

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

Young adults who have been a part of a church community all their life have heard and read scripture often. They may have favorite stories and know some passages by heart. However, this may not be the norm for your group members. For some young adults, this may be their first in-depth encounter with the Bible. They may be skeptical about its relevance, or they may be eager to plumb its depths. Other young adults may be coming back to church after a long absence. Their encounter with scripture in this faith practice might be a rediscovery, especially if they have not read the Bible since early childhood Sunday school. They may have forgotten most of the stories and be delighted to rediscover old favorites. They may find new meanings or be surprised by new interpretations. For all young adults it is important to make connections between the word of God in scripture and their daily lives. Young adults have grown up in an era of rapid social change, the most rapid in history, where newest is often equated with best. This is particularly true when it comes to technology, but it is also true in the realm of ideas and knowledge. They may be resistant to what they consider "old fashioned" beliefs; they may be eager to find a solid ground that isn't constantly shifting under their feet; or, they may come to the Bible eager to discover how God is still speaking through these ancient words. Leaders can help young adults to listen with openness and respect for one another and to honor the diversity of their perspectives, needs, faith, and experiences.

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

Consider what you bring to your leadership role with this group. What gifts do you offer of time, energy, skills, interests, or commitments? What questions do you bring? What are some of your uncertainties about this role? About this faith practice? Remember that not having it all together can be a gift, opening the way for others to share doubts and questions.

Consider what scripture means to you. Recall one of the first times you held or opened a Bible. Was it recently or in your childhood? What do you remember about that experience? What place does the Bible have in your own life of faith? How do you feel about the Bible? Read Proverbs 2:1–8 and 2:20–21. The writer imagines God's companion, Wisdom, standing on a busy street corner sharing God's holy word with human beings. How do you experience God's word in your daily life? How do you discern the voice of Wisdom amid all the other voices competing for your attention?

Read John 21:1–19. This is yet another image of God's word taking human form and dwelling among us. How

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Bible and Me (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Print a copy of "The Bible and Me" questionnaire and answer the questions yourself. Consider what place the Bible and God's word has in your life at the moment. Do you read the Bible? If so, when? Why?

Supplies:

- pencils
- "The Bible and Me," Attachment: Activity 1
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Hand out copies of the questionnaire, and ask people to select their responses. Allow for laughter (or other reactions). This is an irreverent questionnaire! Ask people to find a partner with whom to share their responses to the questions, including their more serious responses. Invite sharing on people's level of familiarity or comfort with the Bible and what it means to them. Gather back in the whole group. Ask: *How do you feel about the Bible? How is the Bible important in your life, if it is? What questions do you have about the Bible?* Record questions on newsprint. Ask how the group might wish to follow up on some of these questions (with a minister or resource person, looking on the Internet, through further discussion, and so forth).

2 Bible Basics

Leader preparation: Watch the YouTube video "The Medieval Help Desk." There are several versions of this video on YouTube, including one in English, but the original with English subtitles is the funniest. Opening the Bible, literally as well as figuratively, may be a new experience for some members of your group. Consider what a gift it might be to be able to come to a passage of scripture with completely fresh eyes, as though you have never read or heard it before. Pray for a beginner's mind as you encounter scripture with your group. Look up some Bible search tools such as *Bible Gateway*, <http://www.biblegateway.com/>.

Supplies:

- Bible, one per person, of several different versions if possible
- paper and pencils
- video: "The Medieval Help Desk," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pyjRj3UMRM>
- computer with Internet access

does this word speak to you? What does it call you to do or be?

Prayer:

Holy One, Living Word, guide me in my leadership with this group.

(pause)

Holy One I am listening. Let me hear your word.

Let me experience your word active in my life.

(pause)

Let me feel your presence.

(pause)

Let me know your ways.

Let me show your love.

(pause)

I pray in the name of Jesus, your holy Word to us. 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.

Have participants watch the video “The Medieval Help Desk.” Pass out Bibles to everyone and ask people to hold them for a few moments, unopened, simply feeling the weight and texture of the book in their hands. *Can you recall when the Bible was new for you? What might it be like for us to always come to the Bible as beginners?* Invite people to share their earliest experiences with the Bible. For some this may go back to their childhood if they have a long history of church experience. *Did you ever receive a Bible as a gift? What was that like?* If people are newcomers to the Bible, invite them to reflect on what it feels like to encounter a book they don’t know much about. *What do you expect to find within this book? What does this book mean to you?*

If some people are unfamiliar with the Bible, help them begin to find their way around it. Note the two main sections of the Bible: The Hebrew Scriptures (commonly called the Old Testament) and the Christian or Greek Scriptures (commonly called the New Testament). Ask those who are comfortable doing so to demonstrate how to find a passage by the title of the book, chapter, and verse number. Invite people to share the different methods they use to find things in the Bible—some may be familiar with search programs such as *Bible Gateway* on the Internet, which allow the user to search by key words or by chapter and verse. Note the table of contents and chronological list at the front of most Bibles (most people find it helpful to use this at times, especially for the more obscure books). Note that Psalms and Isaiah fall somewhere at the middle of the Bible and that the Christian scriptures, beginning with the book of Matthew, comprise the last quarter of the Bible.

Have someone look up Proverbs 2:1–8 and read it aloud. Have group members identify the many different phrases used in this short passage to suggest the idea of seeking wisdom: “incline your heart for understanding,” “cry out for wisdom,” “raise your voice for insight,” “search,” “seek.” Invite the group to identify these different phrases in their various translations (such as “incline your ear,” in the New Revised Standard Version). There are other verbs and phrases used in other translations. *What do these phrases suggest about the importance of wisdom for the writer of this passage? What does the word “wisdom” mean to you? In what way can you identify with this longing to find wisdom? In what way might scripture have a place in that quest for you? Point out the warning in the text not to rely on intuition alone. What do you think that points to? Why do you think that could be significant?*

3 Meeting Wisdom at the Corner

Leader preparation: Imagine you were to meet the Bible as a person walking down the street where you live. Who would the Bible be? Read Proverbs 2:1–8 and 2:20–21. The writer imagines God’s companion, Wisdom, standing on a busy street corner sharing God’s holy Word with human beings. Be open to experiencing that possibility in this activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles of several different versions, one per person

Invite the group to use their imaginations. *Imagine you were to meet the Bible as a person walking down the street where you live. Who would the Bible be? Would Ms. or Mr. Bible be a familiar friend? An emergency services worker to be called on only in a crisis? An enemy? Someone of a different nationality or culture? A playful child? Or, someone else?* Pause for a moment to let people think, and then invite them to describe the character they think the Bible might be. Read aloud Proverbs 2:1–8

and 2:20–21. The writer imagines God's companion, Wisdom, standing on a busy street corner sharing God's holy word with human beings. *Where do you think God's Word is out there for our busy lives?*

Have the participants pair up, and have an imaginary conversation in which one is Wisdom and the other is him- or herself. *Exchange greetings. What do you say to one another?* Then have partners reverse roles. Gather back in the whole group. *How do you think God speaks to us or through us?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Word on the Street (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Gather some real graffiti, or recall a profound nugget of wisdom or favorite proverb. Some examples of found graffiti include: "Is reality real?" "You can only see as far as you can imagine." and "Time is what keeps everything from happening at once." Cut apart the proverbs from around the world on the attachment "Proverbs," and have them available to distribute. Cut apart the Proverbs from the Bible text references from the attachment and put them in a basket or envelope.

Supplies:

- Bibles of several different versions if possible, one per person
- paper and pencils
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- tape
- "Proverbs," Attachment: Activity 4
- scissors
- a container or envelope to hold small slips of paper

Have someone turn to Proverbs 2:1–8 and read it to the group. Invite each person to say aloud one word that stands out for them from this reading. Distribute the proverbs from around the world that you cut apart from the attachment. Ask people to read aloud the proverb they received. Ask group members to comment on the wisdom or insight they find in the proverb.

Tape one or two sheets of newsprint to a wall in your learning area. Distribute markers. Ask group members to write some "words on the street"—some graffiti-style messages of wisdom they have encountered. Kick things off with a couple of pieces of found graffiti, such as "Is reality real?" or "You can only see as far as you can imagine." or "Time is what keeps everything from happening at once." Invite people to share other favorite proverbs.

The book of Proverbs in the Bible contains many sayings, proverbs, and riddles that were collected together, probably over many years. Some of these proverbs are ones we still quote today. Distribute the references for biblical proverbs from the attachment that you cut apart. Ask people to find and read the passages in their Bibles. (If necessary, explain how to find a biblical reference by book name, chapter, and verse. Note that most Bibles have a table of contents or list of books of the Bible with page numbers.)

Distribute pens and paper. Have people write the proverb in their own words, using as few words as possible to make it punchy. Post the proverbs on the newsprint and look at them together. *Which of these proverbs stands out for you as one that you need to pay attention to? Why?* There are some proverbs in the book of Proverbs

that we might have difficulty with today. For example, "If you beat children with a rod, you will save their lives" (Proverbs 23:13) or "A beautiful woman who is stupid is like a gold ring in a pig's snout" (Proverbs 11:22). *How do we discern whether or not it is God's word we are hearing as we read and interpret scripture?*

5 Guess Who's Coming to Breakfast

Leader preparation: This activity aims to draw the learner into a conversational relationship with the scripture. We practice our faith vividly when we are in dialog with the text. Have the supplies readily available and review the activity before engaging the learners. Read John 21:1–19.

Supplies:

- 3 × 5" file cards
- Bible
- pencils or pens

Imagine that Jesus will be visiting your home immediately following today's group session. You will play host to him, probably offering him something to eat. Around the table there will be conversation. This is your chance to ask Jesus questions that have been on your mind. Distribute file cards and pens or pencils. Write on the file cards two or three questions you would like Jesus to answer.

Collect the cards. Mix them up and distribute them randomly to each member of the group. Have each person read the questions on the card. Do not discuss answers to the questions. Rather, invite the group to consider the kinds of questions they have about the story of Jesus. *What questions stand out for you as being particularly significant? Why?*

Ask a group member to read John 21:1–14. Focus on verse 12. *Why do you suppose that none of the disciples dared ask Jesus, "Who are you?" If they knew it was Jesus, why were they hesitant to ask questions about his ministry? If you were there in that scene, how might you respond to Jesus' presence?*



6 First Words

Leader preparation: Write these 20 words and phrases on separate slips of paper:

mama	bird	uh-oh	daddy	thank you
baby	cow	book	kitty	no
hot	apple	bye-bye	Batman	shoe
juice	all gone	mine	bear	more

Write these books of the Bible on pieces of paper (one Bible reference per paper):

Genesis	Exodus	Numbers	Deuteronomy	Ruth
1 Kings	1 Chronicles	Job	Psalms	Proverbs
Ecclesiastes	Song of Songs (Song of Solomon)			Isaiah
Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Jonah,	Matthew	Mark
Luke	John	Acts	Romans	Philippian
1 Thessalonians	Philemon	Hebrews	Revelation	

This is a sampling, not a complete list of all the biblical books.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens and paper
- "First Words Worksheet," Attachment: Activity 6

Distribute the slips of paper with the 20 words and phrases to the participants. Some may get more than one word. In 1982, an American mother made a list of her baby's first 100 spoken words. Invite participants to look at the word on the slip of paper. These are the first 20 words this child spoke. These words suggest some of the early stages of human development. They identify things that are important to a toddler who is just beginning to talk. And they also tell us something about this particular child's world, what was available in his environment, and what he loved. Have people in turn each read aloud the word they received. *Which of this baby's first words reflect universal human needs? Which reflect stages of development every child experiences? Which words are specific to this child's environment, culture, or family?*

The Bible records the history of human development. It is the story of humankind's relationship with God over many thousands of years. We often think of the Bible as one book, but it is actually 66 books, a whole library in one volume! Distribute the slips of paper with books of the Bible. Similar to a baby's first words, the Bible addresses some aspects of human life that everyone experiences. And it also highlights very specific concerns, related to particular times, places, needs, gifts, and circumstances.

Have group members open the Bible to the index page. If necessary, explain how to locate a book by its page number. In many Bibles, the page numbers start over for the New Testament. Hand out slips of paper with the books of the Bible on them so that each person gets two or three papers. Ask group members to fill out a "First Word Worksheet" for two or three books of the Bible.

After about 7 minutes, reconvene the group. Ask people to briefly share one new thing they discovered about the Bible. Use questions such as the following for group discussion: *Which "first words" of these books of the Bible made you want to read more? Which of the opening lines surprised you? Which of these verses were already familiar to you? Which of the "first words" you read pointed to universal concerns or needs? Which pointed to particular situations or historical contexts? What did you discover about the different literary forms in the Bible? What else did you learn about the Bible from reading these first words?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Sarah's Circle (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The circle is an important ancient symbol for completion, infinity, connection, and wholeness. The Celtic cross is a cross superimposed with a circle. What do you think this represents? In this activity, participants will sing the hymn "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle." Write the words to the hymn on newsprint, or display them using a projector so that all will be able to see them clearly.

Supplies:

- hymn: "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle" (tune: Jacob's Ladder, 8.8.8.5.)
<http://www.theinterpretersfriend.org/songs/w-r-dncg-srh%27s-crcl.html>
- Bibles
- projector or newsprint and markers
- a Celtic cross or a picture of a Celtic cross, downloaded from a site such as "Celtic Cross Images"

The circle is well represented in our experience in the world. *What natural objects or events appear in the shape of a circle?* Explain that in many ancient religions the circle represented infinity, completion, and perfection. Show the group the Celtic cross that you have brought. *What might the circle represent?* Note that there are many possibilities. Some say the circle represents the infinite, unending love of God that, when superimposed on the cross, shows how that love is made known in Jesus. Others say the Celtic cross represents a merger of two religious traditions. To the Christian cross is added the symbol of infinity or perfection from the pre-Christian Celtic religion.

Form a circle. Show the words to the song, "We are Dancing Sarah's Circle." The tune may be familiar ("Jacobs Ladder"). Sing the song together. While still in a circle, ask: *How might God's word be like a circle?*

Share a prayer such as the following:

*Holy Word,
you call us into the circle of your love.
Bind us to one another in an unbroken circle of compassion
And help us know our place within your great circle of life. Amen.*



8 Breakfast on the Beach

Leader preparation: Check for allergies and food preferences in your group, and prepare a fishy snack for everyone such as fish-shaped crackers (sometimes called goldfish), tuna or salmon sandwiches, or sushi. Other options, if they are available, include sweet, fish-shaped pastries such as *bungeoppang* (Korean) or *tai-yaki* (Japanese). Read John 21:1–19 and consider how God's word addresses you through this passage. Put up the poster so that it can be seen by all.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: "Baptism of Jesus" by Pheoris West
https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401
- tape or pins to mount the poster
- a fun fishy snack to share; water or juice and glasses; napkins or plates, if needed

Gather around the poster. Do not reveal its title because you will be using it to speak to a different biblical story than the one the artist had in mind. Invite people to look at the artwork in silence for a few moments. *Notice the forms and lines the artist used, the color and texture in the image. Look away, then look back. Look deeply into the picture and notice what you may not have noticed at first glance. Try to avoid judging or thinking—simply seeing what is there to be seen in this image.* Invite people to comment on what they see. *How does this picture make you feel? What experiences*

of your own does it bring to mind? Have someone read aloud John 21:1–17 as the others continue to look at the poster. How is the image in the poster like Peter as you imagine him to be? Have participants look again at the poster, imagining that scene by the shore, imagining being there with Peter jumping heedlessly into the water. What does it feel like?

