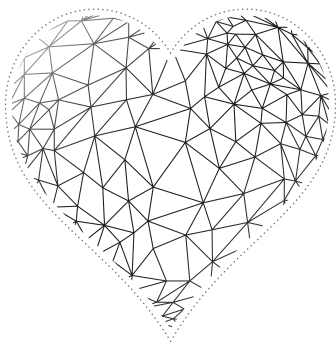


# 2026 A Call to Prayer & Self-Denial





# **The Future Is Now Invest in Our Children**

by Carol Burnett

## **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the 2026 United Women in Faith's A Call to Prayer and Self-Denial Service.

The 2026 theme, *The Future Is Now: Invest in Our Children*, is an expansive topic, as our children are influenced, and their future is shaped by all they experience at home, in their church, community, and world. We are their caregivers and those who shape their environment, whether we have children or not and whether we are currently caring for children or not. So, in many ways, this program is for us, the adults who shoulder this awesome responsibility.

Too many of our children live in poverty, too many live in families that can't afford what they need despite the fact their parents work. Too many children are hungry and too many children live in unsafe housing and unsafe communities. Too many children don't have the health care or the early childhood education they need because their parents can't afford it. Our children need us to act on their behalf to address these problems and protect them. This often means helping their parents, and it often means prioritizing children in national policy and budgeting.

This year's A Call to Prayer and Self-Denial offering will help children through the work of National Mission Institutions, which helps our most marginalized and vulnerable children through low-cost early childhood education, afterschool programs with a hot meal and caring mentors and enrichment programs, mental health counseling and social-emotional support, internships and work experiences, life-saving intensive care for severely traumatized youth, guidance for the transition to adulthood and independence, and reunification with family.

We are in a troubling period where many government-funded programs supporting children are at risk of reduction or elimination. The National Mission Institutions will remain steadfast throughout these tumultuous times, but they need our help.

Let's learn more about their work with children and know that our gifts today will impact the lives of countless children across the country. Our charge is daunting, but we can meet the moment and build the future we want for all our children.

Let's get started.

### **Before the service**

- Identify at least three readers to help lead the service.
- Find articles and photos from **response** that uplift the work of National Mission Institutions with children and youth.
- Cut out NMI photos for placement on the altar. Photos can be found online ([bit.ly/CTP-2026-toolkit](https://bit.ly/CTP-2026-toolkit)).
- Gather materials for the activity and altar (see list below).

### **Materials**

For the activity:

- Printed list of National Mission Institutions working with children and youth found online at: [bit.ly/CTP-2026-toolkit](https://bit.ly/CTP-2026-toolkit).
- Postcards, greeting cards, or blank paper and envelopes
- Stamps
- Pens and pencils

For the altar:

- Cloth or table covering
- Photos or artifacts from National Mission Institutions, **response** articles featuring National Mission Institutions
- Baskets for the offering
- Plants, candles, and other things for the altar

## **WORSHIP CELEBRATION: THE FUTURE IS NOW: INVEST IN OUR CHILDREN**

**Leader:** Welcome to this sacred time of worship. Today, we gather to glorify God and reflect on our collective responsibility to care for our children. Our foremothers recognized the needs of children and youth in their local communities and started childcare centers, orphanages, schools, feeding programs, and training opportunities. Their efforts continue today through the work of National Mission Institutions.

This year's A Call to Prayer and Self-Denial offering will support programs and national advocacy efforts at National Mission Institutions. Programs such as

anti-violence and child protection programs; daycare, afterschool, and wrap-around programs; vocational livelihood training for refugee and vulnerable children and youth; access to education and life opportunities for children with disabilities; and advocacy to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

Let us open our hearts and minds as we ask for God's guidance in how we are called to create a world where every child is loved, valued, and able to thrive.

### **Opening Prayer**

Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of children and for the joy they bring into our lives. We ask for your wisdom and strength today as we reflect on how we can better serve the youngest among us. Help us to be faithful stewards of their well-being, advocating for policies and practices that nurture them into the fullness of who you created them to be. Stir in us a deep compassion and urgency to take action, bolstering the missions that bring them hope. Move us to embrace your call to give of ourselves to nurture all children, especially those pushed to the margins. May your love guide our actions, and may your justice flow through our hearts. Amen.

**Reader:** Let us listen to God's Word, reminding us of the precious value of children and the sacred trust we have in their care and upbringing.

### **Scripture Readings**

#### **Mark 9:36–37 (NIV)**

[Jesus] took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

#### **Matthew 18:3–5 (NRSVUE)**

[Jesus said,] "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

### **Song**

"This Little Light of Mine," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, #585

### **Message: A Charge to Support Children**

Jesus made it clear: when we welcome and care for a child, we are welcoming him. In this simple but profound truth, we are reminded that children are not just our future—they are God's precious gifts in the present. Each child carries

inherent dignity, value, and purpose, and as followers of Christ, we are called to see them through Jesus' eyes.

