls forth not just an intellectual assent to faith, but a commitment to incorporate a faith response within one's own life. The Word of God brought to bear upon the situation challenges old ways of thinking and responding by raising new questions, suggesting new insights, and opening people up to new action possibilities.

The Bible Teaches. . . Jesus Respects and Restores Human Dignity

Preparation

Use the information on Handout #8 to prepare an introduction to Jesus' ministry to restore and affirm the dignity of people that society had deemed worthless. Use these or your own words:

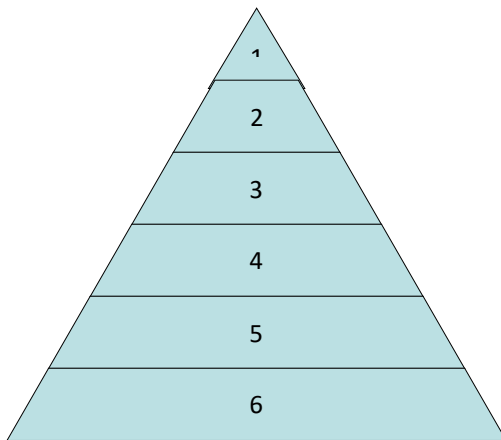
We are now going to explore the way Jesus respected and restored the human dignity of people. The overall picture is that whatever society had dismissed, devalued, or forgotten, Jesus pursued. Jesus did not exclude anybody on the basis of group affiliation or on the unchosen givens of the human condition such as sickness. Jesus was not prejudiced; he took each person on his or her merits. What is fascinating and liberating about Jesus is that he encountered each person as unique with a dignity given by God. Jesus restored people to health and in so doing helped them regain their own sense of dignity. His love and forgiveness restored their dignity as sons and daughters of God.

In the Jewish society of Jesus' time there was a ranking of people—everyone had a place on the social ladder. Status and prestige were based upon ancestry, wealth, authority, education, and virtue. Status and prestige were signified and maintained by whom you entertained socially and who invited you to their table and by where you were placed at a banquet or where you sat in the synagogue. Rights and privileges were given out according to one's rank and the people who had no

status at all in society—women, children, the poor, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the maimed, and lepers—were totally excluded.

The social ladder in Jesus' time would have looked like a pyramid with the religious authorities at the top of the pyramid and the "outcasts" at the bottom:

- 1 - Religious Authorities: Chief Priests and Sanhedrin (men)
- 2 – Sadducees: the wealthy, ruling class in Jewish society (men)
- 3 – Pharisees: the religious, law-abiding Jews, middle class (men)
- 4 - Working class (men)
- 5 - Women and children
- 6 - The "outcasts:" the poor, the blind, the lame, the sick, lepers, adulterers, beggars, tax collectors



Jesus confronted and contradicted this ladder. Jesus valued people, not status and prestige.

In Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus announces his mission—a mission to the "outcasts" of his day.

"When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" (Luke 4:16-21)

Materials Needed

- Bible or copy of the Gospel stories for every table

- Creative art supplies: magazines with photos, newsprint, paper, poster paper, markers, crayons, etc. (See the details in each activity.)
- Handouts #2 and #3

All activities engage the participants in reading a story of Jesus respecting and restoring the dignity of an “outcast” person. The following chart presents the Gospel stories that you can assign to the groups.