Serve the fishy snack you prepared, and invite the group to continue to talk about what they imagined as they heard that story about a breakfast on the beach. *Imagine Jesus' voice calling out from the shore to the disciples. What did Jesus call Peter to do? How does God's voice call out to you through this story? How might you respond?*



9 Words to the Wise: Cinquain Poetry

Leader preparation: This activity uses a form of poetry called cinquain, similar in style to haiku. There are few rules other than it must be five lines with 20 syllables. See the attachment with the sample cinquain poem. Try your hand at writing a cinquain poem to get the feel of this simple, but effective form.

Supplies:

- “Cinquain Poetry,” Attachment: Activity 9
- pencils or pens
- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Write the phrase “God’s word” on the newsprint or a whiteboard. Ask the group for words or short phrases that come to mind when they hear this phrase. Write responses on the newsprint around the phrase. Distribute the cinquain poetry handout and pencils or pens. Share an example of a cinquain poem you have created, or review the example on the handout to illustrate how the form works. Invite people to write poems about God’s word or holy wisdom in their lives. Give at least 10 minutes for people to work on this. Ask for volunteers to share their poems, but assure group members that they do not have to share if they do not wish to do so. Ask for a volunteer to read John 21:1–19 to the group. *What does Jesus call Peter to do? How might God be calling to us through this story? Through the poems we heard or created? How might we respond to God’s word as expressed in words we heard today?*

Reflect

Think about the various activities you chose for your group. Which ones energized? Which drew thoughtful or reflective responses from the group? Which challenged? Which activities seemed uncomfortable or disconcerting? Note that this may not necessarily be a bad thing. Seek feedback from participants about how the experience has been for them. Give thanks for the ways this leadership experience is helping you to grow and learn. Pray for the members of your group that all of you might experience God’s presence and hear God’s word anew in your lives.

Attachment: Activity 1

The Bible and Me

1. When it comes to finding my way around the Bible, I am
 - a. practically a world expert.
 - b. pretty comfortable.
 - c. okay, once I find the table of contents.
 - d. like a fish riding a bicycle.

2. For me, reading the Bible feels like
 - a. having a long chat with my best friend.
 - b. diving into a clear, cool mountain lake.
 - c. riding the Tokyo subway.
 - d. watching the Discovery Channel.
 - e. a fish watching the Discovery Channel.

3. My favorite parts of the Bible are
 - a. the ancient Hebrew stories and histories.
 - b. the poetry and psalms.
 - c. Paul's letters to the early church.
 - e. parables and stories about Jesus.
 - f. that story about the fish . . . I think . . . it was a fish . . . wasn't it? Or was it a whale? Anyway, fish, whale, whatever, that creature that Noah rode on to escape from the Ark of the Covenant.

4. The Bible is important in my faith because
 - a. it offers me guidance about how to live in Gods' way.
 - b. I discover new questions and possibilities for my life.
 - c. it reminds me of God's love and care.
 - d. it challenges me to think about what I *really* believe.
 - e. I'll let you know just as soon as I get a handle on that fish thing.

5. I believe the Bible
 - a. was written by prophetic individuals with lots of inspiration from God.
 - b. was written by God with a little help from humans.
 - c. was written by many different groups of people as they struggled with questions of faith, life, and meaning over many centuries.
 - d. was written, but definitely *not* by fish.

6. My relationship with the Bible is best described as
 - a. passionate.
 - b. stand-off-ish.
 - c. familiar.
 - d. You thought I was going to say something about that fish didn't you. Well, ha! Fooled you. 'Cause I actually read the bible with *baited* breath. You might even say, I'm *hooked* on the Bible. And I'm always *fishing* around for new interpretations.

Attachment: Activity 4

Proverbs

Proverbs from around the world.

A closed mouth catches no flies. (Italy)

A courtyard belonging to everyone will be swept by no one. (China)

A thief believes everyone steals. (unknown)

A broken hand works, but not a broken heart. (Iran)

A friend's eye is a good mirror. (Ireland)

A lie travels around the world while truth is putting on her boots. (France)

A society grows great when people plant trees. (Greece)

A wise woman does not make the goat her gardener. (Hungary)

A man's greatest strength is gentleness. (Iroquois)

Attachment: Activity 4 (continued)

Proverbs from the Bible

Proverbs 22:1

Proverbs 12:25

Proverbs 19:8

Proverbs 11:22

Proverbs 10:12

Proverbs 3:18

Proverbs 11:12

Proverbs 8:10–11

Proverbs 15:1

Proverbs 11:24

Proverbs 15:17

Proverbs 3:5

Proverbs 11:2

Attachment: Activity 6

First Words Worksheet

For each book assigned to you, write the name of the book. Read the first few verses of the book, and answer the questions.

Book of the Bible: _____

What mood is suggested by the first lines?

How do the first words make you feel?

What information, if any, is given about the writer(s) of this book?

What information, if any, is given about the situation or audience?

What type of writing is this? (poetry, story, history, philosophy, advice, gospel, song, dream, vision, a letter, other)

Attachment: Activity 9

Cinquain Poetry

Cinquain poems have five lines. Most cinquain poems have 22 syllables divided as follows:

- Line 1: two syllables
- Line 2: four syllables
- Line 3: six syllables
- Line 4: eight syllables
- Line 5: two syllables

Here is one simple version of a cinquain:

- Line 1: two syllables, with a noun that is the subject or focus of the poem
- Line 2: has four syllables that describe the noun in Line 1
- Line 3: has six syllables that describe an action
- Line 4: has eight syllables that express a feeling or response
- Line 5: has one word that recalls or reiterates the word in Line 1

For example:

the word
sacred being
waiting at the corner
tenderly calling her children
wisdom

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Through the Internet, or in person, most young adults are in contact with people of various ethnic, cultural, national, or faith backgrounds. They may live on the same street, attend college, or work with people of many different nationalities or social contexts. Even if they grew up in a relatively homogeneous community, it is likely that as they make choices about work, education, or travel they will encounter greater social diversity. They are aware that the way they live is not the only possible way to live, that their culture is only one among many, and that what they believe is not what everyone believes. Many young adults embrace and celebrate this diversity, recognizing the blessing it brings in their lives. They are unwilling to accept Christian faith as the only path to God, and they may be deeply troubled by the way the Bible has been used to judge and exclude others because of their religion, sexual orientation, or life experience. This capacity to embrace diversity brings richness to their encounter with scripture because it helps them to open up texts to multiple meanings and possibilities. Thus, the word of God speaking through scripture and through inquiring community can be experienced not as a singular truth, but as an unfolding revelation. God is still speaking.

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 acknowledge the ways scripture has been misused and recover its power to create new life.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

John 1:1–14
2 Kings 2:1–14

Leader Preparation

Read 2 Kings 2:1–14. Have you heard this story before? Notice the pattern of threes, as in many folktales. Notice the skill of the storyteller—just enough detail, no words wasted. Next, read John 1:1–14. Read it aloud with your morning coffee or at the bus stop. Notice the flow of the words. Notice how different the style is from that of 2 Kings. Each word is a poetic metaphor. Do you love poetry, or do you see it as the brussels sprouts of the literary world, something tolerated because it's good for us? Do you long for words to mean one thing and one thing only, or do you delight in discovering new meanings in a familiar phrase. Wonder, with delight or with frustration, why the writer of John chose to begin the account of the good news of Jesus Christ in this particular way. Consider how members of your group might hear these passages. Bring to mind each member of your group. What do you know about them? How do they challenge you? How do you challenge them? Pray for each one, and for yourself, that as you encounter scripture, you may experience the Holy in one another.

Prayer: *Living Word, you speak in story and dance in poetry. You soothe my heart and ignite my imagination. Open my ears. Interrupt my conversations. Write your Word in my living. Amen.*

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Once Upon a Time (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Recall some famous opening lines to stories such as the ones listed on the attached quiz, "Great Opening Lines." Try this puzzle for yourself. Make copies of the attachment for your group, and gather other supplies you will need.

Supplies:

- "Great Opening Lines," Attachment: Activity 1
- Bibles
- paper and pens or pencils

Divide the group into teams of 2–3 people. Hand out copies of "Great Opening Lines," and invite teams to see how quickly they can match each opening line with the book to which it belongs. Keep the activity light by encouraging playfulness and friendly rivalry. Note that some of the answers will likely be unknown to everyone and can only be worked out by eliminating other options. The correct answers are: 1. d, 2. g, 3. h, 4. f, 5. l, 6. i, 7. e, 8. a, 9. b, 10. c, 11. j, 12. m, 13. k.

Which of these opening lines, if any, did you know by heart? What are the things that make for an attention-grabbing opening line? Notice how the style of an opening seems to change in different times and across different literary genres. How do these opening lines foreshadow or point to things to come in the book? Which opening lines would be most effective for an audience today? Notice how the writer of John begins the Gospel. Have someone find and read aloud John 1:1–5. What in this opening puzzles you? What catches your attention? Have someone else read aloud Genesis 1:1–3. In what way is the opening of John similar to that of Genesis? Why do you think these similarities might be there?

Distribute pencils and paper. Ask people to work in the same teams as before to write their own opening to a Gospel of Jesus Christ. Note that the word "gospel" means "good news" and that the four gospels in our Bible each proclaim the "good news" about Jesus. Ask teams to consider how they might attract a reader's attention and how they might foreshadow what will follow. Have each team share its opening line.



2 In the Beginning

Leader preparation: Obtain the artwork "No-Traveller's Borne" by Jess and place it in a location easily seen by the group. Take time to look carefully at the poster yourself. What do you notice? What emotions are stirred in you? What do you like about this image?

Supplies:

- artwork: "No-Traveller's Borne" by Jess
https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401
- wax crayons or oil pastels, white paper
- 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.

Gather the group around the poster and ask the group members to look at it. Ask what they first notice in the painting. Look again—notice the details of the brush strokes, the colors, the shapes. *What emotions do you sense within this image?* (Note that people may respond differently.) Ask other questions such as the following:

- What do you see in this painting?
- What does the sphere in the center represent to you?
- Look at the top left corner. What do you see?
- What is your interpretation of what the artist is expressing?
- If you were to add one image to this poster, what would you add?

All human societies, including our own, tell stories of how the world began and the development of its living things, including humans. Most of these stories involve some metaphors and imagery. *What is our modern society’s accepted “creation story”?* *What images of creation does this painting suggest?* Have someone read aloud John 1:1–14. *What is the “creation story” that John tells?* Distribute oil pastels or crayons and paper. Ask people to create a response, in colors and shapes, to the images and ideas in this passage. You do not have to be an artist. Simply let the crayons or pastels lead you. Use the side of a peeled crayon piece to make wide lines, blend the colors, have fun.

Share the drawings with one another and invite participants to say what they notice in one another’s work without judging or evaluating.

3 Word and Light

Leader preparation: Read again John 1:1–14. Do you hear anything new in the passage as you read it today? What comes to mind when you think of the word “light”? What comes to mind when you hear the word “word”?

Supplies:

- Bible

Distribute Bibles and invite people individually to read John 1:1–5. Notice the two metaphors John proposes: word and light. Suggest that word and light are two different ways of communicating or expressing something. Word employs language, which, for the ancient world would have been primarily spoken language since very few people were literate. Light uses images. In other words, the two metaphors appeal to two different senses—sight and hearing.

Ask participants to form two groups based on whether they think that they are more visual or more auditory in the way they take in information and express themselves. Have the visual group work in one part of the room and the auditory or sound group work in another part of the space (or, ideally, in a separate room). Ask the auditory group to talk about why sound is a good metaphor for Jesus. Ask the visual group to discuss why light is a good metaphor for Jesus. Ask members in each group to prepare a way to present their reflections—for the auditory group, using only sounds (but no words or movement); for the visual group, using only posture, movement, or gesture (but no words or sounds).

Gather back. Have each group present a summary of its conversation. Pause for a moment of silence while people reflect on what they have seen and heard. *How is Jesus the Word in your life? How is Jesus Light in your life?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities

 4 **Swing Low (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Choose a version of the African American spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." There are many versions available. Here are some classics:

- Kathleen Battle, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVyBjqY3r0k&feature=related>
- Marion Williams, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxRCefkVBr8&feature=more_related
- The Caravans, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-J4MxuKNew&feature=related>

Write these scripture references on newsprint or a whiteboard: Genesis 1: 6–7, Exodus 14:21–22, and Joshua 4:17. Here are lyrics to this well-loved spiritual:

Chorus:

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home;
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Comin' for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan,
And what did I see,
Comin' for to carry me home,
A band of angels comin' after me,
Comin' for to carry me home.

Repeat Chorus

If you get there before I do,
Comin' for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too,
Comin' for to carry me home.

Supplies:

- a recording of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot"
- Bibles of the same version

Listen to or read the lyrics of the spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Invite the group to comment on what comes to mind as they hear this song. Note that this was originally both a song of hope for enslaved African Americans and one of many such spirituals that the Underground Railroad used to communicate coded messages to those traveling to freedom. *What emotions does this song evoke? For whom do you think this song might have been a source of comfort or hope? Why?*

The spiritual is based on a text from 2 Kings. Have participants find 2 Kings 2:1–14 in their Bibles. Ask for volunteers to read the parts of the Narrator, Elijah, and Elisha. The rest of the group can be the company of prophets. Ask the Narrator to read, pausing at the quotation marks for others to read their parts. This story comes at the end of the life of the prophet Elijah. He and his beloved disciple, Elisha, are traveling together. *What do you notice about Elisha's reaction to the impending end of his master's life? Does this ring true for you? What do you notice about the company of prophets? What is their dramatic role in the story? Point out that the*

story takes place at the crossing of the River Jordan. *What do you think might be the symbolism of the parting of the water?*

Have participants consider that question as they hear these other scripture references to parting of water: Genesis 1:6–7, Exodus 14:21–22 (the Israelites cross the Red Sea to escape from slavery in Egypt), and Joshua 4:17 (the Israelites cross the Jordan River to enter the promised land). Invite suggestions about what parting water might represent. Some possibilities are that it's a sign of God doing a "new thing" (God's creative activity); heaven and earth touching each other; new life; the Promised Land (redemption); or liberation. Scripture is rich with such symbolism, and repeated symbols are one way biblical storytellers attract our attention and convey meaning. *What does the idea of "crossing over" or "across the river" mean today?*

Play "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Listen for other images and ideas in the familiar lines.



5 Prophecy Through the Ages

Leader preparation: Consider what the word "prophet" means to you. What might it mean for members of your group? As you prepare for this session, think about the role of a prophet to act as a God's spokesperson. In what way can you be a prophet—bearer of good news—for your group? Read 2 Kings 2:1–14 as you prepare to take up the prophet's mantle!

