LEADER’S NOTES

Bible Study Suitable for a cross-cultural women’s group

Suggested time 2 hours (Could be run over 2 sessions)

Aims: To explore our differences and also discover points of connection as women. Through a bible study to develop a greater depth of understanding and appreciation of each other’s experiences.

Materials needed:
Ask people to bring with them a bible and a small piece of cloth. Prepare A4 sized paper and plenty of coloured felt pens. Some needles and thread

Step 1 Preparing Life Maps
Each person takes approximately 15-20 minutes on their own to draw their “Life map”. Ask people on their sheet of A4 paper to begin with their birth and trace through some of the key events and experiences in their life.

Step 2 Time of Sharing Life Maps
Each takes turns to share their life maps with each other. If it is a big group break into smaller groups. What has been a “golden thread” running through your life?

After everyone has shared ask -What have you learnt from this experience?

- The uniqueness of each person’s story
- A sense of our common humanity
- How do all these stories find a place in the story of God’s love?

Step 3 Bible Study  Read Genesis 16: 1-15; 21: 1-21

Break into 2 smaller groups; one group discusses what it feels like to be Sarah and the other what it is like to be Hagar. After a time apart the 2 groups come together for a conversation, still being their character in the story. Have a Conversation: What does each group want to say to the other? The leader may find it helpful to draw on the commentary notes written by Mukti Barton
Invite participants to listen to the *Dramatised Reading* with 2 people taking the parts of Sarah and Hagar.

**Time of Discussion**
- *How does this dramatic reading speak to you?*
- *What are some of the differences between women in our Church?*
- *How can we cross the gap that often divides us and build bridges of understanding?*

**Step 4 Learning from each other - *"Being a Girl"* A story from a cross cultural women’s group written by Eleanor Rowland**
- *How does this story speak to you?*

**Step 5 Time of Reflection**
Invite people to share one thing they have learned through this time together that they will away with them.
How could this experience be shared with others? For example during *One Great Sunday of Sharing.*

**Step 6 Closing time of worship**

_Hagar,_ you thought you had been abandoned by God but instead you were led to a spring of water and given courage to go on. May the despised of this world, find their thirst for justice quenched. _Sarah,_ barren for so long, insecure in God’s promise, we reach out to you naming our own fear and uncertainty. You show us that new life can come out of disappointment and pain. We remember you, our sisters from ancient times, mothers of two great nations. We light these candles in hope of reconciliation and healing between all God’s children.
Two candles may be lit

**A Patchwork Prayer** *Written by Coralie Ling and Jenny Meyers*

O Patchwork God, we are not sure we can address you like this but you are with so much diversity and the image springs to mind. For you bring each of us different shapes and sizes, different colours and ages, different experiences and languages, different memories and songs. Sew us together into the one patchwork quilt, a living glowing work of art.

We are made in your image Patchwork God.
You embody the rich colours of anger, love and growth, birth and death.
You shine with the lustre of the colours of the universe in the cosmic dance.
You hold all shapes and feelings, textures and thoughts,
directions and patterns within your being.
In our lives we need the contrasts of shade and darkness against the purple and scarlet.
In our community we need the gathering of threads that we may become the one fabric.

**Patchwork God enable us to be your patchwork people in your patchwork church.**

*Amen*

**Sewing our pieces of material together**
As a way to symbolise the time of sharing the group has experienced, we sew the pieces of material we each brought together.

*It doesn’t need to be a work of art! This may need to continue over coffee*

**Going Out Prayer**

The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it!