Caring for children is not a task reserved for just parents or teachers—it is a calling for all of us. Whether we interact with them daily or rarely cross their paths, we have a role to play in creating a world where children can flourish physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

God calls us to not just to love in words but by our actions. This means nurturing children through encouragement, mentorship, and unconditional compassion. It means standing in the gap when they are vulnerable, advocating for justice on their behalf, and supporting the National Mission Institutions that serve on our behalf. Every child deserves access to education, food, safety, health care, and the hope of a bright future.

The National Mission Institution programs we celebrate in today's offering provide for the most vulnerable children in our midst. At MacDonell United Methodist Children's Services in Louisiana, children find a home where they can experience safety and healing. In Georgia, the New Bethlehem Community Center empowers young minds with K-12 education and supports pregnant teens. In Arizona, the Wesley Community Center offers health care, afterschool programs, and ESL classes. In Utah, Crossroads Urban Center helps families in crisis access emergency food, clothing, and household essentials.

These ministries are the hands and feet of Christ in action—and we are invited to join them through the Call to Prayer and Self-Denial offering.

As we give, pray, and advocate, may we be reminded that when we welcome and serve a child, we are welcoming Christ. Let us open our hearts to the children around us—not just today, but every day—and be vessels of God's life-changing love and unwavering justice.

### **Prayer: Open My Eyes, That I May See**

*The United Methodist Hymnal, #454*

Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth thou hast for me;  
place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for thee, ready, my God, thy will to see.

Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine.

Amen.

WORDS: Clara H. Scott, 1895  
Public Domain

## Reading 1: Children Learn What They Live

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.

If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.

If children live with ridicule, they learn to be shy.

If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.

If children live with tolerance, they learn to be patient.

If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

If children live with praise, they learn to appreciate.

If children live with fairness, they learn justice.

If children live with security, they learn to have faith.

If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.

If children live with acceptance and friendship, they learn to find love in the world.

*If children live with secure homes, they learn to thrive.*

*If children live without fear of law enforcement, they learn to hope.*

*If children live with a supportive community, they learn to trust.*

*If children live with nourished bodies, they learn to grow.*

From *Children Learn What They Live* by Rachel Harris, copyright © 1998. Reprinted by permission of Workman Publishing, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc. *Italicized text was added for this service.*


## Song

"What Does the Lord Require," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, # 441

## Responsive Reading

**All:** Income inequality in the United States has been growing, and many children grow up in families struggling to meet basic needs. Economic disparities are often exacerbated by factors such as race, geography, and family structure.

**Reader 1:** Bethlehem Center donated clothes and food to a family that was on our waitlist for a few months. They were a young couple with two children that needed clothing and shoes. Their apartment was not habitable for a pregnant mother and her family of four. We worked with this family for over five months



to get the items and housing they needed. We purchased diapers, wipes, and formula. When the new twins were born, the family could move to a habitable home. The money we received from United Women in Faith allowed us to purchase these items, and with no registration fees, the children were enrolled in a free Early Head Start program.

**All: Raising the federal minimum wage and ensuring family-supporting wages for low-income workers can reduce income inequality and alleviate poverty. We give thanks for Bethlehem Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina who cared for this family.**

**All: Children in low-income households face increased risks of poor health, limited access to quality education, and food insecurity.**

**Reader 2:** At the Bethlehem Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee, we believe in the power of holistic education—an approach that nurtures not only the minds of our students but also their bodies, spirits, and connection to the world around them. In 2024, the Read to Lead Academy integrated the farm at Bethlehem into the program, creating a unique learning opportunity for our students that combined agriculture, literacy, numeracy, and healthy living.

Read to Lead Academy students participated in the Farm and Garden Club, diving into a hands-on project that taught them about growth, responsibility, and the joys of seeing something flourish from the ground up.

This project wasn't just about gardening; it was a deeply interconnected learning experience that combined practical skills with educational goals. Students applied their literacy skills by reading instructions on how to care for the plants and researching the best ways to cultivate healthy crops. They enhanced their numeracy by measuring plant spacing, tracking growth, and calculating harvest yields. As they harvested the fruits of their labor, the students came together to make fresh salsa, using the very ingredients they grew. This was a celebratory moment, showing them the tangible results of their hard work and learning.

By working on the farm, students developed a deeper connection with God's earth, learning about stewardship, the cycles of nature, and the impact of caring for the environment. The project helped them understand that the food they eat doesn't just come from the store but is part of a larger ecosystem they can contribute to and care for.