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computers with Internet access
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- "Who's a Prophet?" Attachment: Activity 5

Print the word "prophet" at the top of the newsprint or whiteboard. Ask participants to quickly call out what comes to mind when they think of this word. Record responses. *What do prophets do? What are some qualities that would make someone a prophet?* Read aloud 2 Kings 2:1–14 as an illustration of biblical prophets. *What do you notice about the prophets in this text?*

Hand out copies of the attachment "Who's a Prophet?" Ask people to read it. *What are some characteristics of a biblical prophet?* Explain that in the Bible prophecy is not foretelling the future. Rather, it is speaking with divine inspiration about the signs of the present time. It is a way of critiquing and calling people back to fundamentals of justice, equality, and righteousness. *With this in mind, can you think of any prophets of recent times?* Suggest, if necessary such, figures such as John Brown, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, the gay-rights activists, environmentalists, and anti-racism activists. Invite participants to consider nominations for the role of prophet—someone who might speak God's word to this group in this time and place; someone who might unsettle and disturb (as prophets often did) and call us back to God's way. Provide access to computers and give people time to research some potential prophet nominations from or beyond the ones suggested on the handout. *Who are some of the prophet nominations you propose? What word of truth or challenge do they bring to us?*



6 Bible Time Line

Leader preparation: Print out the Bible time line cards from the attachment. Keep one copy of the time line cards in order for yourself so that you know the correct sequence. Note that the last few cards—Good King Wenceslas, The Trojan Horse, the Holy Grail, Joan of Arc, and St. Christopher—are *not* in the Bible. However, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are (see Revelation 6:1–8). Make three copies of the cards on card stock or heavy paper. Cut them apart, keeping each set of cards separate, and shuffle each set. Go online to research any terms or events that you don't know. Useful sites are <http://www.biblegateway.com/> and <http://bible.cc/>.

Supplies:

- “Bible Time Line,” Attachment: Activity 6
- 3 sets of time-line cards, shuffled
- 3 pieces of strong string or yarn
- 3 boxes of paper clips
- tape
- Bibles
- Bible search tools such as concordances, or computers with Internet access
- 3 goofy prizes or treats to share

The books of the Bible were not written in a strict chronological order. However, there is an overall storyline—a kind of meta-narrative in which much of the biblical material is located. Create three teams. Give each team a long piece of string, tape, paper clips, a set of biblical time-line cards, and access to reference tools. Challenge teams to put the cards in the sequence in which these events or people appear in the Bible and to hang them on a Time Line (a piece of string taped to the wall hung with cards on paperclips). Hints:

- A biblical overview begins with creation and ends with a vision for God's new creation.
- Not all of the events or people included on the attachment are in the Bible.

Award goofy prizes for such things as “creativity,” “Bible brilliance,” and “teamwork.” Gather to share insights or discoveries about the Bible, or any new questions.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Name a Mentor, Be a Mentor (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think of people who have been mentors in your life. How have these people influenced your life choices? How have they helped to shape who you are as a person today? Do you think you have been a mentor or role model for others? In what way do you think you may have influenced people in their faith? Consider your role as mentor with this group. Are you one who leads by example? Are you able to risk being authentic?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens or pencils and paper (two sheets per person, preferably of two different colors)
- (optional) candle, with a holder and matches
- container, such as a bowl, basket, or offering plate

Set the container (and candle, if you have one) in the center of the learning area and invite the group to gather in a circle around it. Light the candle. Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Explain that the passage everyone is about to hear occurs at the end of the life of the prophet Elijah. His disciple, Elisha, is with him. Ask someone to read aloud 2 Kings 2:9–15. Invite participants to think of someone who is or who has been a mentor for them—perhaps a gifted teacher, a role model, someone in their family. Ask participants to write that person’s name on the piece of paper. *Think about the qualities and characteristics of this person. How has he or she guided or influenced you? What difference did that person make in your faith? Write two or three adjectives to describe this person. Find a partner, and share the adjectives you each wrote.*

Invite the group to identify important characteristics or qualities of a mentor. Have everyone take a second sheet of paper and write his or her name at the top of the page. Have participants pass these sheets of paper with names at the top around the group. Others will write an adjective or word that describes a quality of the person named on the page—something that might make him or her a good mentor or role model for others. In this way, each person's paper will have words added to it by other members of the group, words that identify the mentorship qualities that others see in him or her. Emphasize that people are to write one or two words per person, not a whole paragraph. Keep the papers circulating around the group fairly quickly. When each person's paper has come back to the original owner, he or she can read the words that have been written. Ask people to fold the second paper and place it with the first one.

Say this prayer, or one of your own:

Holy One, Word among us, thank you for those who make your word known in our lives—those who have named us, mentored us, taught us, and shaped us.

Pause for a moment of silence, and then invite people to place their first paper, the one with the name of a mentor, in the container.

Holy One, Word among us, thank you for the ways you equip us to be mentors for others. Help us accept and honor the gifts you have given us. Help us to take up the mantle from others and to be your holy people in the world.

Invite people to place the second paper, the one with their own name on it, in the container as a sign of their willingness to share their gifts with others.

Blessed be these people and these gifts. Amen.



8 Words that Go Pop in the Dark

Leader preparation: Make a copy of the attachment "Words from John," and cut apart the words or phrases on the lines. Place the slips of paper in an envelope or basket.

Supplies:

- Bible
- "Words from John," Attachment: Activity 8
- (optional) supplies to make popcorn

Evenly distribute among group members the slips of paper with the words from John. Each person will receive several. Ask people to read aloud the words or phrases they have received as a kind of "popcorn litany." The idea is that as people feel moved, they will read a word or phrase from one or more of the slips of paper. Like popcorn popping, there may be moments of silence, then several words all at once. People may read their words or phrases once or perhaps repeat them if it feels right. When the group is ready, let the words pop. Pause for a moment, then have someone read aloud John 1:1–14 from the Bible. *What words or phrases popped out at you as you heard this scripture passage?*

Have everyone choose a word or phrase from the ones that they received. *Choose one that you like the sound or feeling of. Sit with that word or phrase. Say it over in your mind a few times. Feel how it feels. Then, put the slip of paper with these words from John's gospel in your wallet, purse, or pocket—somewhere where you are likely to find it over the next few days. Whenever you see the word or phrase—whenever it pops out at you—take a moment to meditate on the word(s). Ask yourself how the word speaks to you or connects with whatever you are doing at that moment. Consider how that word is coming alive in you.*

Option: Make and share popcorn together.

So You Think You Can Prophecy

Leader preparation: Read 2 Kings 2:1–14. Elijah passes on the mantle of prophecy to Elisha. The scripture relates an emotional exchange between a mentor and his student. Attachments between the two are great. So also must be the emotions. Elijah is attempting to inform Elisha of his imminent departure and encouraging him to carry on his work. Elisha understands what he hears, but doesn't want to believe it—he would rather deny it. Is it audacious to believe that you could pick up the prophet's mantle? That God speaks through you? Through one of the people in your group? Through all of them? Consider how our faith calls us to walk humbly and yet to bear passionate and courageous witness to God's good news. You are God's prophet. Wear the mantle. Be bold!

Supplies:

- Bibles
- an ornate or colorful piece of fabric big enough to drape over a person's shoulders (tablecloth, minister's stole, or altar cloth)

What is a prophet? Brainstorm ideas. Many people think that prophets are like fortune tellers, predicting the future. But in the Bible, prophets serve as spokespeople for God's truth. Prophets speak truth to power, often getting in trouble because they challenge unjust rulers or corrupt religious leaders. Modern-day prophets might challenge heads of corporations, speak up about unpopular issues, and oppose unjust laws. *Who are some modern-day prophets?*

The prophet Elijah was very old. His mantle, or prophet's cloak, was the symbol of his power, his wisdom, and his connection with God. When Elijah was about to die, his long-time assistant, Elisha, was hoping to step into Elijah's shoes. Elisha wanted to wear his mantle. If you have not yet done so, read 2 Kings 2:1–14 with your group, alternating readers by verse. If you have already read the passage together, simply recall the key events.

How do you think Elisha felt during this time? How do you think he felt about possibly wearing Elijah's mantle? Did you notice that there was a community of prophets who were involved and keenly interested in this story? We are all called to be prophets, although some of us are bolder and more able to speak out than others.

Sit in a circle on the floor. Drape the mantle over the shoulders of the first person and ask him or her to finish the first statement. The leader will say, "When I think about how to make the world a more peaceful place, I hear God saying . . ." The person wearing the mantle completes the sentence after taking some time to listen for God. Any group members can pass by saying "I am still listening . . ." (if the person isn't coming up with a way to finish the prompt.)

Move around the circle, draping the mantle over each participant in turn, and repeating the prompts or using new ones from the list below. You can go around the circle more than once to give participants more than one chance to be a prophet, using prompts more than once if needed. These are prompts you may consider using:

- When I think about how to make the world a more peaceful place, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about what our community needs, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about one thing our church should do, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about an issue that needs to be addressed, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about a particular injustice, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about what makes God smile, I hear God saying . . .
- When I think about what makes God cry, I hear God saying . . .

Anoint each person as a prophet. Have him or her kneel, while wearing the mantle, and have the whole group lay their hands on the person's shoulders while saying, "[Name], God sends you. God speaks through you."

Reflect

These sessions about scripture only touch the surface of what lies deep within the Bible, in the Word of God. If you have provided only a seed sprinkled with a little water, that's the beginning of growth. Celebrate the moments of insight and questioning in your group and in yourself. How have you been challenged by this experience? What questions have emerged for you? Consider ways you can help group members to deepen their connection to one another and to God's word.

Attachment: Activity 1

Great Opening Lines

Can you identify the name of the book that begins with this great opening line? Complete the table by writing the letter of the book in the list below next to its first line in the table.

- a. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, J.K. Rowling, 1997
- b. *Don Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes, 1605
- c. *Paul Clifford*, Edward George Bulwer-Lytton, 1830
- d. *1984*, George Orwell, 1949
- e. *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie, 1980
- f. Genesis (NRSV)
- g. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, 1885
- h. *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens, 1859
- i. *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, 1719
- j. The Gospel of John (NRSV)
- k. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, Christopher Paul Curtis, 1995
- l. *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker, 1982
- m. *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen, 1813

Opening Line	Book (letter)
1. It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.	
2. You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter.	
3. It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.	
4. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth...	
5. You better not never tell nobody but God.	
6. I was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York, of a good Family, tho' not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull; He got a good Estate by Merchandise, and leaving off his Trade, lived afterward at York, from whence he had married my Mother, whose Relations were named Robinson. . . .	
7. I was born in the city of Bombay. . . once upon a time. No, that won't do, there's no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947.	
8. Mr. and Mrs. Dursley of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much.	
9. Somewhere in la Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago, one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing	
10. It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals . . .	
11. In the beginning was the Word.	
12. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.	
13. It was one of those super-duper-cold Saturdays. One of those days that when you breathed out your breath kind of hung frozen in the air like a hunk of smoke and you could walk along and look exactly like a train blowing out big, fat, white puffs of smoke.	

Attachment: Activity 5

Who's a Prophet?

In Hebrew, the word *navi*, "spokesperson," is usually translated in the Bible as "prophet." In the Bible, a prophet is a person who is selected by God to speak for God. The prophet's task is to bring things back in line with God's intentions—that is, to call for social change. Prophets urge people to change their attitudes and behaviors to conform with God's hopes, dreams, and intentions for creation.

Prophets are often:

- Dramatic communicators. They may do strange, symbolic things, and speak in unusual ways.
- Unpopular with people who don't want to change. Sometimes prophets get stoned or run out of town.
- Unlikely candidates for stardom. Some prophets are very young. Others are not great public speakers. Some are reluctant or inexperienced. Many are part of the social "elite," or come from somewhere off the beaten track.

Prophet nominations are now open. Who would you name as a prophet today? Need ideas to get going? Consider which of these young people might fit the bill for a modern-day prophet:

- Severn Cullis-Suzuki (Canada)
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/rights-and-freedoms/023021-1300->
- Thandiwe Charma (Zambia)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHe91ewt7ts>
- Samantha Nutt (Canada)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samantha_Nutt
- Om Prakash Gurja (India)
http://www.tutufoundation-usa.org/about_desmond_tutu.html <http://children-sppeaceprize.org/childrens-peace-price/price2006/>

Attachment: Activity 6

Bible Time Line

Copy onto heavy paper or card stock. Cut apart at the lines so that each of these phrases is on its own piece of card.

CREATION IN SEVEN DAYS	JOSEPH AND THE COAT OF MANY COLORS
THE GARDEN OF EDEN	MOSES IS BORN
ADAM AND EVE	THE BURNING BUSH
NOAH'S ARK	EXODUS
ABRAHAM AND SARAH	THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

Attachment: Activity 6 (continued)

DAVID AND GOLIATH	RE-BUILDING A TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM
KING DAVID	JOHN THE BAPTIST IS BORN
KING SOLOMON	JESUS IS BORN
BUILDING A TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM	THREE MAGI
EXILE IN BABYLON	JESUS TEACHES AND HEALS
DANIEL IN THE LION'S DEN	THE LAST SUPPER
RETURN FROM EXILE	JUDAS BETRAYS JESUS

Attachment: Activity 6 (continued)

PETER DENIES JESUS	GOOD KING WENCESLAS
JESUS DIES	THE TROJAN HORSE
RESURRECTION	THE RETURN OF THE HOLY GRAIL
THE HOLY SPIRIT AT PENTECOST	JOAN OF ARC
THE APOSTLE PAUL	ST. CHRISTOPHER
THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE	

Attachment: Activity 8

Words from John

Cut apart along the lines so that the words or phrases below are each on separate slips of paper. Place the pieces of paper in an envelope or container.

SHINES IN THE DARKNESS	WITH GOD	LIGHT OF ALL	LIFE
FROM GOD	ENLIGHTENS EVERY-ONE	BELIEVE	AS A WITNESS
GLORY	INTO BEING	THE BEGINNING	SENT
TESTIFY TO THE LIGHT	POWER TO BECOME	FULL OF GRACE	GRACE AND TRUTH
CAME TO	OVERCOME	THE LIGHT	BEGINNING
INTO THE WORLD	WORD BECAME FLESH	IN THE BEGINNING	TRUE LIGHT
ONE THING	ALL THINGS	WITH GOD	BORN
WORD WAS GOD	COME INTO BEING	SENT FROM GOD	LIGHT SHINES
BECOME CHILDREN	ALL MIGHT BELIEVE	CHILDREN OF GOD	RECEIVED
LIFE WAS THE LIGHT	ACCEPT	KNOW	POWER

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Young adults have many possible role models in life. As teens, many were more influenced by the values and opinions of their peer group than they were by parents or older adults in their lives. As they mature, they increasingly understand and value other perspectives. They gain a greater capacity to discern among conflicting values and beliefs. Because they have grown up in a post-modern world, most young adults are not willing to accept a previous generation's faith at face value. They are not willing to accept the Bible as an infallible rulebook but are willing to engage with it. They question and consider and challenge what is in the Bible. For them, faith is one option among many, not a given. Likewise, ethical decisions and pathways in life are not clear cut or predetermined. Adult leaders who can confidently express their own discipleship, while remaining open to questioning and learning, can play a very important role. They may accompany young adults as members of this younger generation discover their own discipleship.

