

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

Seekers and new church participants may be unfamiliar with many things about the church in general and about the Bible specifically. They may have stereotypes about Christianity that need to be dismantled. They will have a faith life of varying maturity, depth, and breadth, but they may not have a faith language to speak of their faith experiences. Because they do not know a lot about the faith stories of Christianity, they may not understand how scripture can inform and reflect their faith or their lives. This will indeed be a time of discovery. It is important to whet their appetites for the richness and diversity of the Bible and help them see how encountering scripture will ground their day-to-day living.

About this Exploration

Scripture tells the story of God's relationship with human beings. It is a gift of God for the people of God. As we engage with scripture, we discover God and we discover a new world through words from long ago. We encounter scripture as an ancient text, but one that is living, breathing, and alive to contemporary people. It comforts and challenges, heals and holds accountable. Scripture expands worldviews and limits selfishness, offers forgiveness and embraces those who are on the margins. As we encounter scripture, we join with the great diversity of God's people to ask questions, connect with the text, pray, and discern together God's unfolding word for us.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Proverbs 2:1-8
John 21:1-19

Leader Preparation

When leading people who are new to your church community or who are seeking a church community, let your sense of hospitality guide you. The leadership qualities that may serve you best include facilitation, invitation, encouragement, and giving permission for questions and doubts. Reassure participants that there are not any stupid questions or comments. Everyone is here to learn from one another. Create a safe space by talking about the parameters and expectations for this time including:

- no pressure to talk
- no pressure to conform to certain beliefs
- extroverts need to pace their need to talk
- introverts need to assert themselves
- respect for others

In the spirit of hospitality for this session you may wish to have food and beverages available either before or after the session to encourage an informal mingling, unless you are doing Activity 9, which includes food. Welcome participants as they enter in the room and encourage mingling before starting the session. You may also wish to think about the space you will be using. Use it prayerfully. Remove clutter. Set chairs in a circle so that learners can all see one another's faces. Create a focal point with a table in the center covered with a cloth on which you place an open Bible or a candle, or

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Encountering Wisdom (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Arrange chairs in a circle leaving a couple of spaces for learners to enter the circle. Place a table in the center with an open Bible on it. Read an introduction to the book of Proverbs in your Bible, or read the information below.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Write this question on the newsprint or whiteboard and invite people to think in silence about it: *Who are some people in the world that you consider to be truly wise?* After a few moments invite the group members to mingle with one another and exchange names. Then ask each participant to name one wise person he or she would like to meet and why. Include yourself in this mingling.

Invite the learners to be seated. Ask the group to identify qualities and characteristics of wisdom. Use the following questions to stimulate discussion: *What is wisdom? From where does wisdom come? In what ways is wisdom cultivated? How does one become wise?* Record participants' ideas on the newsprint or whiteboard.

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wisdom sayings. The book was traditionally attributed to King Solomon (around 970 B.C.E.) because Solomon is said to have asked God for an understanding mind, literally a "listening heart" (1 Kings 3:6-9). Biblical scholars note that although some parts are very old, Proverbs has many essentially anonymous authors who contributed over many centuries. The book was completed during the period of exile in Babylon (597-538 B.C.E.). Proverbs sets out to teach the ways of wisdom and the desirability of avoiding ignorance and folly. Proverbs 2 is one of several chapters within Proverbs written in the voice of a female figure named Wisdom.

Ask someone to read aloud Proverbs 2:1-8. Reflect on the ideas about wisdom recorded long ago. *How is this scripture similar in its understanding of wisdom? What differences do you note? After having heard Proverbs 2:1-8, what other ideas about wisdom would you add to the list? What are some sources of wisdom in your life?*



2 People from the Bible

Leader preparation: Arrange chairs in a circle. On slips of paper, write out names of the Bible characters included on the attachment "People of the Bible." Write one name per slip, ensuring enough slips for each learner to draw one name. Fold the slips of paper and put them in the bowl or basket. The goal is for seekers and new church participants to begin finding their way around the Bible and to be able to find the person whose name has been drawn.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- slips of paper with names of biblical characters
- basket or bowl
- Bible concordance or computers with Internet access (perhaps some participants will have cell phones with Internet access)
- "People of the Bible," Attachment: Activity 2



make a grouping of plants with varying heights. If decor is not your forte, ask someone else to help you.

Prayer: Blessings upon you, O Faithful One, for this time of exploration of faith practices. May our time in discovery refresh my own faith as I guide, nurture, facilitate, and encourage the faith of the people who gather with me. Help me to affirm their desire to be more fully aware of your presence in their lives. May the wisdom of you, our Creator, the passion of Jesus, and the liveliness of the Holy Spirit be with us as we seek you, Holy One. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

If you could choose, which character from a book, movie, or TV show would you like to be? Pause so people have time to think about this question. You may start this process by answering the question yourself and then inviting others to share their responses.

Invite the learners to gather in groups of four or five. If there are learners who have online access through their cell phones, let there be at least one in each group who has Internet access. Pass out Bibles for each group. Invite the learners to look at the Bible first. If there are some who do not know this, point out that the Bible is divided into two sections, the Hebrew Scriptures (traditionally called the Old Testament) and the Christian Scriptures (traditionally called the New Testament). Give the learners time to find the division between the Old Testament and the New Testament in their Bibles. If there is an Apocrypha in their Bibles, mention that not all Bibles have these books and the Bibles that do have an Apocrypha will have them placed in between the Old and New Testaments. The books of the Apocrypha are typically not read as scriptures during worship in most Protestant churches.

Have the learners find the Table of Contents or the page that lists each book of the Bible. Mention that the Bible is a collection of 66 books—39 are in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. These books were individual Hebrew or Greek scrolls or papyri. Pass around the basket and invite each learner to take a slip of paper. Each slip has the name of a Bible person or a Bible couple. Their tasks are to:

- use the Bible concordance or the Internet to find the book(s) of the Bible in which her or his person or couple is named
- look up the book in the Bible to see if her or his person or couple is in the Old or New Testament

Some Bible characters have a book named after them; others appear in more than one book. Invite people to help one another, especially those who drew less familiar biblical names. Sites such as “Biblios,” <http://bible.cc/>, or “Bible Gateway,” <http://www.biblegateway.com>, are helpful sites to search for biblical names, passages, or keywords.

Gather back in the large group. Have the learners share the results of their searches as well as any information they learned about the characters. If there is time, look up some of the characters and discover more about them. As we become more familiar with Bible people and their stories, we may find ourselves or a current life situation reflected within these faith stories just as we may find current TV, movie, or book characters mirroring our own lives.

3 Singing Our Faith

Leader preparation: Arrange chairs in a circle. Place a table covered with a white cloth in the center of the circle. Place on the table an open Bible, a loaf of bread or a roll, and a chalice filled with wine or grape juice. This is not a communion table, so the chalice and the platter for the bread (if included) do not have to be the vessels the church uses. Reflect on the meaning of communion within your local church so that you can summarize it for the learners. For singing the song “As We Gather at Your Table,” you may lead it with your voice, or you may ask a musically talented member of the church to help out by singing it or by playing it on an instrument. From this song, focus on the phrase “Nourish us with sacred story ‘til we claim it as our own,” and think of a story from your past that nourishes you every time you recall it. Then think of a Bible story that nourishes you.

Supplies:

- loaf of unsliced bread or a roll
- chalice of wine or grape juice
- hymn: “As We Gather at Your Table” (tune: Beach Spring, 8.7.8.7.D), www.tinyurl.com/fp-table

Introduce the elements on the table and talk together about what they mean in the church. Speak briefly about the meaning of communion. Invite the learners to share comments and questions. Teach the song “As We Gather at Your Table.” Sing the first verse as a solo, or have your musical helper sing or play it as a solo. Then invite everyone to sing all three verses prayerfully. Focus on the phrase “Nourish us with sacred story ‘til we claim it as our own.” Ask: *What particular memory or story nourishes you?* It can be a childhood memory, an adult memory, or a fictional story. It can be about family, friends, work, or church. Have participants gather in groups of 3–4 to share this story with others. Give them a time frame so everyone in the small group has time to share.

Gather in the large group. Invite people to share a Bible story if they know one and to tell how they heard this story. As a leader, you may wish to talk about a Bible story that nourishes you. In this faith practice of Encountering Scripture, we will be hearing many more Bible stories that have nourished people over the centuries. Some of these stories may be ones that you will claim as your own.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Worship (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Gather old bulletins from Sunday worship services or make copies of one, enough for each learner to have one. Go through a bulletin to mark the four movements of worship: (1) approach/gather, (2) listen, (3) respond, and (4) send/go. Read John 21:1–20. Notice the four worship movements in this story: approach/gather, vv.1–4; listen, vv. 5–6; respond, vv. 7–14; and send/go, vv. 15–20.

Supplies:

- worship bulletins for each learner
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles
- paper and pencils or pens

Pass out the bulletin of the worship service. Go through the service and point out the different movements of worship. Have the learners find John 21:1–20 in the Bibles. Invite people to take turns reading this passage. Allow people to pass if they prefer not to read aloud. Point out the four worship movements in this story.

Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Divide participants into four small groups. Using John 21:1–20 as the focus, have each group create one part of a worship service: (1) approach/gather—an opening gathering or prayer of approach; (2) listen—a way of listening to or talking about this Bible story; (3) respond—an offering prayer or a prayer of Thanksgiving; and (4) send/go—a blessing or commissioning. Note that a group’s part of worship doesn’t have to be in words. It could be a gesture, chant, song, dance, simple movement, or use of a symbol. Gather the whole group. Invite small groups to share what they created.

5 Bible Tools

Leader preparation: Bring various Bible versions and other reference tools that you, your minister, and other church people use to aid in reading scripture. Place these resources on a table around which the learners can walk. If possible, have available Internet access. Print the latest “Stillspeaking Daily Devotional” from the United Church of Christ website. If available, use a data projector to display it, or make copies for the group. As you prepare for this activity, reflect on your faith life. When have there been moments that a story from scripture immediately came to your mind as being similar to what you were feeling or experiencing?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- reference tools such as study Bibles and books about the Bible, including Gospel parallels, Bible dictionary, Bible commentaries, concordances, atlases, maps of Bible times
- “Stillspeaking Daily Devotional” from <http://tinyurl.com/326nw66>
- computer with Internet access
- (optional) data projector

Affirm that knowledge of the Bible is not a prerequisite for engagement in faith community. The Bible is rich and complex—even people who are very familiar with its contents have lots to learn from its pages. Invite the learners to talk about how familiar they are, or are not, with the Bible. Some may have never opened or held a Bible. Others may be more familiar with its contents. *What books of the Bible have you read or know something about? Have there been times when you have read or heard a passage but did not understand what it meant or what the context was? Have any of you experienced times when you’ve been to church or a workshop and the person speaking about the Bible opened up a whole new world—an “aha!” moment—for you?*

Have the learners stand around the table with the Bible reference books. Invite them to pick up the books and thumb through them. Point out the names of the books and what their purpose is, such as a concordance helps you find passages through the use of a name, a word, or phrases. Introduce Internet sites that are useful search tools, such as “Bible Gateway,” <http://www.biblegateway.com>, “Biblos” <http://bible.cc>, or “Bible Study Tools” <http://tinyurl.com/yysj8lh>

Have everyone holding a book or study tool look up the word “Isaiah.” The Gospel Parallels and maps, of course, will not have this name. As a learner finds the name in a book, have him or her read a brief piece from it. Point out that a study Bible may have footnotes and will probably have an introduction to each book. It may also have various study aids and other essays. Tell the learners that these Bible reference tools can also be found online. Gather them around the computer and pull up a search engine and type in the word “concordance” and show them the links that come up. Click on the link to one website and look up the name “Isaiah.”

If any learners express an interest in purchasing a study Bible or a book about the Bible, invite them to talk with you or the pastor first. Help the learners be aware that there is a huge variety of Bible resources available, in book form and online. Point out that the purpose of the various books and online resources is often to broaden and deepen the understanding of the Bible and encourage more regular reading. With more encounters, the stories will begin to have greater meaning and connection to learners’ lives.

Another way to connect more with the Bible is through use of daily devotional resources. Read or display the Stillspeaking Daily Devotional for the day. Written by a variety of authors, devotional resources can also open our hearts to see familiar scripture stories from another perspective. Provide the website address for those who are interested in becoming a subscriber and receive this via email every morning.

One value of learning the Bible is to let the stories of the Bible become familiar friends. At unexpected moments in our lives, we may find that our life is embraced by a particular biblical story. If it seems appropriate and you wish to share, talk briefly about a moment from your own life in which you felt connected to or embraced by a particular Bible passage or story.



6 Listening

Leader preparation: Display the poster “No-Traveller’s Borne” by Jess in a prominent place in the room. Gather art supplies. Find music to play. Arrange furniture so there is space for the learners to spread out and be able to sit or lie on the floor. Perhaps spread some fabric or canvas on the floor for those who wish to work there.

Supplies:

- artwork: “No-Traveller’s Borne” by Jess
www.tinyurl.com/fp-uccr3
- Bibles
- watercolor paints, brushes, and paper; finger paints and paper; charcoal pencils, pencils, pens, and drawing paper
- paper
- sheets of plastic or newspaper to protect surfaces
- clean rags
- an audio player and a recording of music, such as “Fly Me to the Moon” sung by Diana Krall, <http://tinyurl.com/3vemtnv>, or “Sunrise” sung by Norah Jones, <http://tinyurl.com/44mg3w8>

Invite the learners to focus on the artwork. Encourage comments. Notice colors and textures in the painting. Take down the poster and turn it upside down. *What do you see now? What emotions does this artwork suggest?* Read the title aloud. *Why might the painting be called “No-Traveller’s Borne”?* Have everyone focus on the poster while you read Proverbs 2:1–8. Point out the art supplies and describe what is available. Have everyone choose the art supplies they wish to use and find some space to work, whether on the floor, at a table, by a window. Play music and let participants create pictures or journal or both.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Praying a Text (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about the various forms and types of prayer we use. During worship there are written prayers (sometimes printed in the bulletin) and verbal prayers said by the pastor and or other worship leaders. There are different types of prayers listed on the attachment as a guide. In addition, many churches use the Lord’s Prayer, a pastoral prayer, and a silent prayer.

Written prayers can take the form of poetry or prose. Prayers within and beyond the church door can take the forms of walking prayers, as we let our minds and hearts wander with God by our side; meditative prayers, as we sit in a garden or by a table with a candle and Bible and intentionally focus on God; or “in-the-car” prayers, as we ask God for patience in rush hour traffic. Prayers can be formal or informal. Think about what prayer means for you. What are some of your prayer practices?

If you wish to use music for this session when the learners are writing prayers, take care in your selection of the music’s “mood,” or choose a piece that may have many possible interpretations. Let the music set the tone for the prayer time. Write on newsprint or a whiteboard these two phrases:

Do you love me?
Feed my sheep.

Supplies:

- Bible
- paper
- pens, pencils, markers, colored pencils
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- “Different Forms of Prayer,” Attachment: Activity 7

Using the attachment and the following questions as a guide, facilitate discussion on prayer. *What are different ways of praying with which you are familiar? What places are most conducive for you to pray, meditate, or reflect? What do you ask for when you pray for another person or a country? For whom do you pray? Do you use the book of Psalms in the Bible as a way to offer prayer or to help inspire prayer? Do you pray for specific outcomes, or do you ask that God’s will be done?* Invite someone to read aloud John 21:1–20. Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” Peter replied, “Yes, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” Post the two phrases “Do you love me?” and “Feed my sheep.”