The success of this project is a shining example of the Bethlehem Center's commitment to holistic education—teaching students not just academic skills but life skills that will nourish them for years to come.

**All:** Teaching children about growing food provides not only greater knowledge about health, but also about how to care for the environment, and how our actions impact others. We give thanks for the Bethlehem Center of Chattanooga.

**All:** There is a significant disparity in educational outcomes, particularly between white and minority children, as well as between children from wealthy and low-income families. These achievement gaps are exacerbated by underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of access to advanced coursework in disadvantaged communities.

**Reader 3:** A mother recently contacted us about her son, Ben, joining our afterschool program. Ben is a very energetic seven-year-old, and keeping his attention on his work at school and home has been a struggle for her. He is the middle child of three boys, and as a parent of three, I know the hardship for the mother to make sure all have the help at home they need for homework. That is where we can step in to help this family, particularly Ben. When he started our afterschool program, he was reluctant to participate in group activities or come forth with the homework he needed help with. His mom showed us some of his papers with average scores of 60-70, and his test scores at school were the same or even lower.

Our counselors work with kids one-on-one in these situations and help build their confidence. Ben has been with our program for several weeks and has made great progress. He loves to participate in our devotion time and group activities. He doesn't wait for the counselors to ask about homework, he voluntarily gets out the work he needs help with. He loves working with other kids doing STEM activities or engaging in outdoor recreation. Ben was excited to let us know that his scores on his homework papers are now averaging between 80-90. We are hoping to see an improvement in his test-taking at school, also.

We are so proud of Ben and amazed at how he improved his academics and how he seems more confident in trying new things, even though they may seem scary. This is only one example of how our youth programs help the children in our community. Our mission is to strengthen the youth of our community by empowering them spiritually, physically, mentally, and socially.

**All:** Expanding funding for after-school and summer learning programs can help mitigate the effects of learning loss and provide safe, enriching environments for children outside of school hours and better serve working parents. We give thanks for the work of Henderson Settlement in Frakes, Kentucky.

**All:** The cost of childcare is a significant burden on families, particularly low-income and middle-class families. Many parents, especially single parents,



**struggle to afford quality care for their children, which can lead to poor developmental outcomes for children in the absence of high-quality early childhood environments.**

**Reader 4:** Calister was struggling to make ends meet because she was raising her three grandchildren and her husband was between jobs. She did not work because childcare was not affordable. When she enrolled her grandchildren in Moore Community House Early Head Start, she didn't have to worry about paying the high cost of childcare. When we helped her obtain financial aid she went back to school to renew her CNA (Certified Nurse's Aide) license. Moore Community House also helped her find community resources to help pay utility bills and meet other needs. She says she would not have been able to do it without help from Moore Community House Early Head Start.

**All: Expanding and increasing funding for childcare subsidies would make childcare more affordable for low- and middle-income families. We give thanks for the work of Moore Community House in Biloxi, Mississippi, which supports women and their (grand)children to find stability and growth.**

### **Prayer of Confession**

Gracious God, we confess that too often, we have overlooked the needs of children and their families, especially those who live in poverty. We are grateful for the steadfast work of National Mission Institutions while we have been slow to act in justice, slow to speak out for those in need. Forgive us for our complacency and our failure to see your image in every child. Open our eyes and hearts to the suffering around us and lead us to act with compassion, urgency, and love. Amen.

### **Activity: A Word of Thanks**

Assign each participant a National Mission Institution, or print and cut the online list and have each person draw the name of a National Mission Institution.

On the greeting card, or letter paper, have each participant write a note to the National Mission Institution they selected. The note can thank the organization for the work they do with children, tell them that United Women in Faith supports them, ask them what their most critical needs are right now, and if there are any specific policies the National Mission Institution is advocating around. Be sure to invite further conversation by including a mailing address or email address where the National Mission Institution can respond.

Here's a sample:

*Dear friends at [National Mission Institution],*

*I am a member of United Women in Faith in [insert name of location]. We are so grateful for the ways in which you continue the legacy of our foremothers to address the needs of children and youth.*

*We continue to support you through our prayers and financial gifts. Please let us know what your most critical needs are right now, and/or if there are key policy measures you are advocating around.*

*You can write me back or email me at [email address].*

*Thank you,*

*[name]*

When participants are done writing their notes, have each place the note in an addressed envelope on the altar. The program leader will ensure these notes are mailed at the end of the service.

**Optional:** Use the online toolkit to learn about solutions that address the issues affecting children, then read the section in the toolkit on elected officials and identify your members of Congress and their contact information. Write a letter or postcard to your members of Congress advocating for changes that would improve the lives of children.