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:

Ruth 1
Acts 8:26–40

Leader Preparation

As you prepare to lead this Exploration, consider what the word "discipleship" means to you. Recall some of the biblical characters that you consider to be important sources of inspiration for you as you seek to live a life of faith. Think about the participants in your group. What role models or heroes may be important for them in their lives? How might you be a role model or inspiration for them? How are they a source of inspiration and hope for you? What biblical passages or stories come to mind as you think about what it means to be a disciple? How does scripture inform, challenge, or support you as you seek to live your faith? As you offer leadership in this group?

Prayer:

*Spirit of life, provider of abundance,
companion of those who suffer,
speak to me and through me in these
activities.*

*Help me hear those who are privileged
and safe,
as well as those who are hanging on by
a thread.*

*Help all of us to offer companionship to
one another
no matter where our journey of
discipleship takes us.*

*Remind us that you walk ahead of us
to lead us*

and beside us to bless us.

Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Tell About Jesus? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Consider who Jesus is for you. How do you communicate in words or through your living your life what it means for you to be a follower of Jesus? What do you value most about being part of a Christian faith community? Imagine having a conversation with someone who has a very different faith background (or none). What would you tell them about your faith, if anything?

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard or 2 cell phones
- Bibles
- paper and pens, or have participants use their own cell phones

Invite members of the group to consider what it means to them to participate in this Christian faith community of which they are a part. Use questions such as the following to prompt conversation:

- How did you come to be a part of this faith community?
- If you are new here, what attracted you here?
- What keeps you coming here?
- What do you value about this community?
- Have you ever encouraged or invited another person to be part of this community? What motivated you to do so?

Distribute Bibles. Ask someone to read aloud Acts 8:26–40 as others follow along. Note that Philip and the Ethiopian come from very different contexts. Invite the group to identify some of the differences they notice in the text. Share the following information, if not known by participants.

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 other outcasts. The Ethiopian was an adherent of Judaism who had been attracted to the faith but remained an outsider. He was a high-ranking official in the court of the Queen of Ethiopia. He was African, from the southern Nile region of east central Africa. In the story, the Ethiopian asks Philip to explain Jewish Scripture he is reading (the book of Isaiah).

Ask participants to recall what Philip says in response to the Ethiopian. *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?*

Seek two volunteers to play the roles of X and Y, two coworkers. X has no previous knowledge of Christianity, and Y has been part of the Christian community all his or her life. Set up the situation. Ask participants to imagine a conversation between the two in which the Christian has the task of explaining who Jesus is to the other person and why someone would choose to be baptized (to become a follower of Jesus). The conversation might begin as follows.

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.

X: I got an invite to go to Mike's baptism. Are you going?

Y: Yeah, do you want a ride?

X: I'm not sure. I don't even know what a baptism is. Why is M doing this?

Encourage X to ask questions about the information Y gives. Have group members suggest questions and responses.

Invite group members to consider how they might explain to an outsider why they have chosen to participate in a Christian community (or why they are a follower of Jesus or a member of the church). Use pens and paper or cell phones to write or prepare a message to the outsider. Invite people to share the messages they create. *How does your message differ from the one Philip gives to the Ethiopian? How is it similar?*



2 Dramatic Tableau

Leader preparation: Read the story of the encounter involving Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah in Ruth 1. Focus on the feelings of each person as expressed in the text. Spend time with the painting “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab” by William Blake. Pay particular attention to the faces of the three people in the artwork and what feelings they might be experiencing. Be prepared to guide the group members in expressing these feelings.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab” by William Blake
<http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?item=1590989&AID=1413628417&PSTID=1<ID=1&lang=1>

This activity uses dramatic tableaus to explore possible relationships among the three main characters in Ruth 1. Distribute Bibles. Have participants read Ruth 1 aloud, with people reading designated parts. Choose one person to be the Narrator, reading those parts that are not specific dialog. Select two other people, one to be Ruth, and one to be Naomi. (Orpah does not speak in the text.) Have the group review the text, and then read it as a drama, with three participants playing their parts. Also, invite four volunteers from the group to be part of a short improvisation. Ask one to be the “artist” and the other three to be the characters of Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah from the Book of Ruth

Display the painting by William Blake. Invite the group to ponder it contemplatively in silence. Explain that the person chosen as the “artist” will pose the three characters the way they are depicted by William Blake in this poster. Then, have the artist change the body positions of the three to represent another scene in Ruth 1. Invite other participants to comment on what they observe in each representation.

Divide the whole group into small groups of three or four people each. Have each small group prepare two or three poses of significant scenes from Ruth 1 to present to the rest of the group. Explain that the scene can represent any part of the text they choose. Give small groups time to work, and then have the whole group gather together. Explain that you will read aloud Ruth 1, and groups that have a depiction of that part of the story can raise their hands to let you know they are ready to present. Read Ruth 1, pausing at appropriate points in the reading to let small groups show their tableaus. After the whole chapter has been read

aloud, talk about what participants noticed about the relationships between the characters in the story. *With whom do you identify in this story? Why?* Invite group members to talk about a relationship or an experience of their own that connects with the story of Ruth.



3 Good News—Bad News Stories

Leader preparation: Do you remember telling good news–bad news stories and jokes when you were a child? Read the activity instructions on the attachment to recall how these stories are told. Think about good news and bad news in the story of Ruth. Who or what in your life helps turn bad news into good news? Give thanks for God's transforming and healing presence in your life.

Supplies:

- “Telling Good News–Bad News Stories,” Attachment: Activity 3
- paper and pens or pencils
- Bibles
- newspapers

Hand out copies of the attachment. Ask people to pair up and to create a good news–bad news story using one of the two options provided on the attachment. Then, ask them to read Ruth 1 together. Create a short good news–bad news story to retell the story of Naomi and her family from Ruth 1 together.

Gather back in the group. *What is some of the bad news in the story from Ruth 1? How does Ruth help to turn Naomi's life from bad news to good news?* Hand out copies of the news sections of daily newspapers. Ask people to find a story of human tragedy or disaster that in some way connects for them with the story of Ruth. Ask them individually to consider what might bring good news in this situation. Have people share the news items they found and their ideas for what might bring good news. *Who or what in your life helps turn bad news into good news? In what way?*

Is there a "happy ending" to the story of Ruth and Naomi? Encourage participants to read on to find out what happens later in the life of this biblical family.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Follow Me (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
- current newspapers and a variety of magazines, including news magazines and periodicals that focus on celebrity figures from sports and entertainment
- scissors

Ask for volunteers to read the different parts of Acts 8:26–40. You will need six volunteers: Narrator (who reads everything except quoted sections), angel of the Lord, Philip, the Spirit, the Ethiopian official, and a reader for the passage from Isaiah (Acts 8:32b–33). Have volunteers read the passage aloud as others follow along in their Bibles.

Ask people to work in teams of 2–4 people. Each team is to find an image of one celebrity figure from the magazines or newspapers that you provided. When each has selected a celebrity, ask each team to make a case for why others in the group should give up everything else in their lives to follow this celebrated person. Encourage people to be playful. Give a few minutes for preparation, and then have each team present its celebrity and the reasons others should follow him or her.

Have a mock vote to decide which team made the best case for its person. *What characteristics attract media attention? What qualities attract your attention to a celebrity figure? What might make you choose to model your life after another person's, or to follow that person's example? What do you think might have made the Ethiopian official want to become a follower of Jesus?*



5 Used to Think/Now I Think

Leader preparation: Spend time looking at the painting by Nolde before showing it to the group. Have the painting displayed so all can see it in detail clearly.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401
- Bibles

Prominently display the painting "Christ Among the Children" in your learning area. Gather the group around and allow a few minutes for reflective viewing. Make no comments at first about the painting's interpretation. Simply ask: *What do you see?* Direct the group's attention to Jesus in the middle, to the children on the right side, and to the adults on the left side in the background. Ask the participants to place themselves in the picture as children. *What thoughts do you suppose are going through the minds of the children at this moment in the picture?* Next ask the participants to place themselves in the picture as an adult. *What thoughts do you suppose are going through the minds of the adults at this moment in the picture? If you could be anywhere at all in this scene, where would you be? Why?*

Invite the group to consider how their understanding of Jesus has changed or grown over the years, using questions such as the following:

- As a child, did you think about Jesus at all?
- What did you know about him?
- Who was Jesus for you, when you were a child?
- How did you feel about him?
- What Bible stories, if any, did you know about Jesus when you were a child?
- Which stories were most important to you?
- Did your understanding or beliefs about Jesus change in any way as you grew older? If so, how?

Then ask someone to read aloud Acts 8:27–35. *As a child or teenager, was Jesus “good news” for you, and if so, in what way? What good news might you tell someone about Jesus today?*

 **6 Water**

Leader preparation: Have a table set with a pitcher of water and a bowl. Display the baptism picture prominently. Protect tables or work surfaces where the painting will take place.

Supplies:

- pitcher of water and a bowl
- Bibles
- finger paints and finger paint paper
- towels and water for clean up
- artwork: “Baptism of Jesus,” by Pheoris West

https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1282230595?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=17101&store_id=1401

Pour water into the bowl. Have the learners think about water at church and in everyday life. *In what ways have you used or seen or touched water so far today? Think of an experience when you touched or received water as a welcome gift, such as a glass of water on a hot day, a cooling dip in a lake or pool.*

Focus on the artwork. *What do you notice in this image? What do you feel? As participants contemplate the painting, slowly read aloud Acts 8:26–40. What is the overall feeling or mood of this story? The storyteller doesn’t tell us anything about the water. That is left to our imaginations. Picture the scene. Was it a large river or a small pool? Was it rippled or still? What do you imagine the water in this story felt like to the Ethiopian official as he entered deeper into the water.*

Have participants use the finger paints to respond to this text. Tell them to experiment with color and shape rather than trying to paint something specific—and to be playful. Lay paintings flat to dry. Invite those who wish to do so to talk about the experience of painting images or ideas that occurred to them about this story.

Sending & Serving Activities

  **7 Words to Live By (Easy Preparation)**

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 a 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 “Words to Live By.” Cut on the dotted lines so each text is on a separate piece of paper. Make several sets of verses, keeping each set separate.

Supplies:

- Bible search tools such as computers with Internet access, a Bible computer reference program, or concordances
- Bibles

- “Words to Live By,” Attachment: Activity 7
- set of verses for each participant
- (optional) art supplies such as crayons, colored pencils, watercolor paints and brushes, and paper

Hand out one set of verses from the attachment so that everyone has one or more verses. Go around the circle, having each person read one of the verses aloud. 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? Another one?* Invite participants to choose one of the verses you have provided or to use Bible reference tools to find another text that gives them “words to live by.” Find a partner and talk about the passage you selected. *Why is it important to you? What challenges do you foresee in trying to live this verse in your daily life? What joys might this bring you?* Another option is for participants to use art supplies to create a visual impression of the text each has selected.

Encourage people to put the chosen verse in their wallet, on their phone screen, or somewhere else they will see it frequently during the coming week. *When you read 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?*

8 Gospel Tweets

Leader preparation: If you are not a regular Twitter member, consider going to <http://twitter.com/> to see how Twitter works and to find examples of recent tweets. What message about your faith might you convey in 140 characters or less? Recall the story of Philip and the Ethiopian official, and read it for yourself from Acts 8:27–35. Read the information below about Luke and Acts.

Supplies:

- computers with Internet access or cell phones
- Bibles

Invite people to read Acts 8:26–40 for themselves. Philip, a member of the early Christian community, is asked to tell an outsider to the community who Jesus is and what the good news is all about. This passage does not tell us what Philip says or how he communicated the message. We are left to wonder what good news was shared. We are also left wondering about the motivations of Philip and the Ethiopian. *Why did the Ethiopian want to know more about the Bible? Why did Philip want to share the news about Jesus with others?*

Invite learners to look in their Bibles at Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1:1–3. *What do you notice? What do you wonder about?* The author of Luke and Acts is one and the same person, usually referred to as “Luke.” Discipleship is very important to the writer of this gospel. To be a disciple, for Luke, is to participate in God’s realm here and now. It is to live out God’s love for all creation—love that is made known in Jesus Christ. And, it is to share the good news with others. Acts 1:1–3 gives a short summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ—literally, the good news about Jesus—as Luke understands it. Have someone read aloud Acts 1:1–3. In Luke 24:44–48, the gospel writer gives a longer summary. Have people read this passage for themselves. Ask participants to write a 140-character summary of their own that tells the Jesus story and its significance for them. Share these “tweets” with the group.

9 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 (a KH sound is a cough, like sound at the back of the throat). Listen to a pronunciation of the word at <http://www.forvo.com/word/chesed>. Think about how you might translate this word for yourself. How have you experienced God's loving kindness in your own life? How have others been examples of God's loving kindness? How have you shared loving kindness with others?

Supplies:

- Bibles in several different translations, including at least one New Revised Standard Version Bible
- pens or pencils and paper
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Explain that 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 at Ruth 1:8 in their Bibles and to identify what word or phrase is used to translate *chesed*. Write the words and phrases on newsprint or a 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 significant about Ruth. Invite the group to suggest possibilities for what the storyteller is intending.

Have volunteers look up these passages in various versions of the Bible, including the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Psalms 5:7, Psalm 23:6, Isaiah 16:5, Isaiah 40:6, Micah 6:8, Ruth 2:20, and Ruth 3:10. Ask them if they can you spot the word *chesed* in its various English disguises. List on newsprint or a whiteboard the English words and phrases used to translate *chesed*. Have people find a partner, and have each person talk about a significant experience when someone showed loving kindness to him or her. *What happened? How did you feel at the time? Later?* Gather in the whole group. *What are some ways we can show loving kindness to others?*

Reflect

There are so many ways in which a person can become a follower of Jesus, more than can be addressed in one 45-minute session. So also are there many ways to relate to scripture—with words, with song, with art and drama, or with personal reflection. Discipleship is more than following; it means choosing who and what you will follow. In this session, how have you provided a direction, a way to go? When have you helped participants to raise critical questions or discern their own responses to scripture? Give thanks for the challenges you faced together and for the joys and new discoveries.

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Attachment: Activity 3

Telling Good News—Bad News Stories

Teams work in pairs to tell a story in which they tell one piece of good news followed by one piece of bad news, in alternating fashion.

Option 1: One person tells the story alternating good news and bad news, and the other person acts as the listener. The listener gives positive responses to the good news statements (“cool,” “awesome,” “wow,” “congratulations!” “good,” “great”) and negative responses (“oh no,” “too bad,” “bummer,” “darn,” “rats”) to the bad news statements.

Example:

Storyteller: The good news is I went to a party on Saturday.

Listener: Really.

Storyteller: The bad news is that the party was on Friday.

Listener: Too bad.

Storyteller: The good news is I wore my new shirt.

Listener: Nice.

Storyteller: The bad news is that my new shirt got completely ruined.

Listener: Bummer.

Storyteller: The good news is they were serving my favorite food—BBQ pork.

Listener: Cool.