Ask people to write Jesus’ question on a piece of paper, but replacing “Peter” with his or her own name. Below the question, ask learners to write Jesus’ instruction, “Feed my sheep.” Then ask the group to spend 4 minutes (more if you think the group can sustain this long a period) of complete silence focusing on the two sentences they have written. Ask learners to close their eyes if they wish and to ask the question, pause, and then hear the instruction. If they find their minds wandering, ask them gently to refocus on the two sentences.

At the end of this activity, gather the learners back together into a circle. Invite them to stand (if they are able) and hold hands with you as part of this circle. Let them know that you will begin and end the prayer, but there will be a space within that prayer when you pause for the learners to say something if they wish to add their voices to the prayer or simply to reflect in silence. You may wish to begin with a prayer of thanks for this time and for the grace of this moment that has brought all of you together, or you could use the following opening and closing:

Here in this sacred moment, we open ourselves to you, God of compassion, God of infinite love. Hear us when we pray.

Pause.

Hear our prayers O God, the ones formed in words and the ones that lie deep within the silence. Help us to experience your presence. Help us to share your love. Amen.

When you pause, allow a comfortable time of silence in which some may choose to speak her or his prayers aloud. When there is enough silence to indicate that everyone who wants to has spoken, finish the prayer.

8 Sustaining Curiosity

Leader preparation: Do at least one other activity from this session before doing this one. Display the posters in a spot where everyone can see them. Read Exodus 3:1–5. Be sure that you know enough about Moses to summarize briefly his life should there be any learners who are unfamiliar with Moses. See Wikipedia for information about Moses.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “Moses” (Wikipedia entry), <http://tinyurl.com/nthye>
- artwork: “Hidden Depths”
www.tinyurl.com/fp-aphd
- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde
www.tinyurl.com/fp-uCCR3

Invite the learners to focus on the poster “Hidden Depths.” Ask for their observations about which part of the iceberg is the greater portion. Reflect with them about what they have learned in other activities or conversations this group has had together today or previously. Ask: *What surprised you? What did you learn that was new to you? What kinds of experiences stir your curiosity to learn more about faith practices, about God, about Jesus, about the Holy Spirit?*

Point out that curiosity comes from having an open heart. Before reading Exodus 3:1–5, ask the learners to tell what they know about Moses. If they have missed anything that seems important to know about Moses, talk about that. The stories of Moses are found in the Bible in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Then read aloud Exodus 3:1–5. Moses was drawn by curiosity and a sense of wonder. Curiosity comes from having an open heart, a heart that’s ready to explore, a mind that’s ready to be engaged. Draw attention to the painting of Jesus and the children. *What could have made the children flock to Jesus? What might they have been curious about?* Invite the learners to share how, for one week, they might practice curiosity and become aware of their curiosity. *How might you learn to be more curious and more open minded to the world around you?*

9 Sharing Food

Leader preparation: Many of the stories about Jesus involved gathering around food. Jesus lifted up the bread and wine during the Passover feast to be a remembrance of him and a blessing for all of us. Call to mind some Gospel stories of the tables where Jesus shared food. Check out the online picture of Jesus smiling or laughing. You may wish to order postcards of these pictures to hand out. In the spirit of hospitality for these seekers and new church participants, set a welcome table for the learners in the fellowship hall or social room, away from the meeting space, if possible. This is not intended to be a meal but to be a snack, a time for mingling and visiting with one another as part of beginning to build community. Be glad to share your leadership with them, to be a part of guiding them on their pilgrim journeys.

Supplies:

- Bibles

- fish-shaped crackers
- small variety of breads, perhaps with spreads to put on them
- small variety of fruit or cheese
- an image of Jesus laughing, such as one from <http://tinyurl.com/43akpsv>, <http://tinyurl.com/43lbzq6>, or <http://tinyurl.com/3ftg899>
- (optional) postcards of “The Risen Christ by the Sea” ordered from “The Joyful Noiseletter,” <http://tinyurl.com/43lbzq6>

Invite everyone into the circle of chairs. Jesus often ate with people, sharing food with people who were considered social outcasts and sinners in his days as well as with prominent members of his society. Pass out the Bibles. Introduce this story by saying that it is an Easter story, an event that occurred after Jesus’ crucifixion. Have the learners take turns reading John 21:1–20. *How do you feel about this story? What questions does it raise?* Ask people to imagine themselves as the disciples. Invite them to close their eyes, if they wish, and to imagine losing a very close, dear friend to the horrible death of crucifixion, remembering their own cowardice on the night when he was arrested. *You are overcome with grief and in fear of the authorities, because it’s well known that you were his disciple. And now you find that very dear friend appears before you. What feelings well up in you? What thoughts swirl around in your mind? How do you cope with such intense feelings, such impossible things happening? Jesus’ disciples decided to go fishing.* Pause and invite the learners to open their eyes. Ask them to take a deep breath. If you ordered the postcards, distribute them. Then invite everyone to the table you have prepared.

Reflect

What have you found to be exciting or moving in this Exploration? When did you feel the presence of God? Which learners came with curiosity and enthusiasm? What questions or challenges did they pose? What will you do differently for the next session that will help you and the learners be better aware of the pervasiveness of the scriptures in our lives? Were there any parts of this session when you felt out of your depth? How could you have coped better? Who can you look to for support or assistance as you plan future sessions?

Attachment: Activity 2

People of the Bible

Write each of these Biblical individuals or couples on a slip of paper. Keep this list handy for yourself so you can help the learners find where the characters are located in the Bible.

Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)

<i>Character</i>	<i>Book</i>
Adam and Eve	Genesis
Noah	Genesis
Abraham and Sarah	Genesis
Jacob/Israel	Genesis
Moses and Miriam	Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
Deborah	Judges
Samson and Delilah	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
King David	1 Samuel
Nathan	1 Samuel
King Solomon	1 Kings
Isaiah	Isaiah
Esther	Esther
Daniel	Daniel

Christian Scriptures (New Testament)

<i>Character</i>	<i>Book</i>
John the Baptist	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Joseph (Jesus' father)	Matthew, Luke
Three Magi	Matthew
Jesus	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Simon Peter	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Paul	Acts, Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, Philemon

Attachment: Activity 7

Different Forms of Prayer

Within the Christian tradition there are many ways of praying and many different prayer practices, including silent meditation and stillness, centering or listening prayers, labyrinth walk, reciting scripture, dance and movement, repeating or focusing on a single word or phrase, spoken prayers, and chant. Prayer can be communal or private. There are different aspects of prayer within the community worship life, including the following.

Invocation: To invite and openly acknowledge the presence and power of the Spirit in the present moment

Adoration: To honor God out of a sense of awe and reverence for God's majesty, divinity, and compassion

Confession: To name the individual sins and the social evil that exists in our world, acknowledging that as human beings we knowingly or unknowingly collude with evil and participate in oppressive structures, practices, and systems; to seek God's forgiveness and appeal to God's mercy

Praise: To rejoice in God's goodness, blessing, and abundance

Thanksgiving: To give thanks for all that God has done; to name and celebrate the blessings and wonder of God's creation

Petition: To bring before God specific circumstances, people, or countries for whom we ask for God's protection, wholeness, care and advocacy; to call upon God's justice, protection, and compassion

Intercession: To pray for others, asking for God's presence and care for those we know and for situations of suffering, conflict, or injustice in our community and the world

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Many seekers know very little about the Bible except for the fragments that have found their way into popular culture, such as the story of Adam and Eve, the story of Noah and the Ark, and perhaps the story of Moses. The stories of Jesus—with the possible exception of the birth narratives from Matthew and Luke and a bare outline of the crucifixion and resurrection—may be equally unknown. When the Bible stories are known well enough so that their various themes sit in the memory of our hearts, the stories will sometimes speak to us at unexpected times and in unexpected places. Or we may find ourselves embraced in the midst of a story! One goal for this Exploration will be to help seekers and new church participants begin or continue learning the broad outlines of the stories of the scriptures so that they may find themselves and their lives enfolded within the scriptures.

Our culture is not well grounded in a sense of history. Knowledge and wisdom from the past are rejected in favor of current factual understanding. Many who are new to church find it hard to understand how stories that are thousands of years old can have meaning and significance for life today. Our culture's obsession with empirical truth (that which can be observed, measured, and proven, seen as factual and hence true) may blind us to the deeper truths for our lives—truths that may be encountered in poetry, narrative, metaphor, and parable. Yet more often this is the language of scripture.

About this Exploration

The introduction to the Gospel of John gives us an image of God as one who is not distant or inaccessible but active in the world with us. The divine lover, “the Word become flesh,” is intimately involved in our human experience. Encounter with scripture invites us into dialogue with God who dwells with us. Such encounters may heal and challenge, delight and disrupt, comfort and transform. When we hear scripture as a community, we discern its life-giving word for our lives and our world. We seek to acknowledge the ways scripture has been misused and recover its power to create new life.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

2 Kings 2:1–14

John 1:1–14

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Bible Readings (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Gather supplies and organize the room with chairs in a circle. Read John 1:1–14 and ponder its meaning for you. How does this story speak truth to you—truth that is not literal or scientific but is nonetheless important?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Leader Preparation

Breathe deeply and create space for God’s Holy Spirit to enter into the place you will create for learners. Create open space within the learning area. Create space within your own heart. Be attentive to the details, to the small things. For your learners, continue to be the stirrer of their curiosity. Continue to nurture their enthusiasm, their questions. Read John 1:1–14 and ponder its meaning for you. How does this story speak truth to you? Consider how the truths of this text may not be literal or scientific but are nonetheless important. Notice the metaphor that John uses to refer to Jesus—the Word that was there at the beginning. Reflect on what this text says about God, about Jesus, about how God is with us.

Prayer: O Holy One, I come before you in awe and amazement. I come into being within your bright and ancient love; I live within your house. With your resurrection joy, encounter me the stories of our faith ancestors. Break into my world. Enter my daily life. This I pray through the light of Christ and the breath of the Spirit. Amen.

Remind the learners that the Bible is divided into two parts: the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, at the first half of the Bible; and the New Testament, sometimes called the Christian Scriptures, at the back half. Some Bibles, but not all, also contain a part in the middle called the Apocrypha. Point out the table of contents in the Bible. Let the learners be aware that for this activity they will be looking up two passages, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. Ask the learners first to find John 1:1–14, assisting them if necessary. Invite volunteers to take turns reading one verse at a time. Ask: *What phrases or words stand out for you?* Write these in a column on the newsprint or whiteboard. Invite the learners to name what images of God come to mind from the reading of this passage. *How would you describe God from this passage? What personality traits or characteristics would you attribute to God from reading this passage?*

Ask the learners to find Proverbs 8:1–5, 22–31. Point out that the book of Proverbs is located in the Hebrew Scriptures, and provide help finding the passage, if needed. This text is written in first person as the voice of “Lady Wisdom.” Invite volunteers to share in the reading of this passage. In a second column on the newsprint or whiteboard, list the phrases or words that stand out in this passage. *How would you describe God from reading of this passage? What personality traits or characteristics would you attribute to God from reading this passage?*

Discuss the similarities and differences between the two passages. The original language of the Old Testament was Hebrew and of the New Testament was Greek. The Hebrew and Greek words for “wisdom” are both feminine. The Hebrew and Greek words for “word” are masculine. Invite people to playfully imagine these two biblical images, Wisdom and Word, as though they are characters in a drama.

Divide into two groups. Assign each group one of the two characters. Ask each group to reread the text that applies to their character (John 1:1–14 or Proverbs 8:1–5, 22–31) and to imagine how this character might be portrayed dramatically. *What might this character look like? What accent or tone of voice would the character have? What costume or makeup? Stance, gestures, and movements?* Give groups a minute or two to discuss this, and then gather back. Invite groups to share how they might portray their character and why. Both biblical images—Word and Wis-

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

dom—are images of the Divine. *How do you view Jesus in light of reading these two passages? How do you view God, in light of these two images? Does it seem that the passage from Proverbs has anything to do with Jesus? Why or why not? Does comparing and contrasting Word and Lady Wisdom stimulate or challenge your faith? If so, in what way?*



2 Time Line

Leader preparation: Use a marker to write on card stock in large letters the major events or people of the Bible listed on the attachment. Mix up the cards so they are out of chronological order. Create space in the room for the learners to stand or sit in a straight or a curved line to create a time line.

Supplies:

- 8 × 10” card stock or heavy paper and a marker
- Bibles
- space on the walls in the room to tape or pin up the cards in chronological order
- “Time Line,” Attachment: Activity 2

Invite the group to create a time line of biblical events and people. Distribute the cards you prepared with events or people from the Bible, giving one card to each person. The group’s task is to put themselves in chronological order according to the person or event on their cards. Point out which spot in the room is the beginning of the time line. If there are not enough learners, give learners more than one card. If there are more learners than cards, have some learners share a card. Give them time to consult with one another about what their cards say and to line themselves up in the order they think they belong. When they are in place, have them read the name or event from their card. Have the group determine if the card holder is in the right place on the time line. Some people may need to swap places.

If the learners have the cards in chronological order, congratulate them. Post the cards around the room. Invite the learners to sit in a circle. Pass out Bibles. Ask: *What questions do you have about any of the events or people?* See if any of the other learners can answer the questions. If there are any questions that no one else can answer, refer to the book in the Bible where it is listed.

If the cards are not in chronological order, have the learners leave their cards on the floor where they are standing, grab a Bible, and figure out what cards need to be changed. Offer encouragements and share the hints with them from the attachment about what book to find the event or person in. Then have them go back to the cards to arrange them in chronological order. Post the cards on the wall.

3 Dance and Sing

Leader preparation: Create space in the room for movement. Have the Bible and the streamers handy. Make a copy of the sample prayer, or create your own prayer. If you don’t already know it, learn the song “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle,” or have someone musically inclined learn it. If you are not comfortable with group movement, have someone else create a movement for a circle dance. Let this be an informal, relaxed activity. Don’t fuss about it too much.

Supplies:

- Bible
- streamers, any color or color combination, cut in 5-foot lengths
- song: “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle” (tune: Jacob’s Ladder, 8.8.8.5.)
www.tinyurl.com/fp-ladder

Have the learners stand in a circle. Teach the song “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle.” Then have learners grasp hands, and invite them to sing and to do a circle dance. Afterward, invite them to tell what they know about Sarah. Ask basic questions: *Did she live before or after Jesus?* (before) *Before or after Noah and the Ark?* (after) *Before or after Moses?* (before)

According to the Bible, there were ten generations between the stories of Moses and those of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah were the founding matriarch and patriarch of the Israelites, Ishmaelites, Edomites, and Midianites and kindred peoples. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity are all sometimes called Abrahamic religions because of their common faith ancestor, Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah that they would be ancestors of a great nation.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is a long story in Genesis, which is in the Hebrew Scriptures. Read Genesis 18:1–15 to the learners. *What do you notice about this story? Why did Sarah laugh? Why might she deny her laughter? What humor do you find in this story?* Offer a prayer, either your own prayer or this one: *O God, how little we know of you. Your love is an ancient love, a bright love that shines through the stories of the Bible. Draw us to you. Help us to nurture the curiosity of our hearts. Stir our passion for you and for your world. Let us see your infinite humor, your boundless grace, your loving forgiveness. We pray to you, Creator, Redeemer, and dancing and singing Spirit. Amen.*

Invite the learners to pick out a pair of streamers. Form a circle again to sing “We Are Dancing Sarah’s Circle,” and use the streamers to make circles in the air or around their bodies. Maybe participants would like simply to turn around in place, or weave in and out of the learners who choose to stay in one place. Sing the song several times.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Dwell in the Word (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Create a comfortable space for the learners either in chairs or on the floor. This will be a time of listening for God through scripture. Let there be lots of silence as the learners read and become attentive in this practice.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper
- pens/pencils

This activity is one of listening for God’s voice through the intentional, disciplined reading of scripture. Each learner needs a Bible, a sheet of paper, and a pen or pencil. Invite the learners to get comfortable, either in a chair or on the floor. Have participants look up 2 Kings 2:1–14 (help anyone who needs help finding this passage). After they are all in their spots and have found the passage, have them close their eyes and take a deep breath. Say: *Let go of the events of the day. Let*

go of any anxieties or worries. Become centered within yourself in the here and now.