Gospel Stories	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Jesus pardons the sinful woman			7:36-50	
Jesus and the Samaritan women at the well				4:1-42
Jesus heals a nobleman’s son				4:46-54
Jesus forgives a woman caught in adultery				8:1-11
Jesus heals a blind man				9:1-7, 35-38
Jesus and Zacchaeus			19:1-10	
Jesus heals a leper	8:2-4	1:40-45	5:12-16	
Jesus heals a centurion’s servant	8:5-13		7:1-10	
Jesus heals the sick in the evening	8:16-17	1:32-34	4:40-41	
Jesus heals a paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:18-26	
Jesus raises Jairus’ daughter	9:18-19, 23-26	5:22-24, 35-43	8:40-42, 49-56	
Jesus heals a woman hemorrhaging	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
Jesus heals two blind men	9:27-31			
Jesus heals a demon-possessed, mute man	9:32-33			
Jesus heals a man with a withered hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
Jesus heals a demon-possessed, blind, and mute man	12:22		11:14	
Jesus feeds more than 5,000 people	14:13-21	6:30-44	9:10-17	6:1-14
Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee	14:22-27	6:45-52		6:16-21
Jesus heals the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter	15:21-28	7:24-30		
Jesus feeds more than 4,000 people	15:32-39	8:1-10		
Jesus heals an epileptic boy	17:14-18	9:17	9:38-42	
Jesus blesses the children	19:13-15	10:13-16	18:15-17	
Jesus heals two blind men near Jericho	20:29-34			
Jesus casts out an unclean spirit		1:23-28	4:33-37	
Jesus heals a deaf mute		7:31-37		
Jesus heals the blind man at Bethsaida		8:22-26		
Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus		10:46-52	18:35-43	
Jesus raises a widow’s son at Nain			7:11-17	
Jesus heals an infirm, bent woman			13:11-13	
Jesus heals a man with dropsy			14:1-4	
Jesus heals ten lepers			17:11-19	

Assign one or more Gospel stories to each group, depending on the activity instructions.

Give each group a Bible or copy of the Gospel stories. You may want to write the Gospel passage on a file card to give each group.

First Option: Promoting the Message of Human Dignity

Explain to each group that they represent an advertising firm charged with the task of “selling” the message on the dignity of human life, helping people become more aware of the teachings of Jesus and moving them to action. The message they are to work with is found in the Gospel story.

Direct each group to read their Gospel story aloud, and then discuss it using the following reflection questions:

- What is the situation? How is the person or group being denied human dignity?
- What does Jesus say and do?
- What is Jesus teaching us about respecting human dignity?

Explain to each family group or small group that their task is to design a full-page ad that will run in local newspapers or in national magazines targeted at families with children or adolescents or adults (each group should target their own age group). Use the following questions to help each group focus their task.

- How will you design your ad to help people see the message in the Bible on human dignity in a new way?
- What symbols or illustrations, slogans or sayings would be appropriate?
- How will you apply the message to life today?

Instruct each group to develop a full-color draft of their ad on the paper provided (newsprint, poster paper). They can use the markers to draw their ad and use magazines for illustrations and pictures.

Invite groups to share their ads with other like groups nearby.

Conclude by engaging the participants in a discussion of the message of Jesus and the Bible using the following questions:

- How would you characterize Jesus’ practice toward those who society says do not have dignity or worth?
- How does Jesus’ approach compare with what we see in our country and world today?
- What if society adopted the teachings of Jesus and the Bible on human dignity? What would change?

Second Option: Rewriting a Gospel Story

Give each family one Gospel story to re-write or to illustrate. Younger children can illustrate the story with drawings and pictures from magazines.

Invite participants to imagine:

- If Jesus were here today, how would he “re-work” this Gospel story to speak to people today?
- How can we apply Jesus’ message to life today?

- Refer participants to the last activity in which they identified people who are “forgotten” by society. What would Jesus do for them?

Encourage families to share their writings or drawings with other families near them.

Invite them to discuss in their table groups the message of Jesus, using the following questions:

- What is Jesus teaching us about human dignity and worth?
- How does Jesus’ teaching compare with what we see in our country and world today?
- What if society adopted the teachings of Jesus and the Bible on human dignity? What would change?

Activity 3. How Can We Promote and Respect the Dignity of Human Life?

Pastoral Circle Process: Action

Preparation

Create a “Dignity of Human Life Action” handout with ideas and projects that you want individuals, families, or the entire church community to adopt. You might want to select a particular local, national, and international project/program that you want the entire church community to adopt, providing a focus for action and giving everyone an opportunity to work together to make a difference. Begin by researching local organizations involved in direct service to those in need and organizations working to alleviate the causes of injustice (advocacy groups, community organizing groups, etc.).