Storyteller: The bad news is all the food was eaten on Friday.

Listener: Too bad.

Storyteller: The good news is I went out for pizza with someone I really like.

Listener: Great!

Storyteller: The bad news is it’s not me she likes.

Listener: Aw, too bad.

Storyteller: The good news is I managed to get her attention.

Listener: Congratulations!

Storyteller: The bad news is I got her attention by dropping pizza all over my new shirt.

Listener: Rats.

Option 2: Person A tells good news, and Person B tells bad news. Person A starts with good news, which Person B then turns into bad news. Person A then turns the bad news back into good news.

Example:

Person A: The good news is that we went biking last week.

Person B: The bad news is that it was minus 40 degrees and snowing.

Person A: The good news is we were in the south of Spain.

Person B: The bad news is we ran out of food halfway through the trip.

Person A: The good news is that the restaurants were fabulous . . .

Attachment: Activity 7

Words to Live By

Make several copies of this page on card stock. Cut apart the passages on the dotted lines. Keep each set of verses separate.

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 40:1)

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

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

Attachment: Activity 7 (continued)

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)

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Young adults may have some knowledge of Christian faith traditions although they may not have thought much about their faith heritage. There is a tendency for many young adults to dismiss the past as ancient history that is no longer relevant in the modern world. Some may be critical of aspects of our faith heritage. They may be aware of ways the Bible has been used to justify slavery, oppression of women, homophobia, or anti-Semitism. Yet Christianity has also challenged injustice, created healing, and supported social change. In honest reflection upon our heritage, we encounter God's judgment and God's grace. We discover cause for celebration as well as for repentance. In these activities, young adults are invited to critically engage with scripture, to challenge ways in which our tradition has misread or misused the Bible, and to find within the texts a "new song" for their own lives and for our world.

Young adults are coming to maturity in a rapidly changing world of Internet, cell phone, iPods, and other mass communication technologies. They may have great difficulty recognizing the value of tradition and ritual in their lives. No time for the past, the future demands so much of their time. However, many young adults long for security and grounding in a world that seems so much in flux. Scripture can provide a sense of continuity with the past and a connection to community that endures. In a throwaway world, scripture offers a firm foundation for faith that endures.

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

Find a place where you can read aloud Psalm 96. Listen for the mood of the psalm and wonder what in the psalmist’s life might have led to this response to God. Read other psalms, such as: Psalm 59, Protection from evil doers; Psalm 3, Longing for God’s deliverance; Psalm 1, Wisdom; Psalm 38, Forgiveness; and Psalm 90, Confession. Note the attitude expressed in each psalm. Which psalm speaks most directly to your life right now? Using the words “O sing to the Lord a new song,” try creating a few sentences of your own psalm.

Prayer:

O God, as I listen to words written long, long ago,

help me to hear a new song for my life today;

As I ponder the gifts and the failings of our own faith tradition,

help me to sing a new song;

As I offer leadership with young adults in their search for meaning in these ancient texts, help us to sing a new song together with you. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Exploring Psalms (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Psalm 96. Many translations use the word “ascribe” in verses 7 and 8. Look up a definition of the word and consider what it might mean to “ascribe” something to God. It can mean that such things as power and glory are typical qualities or attributes of God, but it may also refer to authorship—to ascribe strength and glory to God is to suggest that God is somehow the author or origin of these things. What does it mean to suggest that God is the source of strength and glory? As you think about this text, what new questions arise for you? Prayerfully consider how this passage may be heard and understood by members of your group. This activity suggests you use several different psalms, such as Psalm 59, Protection from evil doers; Psalm 3, Longing for God’s deliverance; Psalm 1, Wisdom; Psalm 38, Forgiveness; and Psalm 90, Confession. Choose psalms you will use with your group.

Supplies:

- Bibles (different versions make the activity more interesting)
- pens and paper

Ask for someone to read aloud Psalm 96. *What is the mood or tone of the psalm? What situations or circumstances in life might connect with this psalm? How does the psalm speak to those situations?* Have other volunteers read other psalms you have chosen, asking the same questions of each.

From Psalm 96:1, read the words “O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord all the earth.” Ask everyone to write a psalm of their own using this phrase as a starting point. If they wish, have people share their creations with one another.

Option: Participants may wish to work in small groups or pairs to write psalms.

2 Lectio Divina

Leader preparation: Read the article “Lectio Divina” from the attachment. Use the practice of *lectio divina* for your own Bible study and meditation as you prepare for this session. Choose one of the two focus scriptures for this Exploration. Check out other websites that describe *lectio divina*,

<http://ocarm.org/en/content/lectio/what-lectio-divina>.

Supplies:

- “Lectio Divina,” Attachment: Activity 2
- 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.

Tell the group about the ancient practice called *lectio divina*, Latin for “holy reading.” It is a way of praying the Bible, rather than reading the Bible for information. Monks of the 6th century did this kind of reading and praying daily. Many people around the world pray this way today. Lead the group in “holy reading” using Psalm 96:1–6.

Have people find the text in their Bibles. Invite them to prepare themselves by taking some slow, deep breaths.

Focus on the breath. Let the breath enter slowly, deeply. Breathe through your abdomen. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Focus your attention on your breathing and deliberately slow and deepen your breath. Then slowly read the scripture aloud, pausing between lines and phrases. Pause for a moment of silence. Read the passage slowly again.

Invite participants to spend time in silence simply thinking about the passage they have heard, without speaking. People might close their eyes if they are comfortable doing so, or read the passage over for themselves in silence. Give at least 2 minutes for this, or more if the group is comfortable with the silence. Invite people to begin to pray about the text. Give prompts such as: *Imagine a conversation between you and God. How does your heart respond to this passage? What do you want to say to God as you consider this text?*

Pause for another minute or two. Then say:

Breathe deeply. Focus on your breath. Move into a time of deep, silent, attentive listening. Feel the presence of the Holy around you. Breathe slowly and deeply. Focus your attention on this holy, silent time.

Then talk together about how they felt in this “holy reading.” *What was it like to sit in stillness, thinking about the words of scripture? Could you imagine reading scripture in this way at home? What might be the benefits of such a practice?* Distribute the handout to participants. *What appeals to you about the practice of lectio divina? What questions do you have about it?*

3 Letter Writing

Leader preparation: The letter suggests obstacles Timothy might face as a follower of Jesus. Read 2 Timothy 1:1–14 and consider the obstacles Timothy might face. What obstacles do you face as a follower or disciple? Have available letter-writing materials (stationary, pens, envelopes, stamps) and make sure there are tables or surfaces to write on.

Supplies:

- stationary, pens, envelopes, stamps
- Bibles
- cell phones with texting capability

Young adults frequently use e-mail or text messaging. Ask when was the last time they wrote and mailed a “snail mail” letter to someone. Expect that many will say “never.” Letter writing used to be commonplace. Ask members to use the supplied materials to write a letter to a favorite relative or close friend. Include in the letter information about what you are presently doing in your life. You may also ask how the recipient is doing or what is going on in his or her life. Conclude with some experience you want to share with that person. Give participants an envelope if they wish to address and mail their letters.

Explain that much of the Christian Scripture (New Testament) is in the form of letters. Some books are letters to specific churches. Others contain sermonlike material in the form of a stylized letter. Ask for a volunteer to read aloud 2 Timothy 1:1–7. This is a letter said to be written to Timothy from his mentor and friend, Paul. However, scholars note that the language and style suggest this is a letter written in a Pauline style, but not actually written by Paul. *What do you notice? What does Paul want to tell Timothy?* Provide cell phones for people who don't have one with them. Ask people to send to one another a message containing the essence of Paul's advice and instructions to Timothy in the form of a short text message or tweet.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 As We Gather

Leader preparation: Find someone in your congregation who is at ease leading songs to help you teach the hymn, if you are not comfortable leading it yourself. Consider who and what has helped nourish your faith during this past year or so.

Supplies:

- hymn: "As We Gather at Your Table" (tune: Beach Spring, 8.7.8.7.D), <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/a/a366.html>, tune: <http://www.ccel.org/cceh/0001/x000147.htm>
- a variety of healthy snacks to share with the group

Sing the hymn "As We Gather at Your Table." Alternatively, have someone sing the song for the group as people follow the printed words from <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/a/a366.html>. Focus the group's attention on the words "Nourish us with sacred story till we claim it as our own." Ask what they think this stanza means. Share snacks together and discuss the significance of food in our society. *What kinds of foods do you consider most nourishing? What do you associate with the word "nourish"?* The word comes from a Greek word meaning "flow," and it originally meant to nurse or suckle an infant. "Nourish" also means to rear or raise to maturity. Mammals need more than food to survive. Being held and touched is as important to a baby's survival as food itself. Invite the participants to describe a situation in which they were nourished or fed by something more than food. *What nourishes you in your faith? How might the Bible nourish you?*

5 My Ancestors Were Desert Nomads (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Consider who your ancestors are. What do you consider to be your cultural, national, or ethnic origin? How far back can you trace your family tree? Find a quiet place and read aloud Deuteronomy 26:5–9. Consider how this text has been read aloud for thousands of years by people of faith. Who is the "wandering Aramean"? (a-rah-MAY-an) This is a reference to Jacob whose mother Rebekah was an Aramean (Genesis 24:10; 25:20, 26). Jacob lived in Aram for at least 20 years (Genesis 31:41–42). However, this phrase is generally heard as referring to Abram (or Abraham and Sarah), the common faith ancestors in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Who do you think of as your "faith ancestors"?

Supplies:

- Bibles

Invite participants to gather in groups of three, preferably with others they do not know well. Invite the triads to share with one another what they know of their cultural, national, or ethnic heritage. *What do you know of your cultural or family ancestry? Where did those that you consider to be "your people" come from?* Encourage people to be aware of the time available and to make sure everyone has a chance to talk. If there is time, have people share with others the parts of their heritage that are most important to them. *How does your heritage or ancestry influence who you are today?* Gather the whole group together. *What are the gaps in your knowledge of your heritage? What "missing information" do you wish you had? What do you think of as your religious or faith ancestry?* For some, this may be a blank. For others, this may be a mixed heritage.

Ask someone to read aloud Deuteronomy 26:5–9. This passage has been read for thousands of generations in three major world religions. *Which ones?* (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity). Invite the group to say together, "My ancestor was a wandering Aramean." *Who is the wandering Aramean?* Note that there are several possible answers. See the passages referenced in Leader preparation above. The passage reminds us that our faith ancestors were migrants, refugees, slaves, and nomads. *What is it like for you to imagine your faith ancestors as people on the move? Why do you think this text is important to people of faith today? What are the implications of thinking about faith as a journey rather than a destination?*

6 Clay Art: Praise God

Leader preparation: You will need to visit a craft store or order supplies online to obtain air drying clay. The website of AMACO, www.amaco.com, has three kinds of air-drying clay: Mexican pottery is burnt red, marbelex is gray, and stonex is white. All three clays are lead-free and come ready to use. You will want a ball of clay slightly larger than a tennis ball for each person. (A 5-pound bag of clay should make around 10 individual projects.) Cut the clay with a taunt wire, or chunk off pieces with your hands and knead them quickly together. Put individual portions of clay in air tight bags. Cover a sturdy table with plastic sheet or a plastic tablecloth. Ask a sculptor or provide plastic containers such as margarine tubs so that people can take their clay home.

Supplies:

- water-based, air-drying clay (choose a product that is nontoxic and does not smell; avoid plastic compounds)
- air-tight bags
- pottery tools such as toothpicks, rolling pin, table knives, or ceramic stamps
- plastic tablecloth for the work table
- (optional) clay surface hardener
- plastic-covered shelf or plastic containers

Clay was an important product in Bible times. Clay pots and jars were used for food storage and preparation. Clay lamps were used for lighting. These items were functional but also decorative. Pieces of broken pottery were also used as writing tablets. The Bible sometimes speaks of God's relationship with people as a potter molding clay. Distribute clay and invite people to create any image that comes to mind as they hear you read. Then read Psalm 96 aloud slowly. Before opening the clay (it's air-drying), knead it in the bag to make it soft. When ready, open the clay and start working it. Have fun! Clay will stay moist for this activity but will not be moist enough to manipulate easily after an hour. Depending on the product you choose, you may dampen the clay by covering it with a moist cloth. Give the artists time to share their pieces, if they wish, and tell why they created their works of art.

When the clay is completely dry, you can apply a surface hardener to seal it. This is not necessary but does give a glossier finish. The clay must be absolutely dry before applying the finisher. Avoid this step during humid weather.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Sarah's Circle (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle" is sung to the tune of "Jacob's Ladder." Learn the song or arrange to have someone teach it to the group. The song reminds us of our biblical heritage. Abraham's wife, Sarah, laughed at God's promise that she would have a child, and she rejoiced when the promise came true (Genesis 17, 18). What other passages from scripture come to mind as you hear this song? What does the symbolism of the circle call to mind for you?

Supplies:

- Bible
- song: "We Are Dancing Sarah's Circle" (tune: Jacob's Ladder, 8.8.8.5), <http://www.theinterpretersfriend.org/songs/w-r-dncg-srh%27s-crcl.html>

Teach "Sarah's Circle." Discuss each stanza, and reflect on what it means. For instance, say: *I wonder where we find our history. Who are the people who "dance Sarah's circle" with us?* Be open to creative answers that will deepen your encounter with one another. The circle, with no beginning or end point, is a symbol of infinity. What else might it represent? The circle reminds us of Jesus' teaching that "the first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30, Luke 13:30). *What other circles are part of our faith tradition? We seek and find our history in scripture and in our faith community. Who has helped you to find your history within the faith community? Who has invited you to join the circle of God's worldwide family? How are you helping to widen the circle to include others in our family of faith?*



8 Fan the Flame

Leader preparation: Reflect on what it means for you to fan into flame the spark of faith that is within you. Where did that spark of faith come from? Set up an attractive worship table with flowers, cloth, and other symbols. Place on it candles in holders (one per person) and a central pillar candle.

Supplies:

- Bibles, one per person
- candles and holders, one per person, and a large pillar candle
- matches
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- "Ritual with Candles and Laying on of Hands," Attachment: Activity 8

Two very ancient Christian and Jewish practices are combined in this ritual. Laying on hands was used from earliest times to confer authority, healing, or blessing. It is used in churches today to ordain or commission elders and ministers, to offer healing, and in baptism or confirmation. In ancient times, when Christians met at night or in dark places such as the catacombs, they would have carried candles with them to light their way. Upon arrival, candles were placed in a common area. Thus began a ritual of bringing lighted candles into the worship area—a practice that continues in many orthodox churches today. Today the candle is

commonly used in Christian worship both for decoration and as a symbol that represents the presence of God or the light of Christ.

Have everyone find 1 Timothy 2:6 in their Bibles. Ask a volunteer to read the verse aloud from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: "Rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands." Or, this from the New International Version: "Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands." Write the verse on newsprint or a whiteboard. Place it in a location where all can see it well. Discuss what this verse might mean. Explain the blessing ritual as outlined on the attachment. Share the ritual together.

A Community of Believers

Leader preparation: In preparation for this activity, read the suggested scriptures in the activity. Have paper and colored markers available on a large table with enough room for each learner to draw unencumbered. Prepare poster board in large print with the suggested statements about the church.