Elijah and Elisha are two prophets from the 800s B.C.E. in the Kingdom of Israel. Elijah is the elder. God appointed Elisha to be Elijah's successor. They have been together for awhile when we come to this passage. Slowly read aloud 2 Kings 2:1–14. Allow silence. Then have the learners read the passage to themselves a second time, noticing what words or phrases speak specifically to them. Tell them to focus on the word or phrase that caught their attention and write it down. *What draws you to that word or phrase? Focus on the word or phrase in your mind.* Allow silence for a couple minutes. Then have learners read the passage a third time, giving thanks to God for the scripture and how it has spoken to them this moment. Pause for a few moments of silence.

Invite the learners to pair up with someone nearby to talk briefly about what they noticed during this reading. Each learner is to have a turn talking and a turn listening. Offer these words, adapted from Psalm 25: *To you, O Lord, we lift up our souls. We trust you. Help us to know your ways. Teach us your pathways and lead us in your truth. You are our best hope, the one who saves us. We are waiting for you.*



5 Different Words, Different Perspectives

Leader preparation: Gather a variety of versions of the Bible listed on the attachment or provide Internet access to find various versions of John 1:1–14 from “Bible Gateway” or a similar website. Place the Bibles on a table in addition to the Bible you normally use. Make sure there are enough Bibles or computer accessibility for all learners to read.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- variety of different Bible versions, or access to websites such as “oremus Bible Browser,” <http://bible.oremus.org/>, or “Bible Gateway.” <http://www.biblegateway.com>
- “Bible Versions in English,” Attachment: Activity 5
- (optional) paper and pens or pencils

There are many different versions and translations of the Bible from its original languages (Hebrew and Greek) into English as well as into other contemporary languages. Distribute copies of the attachment. There are websites that have Bible versions listed side by side so that you can read and compare them. Distribute different versions of the Bible or go online. Ask learners to look up John 1:1–14. First, have people read the text silently. Then invite someone to read the first two verses while others follow along. Invite someone else to continue reading, but from a different version of the Bible. Reassure the learners that if they have difficulty following along, that is not surprising. Versions can be very different. Ask for the verse number. Continue until the passage has been read. Invite any comments or questions. Ask: *What surprises you about the different versions? What were some differences you noticed? How did the variety of translations or paraphrases open up different meanings in the story? What Bible do you use? What do you know about this version? What do you like about your version?* If there is time, invite learners to rewrite a verse of their choosing in their own words.

6 Side by Side

Leader preparation: Prepare space for reading, discussing, and creating. If you have an Internet connection, display nature scenery and listen to music while the learners create. You may use the suggested websites below or choose music that fits the character of your group.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) “Vangelis—Hymne,” <http://tinyurl.com/3v2hxzz>
- (optional) Pachelbel’s Canon in D, <http://tinyurl.com/3no4z5c>
- paper and pens or pencils
- water colors or finger paints and paper
- clay or modeling compound such as play dough
- plastic fabric or vinyl table cloths to protect work surfaces for easy cleanup

As Christians, we believe that scripture is the living word of God. It is central to our faith as individuals and as a community. In our encounter with scripture, God meets us and we meet God. In this activity, we will be looking the image of God we have from our encounters with the scriptures. *How do the words that tell a story about God shape our image of God?* Invite a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 1:1–2:3. *What image of God do you have from this reading? What movement or action does God use? Based on this text, what personality traits would you use to describe God?*

Ask another volunteer to read Genesis 2:4b–25. *What different image of God do you have from this reading? What movement or action does God use? Based on this text, what personality traits would you use to describe God?*

Invite learners to ponder these two creation stories and allow time for discussion. Have the learners choose an art media, including writing, painting, or sculpting. Put on music and, as they listen, invite the learners to be creative about how they have encountered scripture today. *What feelings, thoughts, or images were evoked? Express those through the chosen art medium.*

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Mentors (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about your personal faith life. Who has mentored you? How did you find your mentors? Were the relationships intentional, or did they just happen? How did those relationships nourish your spiritual life? How did those relationships change your life? Does your church offer mentoring? Perhaps the elders, church leaders, or the ministers are available for mentoring. Encourage the people in your group to set up a time to meet with someone who could potentially be their mentor.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or a whiteboard

Introduce 2 Kings 2:1–14. Elijah and Elisha are two prophets from about 800 B.C.E. Elijah is the elder of the two and Elisha is his disciple (student). God appointed Elisha to be Elijah’s successor. They have been together for many years before the events described in this passage. Read aloud 2 Kings 2:1–14. *What words would you use to describe the relationship between Elijah and Elisha? Why is the mantle impor-*

tant? What do you think it means when Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit? A mantle is a symbol of prophetic power. It was customary in those days for the eldest son to inherit more than double what the other heirs inherited.

Ask the learners to think about what the word "mentor" means to them. Record their ideas on the newsprint or a whiteboard. Invite the learners to think in silence about mentors in their life. Mentors may have been teachers, scout leaders, neighbors, professors, a business associate. Mentors are not just faith partners. *Who has mentored you? How did you find your mentors? Were any of the relationships intentional, or did they just happen? How did those relationships nourish your spiritual life? How did those relationships change your life? When have you been a mentor?*

Divide the group into smaller groups of three to talk about the mentor relationships they have had and how those relationships shaped their life. Be sure they all have a time to share within their small groups. Gather everyone back into the large circle. *How is the relationship you have had with mentors different from or similar to that of Elisha's relationship with Elijah? In what ways do mentors influence our lives? In what ways are mentors important in our faith?*

Optional: If your church has a mentoring program, mention this. Offer learners the option of following up with you if they would like a mentor from the congregation for their faith journey.



8 Exploring the World of the Bible

Leader preparation: This is a time to explore the Bible in general, to become more familiar with it, to try to imagine the people, the culture, the world that it came from. It is an ancient book, a collection of many types of books. Make copies of the Self-Guided Tour of the Bible. If you are unfamiliar with the Bible, take the self-guided tour yourself.

Supplies:

- Bibles in different versions including some with reference notes or study Bibles
- a chime or a singing bowl
- Internet access
- "Self-Guided Tour of the Bible," Attachment: Activity 8

Some stories in the Bible may seem odd because it is difficult for us to understand the culture of the time in which they were written. Invite the learners to relax and listen as you offer a sense of the biblical world. Give them time to get comfortable. Then make a sound with the chime or singing bowl. Let the sound fade to silence before you begin talking.

Imagine that you live in an ancient world. There are no cars, no cell phones, no TV, no computers, no Blackberries. Imagine no electricity to provide heat or air conditioning, no electricity to refrigerate or cook food. No plumbing to bring water into your home, into your sinks, into toilets, into your bathtub. There is no printing press, there are no books, there are no Kindles. Only a select few can read, and even fewer people know how to write. But there are no papers and pens. There are quills, ink, and papyrus. Written scrolls are rare and precious. They are kept carefully wrapped in the place of worship. The stories of your ancestors are important. The stories are remembered and passed from generation to generation by mouth and mind and heart. You hear stories from your grandparents and your parents and your uncles and your aunts. You hear sacred stories read aloud. You pass on the stories to your children, nieces, neph-

Reflect

How do you encounter scripture? Have you had a time in your life when God broke into the daily routine of your life? Have you ever felt the Spirit of God's presence while at worship or Bible study or during one of these resource sessions? Did you feel or think that this session was helpful or nurturing to the faith of this particular group of learners? Or did you think something was lacking? Were you able to experience one or more "aha!" moments during this session among the learners? Within yourself? Give thanks for what has been, and pray for God's accompaniment in what is to come.

ews, and grandchildren. These stories of how God has worked in your lives and in the lives of your ancestors are vital to your life.

Pause for a brief moment of silence, and then sound the chime or singing bowl. Let the sound fade into silence. Invite reflection with these or similar questions: *What feelings or questions emerge for you as you think about what you heard? How is it different to hear a story than to read it? How is it different to know a story by heart than to hear it only once? What stories do you know well from childhood? (such as folk tales, fairy tales, family stories) What patterns or tricks are used in folk tales to make the story more memorable?* Many stories in the Bible contain such patterns and memory aids, such as groups of three, names that contain meaning (such as Cinderella or Snow White), and repeating patterns.

When the various themes of the Bible sit in the memory of our hearts, the stories will sometimes speak to us at unexpected times, in unexpected places. Or, we may find ourselves embraced in the midst of a story! May we someday find ourselves and our lives enfolded within the scriptures. Distribute copies of the "Self-Guided Tour of the Bible." Invite the learners to gather in small groups to explore their Bibles together. Move among them and be available for questions.



9 Conversations

Leader preparation: Plan to do at least one other activity before this activity. Display the painting so that all can see it. Spend time with the painting, noticing the details in the images of the three figures. On newsprint or a whiteboard, write the following questions that the learners will be answering when each works with a partner: Which figure in the painting do you choose to represent the Word? Why do you choose that figure?

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or a whiteboard
- artwork: "Two Women and a Child" by Diego Rivera

www.tinyurl.com/fp-apdr

Invite the learners to focus on Rivera's painting. *What do you notice about it? What feelings does it evoke? What stories from your own life does this picture bring to mind? What stories from the Bible does it bring to mind?* Relationships are formed by conversations, by sharing of oneself, by disclosing bits and pieces of who you are to another. Through these conversations trust is built.

Read aloud John 1:1. Ask learners to look at the three figures in the painting and think of the John text. Then ask each learner to choose one figure in the painting to represent the Word. *Which one do you choose? Why?* Invite the learners to choose a partner. If there is an odd number in the group, you partner with someone. Ask each learner to take turns talking and listening with his or her partner in response to the questions on the newsprint or whiteboard.

Gather back in the large group. Invite those who wish to share thoughts or insights from their conversations. *What is your relationship with scripture like at the moment? How is it changing through the conversations and activities in this group?*

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Attachment: Activity 2

Time Line

On separate cards write each of the Bible people or events listed in the first column of the table below. Mix up the cards so that the learners can begin to learn more about the chronology of some major events and people in the Bible.

Keep this list handy for yourself so you can help the learners line up the events in chronological order. The list also includes approximate dates for most of the people or events to help the learners begin to learn the scope of biblical history. Note that the Bible is an account of faith, not a history book, although it does refer to historical events. Many dates are only approximate.

Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament)		
Biblical People or Events	Books of the Bible	Approximate Dates
Creation stories	Genesis	
Noah's Ark	Genesis	
Tower of Babel	Genesis	
Abraham and Sarah go to Canaan	Genesis	c.2000–1300 B.C.E.
Moses leads people out of slavery in Egypt	Exodus–Deuteronomy	c.1250 B.C.E.
Wandering in the wilderness	Exodus–Deuteronomy	c.1250 B.C.E.
Conquest of the Promised Land	Joshua	c.1200–1000 B.C.E.
King David, United Monarchy	1–2 Samuel	c.1000 B.C.E.
King Solomon, United Monarchy	1 Kings	c.950 B.C.E.
Kingdom splits in two: Judah in the south and Israel in the north		c.930 BC
Israel, the Northern Kingdom	1 Kings, Amos, Hosea	922–722 B.C.E.
Northern Kingdom destroyed by the Assyrian Empire		722–720 B.C.E.
Judah, the Southern Kingdom	1 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah	922–587 B.C.E.
Judah conquered, Jerusalem and Temple destroyed by Babylonians	Isaiah, Jeremiah	587–586 B.C.E.
Exile of elite from Judah in Babylon	Ezekiel, Daniel, Esther	587–538 B.C.E.
Return from Exile to Jerusalem Rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem	Ezra, Nehemiah	538 B.C.E. c.537 B.C.E.

Attachment: Activity 2 (continued)

Christian Scriptures (New Testament)		
Biblical People or Events	Books of the Bible	Approximate Dates
Palestine comes under Roman rule	Matthew to Revelation	63 B.C.E.
Jesus' life, death, and resurrection	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	c.2 B.C.E.–33 C.E.
Paul's ministry (and letter writing)	Acts, Romans, Corinthians 1 and 2, Ephesians, Galatians, Thessalonians 1 and 2, Philippians, Philemon	50–61 C.E.
Destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	70 C.E.
Gospels and Acts written	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts	c.70–90 C.E.
Other parts of Christian scriptures written	Timothy 1 and 2, Titus, Hebrews, James, Peter 1 and 2, John 1, 2, and 3, Jude, Revelation	c.60–100 C.E.

Attachment: Activity 5

Bible Versions in English

There are many versions of the Bible in English. Some are translated directly from the existing Greek or Hebrew manuscripts. Because there are a variety of manuscripts, the texts vary. Sometimes texts exist only in newer (more recent) manuscripts but not in the oldest ones. Sometimes words vary slightly, possibly because errors may have been introduced when the text was copied. Some versions of the Bible are paraphrases or updates of previous translations.

Some versions of the Bible try to get as close as possible to the meaning of the actual words (word-for-word versions). Other versions try to convey the thought or idea behind the original Greek or Hebrew words (thought-for-thought versions). The following are some well-known versions of the Bible:

- *King James Version (KJV)*—published in 1611; translated by scholars into English from a relatively new Greek version of the New Testament and from the Masoretic Hebrew of the Hebrew Scripture.
- *Revised Standard Version (RSV)*—Hebrew Scripture published in 1952, New Testament published 1946; translated from the original languages.
- *Living Bible Version*—published in 1971; a paraphrase of the American Standard Version intended to create greater readability.
- *Good News Bible*—published 1978, translated from the original Greek and Hebrew in response to request for friendly English for nonnative English speakers; thought-for-thought translation.
- *New International Version (NIV)*—published in 1978; written in response to disagreements with the RSV; uses older Greek New Testament texts than the KJV; translated thought-for-thought.
- *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*—published in 1989; a revision of RSV, with updated scholarship and inclusive language for humanity (e.g., uses “humans” or “people” instead of “men”).
- *New King James Version (NKJV)*—published in 1982; a conservative revision of the KJV that does not make any alterations on the basis of a revised Greek or Hebrew text but adheres to the readings presumed to underlie the King James version.
- *The Message*—published from 1993 to 2002; written by Eugene Peterson, who used contemporary language to write from the original languages of the Bible; translated thought-for-thought.

For example, compare these different versions of John 1:1 from different versions of the Bible:

- In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (NRSV)
- The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. (*The Message*)
- In the beginning was the one who is called the Word. The Word was with God and was truly God. (Contemporary English Version)

Attachment: Activity 8

Self-Guided Tour of the Bible

The original languages of the Bible are Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Bibles in English are sometimes translated from the original language “word-for-word” or “thought-for-thought.” Other English versions of the Bible are paraphrases. You can find out what your version is by going to an online search engine and typing in the name of your version of the Bible, such as the “New Revised Standard Version,” “New King James Version,” “The Message,” and so forth.