Review the descriptions of featured national and international projects that individuals, families, and the entire church community can support. Select a variety of action ideas and one or more featured projects you would like to recommend to people to support and include these descriptions in your handout. Be sure to include projects that your church community already supports.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #4 and #5
- Handout you prepared with service projects/ideas for outreach

1. Accepting Our Responsibilities and Moving to Action

Pass out the handouts to participants. Invite them to follow along on Handout #4. Introduce the final activity by explaining to the group, in your own words, the following:

In this final activity we are going to explore ways we can all get involved, regardless of how young or old we are, and accept our responsibility to the poor and vulnerable in our country and world. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu once noted, “Goodness, laughter, joy, caring, compassion, the things that you do and you help others do, those are going to prevail.”

Action involves helping people survive their present crisis or need *and* addressing the root causes of the problems. We call this the “two feet of social action:” direct service to those in need, and action for justice to address the causes that perpetuate the problem.

Collecting food for the food bank, working at a soup kitchen, visiting the elderly or sick, and tutoring children are common examples of direct service. Direct service needs to be coupled with actions aimed at removing the causes of the problems that direct service is addressing. Legislative advocacy, community organizing, and working with organizations that are changing the structures that promote injustice are examples of action for justice.

To walk with both feet of social action, an individual or family who prepares and serves a meal at the homeless shelter could also be involved with the local organization which is working to create housing, employment, and just policies for those without adequate housing, or make a contribution to Habitat for Humanity which is addressing the worldwide problem of inadequate housing.

By walking on both feet we will experience the benefits of working directly with the homeless *and* learning to change the system which keeps people homeless. Real change will come about only when we work together to alleviate the present suffering caused by an injustice and organize our energies to eradicate the causes of the injustice.

Summarize the ideas for action in the booklet or newsletter you prepared, including the featured projects. If your church has chosen one or more featured projects to adopt, provide a more detailed explanation of how people can be involved in these projects.

2. Action for Human Dignity

Review the Action Projects Booklet with service and justice projects and give families and individuals time to discuss how they would like to be involved.

Ask participants to create a commitment card with a variety of project ideas: personal, family, and working with others in the church community or in community organizations.

Adolescent & Adult Learning Experiences

Activity 1. What Are the Threats to Human Life? Treated with or without Dignity

Pastoral Circle Process: Exploration-Analysis

Exploration or analysis, the second phase of the Pastoral Circle Process, helps the participants ask *why* in the face of human suffering and injustice. Why do these conditions exist? What role do politics or economics or cultural values play in perpetuating the problem?

Exploration broadens the participants' thinking by helping them look for the causes of the injustice; examine the relationships among politics, economics, and cultural values in our world that perpetuate the injustice; and analyze the social or structural realities that keep the situation from changing. Exploration helps the participants understand the social issue more thoroughly so they can envision ways to be involved in working for justice.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint and markers
- Paper and pens

Guide the table groups through the following process. Each group should identify a recorder.

Ask participants to reflect on the challenges and threats to the human dignity of every person in the local, national, and global community. Instruct each group to brainstorm a list of specific and detailed challenges to human dignity. Each group recorder should write the list on a sheet of paper.

Give a few examples to get the groups started: lack of food security for so many, racism, sexism, materialism, abortion, euthanasia, death penalty, war, terrorism, treatment of refugees and immigrants.