Supplies:

- paper and variety of colored markers
- Bibles, any versions
- poster board and marker

Explain to learners that each person might have a different reason for attending church, different attitudes about the importance of the Christian community for them, and different perspectives about the role of the church. Pass out paper and colored markers. Ask each learner to draw a picture that symbolizes his or her reason for being a participant in the church community. *Try not to use words—only symbols, pictures doodles, lines, and so on.* Allow 3–5 minutes.

Invite people to share their drawings if they wish. Explain that the scriptures provide insight into why the Christian community was formed and give reason for participating in the community of believers. Seek different learners to read the texts listed below. Not all the texts have to be used. After each text is read, encourage open discussion about what that text implies about being a part of the Christian church. *Does the text reflect a reason you might want to be part of a church community? Why or why not?*

- Hebrews 10:24–25
- Colossians 1:28–29
- Ephesians 4:11–12
- 1 Thessalonians 1:2–3
- Matthew 16:16–19
- Matthew 28:19–20

Explain that one side of the learning space has been designated "Agree" and the other side "Disagree." *Which of the following statements are true for you?* Ask people to indicate their agreement or disagreement by choosing one side of the space or the other (or somewhere along a continuum or perhaps right in the middle). Read each statement in turn. Give people time to move to one side of the room or another to indicate agreement or disagreement. Those not sure about a statement can move to a middle space. Ask the reason for people's choices. Statements could include:

- Church is a place to worship God.
- Church is a way to learn and grow.
- Church is a place to find community and friendship.
- Church is a safe space.
- Church is a tourist attraction.
- Church is a center for community outreach and care in the world.
- Church is a place to find hope and vision.
- Church is a beautiful building.
- Church is a community of people who follow Jesus.
- Church is an open and affirming community for everyone.
- Church is a place where I am known and accepted.
- Church is a group of people just like me.

Reflect

Which of the activities you chose seemed to most engage the interest of your group members? Which activities seemed to fall flat? What did you discover about the needs, interests, and learning styles of participants? What did you discover about yourself as a leader? Consider how you will prepare for future activities with your group. What questions are surfacing for group members? What insights or significant conversations can you build on in future sessions?

Attachment: Activity 2

Lectio Divina

The Latin phrase *lectio divina* means “holy reading.” *Lectio divina* as a way of reading and praying scripture is an ancient practice, dating from the 6th century or earlier. The progression from Bible reading, to meditation, to prayer, to loving regard for God is depicted in four stages that flow naturally from one to the other. First, one reads the text. This leads one to think about (meditate on) the meaning of the text. This in turn leads one to respond in prayer. Prayer turns into quiet stillness in the presence of God, called contemplation.

These are the four stages of *lectio divina*.

1. **Reading**—a reflective, deliberate, and slow reading of a passage of scripture. Take in each word and phrase without hurrying.
2. **Meditating**—thinking about the deepest sense of the scripture passage. Reflect on the beauty, joy, hope, frustration, even anger of the words and their meaning for you.
3. **Praying**—speaking with God by allowing your hearts to respond to what you have read and meditated on. This is your side of the conversation with God.
4. **Contemplating**—a time of silence when we listen and wait and rest in God’s presence. This stage is a simple, loving focus on God. This is God’s side of the conversation with you.

Lectio divina can be practiced daily for one continuous hour, or for two half-hour periods. Choose a passage ahead of time. Reading may follow a lectionary or schedule, such as the one in the God Is Still Speaking Daily Devotionals from the United Church of Christ (see <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/>).

Check out other websites that describe *lectio divina*, such as the following:

- “Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*,” <http://www.valvermo.com/ld-art.html>
- “What is *Lectio Divina*?” <http://ocarm.org/en/content/lectio/what-lectio-divina>

Attachment: Activity 8

Ritual with Candles and Laying on of Hands

The group gathers, standing or sitting in a circle around a central worship table.

Prayer:

One: Holy presence, we light this candle as a sign of your Spirit with us.

The large pillar candle is lit.

All: Light of the world, enlighten our hearts. Amen.

One: We recall our ancestors of faith. Those who have kept alive the spark of faith through the ages. We give thanks for people who gathered in secret to light candles and share stories and remember Jesus. We give thanks for Christians who bore witness to Jesus' daring and inclusive love, who continued to proclaim in words and actions that love is stronger than hatred, that love is more powerful than injustice, that love is stronger than death. We give thanks for those who planted a spark of faith and hope in us.

All: Light of the world, set our spirits ablaze with your love. Amen.

People are invited to come forward, one by one, to the worship table and light one of the candles. As they do so, they might name (aloud or to themselves) someone who has planted a spark of faith or of hope in them or someone who has been important in their faith journey.

When the person has lit a candle, others in the group gather around them, placing their hands on the person's head, upper arms, or shoulders.

The group blesses each person in turn, saying, "The gift of God is within you through the laying on of our hands."

When everyone has been blessed, gather in a circle around the table. Have someone pass out the candles in holders until each person is holding a lighted candle.

Closing words:

One: Rekindle the gift of God that is within you.

May the love and peace and power of God shine in you and all around you today and always.
Amen.

Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Contemporary young adults seek meaning and purpose for their lives. Their rapidly changing world, with access to limitless information and choices, can sometimes leave them feeling insecure. Their encounter with scripture can provide a renewed focus, one that points them toward deep and lasting commitments. Many young adults can have a passion for mission and justice. They may have strong opinions and commitments to such issues as human rights, peace, and environmental protection. Because many in this age group are still growing in their capacity to understand the perspectives of others, their commitment to social change may make them impatient with others who have a different view of the world. Some issues may be easier for young adults to understand than older adults, such as justice for people of different sexual orientations or gender identities. The passion, vision, and idealism of many young adults are important gifts to our faith community. This generation continues to remind the church of injustices that exclude, divide, and hurt others and our world.

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

Spend time with the Bible passages for this Exploration. Read them several times, at different times of the day. How is God speaking to you through these texts? Take time to read the book of Esther and gain a perspective on the whole story. Consider how important this story is for those who seek to challenge oppressive empires and local bullies. Review the activities with the passages in mind. Select options that will engage, challenge, and inspire members of your group. Choose different learning approaches to accommodate different interests and learning styles in your group.

Prayer: Holy One, speak to me through the words of scripture. Deepen my hope, challenge my complacency, fill me with your deep compassion. Help me to be open to your words spoken through the words of others that I may see the face of Christ in all whom I encounter. 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 A "Once Upon a Time" Story (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Esther 4:1–17. Consider how the story of Esther may be received by members of your group. Read the attachment or the whole book of Esther so that you have an overview of Esther's story. How does this story speak to situations in your community or in our world today?

Supplies:

- "Background to the Book of Esther," Attachment: Activity 1
- Bibles
- paper and pens or pencils
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Introduce the setting and characters from the story of Esther using the background on the attachment. Ask someone to read aloud Esther 4:1–17. This story has many qualities of a "once upon a time" story. *What do you notice about the way the heroine is depicted? About the villains?* Invite comparisons with European folk tales such as Cinderella and Snow White. Hand out copies of the article "Background to the Book of Esther" from the attachment, and have people read this for themselves. *What is it about the story of Esther that makes it feel like a story from long ago and far away? What do you think is the moral of the story?* (Note that there are many possible answers.) *God is not mentioned in the book. Where do you see God's activity in this story? Is there anything in the story of Esther that reminds you of events in our world today? What message or word from God might this story have for us?*

2 A Seed Growing

Leader preparation: Watch a time-lapse video of a seed growing such as one of the following:

- "Radish Seeds Sprouting," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d26AhcKeEbE>
- "Fast Growing Corn, Roots and Leaves Growing," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFCdAgeMGOA&feature=related>
- "Sunflower Seed Sprouting," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFIUrhsIqyk&feature=related>

Read Mark 4:26–29. Watch the video again. Ponder how God's kingdom (God's realm of peace and justice) is like a seed growing.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet access and equipment to show a video of a seed growing

Have participants watch a video of a seed growing, such as the one of radish seeds sprouting. *How did you feel as you watched this video? Pause for a moment of silence. Read aloud Mark 4:26–29. What do you notice in this passage of scripture? Watch the video again. Why do you think Jesus said God's kingdom (God's realm of peace and justice) was like a seed growing? There are many possible responses. What do you know about what causes a seed to germinate? What does a seed need for growth? How do we nurture seeds and help them grow? How do we nurture (or help bring to fruition) God's realm of peace and justice? How does scripture nurture us as we respond to God's vision and hope for our world?*

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.

3 Seeds of the Kingdom

Leader preparation: Read Mark 4:26–34. Think about the image of a seed. How is it a reminder of God's activity in the world? How is God's realm of peace and justice (God's shalom kingdom) like a growing seed? Gather the supplies you need for this activity. Set out a work area with seeds and potting materials.

Supplies:

- seeds and small planting containers
- potting soil
- spoons
- Bibles
- cloth or drop sheet to cover a work area
- watering can or plant sprayer filled with water
- a recording of gentle music to play in the background

Ask people to gather at the work area you prepared. Read aloud Mark 4:26–34. Invite participants to plant seeds in a container and to water them. Ask them to do this slowly and prayerfully, as though they are participating in a sacrament such as communion or baptism. Feel the texture of the seeds. Touch them very gently as you place them in the soil. When the participants have finished, gather in a circle around the seeds. Read Mark 4:26–34 a second time. *How is a seed a reminder of God's presence here? How is it a reminder of the peace and justice and goodness that God promises? How is a seed like God's kingdom?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Interpreting God's Word (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think of a passage of scripture that makes your heart expand with joy. Think of a passage of scripture by which you feel judged. Think of a passage that could be heard in more than one way, depending on the context in which it was used. Think about how you can assist learners to discover that scripture is open to interpretation. Indeed, it requires interpretation in order to be the word of a still-speaking God. Help them understand that scripture should not be used to judge or condemn others. Write on a piece of newsprint or a whiteboard the following words, in block capitals: "JUDGE," "AFFIRM," "HURT," "HEAL." Look up the scripture passages in the list below and bookmark them in your bible for easy reference.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles

Ask the group whether they have ever heard a Bible verse used as a weapon or as an affirmation. The Bible consists of many different kinds of writing and does not speak in one voice. Sometimes the Bible contradicts itself. People interpret and use the Bible very differently according to their theology and their life situations. This activity helps us think about the ways in which scripture might be used to hurt others or the world, to restore or heal others and our world, to judge and condemn others, or to affirm and celebrate human diversity. A passage may be used differently in different contexts. Ask people to look at the four words you wrote on newsprint or a whiteboard. After you read aloud each of the following passages, ask people to consider how this text might be used to judge, affirm, hurt, or heal.

- God said, "Do not eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, for the day you eat of it, you will die." (Genesis 2:17)
- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, and live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:15)
- Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth but if salt has lost its taste, how can it be restored? It is no longer good for anything." (Matthew 5:13)
- God blessed [human beings] and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground." (Genesis 1:28)
- Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will see God." (Matthew 5:5,9)
- Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6)
- Now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who is sexually immoral or greedy, who is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one. (1 Corinthians 5:11)
- Jesus said, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." (John 21:17–18)
- Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:5)
- If I take the wings of the morning, and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me. (Psalm 139:9–10)
- Jesus said, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire." (Matthew 7:19)
- Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)
- I permit no woman to preach or have authority over men. She is to keep silent. (1 Timothy 2:11)
- There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)
- No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)
- Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything. (Colossians 3:22)

Is there one right way to interpret scripture, or are there many possibilities? How can we use the Bible to help bring peace and healing and justice to our world?



5 Time and Place

Leader preparation: Consider the time and place in which you are located, geographically, politically, and socially. Carefully review the questions on the attachment and consider how you will respond. Read Esther 4:1–17 and review the whole story. If necessary, read the summary on the attachment.

Supplies:

- "A Question of Time and Place," Attachment: Activity 4
- pencils or pens
- newsprint or marker board and markers
- stopwatch (or watch with second hand)

Invite people to spend a moment in silence thinking about the place they are in. Ask them to think first of the immediate learning area. *What do you notice about this place in which you find yourself?* Then ask them to think of the building in which this learning area is located. *Where are you, physically, at this moment in*

time and space? Ask them to slowly expand their vision, their sense of location, to include the community in which they are located, then the geographic region, state or province, and finally the country in which they are presently located. Distribute pens or pencils and copies of the handout "A Question of Time and Place." Explain the instructions at the top of the page. Ask people to begin with Question 1. Tell them that when you say "Go" they will have 90 seconds before they move on to Question 2. Set the stopwatch and have people begin writing. Give people 90 seconds for each question.

Form small groups of 2–4 people to share responses to these questions. Gather in the large group. Have a volunteer read aloud Esther 4:1–17 or, if your group has read it previously, recall the story together. Focus on verse 14. *What were some characteristics of the time and setting in which Esther found herself? What qualities, characteristics, or attributes did Esther have that enabled her to respond to the crisis her people were facing? What are some characteristics of our time and place? What are some of the crises or opportunities to which we might be called to respond in this time and place? What aspects of who we are might enable us to respond?*



6 Two Women of Courage

Leader preparation: Preview the video of the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (ahng sahn soo chee) from house arrest. Arrange equipment to show this video to the group. To find out more about Aung San Suu Kyi and her work, view other sites such as the YouTube video "Campaign for Burma—Free Aung San Suu Kyi and Other Political Prisoners." Read Esther 4:1–17. Consider how the story of Esther inspires you as a person of faith. How does this story compare with the story of Aung San Suu Kyi? Have the artwork "Two Women and a Child" displayed prominently where all in the group can see it. You will not use the poster directly, but it will be there in the background to inspire the group's conversation.

Supplies:

- video: "Global Reaction to Aung San Suu Kyi's Release," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11751748>
- "Campaign for Burma—Free Aung San Suu Kyi and Other Political Prisoners," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MkML_mqe7Lc
- Bibles for each person
- computer with Internet connect and equipment for viewing a YouTube video
- artwork: "Two Women and a Child" by Diego Rivera, http://www.all-posters.com/-sp/Two-Women-and-a-Child-Posters_i1813781_.htm?aid=1413628417&LinkTypeID=1&PosterTypeID=1&DestType=7

Watch the video of Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest. Invite the group to share what they know about Aung San Suu Kyi. *How has she shown courage and perseverance in the face of oppression?* Invite people to individually read Esther 4:1–17. In groups of 2–4 people, talk about how the story of Esther compares with the situation of Aung San Suu Kyi. *What are similarities and differences in the two women's responses to oppression?* Read Esther 4:14. Consider the phrase "for such a time as this." *How did Esther and Aung San Suu Kyi respond to "such a time as this"? What courageous action did each take? What were the risks? How might you be called to respond to God's call in your own time and place? What are possible risks or difficulties (big or small) that you might face if you faithfully respond to God's call?*

Sending & Serving Activities

 **7 Justice for the Poor (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Read each text below. Consider what mandate the Bible gives us to respond to those who are poor or needy. Gather information about what your local congregation or church is doing in response to poverty in your community.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Introduce the concept of poverty in the scriptures. Sometimes poverty is understood materially and sometimes spiritually. Divide into six small groups or pairs, or have different learners to look up the following scriptures and be prepared to read the text and respond to the questions.