The Bible is divided into the Hebrew Scripture (or Old Testament) and the New Testament (Christian Scripture). Some Bibles include a collection of books called the Apocrypha. The Apocrypha refer to texts that are left out of officially sanctioned versions (the “canon”) of the Bible. In some Protestant Bibles, the books of the Apocrypha are found between the Old and New Testaments. Find the divisions between these two or three parts in your Bible.

Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)

The 39 books of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) are divided into 3 collections:

1. The first 5 books are called the Torah. Find these books in your Bible. The first book, Genesis, tells the story of creation and of the first patriarchs and matriarchs of faith. Beginning with the second book, Exodus, we read about Moses’ life and his guidance of the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Learn more by going to an online search engine and typing in “Torah.”
2. The second collection is called the Prophets, or *Nevi'im* in Hebrew. The prophets “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” The prophets pronounce God’s judgment on the nation of Israel when it oppresses the poor, the widow, and the orphan. The prophets offer God’s word of hope when the people are exiled. In Christian Bibles, this collection begins with Isaiah and ends with Malachi.

3. The third collection in the Hebrew Scripture is called Writings, *Ketuvim* in Hebrew, and is composed of historical books and poetry. In Christian Bibles, this collection begins with the historical book of Joshua and ends with the poetry of Song of Solomon. This set of books contains the early history of the nation of Israel, its division into two kingdoms, and its eventual attempted colonization by the empires around them.

New Testament (Christian Scriptures)

The New Testament contains 27 books. The first four books are called the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These books are about Jesus, who died in about 33 C.E. The Gospels were written between about 60 and 90 C.E. Find the Gospels in your Bible.

The next book, Acts of the Apostles, was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke.

Next are the letters. The first thirteen letters are traditionally attributed to the apostle Paul, though a few later letters are disputed and were possibly written by a follower of Paul. These letters were written between about 60 and 100 C.E.

Hebrews is a letter addressed to a second generation of Jewish Christian followers who were suffering persecution. The rest of the letters are attributed to various disciples of Jesus.

The last book, Revelation, is of a genre of literature called “apocalyptic.” In symbolic language it depicts the conflict between a small, righteous, remnant of faithful people living among and suffering persecution within a culture of a godless people.

A study Bible provides many other supplements to explore, including maps, glossaries, footnotes, an introduction to each book, perhaps a concordance, and a parallel of passages in the Gospels.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Discipleship is the practice of following the way of Jesus in our daily lives. This is a time to develop and explore the various ways of integrating faith into our living. Seekers and new church participants will come with varied discipleship practices or no practices at all. These activities offer opportunities to support and nourish, stimulate and challenge the faith lives of seekers and new church participants through participation in the local church's worship, education, social, and mission opportunities. Through an encounter with scripture, participants may discover new communal and personal practices of faith.

About this Exploration

For the Christian, discipleship includes servant leadership. As Christians, we believe that scripture makes a difference in our living. Engaging with scripture is one way we discover how to live in Christ's way. As we hear, read, and interpret scripture, we listen for God's word. We discern how to live into its teaching. And as we respond to scripture, we learn the practices of our faith, mentor others, pass on the sacred texts, and learn more about living with compassion, hope, and love.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Galatians 4:4–7
Revelation 7:9–17

Leader Preparation

In these activities learners have opportunities to engage with scripture to discover more about discipleship. They may be able to move away from stereotypes or preconceptions about scripture and about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Take time to consider what following the Way of Jesus means for you. How will you share your own values and experience with the group, while enabling them to express different values, practices, and beliefs?

Prepare the space with chairs in a circle to facilitate group interaction. Since the two scripture stories and most of the activities involve settings that involve either water or barrenness, set up the room with these contrasts in mind. Perhaps one side table can have the theme of water and baptism, with a pitcher of water or water fountain, blue fabric, and green plants. Another side table can have fabrics of tan and brown, a white candle, sand, baskets of shells, and rocks.

Prayer: O Christ, you call us to discipleship. Continue to guide me and the seekers and new church participants in our group. Help us to discern the path that leads to you. As we lead and participate in these activities, help us to learn from one another. Enable us to deepen our commitment to love and justice. Let us be your hands and feet in the world. Empower us with your radical love and grace. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Who Is Jesus for You? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Acts 8:26–40. This activity will involve the learners reading the different parts of the story. Prayerfully consider how this text speaks to you today. How are you called to follow Jesus' way? How do you respond?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper and pens or pencils

Ask for volunteers to read the different parts of Acts 8:26–40. You will need six volunteers: a narrator (who reads everything except quoted sections), the angel of the Lord, Philip, the Spirit, the Ethiopian official, and a reader for the passage from Isaiah (Acts 8:32b–33). If your group is small, have people take more than one part. Have volunteers read the passage aloud. Invite the learners to reflect on this story. *What stood out for you as you heard this story? What questions do you have about it?*

Philip the Evangelist was a Jew from birth. He was from Jerusalem but fled due to the persecution of the Christians. Philip was one of seven who were commissioned by the Jerusalem Christians to carry out the work of sharing the good news about Jesus and caring for the sick, widowed, and outcasts. The Ethiopian was a high-ranking official in the royal court of the Queen of Ethiopia. Castrated servants or slaves were preferred as court officials in the East, although Judaism opposed the practice. The official was African, from the southern Nile region of what is now east-central Africa. The official was attracted to Judaism but would not have been permitted to be a Jewish convert because Mosaic law excluded eunuchs from Israel.

In the story from Acts, the Ethiopian asks Philip to explain the Jewish texts he is reading (the book of Isaiah). Recall what Philip says in response. *Why do you think Philip chose to tell the Ethiopian about Jesus? What did he tell him? What do you think Philip said that so attracted the Ethiopian official that he wanted to be baptized? Recall a time when you heard the Bible being read aloud. What was your response to the Bible? Did you feel caught up by the stories of the Bible, or did you feel frustrated because you couldn't understand what the texts meant? Were you curious to explore more of the Bible, or did you feel unmoved? In this scripture reading, what was the Ethiopian eunuch's response to scriptures?*

Ask each person to find a partner. *Pretend that you are coworkers. One of you has no previous knowledge of Christianity, and the other has been part of a Christian community all your life. Imagine a text conversation between you in which the long-term member is asked to explain who Jesus is to the other person. In the conversation, explore why someone would choose to be baptized (to become a follower of Jesus) and what it means to be a Christian today.*

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

2 Hidden Depths

Leader preparation: Think about your local church. What makes your church unique within your community? What is most visible about your church? What are some behind-the-scene things that happen at the church? Write down those things so that you can share with the learners who might be unaware of some of these activities. How is your faith life enriched by being a part of the community of faith that is your church? How does your church encourage you to continue your practices of faith life beyond the church walls? In what ways does your church encourage you to practice your faith at home?

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- artwork: “Hidden Depths”
www.tinyurl.com/fp-aphd

Invite the group to look at the poster. *If you have seen it before, do you notice anything in it now that didn’t notice earlier?* Note the title of the poster, “Hidden Depths.” Ask someone to read aloud Acts 8:26–40. As they think about this story, have them consider some of its “hidden depths.” *What are some of the mysteries or unknowns in this story? What questions does the story raise but not answer?* Ask people to read the story again for themselves, paying attention to any hidden depths or subtleties in the story. You might share with the group additional information about this story. See Activity 1.

Write the word “disciple” on newsprint or a whiteboard, and ask learners to define it. List their suggestions on the newsprint. Then ask: *What are some outward or obvious signs that someone is a disciple—a follower of Jesus?* Record the group’s ideas. *What are some of the “hidden depths” of discipleship—things that may be less obvious or overt about what it means to be a follower of Jesus?*

3 Water

Leader preparation: Have a table set with a pitcher of water and a bowl. Prominently display the baptism picture. Prepare tables for painting.

Supplies:

- pitcher of water and a bowl
- Bibles
- watercolors, paint brushes, cups for water, rags
- watercolor paper
- artwork: “Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West www.tinyurl.com/fp-uccr3

Draw attention to the water in the pitcher and pour it into the bowl. Have people think about water at church and in everyday life. *How does a drink of water feel after time spent in the sun? How does washing your hands and face feel after playing a game of volleyball or mowing the lawn on a hot day?* Invite the participants to describe a service of baptism that they have seen or in which they have participated. *How was water used in this ritual? Think about the different churches you may have visited. Where was the place for baptism in those churches. Were they visible or hidden? Were they part of the sanctuary or part of the entry to the church? Where is the place for baptism in this church?*

Invite the learners to focus on the painting “Baptism of Jesus.” *What do you notice in this image? What feelings are evoked?* As people contemplate the painting, read aloud Luke 3:21–22, Luke 8:22–25, and Acts 8:36–39. Note that these texts are all from Luke and Acts. These two books of the Bible were compiled by the same person (see Acts 1:1–2 and Luke 1:1–3). *What feelings do these stories evoke in you? How is the image of water used by this biblical storyteller? What does water, as a metaphor, point to or suggest?* Invite the learners to create a watercolor painting as a quiet, meditative response to the scripture. Encourage them to experiment with color and shape rather than trying to paint something specific.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Discerning the Way of Jesus (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: How has being a Christian affected the way you make decisions? What difference does it make in your life? Making decisions is a process of discerning. The purpose of this activity is to raise awareness of how we discern God's hopes and purposes for our world and our lives.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or a whiteboard
- pencils or highlighter markers

Invite group members to recall a time in their life when they had to make an important decision. At the time, how did they anticipate that the decision would impact their lives? How did they go about the decision-making process? Invite them to share this with a person next to them. On the newsprint or a whiteboard, write *discernere*, the Latin for “discern.” Slash the word in two with a line between *dis* and *cernere*. Beneath *dis* write the word “apart.” Beneath *cernere* write “separate.” Think of embroidery floss, a skein of yarn, or the length of a rope. There is more than one strand. To discern is to separate out one strand among many. Discernment is the process of seeking God's will as we partner with God to envision God's dream for our world and our own lives.

Distribute pencils or highlighter markers. Read aloud Luke 18:18–27 as learners follow along in their own Bibles. Use a highlighter or pencil to underline all the questions in the text. *What do you imagine was the process of discernment for Jesus in this story? What discernment does he invite from others?*

Ask: *What stands out for you in this reading? What in the story challenges you? What in the story makes you curious?* Read aloud Acts 8:26–37. *What are some questions that are asked in this text? Note that ritual immersion is required of converts to Judaism as part of their conversion. However, Mosaic law prohibited the Ethiopian official from converting to Judaism because he was a eunuch. When the official asks him what is to prevent him from being baptized, what answer might he be expecting? What discernment is required of Philip in order to make the decision about baptism? What discernment is required of the Ethiopian official? What are some processes you use to discern a path for yourself?* (listing pros and cons, talking with a friend, going with gut feeling, praying, meeting with a spiritual director)

5 Different Roads of Faith

Leader preparation: Read Ruth 1 so you are familiar with the story. Pay attention to the different responses to Naomi's plight from Ruth and Orpah. Are you able to affirm both of these responses as different ways of being faithful? What choices have you faced in life that may have had more than one "right answer"? Display the painting "Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab" where everyone can see it. Spend time contemplating the emotions depicted by the artist.

Supplies:

- Bibles in several different versions
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- artwork: "Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab" by William Blake www.tinyurl.com/fp-apwb

Invite everyone to look at the poster and share comments about it. *What do you think is happening? What is the mood of this picture? What might be the story behind the picture?* At the top of a piece of newsprint write the word "follower." Ask for ideas that come to mind when you think what it means to follow someone. Record these ideas in one column on the newsprint or whiteboard. *What is the opposite of being a follower?* Record these words in a separate column.

Hand out the Bibles. Have everyone find the book of Ruth, letting those familiar with the Bible assist those who need help finding the book. Ask for four volunteers to read the story of Ruth 1: a narrator who reads everything not in quotation marks and volunteers to read what Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah say. Ask the whole group to be the voices of the women of Bethlehem in verse 19b: "Is this Naomi?" *To which of the characters did you feel most drawn? Why? What part of the story pulls at your heart?*

Bible storytellers use powerful images in their storytelling. Notice the emotions depicted in Ruth 1:20–21. Now, read Ruth 1:22. *What do you notice about the last sentence of the chapter. How does the storyteller foreshadow a shift in the story? How is this an image of hope?*

6 Being God's Loving Kindness

Leader preparation: Read the activity suggestions. Pay particular attention to the notes about the word *chesed* in the book of Ruth. The word is pronounced KHEH-sed (KH is a cough—like sound at the back of the throat). Listen to a pronunciation of the word at <http://tinyurl.com/3lfvaho>. Think about how you might translate this word for yourself. How have you experienced God's loving kindness in your own life? How do you seek to show loving kindness to others?

Supplies:

- Bibles in several different translations, including at least one New Revised Standard Version Bible
- pens or pencils and paper
- artwork: "No-Traveller's Borne" by Jess www.tinyurl.com/fp-uccr3
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite the learners to focus on the poster. As they do, ask them to think about our home planet, Earth. *Where do you see struggle and violence in our world? Where is there nurturing in our world? How do you think God feels about our small corner of the universe?* The word *chesed* is used in Hebrew scripture to describe God's love and care for all creation. The word is difficult to translate into English because it has no exact equivalent. English translations use phrases such as "loving kindness," "mercy," "steadfast love," or "loyalty." Invite people to look up Ruth 1:8 in their Bibles. *What word or phrase is used to translate chesed?* Write the words and phrases on newsprint or whiteboard. The concept of *chesed* is used throughout the Bible to speak of God, but only very rarely is it used to describe relationships between human beings. However, the word appears three times in the book of Ruth. Naomi's daughters-in-law treat Naomi with *chesed*, and her wish for them is that God similarly will treat them with *chesed*. Ruth's loyalty to Naomi is an act of *chesed*, as is Boaz's care for the two widows (Ruth 1:8, Ruth 2:20 and Ruth 3:10). By using this word in reference to Ruth, the biblical storyteller is pointing to something about Ruth. Invite the group to suggest possibilities for what the storyteller is intending. Perhaps Ruth is embodying God's loving kindness for Naomi.

Have volunteers look up these passages in various versions of the Bible, including the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Psalm 5:7, Psalm 23:6, Isaiah 16:5, Isaiah 40:6, Micah 6:8, Ruth 2:20, and Ruth 3:10. *Can you spot the word chesed in its various English disguises?* Have learners list the English words and phrases used to translate it.