After sufficient time for groups to finish the task, share the following:

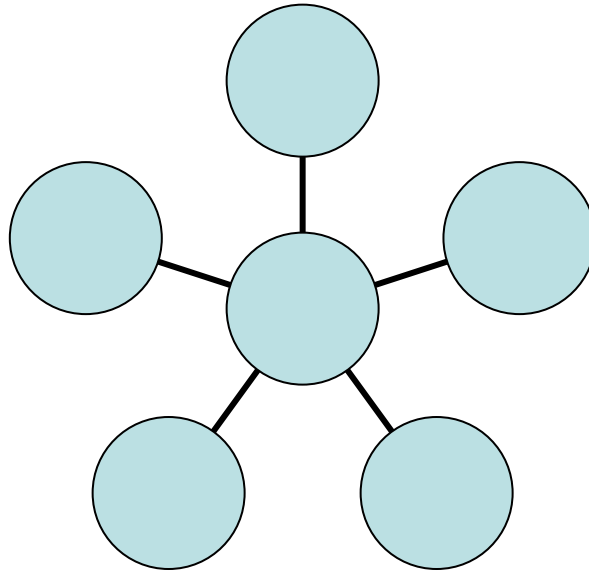
Jesus and the Bible tell us that our dignity does not come from the work we do, from our social positions, or from what we have, but from the fact that we are all children of God, beloved by our Creator.

Why do you think it is difficult to recognize the worth of many people in this society? In your small groups, identify those values in our society that make it difficult to recognize people's worth and respect their dignity.

Direct each group recorder to write the list on a sheet of paper. Give a few examples to get the groups started: the prestige and status that comes with money and the de-valuing of people who do not have money or a good job, stereotypes that value one race or ethnic group over another, emphasis on health and youth leads to devaluing the elderly and the sick.

Direct each group to create a diagram on newsprint that identifies the threats to human life and some of the values that work against human dignity. The diagram should have the heading, "Threats to Human Dignity," at the top of the sheet.

Ask groups to use a "bubble format" by placing the word "Threats" in the center bubble and then identify individual threats in the outside bubbles. See the sample below. Ask each group to relate each threat to attitudes in our society that they see contributing to the de-valuing of human dignity.



Invite groups to share their work with another table group and then post the newsprint on the wall for all to see.

Reflection

In the large group or in small groups with reporting, ask the participants to briefly discuss their thoughts and feelings about what they have just experienced. Use the following questions.

- How are you feeling about the situation of so many people in our world today who are being denied their God-given human dignity?
- What did you learn about the things that contribute to de-valuing the worth of other human beings?

Activity 2. What Do the Scriptures Say about the Dignity of Human Life?

Pastoral Circle Process: Reflection

Preparation

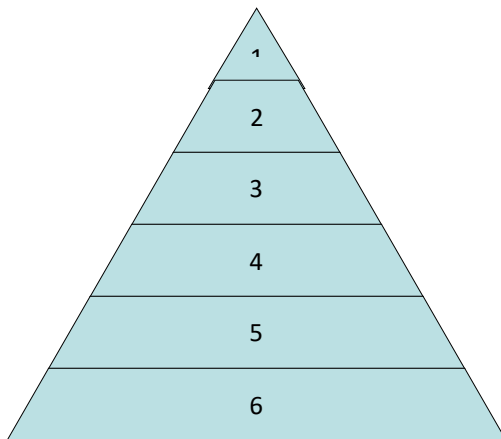
Use the information on Handout #7 to prepare an introduction to Jesus' ministry to restore and affirm the dignity of people that society had deemed worthless. Use these or your own words:

We are now going to explore the way Jesus respected and restored the human dignity of people. The overall picture is that whatever society had dismissed, devalued, or forgotten, Jesus pursued. Jesus did not exclude anybody on the basis of group affiliation or on the unchosen givens of the human condition such as sickness. Jesus was not prejudiced; he took each person on his or her merits. What is fascinating and liberating about Jesus is that he encountered each person as unique with a dignity given by God. Jesus restored people to health and in so doing helped them regain their own sense of dignity. His love and forgiveness restored their dignity as sons and daughters of God.

In the Jewish society of Jesus' time there was a ranking of people—everyone had a place on the social ladder. Status and prestige were based upon ancestry, wealth, authority, education, and virtue. Status and prestige were signified and maintained by whom you entertained socially and who invited you to their table and by where you were placed at a banquet or where you sat in the synagogue. Rights and privileges were given out according to one's rank and the people who had no status at all in society—women, children, the poor, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the maimed, and lepers—were totally excluded.