- Deuteronomy 15:11
- Leviticus 19:9–10
- James 2:5
- Matthew 5:3
- John 12: 6–8
- Amos 2:6

In small groups (or individually) read the assigned scripture. *What does this say about the poor? What does this text say about justice for the poor?* Ask the small group (or individual) to reflect on what the scripture says about poverty and justice. Gather in the whole group. *What message does scripture give us about how we are called to respond to the poor and vulnerable in our society? How well do you think we live out that biblical mandate as individuals? As a church? As a society?* Share information you have gathered about how your church is helping people who are poor or vulnerable. *How are we helping alleviate the effects of poverty? What are we doing to address the root causes of poverty? What might we do as a group to address either the symptoms or the root causes of poverty in our community?* Plan an action you can do together, such as a small action you take on yourselves, supporting or participating in an ongoing activity of your church.

 **8 Two Women and a Child**

Leader preparation: Read Esther 4:1–17. Consider how the story of Esther speaks to you about God's call and invitation to mission in your community or in the wider world. Display the artwork "Two Women and a Child" where all in the group can see it.

Supplies:

- Bibles for each person
- artwork: "Two Women and a Child" by Diego Rivera, http://www.all-posters.com/-sp/Two-Women-and-a-Child-Posters_i1813781_.htm?aid=1413628417&LinkTypeID=1&PosterTypeID=1&DestType=7
- (optional) computer with Internet connection

Ask the group members to focus on the painting for a few minutes. *What draws your attention? What do you notice?* Take a full minute to look in silence. *What else do you notice? What do you think these two women might be talking about?* Explain that the artist, Diego Rivera, was a Spanish painter who spent many years of his life in Mexico. He was passionately committed to creating a more just society. His

paintings and murals depict his deep respect for indigenous Mexican culture and his critique of the economic injustices he encountered in Mexico. You might invite the group to use computers or phones with Internet connection to find out more about Diego Rivera. Look again at the painting "Two Women and a Child." *What else do you see?* Have someone read aloud Esther 4:1–17. *Imagine a conversation between Esther and a poor Hispanic woman living today in your community. What might the two women talk about? Who is like Esther in your community? Who are "her people"?*



9 Guide my Feet

Leader preparation: Learn the song "Guide My Feet" or arrange for someone to lead it with your group. Pray for God's guidance as you prepare to lead this activity with your group. Copy the attachment "Guide My Feet" for each person and consider your responses to the questions for yourself.

Supplies:

- song: "Guide My Feet," (tune: 8.8.8.10.)
<http://www.hymnsite.com/fws/hymn.cgi?2208>
- Bibles
- pens and pencils
- "Guide My Feet," Attachment: Activity 9

Distribute pens or pencils and copies of "Guide My Feet" to each person. Have people work individually or in small groups. Invite people to form small groups or find one other person with whom to share their responses to the questions. Note that people need only share what they wish to share. Gather in the whole group. Invite participants to share the prayer they wrote. Sing together the hymn "Guide My Feet." Invite ideas for additional verses and sing these also.

Reflect

Take time to look back over activities you selected for this Exploration. Recall the group's responses. Which conversations seemed most meaningful? What kinds of activities particularly engaged the learners in your group? Consider how you will use what you know about the group to plan for future learning. How do you think the participants may have grown in their understanding? What have you learned from this experience? Say a prayer of thanks for the learners in your group and for this time together.

Attachment: Activity 1

Background to the Book of Esther

The story of Esther has a folk tale quality. It is set “once upon a time” in the land of Persia. The hero, Esther, is beautiful, brave, and good. The villain, Haman, is bad through and through. The king is powerful, but foolish. Together, beautiful Esther and wise old Uncle Mordecai use cunning and bravery to foil the villain, win over the king, and restore the fortunes of their people. Because many events in the book are not historically accurate, biblical scholars suggest that Esther is a historical novella written to explain the meaning of the Jewish festival of Purim. Although the story probably is fictional, there was a Jewish community in exile in Persia during this period.

The Setting:

- The royal palace at Susa, the Persian capital, sometime between 587 and 538 B.C.E.

The Characters:

Mordecai is a member of the exiled Jewish community living in Persia. He once saved the king’s life by revealing an assassination plot. Mordecai wears sackcloth (a coarse, scratchy fabric used to make sacks) as a sign of mourning.

Esther is also Jewish. She is Mordecai’s niece and was raised by Mordecai, who acted as her guardian after her parents died. Esther was chosen to be queen by the king of Persia after the previous queen was banished for refusing to obey the king’s orders. Esther lives at the royal court. Mordecai has forbidden Esther to tell anyone she is Jewish. Although Esther is queen, she does not have authority with the king.

Haman is a noble who has been given a great place of honor by the Persian king. Haman hates Mordecai and plots to kill him.

The Key Events:

- Esther is chosen as queen by King Xerxes and takes her place in the royal harem.
- Mordecai uncovers an assassination plot; he tells Esther, who warns the king.
- A nobleman named Haman is given a place of honor by King Xerxes.
- Haman orders Mordecai to bow down to him, but Mordecai refuses.
- In revenge, Haman offers King Xerxes a bribe to let him kill all the Jews.
- King Xerxes declines the bribe, but lets Haman do as he wishes.
- Haman issues an order under the king's authority to annihilate all the Jews in Persia.
- Mordecai hears of the order and puts on sackcloth as a sign of mourning.
- Esther hears about Mordecai, sends messages to him, and learns of the plot.
- Mordecai begs Esther to talk to the king; Esther reminds him she could be executed for approaching the king without being summoned.
- Esther asks Mordecai and the Jews to fast and pray for her.
- Esther approaches the king, who agrees to listen to her request; she invites Haman and the king two elaborate banquets.
- At the second banquet, after the king has offered to do whatever she asks, Esther reveals Haman’s plot to kill all Jews in Persia.
- The king executes Haman and gives his estate to Esther.
- Mordecai is honored for his previous action to save the king’s life.
- The edict to destroy the Jews is repealed and the Jews live in peace and prosperity in Persia.

Attachment: Activity 5

A Question of Time and Place

For each question, list as many responses as you can. For example, for the first question you should describe where you are in a physical sense (building, neighborhood, community, county, region, solar system) as well as where you are in terms of a state of mind. The question of what time it is could be answered by the time on the clock, the year, the season, a historical period. Who are you could include your name, your job title, your role in church or community, your culture or racial origin, your national identity, your gender. For each question, keep writing as many responses as possible as quickly as possible until the leader asks you to move to the next question.

1. Where are you right now?

2. What time is it?

3. Who are you?

Attachment: Activity 9

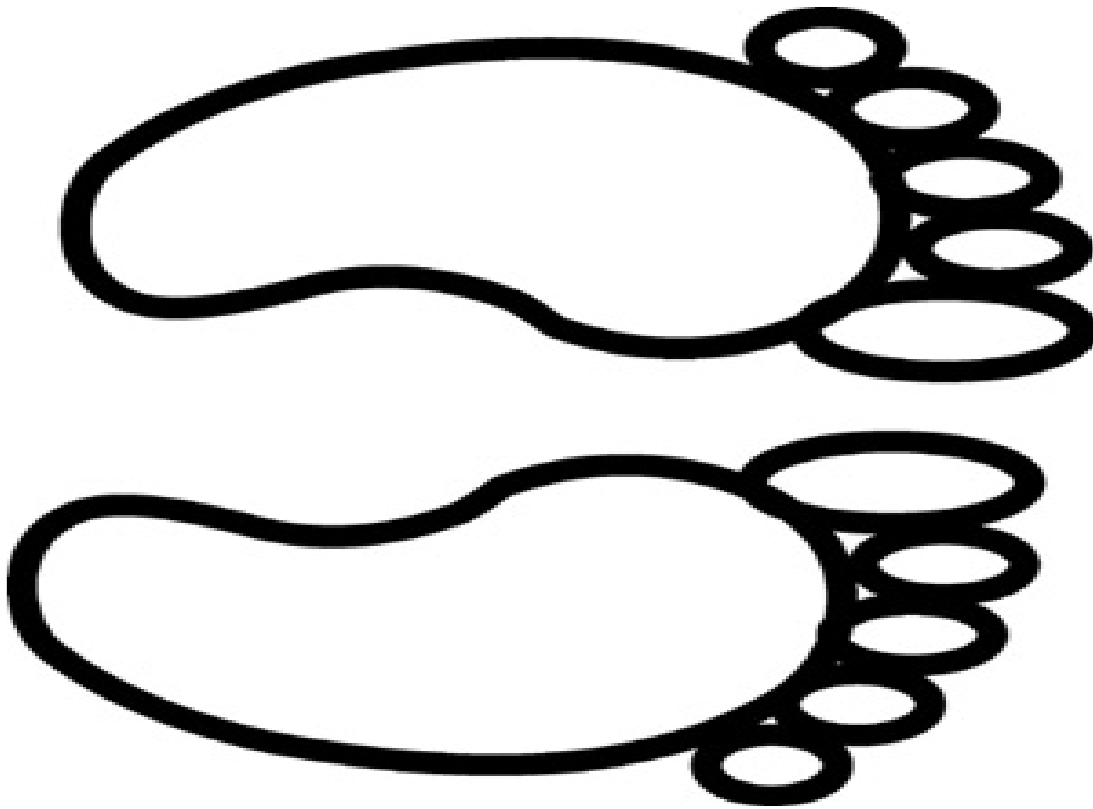
Guide My Feet

1. Read this passage of scripture.

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

—Micah 6:8

2. Consider this path of justice, love, kindness, and humble walking with God. What might such a path be like? Where might the path lead you? What risks or opportunities might you encounter? What might you be called to do? On one of the footprints below, write some of your thoughts about this path:
3. How do you want God to help you on this path? On the other footprint below, write a prayer asking God to guide your feet on this path.



Encountering Scripture



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group or Setting

The practice of faith is a life-long pursuit. To encounter the scriptures is to enter into a world of possibilities, mysteries, and unknowns. Young adults experience both the anxieties and the potentials of venturing into the future. For some young adults, the ever-changing world seems insecure. Many young adults have a strong sense of anxiety about the future—the future health and well-being of the planet, the future of their community or society, or their own personal future. Will they have (or get) meaningful work? Will there be a place for them? They have less than adults to look back on for security, and more than adults to look forward to with anticipation. Scripture keeps us grounded and can give us confidence and hope for the future. This Exploration can help young adults find hope, vision, and inspiration for the future. However, the Bible does not always offer easy or simple answers to life's questions. There are many choices, many unknowns. Scripture reminds young adults that faith sometimes entails stepping into the unknown, confident in "things unseen."

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

Read the two Bible passages that will be used in this Exploration. Deuteronomy 30:15–20 tells the Israelites what they need to remember as they step from the desert into the Promised Land. "Choose life," says Moses to the people. Consider what it means for you to choose life. How might this phrase speak to your group as they venture into the world of mature adulthood? Read Hebrews 11:1–16. This rather complex passage speaks of our ancestors' faith in things that cannot be seen and touched, and their confidence that what they hope for will someday come to pass. What are the "things unseen" that you are confident about, through faith? As you prepare to lead these activities, consider what you know about the members of your group. Which activities will most challenge them? Which will most captivate their interest and inspire their hope for God's future?

Prayer: God of all ages, renew my confidence in things hoped for. Rekindle my vision of things unseen. I place my trust in you, Wonderful God. Help me to step into an uncertain future, aware of your compassionate guidance. Let your words speak to me through the words of scripture and through the voices of the young adults in this group. Keep me always open to your presence in our midst. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Bucket Lists (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This learning experience is based on the concept of "bucket lists," things that a person wants (or needs) to do before dying. Think about your own bucket list. Read Hebrews 11:1–11. What are you confident about? What hopes do you have for the future? For our world? What do you think it means to have confidence in things we cannot see or to be assured that what we hope for will come to pass? If possible, watch a trailer for the movie *The Bucket List* on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhAX6vIR0Zk>.

Supplies:

- paper and pencils
- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- computer with Internet connection or (optional) cell phone with data capacity

The movie *The Bucket List*, starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, is about two cancer patients who decide to complete some of the things they have always wanted to do before dying. A "bucket list" is a list of things a person may want or need to do before they die (i.e., before the person "kicks the bucket"). If you have a computer with Internet access (or if participants have cell phones with a data package), watch a trailer on YouTube from the movie *The Bucket List*. Distribute pencils and paper. Ask the group members to write down the five things they would like to do before they die. Invite people to share some of the items on their list (Make sure this is voluntary. There should be no pressure for anyone to share if they do not wish to do so.)

Bucket lists can be reflections on what you see as significant in life. A bucket list need not be filled with impulsive stuff or the dreams of other people. It can contain items that enrich the lives of others. *What criteria did you use for putting something on your list? What makes these items on your list significant for you?*

Distribute Bibles and have someone read aloud Hebrews 11:1–16. Not all of these biblical characters will be known to the group, and perhaps none of them will be. But it is still possible to identify things for which these people of faith are remembered. *What are some things that the writer of Hebrews points to as being important in a life of faith? Record ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard. Do any of these things match items on anyone's bucket list? If someone were to write a eulogy for you, commending you for having great faith, what would you like the eulogy to say about your faith?*

2 Hidden Depths

Leader preparation: Spend time viewing the artwork "Hidden Depths." Notice that what is revealed below the surface is so much greater than what is seen above the surface of the water. Think about how scripture often is more than the sum of its parts; the significance of a passage may be much deeper than can be seen on first reading.

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.

Put up the poster where all can see it. Obtain Bibles in several different versions, including *The Message* and The New Revised Standard Version Bible. Or look up and bookmark some online versions of this passage from *Bible Gateway* (<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/>) and *Devotions* (<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>).

Supplies:

- artwork: “Hidden Depths,” <http://affiliates.allposters.com/link/redirect.asp?item=416482&AID=1413628417&PSTID=1<ID=1&lang=1Hidden%20Depths>
- Bibles in several different versions, including The New Revised Standard Version Bible and *The Message*
- “What’s in a Word?” Attachment: Activity 2

Call the group’s attention to the poster “Hidden Depths.” *What do you notice? What do you see on the surface? What do you see below the surface? Which part of the image is greatest? How does this image make you feel?*

Read aloud Hebrews 11:1–3 as people follow along in their Bibles. Invite people with different translations to read other versions of this passage. *What do these verses mean to you?* Hand out copies of the article “What’s in a Word?” Invite people to work in pairs, with several different versions of the Bible. Ask them to read the article and to explore the meaning of the scripture, to wrestle with what it says to them. Have them write out Hebrews 11:1–3 in their own words. *What kind of faith is described here? What might it be like to live your life with that kind of faith?*



3 Confidence in Things Not Seen

Leader preparation: Can you read this invisible message? With your mouse, select the space between the two quotation marks that follow: (Copy and paste in your browser)

“

” (Hebrews 11:1).