**We are thankful for the stories we have shared.**
In each there is richness and beauty, wonder and diversity.

**God weaves textures of meaning into the patterns of our lives!**
Commentary Notes on the Passage Material from Mukti Barton

Drawn from chapter 6 Scripture and Empowerment for Liberation: The Experience of Christian and Muslim Women in Bangladesh, (Available from Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender, University of Bristol, 3 Woodland Rd, Bristol, BS8 1TB, UK)

The Egyptian Hagar is introduced as Sarai’s personal slave who can be used to solve Sarai’s problem of barreness. Both women are under the tight control of a patriarchal society. In that cultural setting women’s value and respect was related to bearing sons. What Sarai suggests to Abram is completely in accord with her society’s cultural norm. The slave is her property and she has total control over her and her offspring. A child born to a slave belongs not to its biological mother but to the slave mistress.

The conflict between Sarai and Hagar reveal Sarai’s own pain of childlessness and helplessness that keeps her from being in solidarity with Hagar.

Becoming pregnant, Hagar’s self esteem is raised and her mistress’s status lowered in her esteem. Hagar begins to feel liberated from the exploitative system of slavery and tries to free herself from her desperate situation. Sarai feels he position is threatened by Hagar’s resistance to the status quo and becomes so harsh that Hagar flees thereby risking further punishment prescribed for runaway slaves. Desperately she heads home. In the wilderness there is a spring of water. There she meets an angel of the Lord’ (most commentators note that there is no distinction between an ‘angel of the Lord’ and Yahweh- God). Up until now it is Sarai and Abram who control Hagar’s life, there is no record of them speaking directly to her or her to them, but now, in this encounter, God speaks directly to Hagar, calling her by name and she renames the God of her experience. “You are El-roi”, for “I have seen the Lord and remained alive after seeing him”. It is unusual and extraordinary for a slave to name God and for this name to be recorded.

But God tells Hagar to go back and resubmit. Does God want Hagar to suffer further? Is she not to seek her own liberation from oppression? But Hagar does not return empty handed; she had met God, who knows her suffering, who led her to water. The well is renamed “Beer-lahai-roi” meaning “the well of the Living One who sees me”. Hagar comes back to Sarai but carries with her God’s promise. Though she is a marginalised person, her son will live and will become the father of a great nation.

The painful gulf between the two women only widens. God, who hears the cry of a poor slave woman, also hears the cry of Sarai, and she bears a son. Now, with her own child, Sarai can not bear to see her son play with the son of her slave. She asks Abram to cast Hagar and her son out; she will not risk the inheritance going to another son. So Hagar and Ismael are driven out. Hagar thinks they will die in the wilderness, but God is with them and again shows her where to find water and renews his promise to them. The story finishes telling us that Ismael lives long enough to be married. The rest of the biblical accounts do not mention the Ismaelites but Hagar and her son are not forgotten. In the Exodus story God speaks out against the system of slavery and creates a new community where slavery should no longer exist and where the stranger is to be cared for. (Ex 22: 21-24 Deut 10: 17-20)

In Islam, the Hadith takes up the story of Hagar where the biblical narrative ends. Hagar and Ismael are given asylum in Mecca and Hagar becomes the mother of Muslims. On pilgrimage Muslims drink from the well at Zamzam, the well given to Hagar to save the life of her son.
For Step 4   Learning from each other   ‘Being a Girl: Childhood’
Written by Eleanor  Rowland

This incident took place on week three of a 6-month migrant-women's project. It included 12 women from Cyprus, Sicily, Nth and Sth Italy, France, Poland, the Philippians, Japan and one 5th generation Australian. The day's topic was 'Being a Girl: Childhood.'

"Childhood?   What you mean, Childhood?" said Maria.
"Before you became a woman," replied Michelina.
"No! Not that! It's going to school," added Helena.
"Going to school? I didn't. It was wartime. I needed to help in my village," volunteered Giovanna.
"I went to standard 3, aged 8 years, then learnt - how do you say it? Sewing dresses, with my aunt," said Bella quietly.
"British occupied my island, Cyprus. There was no school then," thundered Helena.

"And you Amelia? What was your childhood like?"
"I went to a British boarding school in Malaysia and was privileged to have good teachers and servants." said the gentle, lady-like Filipino woman. She blushed as others glowered.