The social ladder in Jesus' time would have looked like a pyramid with the religious authorities at the top of the pyramid and the “outcasts” at the bottom:

- 1 - Religious Authorities: Chief Priests and Sanhedrin (men)
- 2 – Sadducees: the wealthy, ruling class in Jewish society (men)
- 3 – Pharisees: the religious, law-abiding Jews, middle class (men)
- 4 - Working class (men)
- 5 - Women and children
- 6 - The “outcasts:” the poor, the blind, the lame, the sick, lepers, adulterers, beggars, tax collectors



Jesus confronted and contradicted this ladder. Jesus valued people, not status and prestige.

In Chapter 4 of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus announces his mission—a mission to the “outcasts” of his day.

“When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:16-21)

Choose one of the following two activities to continue learning: Beliefs That Lead to Action or The Wisdom of Scripture.

1. Beliefs That Lead to Action

Materials Needed

- Bible or copy of the Gospel stories for every table
- Handouts #2, #3, and #4

The following chart presents the Gospel stories that you can assign to the groups.

Gospel Stories	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Jesus pardons the sinful woman			7:36-50	
Jesus and the Samaritan women at the well				4:1-42
Jesus heals a nobleman’s son				4:46-54
Jesus forgives a woman caught in adultery				8:1-11
Jesus heals a blind man				9:1-7, 35-38
Jesus and Zacchaeus			19:1-10	
Jesus heals a leper	8:2-4	1:40-45	5:12-16	
Jesus heals a centurion’s servant	8:5-13		7:1-10	
Jesus heals the sick in the evening	8:16-17	1:32-34	4:40-41	
Jesus heals a paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:18-26	
Jesus raises Jairus’ daughter	9:18-19, 23-26	5:22-24, 35-43	8:40-42, 49-56	
Jesus heals a woman hemorrhaging	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
Jesus heals two blind men	9:27-31			
Jesus heals a demon-possessed, mute man	9:32-33			
Jesus heals a man with a withered hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
Jesus heals a demon-possessed, blind, and mute man	12:22		11:14	
Jesus feeds more than 5,000 people	14:13-21	6:30-44	9:10-17	6:1-14
Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee	14:22-27	6:45-52		6:16-21
Jesus heals the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter	15:21-28	7:24-30		
Jesus feeds more than 4,000 people	15:32-39	8:1-10		
Jesus heals an epileptic boy	17:14-18	9:17	9:38-42	
Jesus blesses the children	19:13-15	10:13-16	18:15-17	
Jesus heals two blind men near Jericho	20:29-34			
Jesus casts out an unclean spirit		1:23-28	4:33-37	
Jesus heals a deaf mute		7:31-37		
Jesus heals the blind man at Bethsaida		8:22-26		
Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus		10:46-52	18:35-43	
Jesus raises a widow’s son at Nain			7:11-17	
Jesus heals an infirm, bent woman			13:11-13	

Jesus heals a man with dropsy			14:1-4	
Jesus heals ten lepers			17:11-19	

Give each group a Bible or copy of the Gospel stories. You may want to write the Gospel passage on a file card to give each group.

Assign each person or pair in the group one Gospel story. Give the participants several minutes to read the passage and prepare a summary of what they think Jesus is saying to us today through this story. It is important that they not only summarize Jesus' teaching but relate it to the world today. Refer participants to the earlier activity in which they identified people and groups who are being denied their human dignity.

Use the following questions to guide the work of the participants:

- What is the situation? How does the person or group lack human dignity?
- What does Jesus say and do?
- What is Jesus teaching us about respecting human dignity?
- How does Jesus' message apply to society today?

Have participants read their Gospel story aloud or summarize it for the others in their group, and then share what they think Jesus is saying to us today through this passage.