What do you notice? Read Hebrews 11:1–11. What does faith mean to you? What are some things you are sure of that you cannot see? To what unseen things and future hopes do you think the writer is referring? Using the ideas on the attachment, experiment with making secret messages with invisible ink, or experiment with some digital invisible messages. Gather supplies to make secret messages with the group.

Supplies:

- “Invisible Ink,” Attachment: Activity 3
- supplies for invisible writing, including fine-tipped brushes, feathers or Q tips
- solutions to make invisible inks, such as milk, lemon juice, cornstarch, vitamin B–12, vinegar, acetic acid, baking soda solution, tonic water, or laundry detergent
- developers such as an iron, iodine solution, purple cabbage water, or purple grape juice
- source of ultraviolet light
- (optional) computers with Internet access
- (optional) “What’s in a Word?” Attachment: Activity 2

Invite someone in the group to read aloud Read Hebrews 11:1–3. Consider some of the unseen things that the writer may be pointing to. *What may be some of the things that the writer of Hebrews is hoping for that have not yet come to pass? What are you hoping for in life? For the future? How does your faith give you confidence or assurance about the future?*

When you were a child, did you ever write secret messages to your friends using invisible ink? What were some of the techniques you used? Invite those who wrote secret messages to talk about the experience. *Was it fun to send secret, invisible messages? What made it fun?* Invite the group to playfully experiment with different ways of writing invisible messages, using the materials you provided (or using a computer, texting, and so on). Write an invisible message that explains some of the things you are confident and sure about by faith. Give lots of time for people to work on their messages. Invite people to share their messages with one another (and to reveal their secrets).

Option: Refer to the attachment "What's in a Word?" from Activity 2. Share some of the information about possible meanings of this passage.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Commandments for a New Land

Leader preparation: Look up each of the following passages and mark them in your bible with a bookmark: Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 6:3–5; Psalm 119:35–37; Psalm 119:96–98; Luke 6:27–28; John 13:34–35. Write these text references on a piece of newsprint or on the whiteboard so all participants can see them.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pens or pencils, paper
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Have a volunteer read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–20. This passage was written for the Israelite people as they were about to enter a new land, the Promised Land. *How do you think these instructions might have helped them as they entered this new phase of their life as a people? What command might be most important for our nation today?* Have people in turn slowly read aloud each of the following texts: Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 6:3–5; Psalm 119:35–37; Psalm 119:96–98; Luke 6:27–28; and John 13:34–35. *Which text do you think would be most helpful or important for our society? Why?* Invite people to choose a text for themselves and then, as a group, come to consensus on a passage (or combination of passages or a rewriting of one of the passages). Write out the full text that the group selects on newsprint or a whiteboard. *What would it be like if our churches and other social institutions, including government, banks and businesses, lived this commandment?*

Invite people to close their eyes, take a few deep and slow breaths. *Imagine that God's reign is now; the hope that God offers us is real. Imagine, just for a moment, that God's commands are written on the heart and that all people, from all walks of life, have chosen life. Large banks follow God's way. And so do small businesses and corporations. And counties. And countries. Courts follow the command, as well as ordinary citizens. Breathe deeply. Let yourself dream; catch a glimpse of what might be possible. Try for a God's-eye-view.* Pause for a moment of silence, then slowly read aloud Hebrews 11:13.

5 Signs of God's Hope

Leader preparation: Collect news sections of current newspapers or arrange for use of computers with Internet access. Browse a "good news" site, such as Good News Network (<http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/>) or Alltop (<http://good.alltop.com/>). Browse a mainline news site such as CNN (<http://www.cnn.com/>), CBC (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/>), or the BBC (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk/>). Read Mark 4:26–34 and consider how this text might be good news for our world today. Bookmarks several mainline and "good news" news sites on the computer so that they will be easy to access.

Supplies:

- computers with Internet access, or copies of news sections of daily newspapers
- (optional) scissors
- Bibles

Ask people to search in the newspapers or online for stories that they consider to be either good news or bad news. Have them clip out with scissors or bookmark one good news story and one bad news story. Share the stories people find. As you hear the stories of good news and bad news story, consider what makes a story good news or bad news and for whom. Something that is good news for some people might be bad for others. *How is the Bible good news? For whom is it good news? Why?*

6 Choose Life or Guernica

Leader preparation: Locate a copy of "Guernica" by Picasso, from a site such as River's Edge (<http://riversstream.blogspot.com/2010/04/guernica.html>), YouTube ("Picasso Guernica"), or Spanish Fiestas (<http://www.spanish-fiestas.com/art/picasso-guernica.htm>), and bookmark the site. Consider the phrase from Deuteronomy 30:19—"choose life." What does that mean to you as you look at this painting. Read the background to the painting on one of the sites.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- artwork: "Guernica" by Pablo Picasso
- Bibles

Show the learners the painting "Guernica" by Picasso. *What does the painting say to you? What images do you see that strike you as particularly moving or significant? Focus on the small flower emerging near the center bottom of the painting. Do you see any significance in this flower in the midst of destruction? Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–20. What connections do you see, if any, between the Deuteronomy scripture and "Guernica"?* Explain that on April 26, 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, Hitler's air force conducted an aerial bombing raid on Basque town of Guernica. Hundreds of innocent civilians died that night. This brutal attack inspired Pablo Picasso to paint "Guernica." *Does knowing this background change or add to what you notice in the painting? Consider the phrase from Deuteronomy 30:19—"choose life"—and what it means to you as you look at this painting. What does it mean for you to choose life?*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Choosing Life in the Midst of Empire (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation:

Supplies:

- Bibles
- "Empire," Attachment: Activity 7
- pens or pencils

Hand out copies of the article "Empire" along with pens or pencils. Ask people to read the article for themselves and to think about each action item listed on the chart following the article, marking each one according to whether they think the action might support or resist empire (or neither of these if the action is essentially neutral, or both if the action is context-dependent). Have participants form small groups to discuss the article and the actions. *How would you describe the empire that is dominant in our world today? Do you agree with the descriptions in this article? What actions do you think uphold the power of empire today? What actions resist it?*

Deuteronomy 30:15–20 is set in the context of the Israelite exodus—their escape from slavery in the powerful Egyptian Empire. The Israelite people, led by Moses, are about to enter the Promised Land. Moses gives final instructions from God. Have someone read aloud Deuteronomy 30:15–20, as people follow along in their own Bibles. Note verses 19–20. *What choice are the people asked to make? What does it mean to "choose life" as they enter the Promised Land? What specifically are they being asked to do? What does it mean for us to choose life as we try to live faithfully in the midst of empire today?*

8 Guide My Feet

Leader Preparation: Listen to the song "Guide My Feet" from a site such as Kids' Music Town (<http://kidsmusictown.com/childrensongslyrics/biblesongs/guide-myfeet.htm>) or YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-WVIppNBls>). Arrange to play the song for your group. If you are not comfortable leading music, arrange for someone to lead this song with the group. Write on newsprint or a whiteboard the following text references: Psalm 46:1–2; Matthew 5:11–12; Hebrews 11:1; Hebrews 13:5–6; 1 Peter 1:13; Matthew 14:28–31; Proverbs 3:5–6; Luke 12:29–32; John 14:2; Psalm 23: 4.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- song: "Guide My Feet," (tune: Guide My Feet, 8.8.8.10.) <http://www.hymn-site.com/fws/hymn.cgi?2208>
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

As you consider the future, what causes you anxiety? What are some of your fears or worries about the future? Record ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard. The song "Guide My Feet" is an African American spiritual seeking assistance from faith while enduring the hardship of life. Play the song, and then sing it together. Does this song provide a sense of hope or encouragement? What other songs help you gain hope or encouragement? Where do you turn for help in facing your anxieties?

Introduce the idea of scripture as if it were like the yellow pages in the telephone book; a place to go when looking for something in particular. Show the text references you have written on newsprint or a whiteboard. Each of these texts directly speaks to an anxiety that a person might be feeling and provides some reassurance. Ask people to browse the texts (they don't have to read all of them) and to consider: *What anxiety does this text address? Does it provide relief or a sense of comfort for you? Choose a text that in some way connects with a source of worry or concern you have in your life right now.*

Have each person choose one other person with whom to share the text she or he selected, how it connects with her or his life, and how she or he feel about the passage. Gather in the whole group. Invite people to think about these questions: *In what way is scripture a source of guidance or hope for you in the face of life's difficulties?* Invite people to respond. Give time for each person who wishes to do so to say something. Avoid debate or discussion. Let this be a time of honest sharing.

9 Prayer for the Future

Leader preparation: Review the activity. Find a version of Thomas Merton's prayer from *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1958) from a book or a website such as DanWilt.com (<http://www.danwilt.com/thomas-merton-i-have-no-idea-where-i-am-going/>) or Spirituality & Practice (<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=13380>). Write your own prayer in response to the quotation from Merton's prayer.

Supplies:

- paper
- pens and pencils
- copy of *Thoughts in Solitude* by Thomas Merton or computer with access to an online version

What is your prayer for your future? Thomas Merton was a Trappist Monk who lived from 1915 to 1968. He wrote and meditated on spirituality from a faith perspective. One of his famous prayers begins, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so." Share the rest of the prayer with the group. Invite people, working alone or in small groups, to write their own prayer for the future. Have participants share their prayers (or parts of their prayers) with the group if they wish to.

Reflect

What were some of the joys and high points of this session for you? For your group? What did you learn about your own faith? About this group of young adults? Consider how this session has stretched you. What new skills or capacities are being shaped in you? How are you growing as a person of faith? What future possibilities are calling to you? What is your prayer for the future?

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 NRSV)

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

Hypostasis is a Greek word, translated as "assurance" in the New Revised Standard Version. The Greek word can have these meanings:

- "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 some other ways 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

Invisible Ink

Supplies you might need:

- fine-tipped brushes, feathers, or Q tips
- Inks such as milk, lemon juice, cornstarch, vitamin B-12, vinegar, acetic acid, baking soda, tonic water, laundry detergent
- developers such as an iron, a source of ultraviolet light, iodine solution, purple cabbage water, or purple grape juice

Use a fine-tipped paintbrush, Q tip, or a feather dipped in the invisible ink to paint a message on ordinary paper. Let the paper dry completely. The message will be virtually invisible. Use an ordinary pen to write on the paper, being careful not to smudge the invisible message. This helps disguise the fact that there is an invisible message on the paper. Develop the message as indicated below. Use heat, developing solution, or an ultraviolet light to reveal the secret message.

Inks that are visible when heated:

- Lemon juice
- Milk

Use an iron on a low setting. Put the paper with the message under a tea towel and iron the towel. Alternatively, you can place the paper near a 100-watt bulb until the message shows brown. Be very careful not to overheat the paper, as it will burn.

Inks that are made visible in ultraviolet light (black light, light bulbs that are used for plant lights, day-light spectrum bulbs):

- Laundry detergent dissolved in water (the bluing agent glows)
- Tonic water (the quinine in tonic water glows)
- Vitamin B-12 dissolved in vinegar

In the following table are inks that are visible when brushed with a developer solution. With these inks, let the ink dry completely first. Then, to reveal the message, use a small amount of the developing solution brushed on gently with a wide brush or Q tip.

Invisible ink	Developing solution
baking soda dissolved in water	purple grape juice (concentrated grape juice is best)
cornstarch dissolved in water (1 tablespoon of cornstarch to ½ cup of water, heat until it thickens, let cool and apply to paper)	iodine solution
acetic acid, lemon juice, or vinegar	purple cabbage water (this is a solution made from boiling purple cabbage in water; when the cabbage is cooked, save the purple liquid and let it cool; white or green cabbage won't work, it must be purple)

Attachment: Activity 3 (continued)

Invisible Computer Messages

For an invisible e-mail or text message, first write the message. Then, select the message and set the color of the message to the same color as the background. For instance, if the background to your e-mails is white, select white as the color for the text. Send the e-mail. The message is only visible if the receiver highlights it.

Many cell phone text messages have a feature that lets you select the color of the text. It works the same way.

On a regular Word file—and in some e-mail programs—you have to actually change the color of the text to read the message.

Can you read this invisible message? Select the sentence between the quotation marks and change the color of the type:

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

On Web or Wiki pages, you can write the message in your Web editor (or in the HTML code directly). Try this:

1. Write the message.
2. Insert the following code right before your secret message, replacing the word "white" with the background color of your webpage (such as "blue" or "black" or "red");

```
<span style="color: white; background:white;>
```

3. Insert the following code right after your secret message: ``
4. Save your changes.
5. View the webpage. The message will only be visible if it is selected.

Attachment: Activity 7

Empire

*North American Christians . . . are oblivious to the fact that we are thoroughly immersed in a global, neoliberal empire, the values of which are the polar opposite of God's good news for the poor, the least, the last and the lost.*¹

What comes to mind when you consider the word *empire*? The British Empire? The Roman Empire? Star Wars? At the time of Christ, the colossal Roman Empire dominated tiny Palestine and much of the known world. The Romans had replaced the Greeks who had conquered the Persians. At its height, around 500 B.C.E., the Persian Empire included all of today's Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, southwestern Central Asia as far east as Pakistan, parts of Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf area, Greece, and North Africa including what is now Egypt and Libya. What empire rules today's world?

Some countries, such as the United States, have great global dominance. But the concept of *empire* today encompasses more than a single nation. Think of the power wielded by alliances such as the G8, NATO, or the European Union. And a handful of multinational corporations have as much political and financial power as many countries. Empire in the 21st century is "a complex system of global domination directed by powerful nations and organizations."² It includes institutions and corporations as well as states. It is a web of organizations, governments, and institutions that exerts power and dominance. In today's global empire, just as in empires of the past, in today's global empire, most people are very poor while the rich control most of the resources. The environment is at risk as more and more resources are gobbled up to feed its demands. Military forces hold empire in place. It is a system in which most people, either knowingly or unknowingly, have a part to play. Some actions support empire while other actions resist its oppressive power.

Empire needs the participation of most people most of the time if it is to retain its global dominance. Empire's tentacles reach everywhere, into everything we do. Think about the following actions. How do your actions support empire? How do your actions resist it?

1. Robert Smith, former moderator of The United Church of Canada, from "Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire. World Alliance of Reformed Churches. http://warc.ialb.de/warcqjsp/side.jsp?news_id=909&part_id=0&navi=5 (accessed November 6, 2010).
2. Nanette McKay, "Living Faithfully in the Midst of Empire. World Alliance of Reformed Churches. http://warc.ialb.de/warcqjsp/side.jsp?news_id=909&part_id=0&navi=5 (accessed November 6, 2010).

Attachment: Activity 7 (continued)

Action	Resists	Supports	Neither resists nor supports	Both resists and supports
Writing a letter on behalf of a political prisoner				
Watching the news				
Sending a text message				
Buying fairly traded coffee				
Supporting a local food bank or homeless shelter				
Attending a Pride march				
Buying a chocolate bar				
Recycling used clothing				
Planting a tree				
Paying a utility bill				
Walking to church				
Saving for retirement				
Voting				
Reading the Bible				
Using reusable shopping bags				
Composting vegetable scraps				
Getting a job in a clothing retail outlet				
Taking the bus to work				
Getting a bank loan				
Going to college or university				
Cleaning your kitchen floor				