Hand out paper and pens or pencils. *Write a poem about chesed. You might describe how God shows chesed to you, how you embody chesed for others, or what the word means in your life as a follower of Jesus.* Invite people who wish to do so to share their poems with the group.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Following Jesus (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: We gather in church to be disciples, to be nourished, strengthened, and challenged and sent back out into the world. We are not the body of Christ if we only focus on our own members or our own survival as a church. We are not the body of Christ if we only ever do mission or reach out with no attempt to gather together. This moving in and moving out is a dance that seeks balance between the two ways of being and doing as followers of Jesus. Consider how you participate in that dance.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite the learners to think quietly about this question: *What do disciples do?* Pass out the Bibles and invite volunteers to take turns reading Acts 8:26–40, verse by verse. *What are some of the behaviors of discipleship depicted in this story? How did the Ethiopian official show discipleship? (worship in Jerusalem, reading scriptures) How did Philip demonstrate discipleship? (being attentive to the voice of the Spirit, sharing his knowledge of scriptures with the eunuch, reaching out to someone newer to the faith)* Write their suggestions on the newsprint or whiteboard. Have the learners find Matthew 25:31–46, and let several of them take turns reading this passage. Invite their comments on the practices they heard in this passage that

a disciple of Jesus might do. Write their suggestions on the newsprint or whiteboard. Ask: *What activities do you do that could fit under the practices of a disciple? What are other activities that you could do? What are possible activities within the local community that you would consider as part of your discipleship?*



8 Guide Our Feet

Leader preparation: Create a worship center using a table with a lit pillar candle and enough votive candles for each learner. You may add a cross or a Bible to this table. Have recorded music and a music player available for music during the time the learners will light candles. Choose music to provide for a thoughtful or joyful mood. Make copies of the attachment for each learner or use a projector to display it. Have a copy of the Leader's Copy on hand for you to use during the ceremony. Either teach the song "Guide My Feet" orally or use the projector to display the words. If you are not comfortable teaching the song, invite someone from your congregation or from your group who knows it and is comfortable teaching and singing it.

Supplies:

- Bible
- white pillar candle, matches
- votive candles and a taper
- recorded instrumental music and a music player
- song: "Guide My Feet" (tune: Guide My Feet, 8.8.8.10.)
www.tinyurl.com/fp-feet
- "Guide Our Feet," Attachment: Activity 8

Gather the learners in a semicircle around the table. Ask for a volunteer to read the scriptures listed on the attachment, giving them the Bible. Teach the tune to "Guide My Feet" so that learners can participate fully when it is time for the singing of the song during the ceremony. Allow a pause (perhaps dim the lights) as a sign that you are preparing for worship. Then worship together using the outline on the attachment.

9 Grace-filled Hearts

Leader preparation: Gather enough pebbles or shells for each participant. Place the pebbles in a container on a table in the middle of the gathered group. There is to be nothing else on the table except a plain tablecloth.

Supplies:

- basket or bowl with pebbles or shells
- plain tablecloth

Gather learners in a circle around a table, and explain that each of us is a pilgrim on a faith journey.

We have all gathered together for awhile to help nurture, strengthen, challenge, or stimulate our faith through these activities, specifically through the Christian faith centered on Jesus. Jesus had a varied group of disciples and followers. They didn't always understand him and weren't always sure of themselves. They weren't always sure about Jesus. Jesus calls each of us, from the place where we are, at the pace we are able to manage. We always have the freedom to choose if we wish to follow.

Invite the learners to think about what it means to be a pilgrim on a faith journey. *What do you need for that journey of faith?* Pause for a moment. Then invite the learners, one at a time, to go to the table and take a pebble to carry with them as they leave.

Have people circulate and use the *chesed* blessing from Ruth 1:8–9 to bless one another: *May God show loving kindness to you as you have shown loving kindness to me.* See Activity 6 for more about the meaning of the Hebrew word *chesed*.

Reflect

What did you learn about discipleship from these activities? What did you discover about new ways to encounter scripture? What might have been missing from this time you and your group spent together? How did the learners respond to the activities in this session? What did they seem to appreciate the most? What new questions or insights emerged for them? Give thanks for new learning and for new questions and challenges.

Attachment: Activity 8

Guide Our Feet

Opening

Leader: We gather as your people of faith, O God.

People: We gather because we love you, O God, and we want to learn more about Jesus

Leader: Help us to grow and learn and serve you.

People: On this day, at this time, we offer ourselves to you.

Song: "Guide My Feet" (verses 1 and 2)

Scripture: Acts 8:26–31a

Invitation (during which there will be a pause to allow time for thought)

Lighting Candles

Prayer

Song: "Guide My Feet" (verses 3 and 4)

Commissioning

Leader: As we go out into this world,

People: We go as people of faith, gifted by the Holy Spirit.

Leader: We go, knowing that we are embraced, O God, as your children.

People: We go with joy in our hearts, we go with strength in our spirits, we go giving thanks for your great love.

Attachment: Activity 8 (continued)

Guide Our Feet—Leader's Copy

Opening Responses:

Leader: We gather as your people of faith,
O God.

People: We gather because we love you,
O God, and we want to learn more
about Jesus

Leader: Help us to grow and learn and
serve you.

People: On this day, at this time, we offer
ourselves to you.

Song: "Guide My Feet" (verses 1 and 2)

Preface to Scripture: Today we hear a story
about one of Jesus' disciples, Philip. Philip is
urged by the Spirit to visit with an Ethiopian
eunuch. Listen now for the Word of God.

Scripture: Acts 8:26–31a

Invitation:

Each of us moves in our faith journey, on dif-
ferent paths, in different ways. Philip was sent
by an angel of God to meet the Ethiopian of-
ficial. There are times when God may send a
guide or a mentor to help us along the way.
Mentors and guides provide a light for our
spiritual journey. They feed our souls. They en-
courage our faith. They help our faith to grow
deeper and wider. Take time now to reflect
on the people who have been a part of your
spiritual path.

Pause and allow a minute or two for thought.

I invite each of you, if you wish, to light a can-
dle to honor the guides and mentors who
have been a part of your faith journey, who
have guided your feet so that you are now
here in this place, in this time.

Lighting of Candles: *Play music.*

Prayer: We give you thanks, Compassionate
One, for our gathering here. We thank you for
planting the seed of faith in us. We thank you
for the nurturing of the soil of our soul through
churches, through groups such as this, and
through others who are part of our lives. We
ask that you continue to guide each of us on
our way. Through Christ we pray, Amen.

Song: "Guide My Feet" (verses 3 and 4)

Commissioning:

Leader: As we go out into this world,

People: We go as people of faith, gifted by
the Holy Spirit.

Leader: We go, knowing that we are em-
braced, O God, as your children.

People: We go with joy in our hearts, we go
with strength in our spirits, we go giv-
ing thanks for your great love.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Seekers and new church participants will probably have some knowledge of Christian history. They may be painfully aware of the ways Christianity has been used to bolster the aims of empire through crusades, inquisitions, witch hunts, and colonialism. It is important to acknowledge the ways Christianity created injustice and hurt in its legacy of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and homophobia, as well as in its treatment of women, the marginalized, Aboriginal peoples, and First Nations. Yet Christianity has also challenged injustice, created healing, and supported social change. In honest reflection on our heritage, we encounter God's judgment and God's grace. We discover cause for celebration as well as for repentance. In these activities, we will look at how encountering God through Christian tradition is life affirming. We will look at the amazing ways that God continually breathed new life throughout history by the power of the Holy Spirit.

About this Exploration

Encounters with God through scripture take many forms. Christian tradition offers a rich treasury of practices for personal, family, and community engagement with the Word. Over the centuries, scripture has been read aloud in worship, sung through the Psalms, or enacted in medieval mystery plays. Scripture has been shared through mosaics, painting, dance, architecture, and sermons. Families have anchored their days in the sharing of scripture. Bold souls immersed in God's word have sparked social change movements. Memorized passages have given courage to those who struggle. Our Reform tradition reminds us that all Christians have the privilege and responsibility to wrestle with God's word and to give it new voice in our own lives.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 96
2 Timothy 1:1–14

Leader Preparation

What comes into your mind when you think of the broad sweep Christian history and tradition? What parts of our heritage do you celebrate? Which parts of our history or tradition do you lament? Consider how God may be calling the church to new ways of living and celebrating faith in the world. Review the nine activities. Which sound appealing? Which are most likely to engage the interest of group members? Arrange the room so that it is comfortable and bright, with chairs in a circle. Perhaps have a table with a cross (or crosses from other places and from different Christian traditions). Add green plants as a reminder of our connection to all living things. Demonstrate hospitality by welcoming group members as they come into the learning area. Introduce yourself to any newcomers, and introduce them to other participants.

Prayer: O God of blessings, I give thanks for your ancient love, present throughout human history. May your compassionate Spirit renew and refresh me. Speak your wisdom to me through scripture and story, through ancient texts and contemporary voices, through words that reassure and voices that confront. Help me to know your ways, O God. Help me to walk in your truth. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 What Do You Know? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The intent of this activity is for the learners to reflect on how they gained their knowledge about Jesus and Christianity. Set up the room with chairs in a circle. Make sure there are tables, clipboards, or something else firm to write on.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- copy paper and various colors of paper
- pens, pencils, colored pencils, markers
- clipboards or magazines to use as a writing surface, if needed

Ask for a volunteer to read 2 Timothy 1:1–14. Sit in silence for a moment before beginning discussion. Ask: *What stands out for you in these verses?* Have a different person read the passage again. Sit with it in silence for a few moments. Ask: *What did you hear new in this second reading? Where or how did you learn about Christianity? Who are some of the people who have taught you about Christianity? Where or how did they learn about Christianity? What draws you to Christianity now?* Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Ask: *What faith or hope is being kindled in you at the moment?* Have each learner think of someone who is or has been part of the process of sparking, passing on, or nurturing faith within him or her and then create a response to that person. It might be in the form of a letter, as in 2 Timothy, or it might be in pictures, prose, or poetry.

Encourage people to find a comfortable spot where they can work, and give plenty of time for them to write or draw. Gather back together. Do not force sharing, but ask if anyone has anything they would like to say out of this experience.

2 Celtic High Crosses

Leader preparation: Check out the “Sacred Destinations” website, <http://tinyurl.com/3gz68eo>. Scroll down to the part where there is a picture of St. Martin's Cross and the paragraph that describes the scenes on the cross. Bookmark this page so you can easily find it during the activity. Learn more about Celtic High Crosses from Wikipedia, <http://tinyurl.com/3sbev7r>. Find images of different high crosses to show the group, such as the image at this page: <http://tinyurl.com/3flvz7q>. Set up a computer and data projector. Read the birth narratives in Luke and Matthew.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or a whiteboard
- Internet access and data projector
- Bibles
- self-hardening clay or modeling compound cut into rectangular blocks
- carving implements such as kitchen knives, toothpicks, and small chisels

One ancient Christian tradition is the Celtic High Cross. Celtic Christianity had its beginnings with St. Patrick from 4th century Ireland. From Ireland, Christianity spread to Scotland. It is from Ireland and Iona that the use of Celtic High Crosses sprung up. Display the Cross of St. Martin on the projector. It is on the Isle of Iona in Scotland. On one side of the cross are twining vines, said to symbolize the intertwining of heaven and earth. The side of the cross pictured has

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

carvings of stories from the Bible. The carvings were used to teach and remind people of Bible stories much as stained glass windows were used in later centuries to teach people who were unable to read the Bible. In the middle of the cross is a carving of Mary and the baby Jesus. Invite the learners to remember the story of the birth of Jesus. Ask: *How do you recall the birth of Jesus?*

As a group, tell the story of Christmas. On newsprint or a whiteboard, record key words (such as “Mary,” “Joseph,” “angels,” “shepherds”) that learners will later look up in the Bible. Divide the whole group into four small groups. Invite them to read the birth stories of Jesus in Matthew and Luke using a Bible or online sources (accessed through computers or their smart phones). *What surprised you, if anything? Were there any parts of the story you were unable to find? Why do you think these stories were included in our Bible?*

Have learners look at an image of the birth story on a Celtic high cross, such as the image at <http://tinyurl.com/3flvz7q>. Then have learners take a block of clay and use carving implements to make a simple image of some part of the Jesus’ birth story. Give learners time to work. Then place the blocks of clay together to make a large cross or crosses. Let the clay harden.



3 Labyrinth Walk with Scripture

Leader preparation: Labyrinths are sacred paths. Walking a labyrinth is an ancient Christian practice. Labyrinths can be found in medieval churches as well as in contemporary spaces such as churches, hospitals, universities, and homes. They are spiritual tools for discernment, reflection, and prayer. Read the activity and pray with a labyrinth prior to leading this activity. Practice making a labyrinth in a sand tray. Locate an online image of a labyrinth to show the group.

Supplies:

- online image of a labyrinth, such as at <http://tinyurl.com/3nmur> or <http://tinyurl.com/3j3f9ua>
- “Finger Labyrinth,” Attachment: Activity 3
- a cup of fine sand, flour, or cornmeal on a baking tray or pie plate (one set for each person)
- toothpicks
- Bible

Have someone read aloud Psalm 96, or read it with different voices, each person reading one verse in turn. Distribute sand trays and copies of the attachment “Finger Labyrinth.” Show the image of a labyrinth that you located online. Show the group how to make a labyrinth design in the sand (or cornmeal). Then give quiet time for people to slowly trace the labyrinth path with a finger as they contemplate the verse of scripture. Encourage them to move the finger as slowly as possible.

Option: Arrange for the group to visit a site where they can walk a labyrinth. Or perhaps the group would like to create a labyrinth for your church.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Healing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Take time to reflect on your definition of healing and its many aspects. Is healing different from curing? If so, in what way? The intent of this activity is to assist learners to think about what healing means for them and to understand more about the biblical view of illness and healing. Read Luke 8:26–39 and reflect on the many different aspects of healing—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and cultural. This story is rich in its layers of healing potential, but it also illustrates how very different the biblical worldview and culture is from our own. Consider what healing may have meant in Bible times and what it means for you now. Consider your own body and its incredible capacity to heal. Give thanks for God's gift of healing.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or a whiteboard

Invite the learners to reflect on the word “healing” and what it means. Have them share their ideas and write these on newsprint or a whiteboard. Read aloud Luke 8:26–39b. Notice the many different levels of healing that may have occurred in this story: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, social, and cultural. Focus on the social or cultural aspect of healing. Ask the learners to envision what the man's healing meant to him and his community. *What do you notice about the worldview and culture in which this story takes place? How does the Bible describe this man's condition and its cause? How might our culture describe what is wrong with him? How do other people react to the man? How do people in our culture respond to someone with a mental illness? How does healing take place for the man in the story? How might someone who has a serious mental illness experience healing or wholeness today?*

Ask learners to consider their own bodies and each body's capacity to heal. *If you have recovered from a serious illness, consider all the things that helped you heal. What part do you think your faith or God may have played in that healing?* Ask learners to think of examples of how touch plays in healing (a mother kissing a child's scraped knee, therapeutic massage, a hug from a friend, rubbing a sore muscle with liniment, and so forth). *How is touch a spiritual activity?*

Pause for a moment of quiet reflection, and then read 2 Timothy 1:1–14. Although Paul was in prison, he encouraged Timothy to remain strong in his faith, which he received from his family. Focus on verse 6, where Paul refers to the “laying on of hands.” Laying on of hands is an ancient Christian practice. In the Bible, it is used to confer blessing, healing, or authority. In Christian scriptures, it is associated with receiving the Holy Spirit. The laying on of hands takes place at baptisms, healing services, blessings, ordination of church officers, church membership rituals, and other sacraments and holy ceremonies. If group members are comfortable doing this, have them pair up and take turns laying a hand on the other person's shoulders and saying a prayer or blessing for that person, such as: *May God renew your spirit or Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.*



5 Two Women and a Child

Leader preparation: The Rivera image “Two Women and a Child” depicts two women of different generations and an infant. In your imagination picture how they might be related to one another and what they might be thinking or saying as they sit together. Read 2 Timothy 1:1–14 and learn about Timothy, Lois, and Eunice—three generations of faithful people. Think of people in your life who have been faithful to you and to God.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Two Women and a Child” by Diego Rivera
www.tinyurl.com/fp-apdr
- Bible

Gather so everyone can see the Rivera painting. Look quietly at the art. *What do you see? What people in your life are you reminded of by this painting?* Read aloud 2 Timothy 1:1–14. *How might Lois and Eunice have helped Timothy grow in faith? How does the painting “Two Women and a Child” remind you of this text (or vice versa)?* Paul urges Timothy to “rekindle the gift of faith that is within you” (2 Timothy 1:6). Have people slowly mingle around the room. As they encounter one another, have them say to one another, “Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.” *Be playful. Use different tones of voice, different accents, different moods.* Gather as a whole group and stand or sit in a circle. Invite people to think silently for a moment about what it might mean for them to rekindle the gift of God that is within them. *What is that gift? Who planted it there?*



6 Firm in Hope

Leader preparation: Display the artwork “Baptism of Jesus” so everyone will be able to see it. Take time to reflect on the image, and ask yourself how Jesus gives you hope. As you think about evangelism, past and present, think about the ways it can cause harm and hurt as well as ways it can bring blessing and hope. Have tables available where the learners may work.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West www.tinyurl.com/fp-uccr3
- Bible
- poster-size papers
- markers
- paper and pens or pencils

Invite the learners to focus on the poster for a couple of minutes. Then invite conversation: *What attracts you in the picture? What feelings do you have as you consider this art? What do you notice in the picture? What symbols do you recognize?*

Read aloud Luke 4:16–21. Point out that the word “gospel” means good news, a translation of the Greek word *euangelion* (literally, “a reward for bringing good news”). The author of the Gospel of Mark begins his writings with the phrase “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The word “gospel” was not applied to the first four books of the New Testament until the latter part of the second century. Have the learners form groups of 3–4 and discuss the Luke passages among themselves: *From whom did you first hear about Jesus?* Have learners read Luke 4:16–21 again, focusing on verse 18. *How might Jesus announce “good news to the poor” if he were alive today? What particular groups or situations might Jesus refer to today when we hear that he came to “proclaim release to the captives,”*

"recovery of sight to the blind" or to "let the oppressed go free"? When has Christianity been "good news" for others? When has it been used to judge, diminish or oppress others?