Japanese, Miyama and Aya were silent. Aya had been at school in Japan but highborn Miyama kept her past hidden. She was the daughter of a Samurai Class military man she explained privately to me, much later.
Miyama said. "Study was important to my parents. Girls didn't play, didn't run. Life was serious, not like Australia."

The atmosphere was tense.

The day's topic, which had promised to touch points of common interest, had aroused old national animosities from W.W. II. In desperation I prayed silently “Help, Lord, we need a way forward...."
But aloud I said ---- "Miyama, please show us what you have brought today."

Miyama handed out exquisitely beautiful origami paper squares. Deftly she led us in folding paper, this way & that. Slowly we relaxed and started to laugh at our fumbling attempts.

The result?

12 beautiful paper birds called cranes. "For you to keep." said Miyama.
The crane has become a symbol of peace used by the Japanese people after Hiroshima.
Based on Genesis 16 and 21

Sarah: I am called Sarah. My name means “princes.”

Hagar: I am called Hagar. My name means “flight.”

Sarah: I am Hebrew.

Hagar: I am Egyptian.

Sarah: I am Abraham’s wife.

Hagar: I am Sarah’s slave.

Sarah: I was barren; I hand no value as a woman.

Hagar: I was fruitful; I had no value as a woman.

Sarah: But God promised that I would be fruitful. I laughed.

Hagar: I received no promise. I cried.

Sarah: But I could not bear my husband a child. So I chose to give my slave to my slave to my husband to be his concubine. Perhaps I would have sons through her.

Hagar: I was not given a choice. I was forced to bear my master a child.

Sarah: When my slave became pregnant, she grew prideful. She looked upon me with disdain.

Hagar: I have no pride.

Sarah: I was outraged.

Hagar: I was despised.

Sarah: My husband told me that my slave was in my power. I could do as I wished to do.

Hagar: I had no power. I could not do as I wished.

Sarah: I beat her.

Hagar: I fled.

Sarah: She came back in submission.

Hagar: God sent me back to submit to my mistress’s abuse.

Sarah: Hagar bore a son. He was the son of a slave woman.

Hagar: I bore a son. My master named him Ishmael, meaning “my God hears me.” Does my God hear me?
Sarah: My God heard me, and I bore a son. My husband named him Isaac. Meaning “laughter.” All who heard of my joy laughed with me.

Hagar: I cannot laugh. I have no joy.

Sarah: I saw the slave child playing with my son. I told my husband to drive them out. No slave will share my son’s inheritance.

Hagar: We were driven into the desert with only a loaf of bread and a skin of water. When the water was gone, I sat and waited for my child to die.

Sarah: No slave will share my son’s inheritance.

Hagar: But God heard our cry and look pity on us. God said, “and take the boy by the hands; for I will make of him a great nation.”

Sarah: No slave will share my son’s inheritance.

Hagar: When I opened my eyes, I saw a well of water. We drank and returned to Egypt. God was with my son as he grew. He became the father of a great nation.

Sarah: God was with my son as he grew. He became the father of a great nation.

Hagar: I conceived my son in slavery. Now, I am free.

Sarah: I conceived my son in freedom. Why don’t feel free?

Hagar: {Turning to Sarah} We are mothers of great nations. We are equal.

Sarah: {Turning to Hagar} We are mothers of different nations. How can we be equal?

Hagar: If we become sisters, and no longer despise on another, then we shall bring forth great nations. We will all be equal. {Holds out her hand}

Sarah: We will not be sisters until we are equal. {Takes her hand}

Sarah and Hagar: {Holding hands and turning to front} We will not be equal until we are sisters.

Kay Murdy
Iona Community
Worship Book

This material has been prepared by Assembly Multicultural Ministry of the Uniting Church as a resource in preparation for One Great Sunday of Sharing, 2001. Feel free to use and photocopy with acknowledgment