Pass out Handout #2. Working in pairs, have teams review the wisdom of the Scriptures on the handout. Assign two or three quotes to each pair. Ask them to read the quotes and use the following questions to summarize the Bible's message:

- What is the Bible teaching us about respecting human dignity?
- How is the faith community applying the Bible's teachings to society today?

Pass out Handout #3. Ask participants to complete the handout as a group, working together to clarify what they believe, the situation today, and how we can act in the world to respect human dignity.

Invite groups to share their "Beliefs that Lead to Action" statements with at least one other group near them.

Invite the participants to discuss in their groups the message of Jesus and the Bible using the following questions:

- How would you characterize Jesus' practice toward those who society says do not have dignity or worth?
- How does Jesus' approach compare with what you see in our country and world today?
- What if society adopted the teachings of Jesus on human dignity? What would change?

2. The Wisdom of Scripture

Materials Needed

- Bible or copy of the Gospel stories for every table
- Newsprint and markers for each table group
- Handouts #2 and #3

The following chart presents the Gospel stories that you can assign to the groups.

Gospel Stories	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Jesus pardons the sinful woman			7:36-50	
Jesus and the Samaritan women at the well				4:1-42
Jesus heals a nobleman's son				4:46-54
Jesus forgives a woman caught in adultery				8:1-11
Jesus heals a blind man				9:1-7, 35-38
Jesus and Zacchaeus			19:1-10	
Jesus heals a leper	8:2-4	1:40-45	5:12-16	
Jesus heals a centurion's servant	8:5-13		7:1-10	
Jesus heals the sick in the evening	8:16-17	1:32-34	4:40-41	
Jesus heals a paralytic	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:18-26	
Jesus raises Jairus' daughter	9:18-19, 23-26	5:22-24, 35-43	8:40-42, 49-56	
Jesus heals a woman hemorrhaging	9:20-22	5:25-34	8:43-48	
Jesus heals two blind men	9:27-31			
Jesus heals a demon-possessed, mute man	9:32-33			
Jesus heals a man with a withered hand	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11	
Jesus heals a demon-possessed, blind, and mute man	12:22		11:14	
Jesus feeds more than 5,000 people	14:13-21	6:30-44	9:10-17	6:1-14
Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee	14:22-27	6:45-52		6:16-21
Jesus heals the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter	15:21-28	7:24-30		
Jesus feeds more than 4,000 people	15:32-39	8:1-10		
Jesus heals an epileptic boy	17:14-18	9:17	9:38-42	
Jesus blesses the children	19:13-15	10:13-16	18:15-17	
Jesus heals two blind men near Jericho	20:29-34			
Jesus casts out an unclean spirit		1:23-28	4:33-37	
Jesus heals a deaf mute		7:31-37		
Jesus heals the blind man at Bethsaida		8:22-26		
Jesus heals blind Bartimaeus		10:46-52	18:35-43	
Jesus raises a widow's son at Nain			7:11-17	
Jesus heals an infirm, bent woman			13:11-13	
Jesus heals a man with dropsy			14:1-4	
Jesus heals ten lepers			17:11-19	

Ask each table group to select a recorder. Instruct the recorder to draw a line down the middle of a sheet of newsprint, creating two columns. Ask the recorder to write at the top of the left column,

“Values of American Society,” and at the top of the right column, “Wisdom of Jesus and the Christian Tradition.”

Direct the groups to develop a list of five to ten values of American society that work against respecting and protecting people’s human dignity. Refer participants to the earlier activity in which they identified threats to human dignity and the values that supported those threats. Have the recorder write this list in the left column.

Assign each person or pair in the group one Gospel story.

Give the participants several minutes to read the passage and prepare a summary of what they think Jesus is saying to us today through this story. It is important that they not only summarize Jesus’ teaching but relate it to the world today. Refer participants to the previous activity in which they identified people and groups who are being denied their human dignity.

Use the following questions to guide the work of the participants:

- What is the situation? How does the person or group lack human dignity?
- What does Jesus say and do?
- What is Jesus teaching us about respecting human dignity?
- How does Jesus’ message apply to society today?