Invite the learners to think about different ways Jesus' message of good news could be shared today. Show the paper for making posters. Or provide writing material for those who prefer to be a newspaper columnist or to come up with a dialogue for a radio show or with a TV show host. Some might want to create a 140 character Tweet or a text message. Give the learners the option of working alone, with a partner, or in groups as they create a "media message" that might share Jesus' good news with others.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Praising God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Consider what it means for you to praise God. In what circumstances or situations do you feel like praising God? Arrange the chairs around tables. Think about what percussion instruments you will use for this activity. Percussion instruments can be as simple as clapping hands, tapping feet, or snapping fingers. The learners could (gently) use the table(s) or walls as drums with their open palms or their fingertips. They could slap their own laps or chests as drums or by tapping on their open mouth. Look for items around the church such as spoons, a fork and water glass half full of water, wooden blocks from the children's play area, and so forth. Experiment with ways to create a rhythm to accompany a new song to God while reciting Psalm 96.

For example, recite Psalms 96:1. Slap the table with your right hand; slap the table with your left hand. Continue that pattern with each verse until you reach verse 6; then slap the table twice with both hands.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- simple percussion instruments, including spoons and forks, glasses half filled with water, wooden blocks, and other objects from around the church
- paper and pens or pencils

An ancient Christian tradition is chanting the psalms as part of worship. This early psalmody was exclusively vocal. It is paradoxical that the psalms, which so often mention the use of musical instruments in the praise of God, were sung for centuries in the church without any instrumental accompaniment. However, in the mid-to-late twentieth century, there was an emergence of what is called contemporary worship. The style of contemporary worship music is influenced by popular music. Most churches adopting contemporary worship therefore have a worship band or praise band to provide music during their services.

Have the learners find Psalm 96 in the Bible. Read it aloud by going around in a circle, each learner taking one verse. If a person does not want to read, he or she can pass. Keep the Bible open to Psalm 96.

Invite the learners to sing to a new song to God with percussion instruments. Suggest ways to create percussion sounds using the body or with simple objects. Demonstrate some simple rhythms. Divide into groups of 4–6 people to create a song of praise, thanks, or celebration using rhythm and words. Provide paper

and pens if learners need to write down anything. When the groups are finished, have the learners share the finished rhythm psalms with the whole group.

8 Work of the People

Leader preparation: Create lots of open space for learners to act out a drama, but keep some chairs available for those who need to sit. Read Psalm 99:11–13 slowly and contemplatively. Consider how all creation shows God's grace and wonder.

Supplies:

- Bible
- pieces of cardboard, paint, brushes, and markers
- several fabrics or bed sheets of various colors including green, blue, gray, black, or brown
- streamers, balloons, and party noise makers
- (optional) animal costumes and hats or animal masks
- craft supplies

The word "liturgy" originally meant a "public work" or a "service in the name of/on behalf of the people." In Christian tradition it means the participation of the people of God in "the work of God." Have someone read aloud Psalm 99:11–13. Ask people to imagine that all the earth is having a "welcome home" party for God—a great celebration of God's presence. Invite the learners to work in small groups. Move into the open space and show them the materials you have provided. Encourage them to use their imaginations to become characters that represent different aspects of creation—mountains, trees, waves, creatures of land and sea, and so forth. Have them prepare costumes or symbols and decorate your learning area in preparation for the celebration. Create a scene of celebration together, a scene in which all creation welcomes God. *How does this image of "all creation rejoicing" speak to you? What might it mean for us to celebrate God's presence in our lives? What are some ways our living and being naturally and spontaneously shows God's wonder and grace?*



9 Agape

Leader preparation: Read about the *Agape* meal or Love Feast either through your church library or online at <http://tinyurl.com/3pql9o> to familiarize yourself with this Christian tradition. Place bookmarks in the Bible marking these passages: 1 Corinthians 11:17–24 and 2 Peter 2:13. Prepare a snack, a pitcher of water, and glasses to place on a table in the center of the room. You may wish to consider traditional finger foods from your region that will have special meaning, use grapes and crackers to represent communion, or use traditional Middle Eastern foods such as flat bread, figs, olive oil, honey, and grapes. Make copies of the song and of "An Agape Service." Sing the first and last verses of the song.

Supplies:

- Bible
- snack for an adapted agape feast
- song: "I Come with Joy, A Child of God" (tune: Dove of Peace 8.6.8.6.6) <http://tinyurl.com/3sdkwbe>
- "An Agape Service," Attachment: Activity 9

First Corinthians, a letter written by the apostle Paul in the first century, is addressed to a congregation of people who lived in the city of Corinth, Greece. Ask for a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 11:17–24. *What do you notice about this reading, particularly about the meal practices? What questions does this passage raise for*

you? In the first century when Christians gathered to worship, they often shared a meal. This meal evolved into a love feast, or *agape* meal.

Ask for another volunteer to read aloud 2 Peter 2:13. This is another letter from a first century Christian writer. Writing later than Paul, this Christian also protested against abuses of the *agape* meal. Eventually the love feast was dropped as a Christian practice in most churches. It was revived in the 1800s and still continues as a practice in some denominations today, such as the Moravian Church and the Church of the Brethren. In the Church of the Brethren, the service is called a Love Feast and includes a ritual of washing of feet, as Jesus did at the Last Supper. Invite people to gather at the table where you have set out food. Distribute copies of “An *Agape* Service.” Worship and feast together.

Reflect

Which activities did you particularly enjoy? What were some new discoveries or insights for you? What did you learn about the members of your group? If you were to do the activities over, what might you omit or add? What would you do differently? Which conversations or activities particularly connected with the members of your group? What did they seem most responsive to? How might those be brought forward into future activities together?

Attachment: Activity 3

Finger Labyrinth

Carefully trace the design below in the sand.

Directions: Make six concentric circles with your finger, and then use a toothpick to draw the lines that mark the barriers. Place a small stone or pebble in the centre. Then slowly and carefully follow the path with your finger, going from the outside into the center and then returning by the same path.

As you move your finger, repeat to yourself the words of this verse of scripture: "Sing a new song to God. Sing a new song to God, all the earth" (Psalm 96:1).



Attachment: Activity 9

An Agape Service

Invocation:

We gather here in the name of God, our Maker. May the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the delight of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Prayer:

O Living God, we are a pilgrim people who search for you. Hold us in your arms. Feed our spirits and strengthen our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture: John 6:1-13

Sharing Food

Prayer of Thanksgiving:

We give you thanks, O Creator, for our daily bread and for clean, fresh water that nourishes and sustain us. We give you thanks also for this time together, for the relationships of learning and teaching that we have received. Transform us into your faithful community of love and joy, justice and peace. Amen.

Song: "I Come with Joy, a Child of God"

Benediction:

Leader: The blessing of God go with us,

People: The grace of Christ go with us,

Leader: The joy of the Holy Spirit go with us,

All: Now and always. Amen.



Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Many seekers and new church participants are already involved with organizations that serve others or promote social justice. In this session, participants will connect scripture with what they are already doing in their community and in the world. These activities may help them relate their mission and discipleship activities to their faith through the stories and themes of the Bible.

About this Exploration

Jesus offered an image of God's realm as a tiny seed planted and flourishing. God's word can be like a seed in our lives and in our world. Individually and collectively, we encounter scripture with the hope of better understanding our own context—the place, time, and circumstances in which we live. Scripture invites us into a more intimate knowledge of God and community. It guides and challenges us to discern our mission to our faith community, our neighborhood, and our world. The tiniest of seeds can produce a rich harvest of peace, justice, and restoration.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Esther 4:1–17

Mark 4:26–34

Leader Preparation

Look into the various mission projects and activities in which your church participates so that you can bring those opportunities to the learners. Also, look at the websites of the different judicatories (association, conference, region, area) and national levels of your denomination to gain a wider perspective on the mission and justice work of the wider church of which you are a part.

Think about what it is that you feel passionate about. In what ways do you love and serve others? Think about not only your roles—being a grandparent, parent, sibling, worker, student, volunteer, facilitator of these sessions—but also about why you do some of the things you do. Do you bring excitement and enthusiasm? Do you bring a sense of calling? Do you have skills, gifts, or aptitudes that you seek to offer in the world? Give thanks to God for your passions and vision; give thanks for your gifts and for opportunities to use those gifts.

This session calls for several different types of room arrangements for the various activities. Some activities require space to move around, and others require table and chairs. So plan your space needs ahead of time. Welcome everyone to the group. If there is a new learner who has not yet been to a session, introduce yourself and then introduce that person to a learner who has been here before.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Entering the Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Create a space where three people can perform a short drama. Arrange chairs or floor space for an audience to gather in a semi-circle to watch the drama. Intend for this to be an informal, fun-sharing activity.

Supplies:

- Bible

The story from Esther 4:1–17 takes place at the royal palace at Susa, the Persian capital, sometime between 587 and 538 B.C.E. Mordecai is a Jew, part of the Jewish exile community living in Persia. His niece, for whom he is guardian, is Queen Esther. No one at court knows she is Jewish. Haman, the king's adviser, has issued an edict under the king's authority to annihilate all the Jews in Persia. Have one volunteer read Esther 4:1–17 slowly and clearly.

Allow for a pause after the reading. Then ask for three volunteers to play the parts of the servant, Esther, and Mordecai in a drama. Explain that as this drama unfolds, others in the audience can make suggestions to the actors. If a member of the audience claps his or her hands, the action will stop and the person in the audience will make suggestions. Then the drama will continue where it left off. Move to the space where the drama will take place. Direct the characters to decide where they will be and take up positions. Let the drama unfold, stopping it when an audience member claps his or her hands and then allowing it to restart. At the end of the drama, express appreciation for everyone's participation.

What parts of this story particularly stood out for you? With which character did you most identify? In what way? What recent or contemporary situations in the world remind you of this story? Who have been people who responded like Esther or like Mordecai? Who have been the Haman's of our world? Ask learners to ponder Mordecai's words to Esther, and then read aloud Esther 4:14. In what ways does this verse resonate with your own experience or sense of calling? Have you been or are you in a particular situation which calls you to take action? What are the risks? What is the call?

2 Sharing

Leader preparation: Reflect on what difference it makes, or might make, in your life to be a follower of Jesus. Do you donate a portion of your money to charity or mission or church? Do you volunteer your time with a justice or church-related organization? This activity may help the learners focus on the implications of choosing to be a follower of Jesus. Read Acts 4:32–37 and mark the passage with a bookmark.

Supplies:

- Bible
- flat double-bed sheets (1 per every 6–8 learners)

Divide the learners into small groups, 6–8 people in each group. Give a bed sheet to each group, and have the group spread it completely open on the floor. Invite the groups to step on their bed sheets. Tell them that living in community and sharing requires cooperation. Their task with the sheet is to make it as small as they can, not by scrunching it up, but by folding it. They are not allowed to step off the sheet as they do this. At all times they are to stay on the sheet while folding it to make it as small as they can without anyone falling off. They are allowed



Prayer: *O God, you are present in the tiny seed of my faith and in seemingly small actions of love and care. I am grateful for these times when I can simply sit with you. When I ponder on the needs of our community, when I feel perplexed about our national life, when I wonder what can be done to share light and joy in a world of oppression and violence, help me know your presence. Strengthen my spirit, remind me of your life-giving breath, open my eyes to see the neighbors who share my concerns. Open your word to me through the words of scripture. Amen.*

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

to talk to one another as they figure out how to accomplish their task. Give them time to enjoy this challenge. After all the groups have completed folding, invite comments about what was hard, what was easy, and how it felt to work together. *What are some challenges of working together as a group? What are some challenges people face working together within a Christian community such as a church congregation?*

The book of Acts relates that after Jesus ascended to heaven, the power of the Holy Spirit was poured upon his followers. The disciples began to move beyond Jerusalem to spread the good news of the coming of God’s kingdom through the life of Jesus Christ. Ask a volunteer to read Acts 4:32–37. *How would you react if one of your friends told you they were giving up all their possessions for the sake of following Jesus? How would you counsel them or applaud them? What questions might you ask them? How does our own church community mirror the life of the early church? In what ways is it different?*

Ask group members to reflect individually on the following questions:

- Do you give money to a church, a charity or a justice-oriented organization? Do you give money on a monthly or a yearly basis? Estimate what percent of your income you give.
- Do you give of your time to a church, a charity or a justice-oriented organization? Do you volunteer your time on a weekly, monthly or yearly basis?

In the whole group, discuss these questions:

- What are your reasons for giving your time and money?
- What are reasons you choose to give to these particular causes or organizations?

3 A Global World

Leader preparation: Place a map or globe in a central place where everyone will be able to see it. Create a display using fabric and other items from another country and a potted plant that is not indigenous to the area in which you live. If you’re not comfortable leading the singing or suggested movements to “Guide My Feet,” find someone to do that for you. Perhaps you might know someone who plays an African *djembe* drum to accompany this song.

Learn what world missions your church serves either through mission trips, prayers, financial support, or sponsorship. Download the readings for today’s date from the online United Church of Christ Calendar of Prayer, or photocopy the current week from your church bulletin.