**Online Toolkit**  
**[bit.ly/CTP-2026-toolkit](https://bit.ly/CTP-2026-toolkit)**

## **Reading 2: "On Children"**

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

Excerpt of "On Children," poem by Kahil Gibran. Public Domain.



## A Call to Prayer & Self-Denial Offering

Our gifts today will support the work of National Mission Institutions that create a more just world for all children and their families. As we give our offering, we also bring our hearts and hands. Let us give generously, not only of our financial resources but also of our time, skills, and voices, advocating for policies that protect our children, end child poverty, and help our children thrive.

## Charge to United Women in Faith

**All:** As members of United Women in Faith, as stewards of God's love, we are all called to act, whether it's supporting local initiatives, engaging with lawmakers, standing in solidarity with those experiencing injustice, or meeting the needs of families. Let us not be passive bystanders but active participants in God's work.

As members of Christ's body let us go into the world with renewed commitment to see every child as a gift from God and to take action in whatever ways we can to ensure they have the support they need to grow in body, mind, and spirit. Be advocates, be protectors, and be champions for the children in our world.

## Benediction

**Leader:** Go forth today with a heart full of compassion and hands ready to serve the children of our world. Go forth in peace, knowing that your faith is made whole when it moves you to action. May God bless you with wisdom, strength, and courage as you work for a world where every child has the food, housing, education, health care, and safety they require. May you be instruments of God's peace and justice, inspired to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God, advocating for a world where every child can thrive. Amen.

## Closing Hymn

"Here I Am, Lord," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, #593

*Carol Burnett is the founder and executive director of the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative. She is also executive director of Moore Community House, a National Mission Institution that provides affordable child care and job training in nontraditional occupations for low-income single mothers in Biloxi.*

## Welcome to the 2026 Daily Prayer Guide

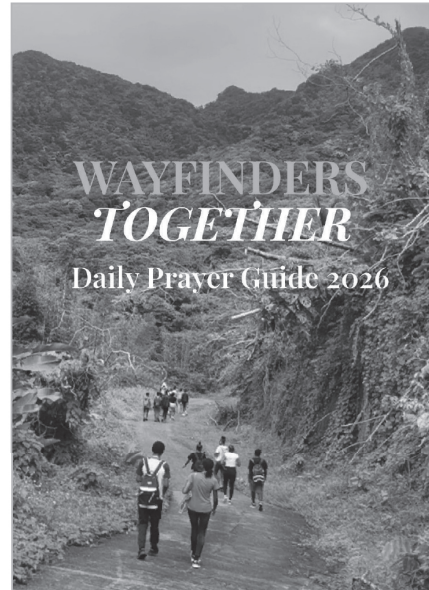
This year's Daily Prayer Guide focuses on how we, as God's people, are forging a new path as wayfinders in these "unprecedented times." The 2026 Daily Prayer Guide features accounts and graphics that illustrate spiritual and social wayfinding in such a time as this.

The Daily Prayer Guide includes many features to lead you through the year:

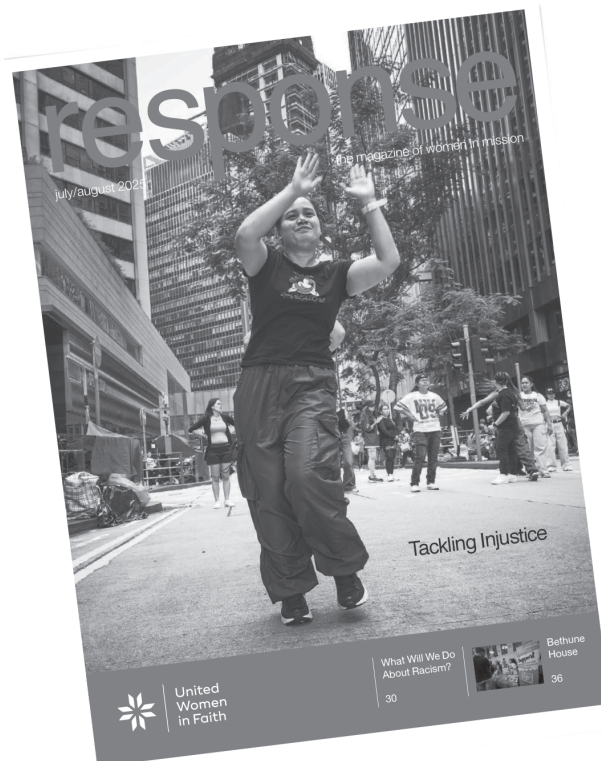
Weekly pages with photos, inspiring reflections, prayers, holidays, advocacy days, and lectionary readings.

A directory of mission personnel affiliated with United Women in Faith and Global Ministries. And more.

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