Have participants read their Gospel story aloud or summarize it for the others in their group, and then share what they think Jesus is saying to us today through this passage.

Working in pairs, have teams review the wisdom of Scripture using Handout #2. Assign two or three passages to each pair. Ask them to read the quotes and use the following questions to summarize the Bible’s message:

- What is the Bible teaching us about respecting human dignity?
- How is the Christian Church applying the Bible’s teachings to society today?

Teams report their findings to their group. Together the group applies the teaching of Jesus and/or the Bible teachings to each of society’s values by developing a summary statement that provides a positive response to each of society’s values they have listed on newsprint.

Post the newsprint sheets and invite everyone to read how the wisdom of Christian tradition confronts values that work against human dignity.

Conclude with a discussion of the message of Jesus and the Bible using the following questions:

- How would you characterize Jesus’ practice toward those who society says do not have dignity or worth?
- How does Jesus’ approach compare with what you see in our country and world today?
- What if society adopted the teachings of Jesus and the Bible on human dignity? What would change?

Activity 3. How Can We Promote and Respect the Dignity of Human Life?

See Activity 3 in the Families with Children Learning Experiences.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (20-25 minutes)

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they learned with the entire group.

Ask representatives from the family, adolescent, and adult groups to share the projects they created in Learning Experience Two: What do the Scriptures and Bible Teachings Say About the Dignity of Human Life?

Have people rejoin their groups from the All Ages Learning Experience. Guide individuals and families in sharing what they learned through the program.

Present the following information using the words below or your own words:

Think of everything we have done in this session to learn about the message of the Scriptures and the Bible teachings on human dignity and the value of human life. What is the most important lesson you have learned tonight? Why do you think respecting and promoting human dignity is so important for us as Christians?

Allow several minutes for small group sharing, and if time allows, ask for responses from the group.

Part 5. Closing Prayer Service (5-10 minutes)

Gather

God of Life, you proclaim that all human life is sacred and that every person is precious in your sight. Give us the courage to work toward a world that respects and protects the human dignity of all people regardless of what society tells us to think. Help us to create a world where every human life counts from conception to old age. Amen.

Listen

Select one of the following Scripture readings and proclaim it to the assembly:

- Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (Choose Life)
- One of the Gospel stories used in the session. See the chart in the session for examples.

Respond

For children who are unwanted, unloved, neglected, or abused, that God may fill their voids with his love, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For all who do not embrace the rights of the unborn that, in love, they may come to know and treasure the infinite value of every human person, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For parents who struggle to make ends meet, that they may find strength when they grow weary, and that they may earn a just wage, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For families and persons who care for those with special emotional or physical needs, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For those who have grown old, that society will acknowledge the contributions which the elderly have made and continue to make to our world, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For those coming through the bleakness of drug or alcohol addiction, unsure of their ability to face life without these supports, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For the unemployed, that they may not lose courage and hope while searching for work, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For the hungry, may they have enough, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For those deprived of their human needs and their human rights, that they may be given the dignity you confer on all your people, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For those who witness to the rights of all human beings. that God might strengthen and guide them, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For a spirit of repentance and conversion, that the culture of death may be defeated by the power of the Cross of Jesus, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For all who are about to die, that through our love, care, and devotion, they might know the beauty of life, to the moment of their final breath, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For those who long for the equality of all persons, that their dedication to the unborn, the old, the condemned, and the forgotten may grow every day, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For all who teach the Gospel of Life, that they might be driven by love alone, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

For those who work to change our laws to reflect the Gospel of Life, that God might inspire and shepherd them, we pray:

Response: Lord, hear our prayer for dignity of all people.

Go Forth

Father and maker of all,
you adorn all creation
with splendor and beauty,
and fashion human lives
in your image and likeness.

Awaken in every heart
reverence for the work of your hands,
and renew among your people
a readiness to nurture and sustain
your precious gift of life.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.