Supplies:

- Bible
- world map (you might choose the Peters Projection map <http://tinyurl.com/eyw3x>) or a globe; items and plants from other regions of the world
- computer with Internet access
- readings for today’s date from the United Church of Christ Calendar of Prayer, at <http://tinyurl.com/3dg8nwq>
- (optional) church bulletin
- song: “Guide My Feet” (tune: Guide My Feet, 8.8.8.10.) www.tinyurl.com/fp-feet

Have the group stand in a circle around the display you created to sing "Guide My Feet." Introduce movement into the song by clapping hands, swaying, or walking in place. Pass out the weekly Calendar of Prayer page, or have learners look at it on the website. The United Church of Christ Calendar of Prayer includes citations for all readings in the ecumenical daily and Sunday lectionary, as well as an inspiring story from the lives of congregations and members working for God's realm locally and globally. This Calendar of Prayer is available in a daily format or RSS feed for individual use or as a weekly insert into a church bulletin. Have different learners volunteer to read parts of the readings for this day. Pause to share observations and reflections. Locate the country on the map. To end this activity, invite learners to once again sing "Guide My Feet."

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Meditation Movement (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Provide space for learners to move around. Plan a short demonstration movement to show the group. Take a time of silent reflection to prepare yourself for this activity. Learn about the "Machine" game at the eHow website. Plan how you will teach this activity.

Supplies:

- "Improv Comedy Games: Machine," <http://tinyurl.com/26u8l53>
- Bibles

"Machine" is a fun theater exercise. People work together to create a representation of a machine. *Note:* People are not using a machine. They *are* the machine.

Gather in an open area where there is lots of room to move. One person in the group begins by making a simple repetitive motion that he or she continues to make over and over. The motion may have a sound that goes with it. The next person joins in with another repetitive motion that connects in some way with the first person. Continue to add people until everyone is a part of the machine. Divide into smaller groups (3–4 people) and have each group create a machine to show the others. Have the others guess what the machine is.

Have someone read Mark 4:26–29 to the group. Ask teams (or the whole group) to make a representation of the passage in which each person makes a repetitive motion and sound that integrates with motions and sounds of others to create a total representation of the action in the passage. Offer applause, and invite learners to be seated after their performances. *What does this passage suggest about God's realm? How is God's realm like a seed? Where can we find the seed in the world? What image or metaphor would you propose to describe God's realm? What part do we play in supporting or nurturing God's realm?*

5 Hope in a Troubled World

Leader preparation: Before looking more closely at the violence in our world, provide yourself with time for prayer; then read John 1:1–14. Where do you find hope in this passage? Do an online search using terms such as "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing." Look through the countries that are listed. Think about other situations of which you are aware of that are not listed that would be considered ethnic cleansing or genocide. Notice some basic information—the names of the ethnic groups, what the power struggles were about, and the years when there was violence or if it is still ongoing. Then read John 1:1–14 again. Consider how

God's hope and vision speaks to you through this text.

In leading this activity, the intent is not to focus on how much evil there is in our world. The purpose of this activity is to connect the evil and violence to the scripture readings, to let the reality of violence be held within the sacred stories of hope. There is a sample prayer included for this activity, but if you prefer to create a prayer of your own, please do so. Set up the room with chairs in a circle around a central table. Place a big pillar candle in the center of the table. Put smaller candles around it, one per person.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- a map (such as a Peters Projection Map at <http://tinyurl.com/eyw3x>)
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- 1 pillar candle and votive candles (one per person), matches or taper for lighting candles
- Internet access

Pass out the Bibles and invite the learners to find John 1:1–9. Read the text in unison. Then stop. Light the pillar candle. Have the learners join you again to read the rest of the verses, John 1:10–14. Pause for silent reflection. Ask people to find Esther 4:1–17, and have volunteers read this passage. Pause at the end of the reading. Offer this prayer, or prayer of your own: *O Holy One, you created a cosmos which you called good. We acknowledge the hurt and injustice and cruelty that exist in our world, in your creation. Sometimes we have been part of the problem; often we have failed to be part of the solution. Help us to be resolute in our response. Give us courage to speak out and integrity to act for change. Help us to follow the example of Jesus. Fill us with daring love and outrageous compassion. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Write the words "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" on the newsprint or whiteboard. Ask the learners to gather in small groups and to search the Internet for definitions and examples of the genocide and ethnic cleansing. Invite people to talk about what they find. *How does this information make you feel?* Tell the learners that you will offer a prayer and then they are invited to come forward in silence to write on the newsprint the name of a region, country, or group that has experienced genocide or ethnic cleansing. Then they may light a votive candle. Alternatively, they may wish to simply light a votive candle without writing. Offer your own prayer or repeat the prayer above. Pause for a moment of silence.

Invite the learners to talk about evil and violence and about goodness and courage. *How do you find hope when you hear about or experience violence? Where do you see goodness and courage expressed in our world?* Join in a circle holding hands. Invite each person to offer one word of hope as a closing blessing.



6 Hospitality

Leader preparation: Think of a place or situation where you experienced hospitality. What did it feel like? What do you remember about this experience? What touched you? Plan a walking tour of the building. What rooms or areas of the church can you go to without interrupting other meetings or gatherings? If necessary, ask permission to visit some areas where groups may be meeting.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde
www.tinyurl.com/fp-uccr3
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite learners into a circle, and direct their attention to the image of Christ among the children. *Where do you see hospitality? How is it expressed? Do you see lack of hospitality? Where is it? Have learners reflect on a time when they experienced hospitality. How was hospitality expressed? Have the learners forms pairs to talk with a partner about this experience. Read aloud Luke 9:1–6. What particular phrase or word draws you into this story? How is hospitality expected to be expressed in this story? What was the purpose of the journey on which Jesus sent the twelve? Write comments on the newsprint or whiteboard.*

Ask the learners to remember the first time they walked into the church building. Invite them to describe what attracted them to come to church. *Was it the building? the people? the sign on the lawn? the website? What hospitality do you experience here?*

Take a walking tour of the church. Start with the front door and then move through the learning areas, the sanctuary, and the places where people gather before and after worship, which may also include the outdoors. Invite comments about what people notice in the church building or grounds that expresses hospitality. *Where is there evidence that the church welcomes newcomers? What are the signs of welcome for people who might sometimes feel excluded? (signs or accessibility for people who use wheelchairs, rainbows or signs to welcome GLBT people, indications that children are welcome here) Do they notice signs of nurturing of members and new people? Do they notice any visible signs of the ways in which the church reaches out beyond its own members and friends? Does the church seem to provide the same feelings of hospitality that is evidenced in the painting between Jesus and the children?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Opening Our Hearts (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: There is much in our world that needs to be done. Where do you focus your heart? Be aware of some of the mission, outreach, and justice activities in which your church is involved. Visit your denomination's website to see what it says about your church's commitment to and understanding of global mission. Read the article "Open Hearts to Global Mission" from the attachment, and look up the Bible passages that are cited.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- "Open Hearts to Global Mission," Attachment: Activity 7
- pens and paper
- Internet access

Is there a world mission that your local church serves? A national or a local mission? Where and in what form does that service take? What are some ways the Christian church has understood the mandate of its missionary work over the centuries? (providing to non-European countries or peoples, sometimes ruthlessly enforcing conversion) What do you think our mission as a church should be?

Pass out Bibles and the reading "Open Hearts to Mission." Ask people to read the article. Work in small groups or individually on the task at the bottom of the page. Invite learners to share their statements about mission. Invite group members to think about the areas of injustice or oppression or violence about which they feel most strongly. *How do you feel called to respond to human need and suffering in the world? How do the stories you read about Jesus influence your sense of what you are called to be and to do?*

8 With Hearts Stirred

Leader preparation: Help the learners come up with a concrete plan in which small steps could potentially create a ripple effect in the church or the community, depending upon their enthusiasm for the small step they decide to do. If you're not comfortable leading the singing of "As We Gather at Your Table, have a musically talented person help you out. Find and view the video clip "Be the Change."

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles
- paper for writing names and email addresses or phone numbers
- song: "As We Gather at Your Table" (tune: Beach Spring, 8.7.8.7.D.)
www.tinyurl.com/fp-table
- Internet access
- video: "Be the Change," <http://tinyurl.com/m97ops>

Together, sing "As We Gather at Your Table." Then invite the learners to sing the first two verses of the song again, paying particular attention to these phrases: "let our hearts and minds be stirred," "turn our worship into witness," and "send us forth to love and serve you." Ask the learners to reflect on activities they have participated in within the church or in the community to respond to human need or suffering. *Were your hearts and minds stirred? How? What do you think it means for the church (or people who are part of a faith community) to turn worship into witness? What might it mean for you to "love and serve" God? How do you feel about this phrase?*

Pass out Bibles, and invite volunteers to take turns reading Mark 4:26–34. Pause after the reading. Ask: *What are some seeds of God's reign that you have seen this week? Tell the learners that you will be asking them to plant a seed, mentally. Show the YouTube video clip "Be the Change." Invite reactions and comments. How can small actions add up to big changes? In what areas of your life might you be able to do a little change that would help to bring about God's realm?*

9 While I Run This Race

Leader preparation: Gather newspapers and news magazines. Spread them out on one table. Place a laptop, cell phone, or another communication device on this table. On another table put a garden plant, seeds, fresh fruit, and vegetables. Cut open some of the fruits or vegetables so that the seeds show. Arrange for someone to teach the song "Guide My Feet."

Supplies:

- Bible
- song: "Guide My Feet" (tune: Guide My Feet, 8.8.8.10.)
www.tinyurl.com/fp-feet

Teach the song "Guide My Feet," and sing the first verse together. If you have not done so in another activity, introduce the story from Esther 4:1–17. The setting is the royal palace in Susa, the Persian capital, sometime between 587 and 538 B.C.E. Mordecai is a Jew, part of the Jewish exiled community living in Persia. His niece, for whom he is guardian, is Queen Esther. No one at court knows she is Jewish. Haman, the king's adviser, has issued an edict under the king's authority to annihilate all the Jews in Persia. Have someone read aloud Esther 4:1–17. Have learners consider the implications of what Esther is being asked to do. Invite the group to think of situations in which responding to injustice or standing up for someone might be challenging or risky. *What kind of support did Esther ask for when she undertook to stand up for her people? What kind of support helps you to take risks for the sake of justice or in order to stand up for someone else?* Sing the second verse of the song (about holding hands), reaching for the hand of someone next to you. *How can we support one another to respond to God's invitation to be a faithful community of God's people?* Sing the final verses of "Guide My Feet."

Reflect

What happened during this session that moved you or inspired you? How was your faith deepened or strengthened? What might you do differently because of what you have learned or experienced with this group? Consider which activities or conversations most engaged your group. Where did you see signs of God's word alive and present in your midst? How will you build on or deepen what is happening in your group in future times together? Give thanks for God's presence and for the learning you have experienced with this group.



Attachment: Activity 7

Open Hearts to Global Mission

Mission is our response to God's call to "seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8). It is our response to Jesus, who said, "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35).

Mission has two dimensions: charity and justice making. Charity is often a first response to care for people in immediate need. Examples are giving food to people who are hungry, responding to international disasters such as a floods or earthquakes or providing protection to the homeless. There are times when charity is appropriate and necessary. Charity is often a lifeline for people, but it does not create long-term solutions, and it can perpetuate injustice. Justice making means addressing structural and social injustices that underlie human need. It works to create long-term solutions and to eradicate the social causes of poverty, violence, or other injustice. Working for justice includes education, advocacy, and lobbying to bring about changes to local international structures, systems, and policies.

Mission is done in partnership. For example, The United Church of Canada has partnerships with national churches, ecumenical organizations, and church agencies around the world. Some of these partnerships emerged from overseas mission work that started in the late 19th century, and some are more recent. "The United Church of Canada and its global partners are called to work together in God's mission for wholeness of life" (<http://tinyurl.com/3s3235d>). The United Church of Christ says of its global mission work, "We commit ourselves to a shared life in Christ and to an ecumenical global sharing of resources and prophetic vision of a just and peaceful world order, joining with God's concern for the poor and oppressed" (<http://tinyurl.com/3hl24hp>).

Mission requires an attitude of humble self-aware-

ness. Responding compassionately requires empathy and a willingness to relinquish power. It means knowing we cannot fix someone else's life or eradicate someone else's pain. We can accompany and support, but we do not control or judge. Giving does not make the giver superior to the recipient, and it should not be used to force another to conform to the givers' values, beliefs, or culture. Those who seek to redress injustice or change social systems do not have all the answers.

Mission calls for us to act locally and globally. We are called to respond to issues and needs in our own communities and also beyond our borders.

Your task:

1. Look on your church's denominational website to find out what it says about mission.
2. Read in one of these gospel stories how Jesus reached out beyond his own Jewish community:

Roman centurion—Luke 7:1–10

Samaritan woman—John 4:7–15

Syrophoenician woman—Mark 7:24–30

3. Read in one of these gospel stories how Jesus responded with compassion to those who were considered outcasts and marginalized within his own community:

Leper—Matthew 8:1–4

Woman who was considered sexually immoral—John 7:53–8:11

Tax collector—Luke 19:1–10

4. Write a sentence that describes what you think the church's mission should be like.



Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Seekers and newcomers may be drawn to traditional churches for a variety of reasons. They may be looking for alternative values to those of the consumer culture in which we live. They may be seeking a sense of community in a time of transition or crisis. Or they may be longing for hope and for deeper meaning and purpose in their lives. Their energy, curiosity, and genuine desire to learn and grow can revitalize the vision and future of our church. Seekers come to our faith communities because they have chosen to, not because they feel they should. This is a gift. It may at times be tempting to offer easy answers to their questions based on traditional interpretations of scripture. However, if leaders truly value their newcomer perspective, it can open up church's interpretation of scripture to fresh insights and new possibilities. Scriptures have so much to offer if we approach the Bible with imagination, creativity, and a receptive heart. Encourage seekers and new church participants to continue the practices of encountering scripture that they are learning. Through their ongoing inquiry, the church can be shaped with integrity into a community that pursues God's dreams and visions for our world.

About this Exploration

As we look toward a shared future as a community of faith, our encounter with scripture restores our sense of hope, renews the multilayered meanings of the texts, and opens our imaginations. We reclaim the stories that shape us and discover possibilities for change and transformation. Encountering scripture fills us with new vision, opening our hearts to Christ who invites us to proclaim and celebrate God's realm. Engagement with the Bible nurtures our faith community from generation to generation.



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 30:15–20
Hebrews 11:1–16

Leader Preparation

Consider endings and beginnings. If this session is a beginning for you and your group, think about how you will welcome one another and help the group feel comfortable. Will you need name tags? How will you arrange the space to make a welcoming learning environment? If this is a closing session for your group, think about how you will say goodbye to one another. An informal social time with refreshments might help a new group feel welcome or provide an opportunity for participants to say goodbye to one another if the group is ending. As you prepare to lead this session, think about what comes to mind when you hear the word "faith." How would you describe what faith means? What do you think the idea of "faith" means to members of your group? Read Hebrews 11:1–16. How does the writer of this epistle understand faith?

Prayer: Blessed are you, Holy One, for your faithfulness throughout all generations. Your word is guidance when I am perplexed, comfort when I am distressed, challenge when I am complacent, and hope when I am in despair. May your word kindle in me vision for my own life, for this learning group, and for our wider community of faith. I pray in Jesus name, Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Knowing our Faith Ancestors (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Take a moment to think about a character from a book or from TV that you think of as exemplary or honorable. Also think about a Bible character you would consider exemplary. Read Hebrews 11:1–16 so you are familiar with the names of the people listed. If possible, provide Internet access. If you have Bible reference books, place them on a side table. Check the church library, or ask the minister for books.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper and pens or pencils
- (optional) computers with Internet access
- Bible reference tools such as Bible dictionaries, study Bibles, and concordances
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Have everyone seated in a circle. Invite the learners to name a character from a book or from TV who they consider an honorable or exemplary person and say a word or two about why they respect this character. Then invite the learners to name a person from the Bible who they find to be a possible role model or exemplary figure. If learners are stuck for ideas, recall some of the stories you talked about in a previous activity together, or suggest some of the following well known characters: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Ruth, Noah, Moses, Jesus, Jesus' parents Mary and Joseph, King David, Jesus' disciple Peter, the apostle Paul. Again, learners should start by naming a Bible character with whom they identify.

Distribute Bibles and invite learners to find Hebrews 11:1–16. Ask for a volunteer to read the passage aloud. Focus on the names of the people mentioned. Look further along in the passage for other names. Ask if anyone knows anything about any of the people. Record names on newsprint or a whiteboard, as well as anything about the person that might help learners identify his or her story. Divide into pairs or small groups, and have people find more information on some of the more familiar characters mentioned in Hebrews 11, such as Abraham, Moses, Sarah, Noah, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Samuel. Gather back to share the information they find about these "faith ancestors." *Why do you think the writer of Hebrews might have used these people as examples of faith? What do you think it means to "have faith"?*



2 What's in a Word?

Leader preparation: Spend time prayerfully pondering Hebrews 11:1: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Read the attachment "What's in a Word?" Read Hebrews 11:1 in different translations. Write the verse on a slip of paper and carry it with you in your pocket to read during the week. What does this verse say to you? How does this verse connect with what is going on for you in your life at the moment?

Supplies:

- "What's in a Word?" Attachment: Activity 2
- paper and pens or pencils
- Bibles



Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

Distribute copies of the attachment “What’s in a Word,” and have learners look at the various translations of Hebrews 11:1. Consider the questions at the bottom of the page. Invite people to identify which translation of Hebrews 11:1 they chose and why. *What do you think the biblical author might have been intending? What are some difficulties we face as we try to figure out what a biblical author might have meant?* (the fact that it’s hard to find an English word that exactly fits a Greek one, the differences in culture) *What do you think might get lost in translation? Even if we could have a perfect translation, we would never know for certain what the author meant. Why or why not?* Point out that even two speakers of English can have a hard time understanding one another and ensuring that what one person hears is what the other person intended. So our understanding scripture is always an interpretation—always open to other possibilities. *How do you feel about that?* Have learners work in pairs, and invite people to discuss what it means for them (or for someone else) to have faith. *In who or what do you have faith? How does your faith impact your sense of confidence and hope for the future?* Ask learners to write Hebrews 11:1 on a slip of paper and carry it with them in a pocket to read over the next week. *Notice times when it connects to something going on in your life or in the world.*



3 Commandments

Leader preparation: Think about the word “commandment.” How do you define this word? Does it bring up positive or negative feelings for you? Think about what this word might mean to a person in his or her 80s, a person in his or her 30s, a person in his or her teens. How might participants in your group feel about this concept? Make copies of the attachment with other Bible verses about commandments.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- paper and pens or pencils
- “Commandments,” Attachment: Activity 3

Write the word “commandment” at the top of the newsprint or whiteboard. Ask for definitions, and write them in one color of marker on the newsprint or whiteboard. Then ask for feelings associated with the word “commandment,” and write these in a second color. *What knowledge, stories, teaching, and life experiences shape how you understand the word “commandment”?*

Invite the learners to form groups of 4–6 people. Make sure each group has Bibles, pens or pencils, and a copy of the attachment for each person in the group. Tell learners to follow the instructions on the attachment. Give sufficient time to do this.

Then gather everyone back together in the larger group. Discuss any insights into the word “commandment” as found in the six scripture passages. *What ideas do these passages give about what this concept meant to the original writers or hearers of the scripture? What does this suggest about the ways the biblical worldview (perspective on and understanding of God, faith, the universe) may be different from our own? What commandments may have been most important to people living in ancient Palestine? What commandments may be most important for our world today? If you had to choose one single commandment that would guide our nation or society into the future, what would that commandment be?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 By Faith (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Hebrews 11:1–16. Reflect on your life, on your faith. What practices have kept your faith going? Think not only of typical practices such as scripture reading, prayer, and going to worship regularly, but think also of nontypical activities such as gardening, walking in the woods, participating with a mission group, having coffee with a friend whose steadiness of faith you admire, and being part of an ecumenical gathering.

Supplies:

- Bibles (in the same translation or version)
- paper and pens or pencils

Have learners gather in a circle. Ask them to take a moment in quiet to think about their faith. *What has made your faith strong? What has kept your faith going in times of distress or grief?* After they've had time to think about these questions, ask them to divide into groups or 2–3 people and talk about these questions in their small groups.

Gather in the whole group and ask if anyone wants to share anything that was helpful to them in their smaller group, being careful not to divulge personal things that are not theirs to share. Distribute the Bibles. Ask volunteers to read Hebrews 11:1–16 to the group. Take time to reflect with them about the passage; see if they have any questions, concerns or thoughts about this reading. Invite the learners to journal or draw their thoughts, questions, or feelings about this passage. At the end, gather in a circle and read in unison Hebrews 11:1–3.

5 Images of Life

Leader preparation: Provide tables and chairs and enough elbow space for learners to do the project. Set glue, scissors, paper, and magazines on the tables. If you do not have nature music readily available, do an Internet search. Read Deuteronomy 30:15–20. In a time of silence, consider how this passage connects with your life today. Think about what it meant for a nomadic people to "choose life" as they traveled to the Promised Land. What does it mean for you to "choose life"?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- a variety of magazines with pictures of people, nature, animals
- poster-size paper on which to glue pictures
- glue and scissors
- colored markers
- nature music (a recording of whale sounds, a piece of classical music with a nature theme such as Beethoven's Symphony 6, a recording of bird sounds)

Deuteronomy 30:15–20 is a passage from the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). It is set in the context of Moses and the Israelites making their way across the wilderness from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. God gives the people commandments to follow for their new life as a nation in a new land. Ask someone to read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–20. *What guidelines and commands might help the Israelites live life fully in a new land?* Read the following quotation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is a nation

approaching spiritual death.” Invite the group to consider what it might mean to “choose life” as a nation or culture today.

Direct the learners to the art supplies and invite them to create a kaleidoscope of images that reflect their understanding of what it means to be fully alive or to embrace life without reserve. Play a recording of nature music as they work. When they have finished, invite people to share their creations with the group. What images and ideas are reflected in the posters?



6 Faith Is . . .

Leader preparation: Read Hebrews 11:1–3. Display Rivera’s image in a prominent place.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- artwork: “Two Women and a Child” by Diego Rivera

www.tinyurl.com/fp-apdr

Invite the learners to focus on the picture. *What do you see? What do you imagine is the relationship between the two women and the child? What feelings are suggested by this picture? If you have seen this picture before, what do you notice that you didn’t see before?* Have someone read aloud Hebrews 11:1–3. Think about what is unseen but present in the image of the two women and child. Pause for a moment of silence to look at the picture again. *What else do you notice in this image? What connections, if any, do you find between the picture and the verses from Hebrews 11?* Read Hebrews 11:1–3 to the group again. *What do you hear or notice now in this passage or in the picture? How does faith undergird or support our sense of hope?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Choose Life (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about what gives you energy and enthusiasm. Have the teachings of these sessions have been exciting in addition to being work? What is it about your church that you feel passionate about, that you enjoy? Are there certain pieces of the church structure and system that you do not enjoy? It’s important to be aware of your church’s strengths and weaknesses and not to feel defensive. Seekers and new church participants can provide a breath of fresh air in the church as they are able to see the church structures differently from those who have been a part of church life for a longer time.

Supplies:

- Bible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Have the learners list things in life that they enjoy or things that they feel excited about and look forward to doing. *What do you dread doing, or what do you put off?* Then ask the learners how they feel about their faith life, both at home and at church. Have the learners focus on church structure and how that affects the faith life. *What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the worship services, education opportunities, fellowship times, mission activities? Do you look forward to being a part of any of these things? Why or why not? Are there things that you dread or have tried*

and simply don't enjoy? Allow time for thoughtful, sensitive discussion. Keep this a safe space. Listen carefully.

Introduce Deuteronomy 30:15–20. These are words of Moses given to the Israelite people before they get ready to enter the Promised Land. Read aloud the Deuteronomy passage. After a pause, ask the learners to think of something that they intend to do, change, or practice that will show that they have chosen life. It can be something as simple as waking up in the morning and offering a brief prayer of thanksgiving to God. Or it can be more elaborate. Write their suggestions on the newsprint or whiteboard.

Invite the learners to stand in a circle holding hands to pray. Let them know that you will begin and end the prayer. In the middle, you will pause to allow them time to add things they hope for or need as they continue to commit themselves to more fully "choose life."



8 Words to Live By

Leader preparation: If you were to select a single Bible verse as a text to live by this coming week, what passage might you select? Use an online Bible reference tool, such as "Bible Gateway" (<http://www.biblegateway.com>) or "Biblos" (<http://biblos.com/>) to find one or two passages that are important for you as a disciple of Jesus. Make copies of the attachment. Cut on the dotted lines so each verse is on a separate piece of paper. Make a set of verses for each person, keeping each set separate by placing it in an envelope. Make one additional set.

Supplies:

- Bible search tools, such as concordances or an online Bible reference website
- Bibles
- "Words to Live By," Attachment: Activity 8
- (optional) art supplies such as crayons, colored pencils, or watercolor paints, brushes, and paper

Distribute one set of verses from the attachment so that everyone has one or more individual verses. Go around the circle, having each person read aloud one of the verses he or she was given. Continue until all the verses have been read. Ask: *If you were going to choose one scripture passage to live your life by, which one might it be? Would it be one of these? A different one?* Invite participants to choose one of the verses you provided or to use Bible reference tools to find another text that gives them "words to live by." Have each learner find a partner and talk about the passage selected. *Why is it important to you? What challenges do you foresee in trying to live out this verse in your daily life? What joys might this bring you?*

Close by having someone read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–20. Encourage people to put his or her chosen verse in a wallet or purse, on a phone screen, or somewhere else where it will be seen frequently during the coming weeks. *When you encounter the text, pause for a moment to think about what is going on around you. How might these words be speaking to you in this moment?*

Option: Provide art supplies, and have people write out and decorate or illustrate the text that they chose.

9 Guide My Feet

Leader preparation: Learn the spiritual "Guide My Feet." Read the activity and determine whether you want the group to trace their feet and cut the pattern as part of the activity, or whether you want to create a pattern based on your feet. Be aware that some people are sensitive about showing their feet in public. Think about your group members and what will work best for the entire group. Set out the mural paper in a long strip. To protect the floor, cover it with drop cloths or paper. Put different colors of paint in shallow paint trays.

Supplies:

- Bible
- mural paper
- poster paint or finger paint, wide brushes, and shallow paint trays
- colored markers
- water, cloths, and towels for cleanup
- lots of old newspapers or drop cloths to protect the floor
- song: "Guide My Feet" (tune: Guide My Feet, 8.8.8.10.)

www.tinyurl.com/fp-feet

Moses asked the Israelites to walk in God's ways, obeying God's commandments and rules for living peacefully and faithfully. Read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–20. Learn the tune and sing the African American spiritual "Guide My Feet." Dance or clap and sway with the music.

Then explain that the group will make a footprint mural using paint, their own feet, and mural paper. Ask people to work in groups of three to help one another. *Take off your shoes and socks, and paint the bottom of one another's feet so that a painted footprint can be put on the mural.* Ask that all footprints be paired and walking in the same direction (more or less) down the mural paper. This is trickier than one might suppose. People will need to paint one foot at a time and use one another for support as they make their footprints. At the end of the activity, people can clean their feet with cloths and water.

Option: If people don't want to paint their bare feet, have partners trace their footprints while they are wearing their shoes. Then the footprints can be painted.

Read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–20. Invite people to consider what it means to choose life as they enter this coming week. Use colored markers to add words or phrases to the mural that describe ways they hope to "choose life" or walk in God's way over the coming weeks and months. Gather in a circle for a prayer: *Guide our feet, O God. Help us to choose life. Help us to walk in your way. Amen.*

Reflect

In what ways has leading this session changed your faith practice of encountering scripture? What have you learned from the activities? What have you learned from being a facilitator and a nurturer of the faith life? What have you learned from the participants? Would you do this again? What would you do different? In future sessions with your group, how might you build on what you have learned or experienced together? Pray for God to guide your feet as you continue to learn and lead.

Attachment: Activity 2

What's in a Word?

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."
(Hebrews 11:1, New Revised Standard Version)

This verse wasn't written in English—none of the Bible was. What we read in our Bibles from the book of Hebrews is a translation from first-century Greek. There is no one single "correct" translation.

Hupostasis, a Greek word, translated as "assurance" in the New Revised Standard Version, means:

- "that which underlies something"
- "the basis of something"
- "the guarantee of something"
- "the real, essential, basic material of something"
- "the nature or underlying reality of something"
- "a fundamental reality that supports everything else"

Read how Hebrews 11:1 has been translated into English in other versions of the Bible. Notice the subtle difference in meaning.

- "Faith makes us sure of what we hope for and gives us proof of what we cannot see." (Contemporary English Version)
- "Faith assures us of things we expect and convinces us of the existence of things we cannot see." (*God's Word Translation*)
- "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (New American Standard Bible)
- "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (King James Version)
- "The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see." (*The Message*)
- "Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see." (New Living Translation)
- "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (New International Version)

Questions to think about:

- Which version of the Bible do you own? How does your Bible translate this verse?
- With which translation of Hebrews 11:1 do you connect? What does this verse say to you?
- What do think the author of Hebrews is saying about faith? What do you think faith is?

Attachment: Activity 3

Commandments

Divide the following Bible verses among the people in your small group. Each person is to write a short summary of the Bible verse he or she looked up. After everyone in the small group has finished their summaries, share them with the rest of the small group.

1. Exodus 20:1–17

2. Deuteronomy 6:1–5

3. Psalm 119: 35–47

4. Psalm 119: 96–103

5. Luke 12:28–31

6. John 13:34–35

Attachment: Activity 8

Words to Live By

Make copies onto card stock, one copy for each participant. Cut apart the passages on the dotted lines. Keep each set of verses separate by placing it in an envelope.

God is my shepherd, leading me beside still waters. (Psalm 23:1)

God came and stood there near the boy, calling as before "Samuel, Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Here I am. Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3:10)

God is my rock in whom I take shelter. (2 Samuel 22:3)

I heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for me?" And I said, "Here I am. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. (Psalm 100)

Those who trust in God will gain new strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run without getting tired. They will walk and not grow faint. (Isaiah 40:31)

What does God require of you? Only this, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

Attachment: Activity 8 (continued)

This is my servant, the one I have chosen, my beloved child
with whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 12:18)

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. God has anointed me to bring good news to the
poor, to declare freedom to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the
oppressed go free and to announce the year of God's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

The third time Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" . . .
Peter said, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."
Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:17)

Do not be afraid, little flock, for God, your loving parent,
has been pleased to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself. . . .
Do this and you will live. (Luke 10:27)

Love your enemies, be kind to them, and lend to them
without expecting to get in return. (Luke 6:35)

God will be judge between people and will settle disputes among the nations. They
will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will
not take up sword against nation, nor will they prepare for war anymore. (Micah 4:3)

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and
the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. (Isaiah 11:6)

Many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Mark 10:31)