

The Acts of the Apostles



Hearts Afire and the Four Areas of Focus
Group Sessions

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A Study of the Acts of the Apostles

A Six-Session Study for the Churches of the
Illinois Great Rivers Conference of
The United Methodist Church

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To the Leader

This study is intended for use as a six-week Bible study. It could be used by existing Sunday school classes, small groups, or Bible study groups, or by new groups formed specifically for this short-term study. While the study was designed for use by adults, it could be adapted for use with youth.

The study consists of two components: daily participant readings, and weekly group lessons. Each study participant will need a copy of the daily readings at least one week prior to the beginning of the study. As the leader of this study, you may decide to provide participants with a copy of the group session material, as well, or you may choose to lead the session from a single copy of that material. Local churches and other ministries in the Illinois Great Rivers Conference are welcome to make as many copies of both the daily and weekly lessons as may be needed to conduct the study.

Each daily reading includes a passage of scripture or an excerpt from one of John Wesley's writings, along with one or more questions for reflection, a prayer or prayer suggestion, and a space for recording notes. The full text of each reading is included in the daily reading material. Scripture passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. References are also provided, so participants may also choose to read the scripture passages in their favorite translation.

The daily readings, which are suitable for use during participants' devotional time, are designed to "prime the pump" for the weekly group sessions. They should be read in the week leading up to the weekly session of the same number. Readings are provided for six days each week, with the expectation that the group session will occur on the seventh day. While the weekly group sessions will still make sense if participants have not read the daily readings, the group sessions will be greatly enriched by the advance preparation the daily readings provide.

The weekly group sessions are designed to last approximately 90 minutes, though they may be adapted for a shorter or longer session. Each session is based around a thought-provoking question and includes some common components:

- A brief introduction, which may be read out loud during the session
- Opening and closing worship, including song and prayer suggestions
- One or more scripture studies, including discussion questions
- "A Word from Wesley," which includes a passage from one of John Wesley's writings and related discussion questions
- "A Charge to Keep I Have" – an opportunity for participants to commit to some course of action as a result of what is learned in the session
- "Going Deeper" – additional activities and/or resources to explore if you have additional time in your session (or for participants to explore on their own)

As the study leader, you will want to preview the weekly group sessions in advance. Some require advance preparation, particularly if you want to incorporate material from the “Going Deeper” section. You may also wish to arrange for someone to accompany group singing. You may choose to encourage study participants to bring their own Bibles to the sessions, or you may want to be sure that Bibles are available in the room for participants to use.

Your role as leader is primarily to keep the session moving, to ask the questions, and to provide a safe space for participants to express their answers, even when there is disagreement within the group. During the session, try to involve as many participants as possible. Invite them to read the scripture passages aloud, and watch to be sure that everyone has the opportunity to share during the discussion times (and that no one monopolizes the conversation). However, be aware that some participants may be uncomfortable reading or praying aloud, or may prefer to think for a while before responding to a question. Therefore, never require participants to share aloud if they seem reluctant to do so.

It is the hope of the writing team that this study will open you and those you lead to a deeper experience of the working of the Holy Spirit in your midst. We will be praying for you, for your church, and for your experience with this study. May you be open to the stirrings of the Spirit, and may you be empowered to move forward in mission and ministry as the Spirit leads.

Acts of the Apostles Bible Study

Lesson # 1

“What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church?”

Introduction

The gospel writer Luke in his second volume, called “The Acts of the Apostles” or simply “Acts,” is giving Theophilus an account of the birth of the Church, how it organized and solved its problems, and its subsequent spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ following his ascension. Luke makes it clear that the Church did not start on account of any human endeavor but by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to give. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church became an agent for change, bore witness to the faith and became a radically unique and diverse community. From Jerusalem at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit enabled the Church to spread to Syria, Asia, Europe and Africa. The Holy Spirit also took a wide range of people, from a Galilean fisherman to a learned scholar, to cities and towns throughout the Roman Empire to preach the good news, heal, teach and demonstrate God’s love. Despite the apostle’s imprisonment and beatings, and an occasional riot, the band of faithful managed to grow in spite of their persecution. The growth of the Church Luke credits to the guiding work of the Holy Spirit that cannot be bottled or contained. Women, children, Jews and Gentiles were coming together into a new sense of community and purpose through the common experience of encountering the transformative power of Jesus Christ. This bible study is produced to not only help the faithful understand God’s plan for the expansion of the Church but to challenge individual Christians as well as faith communities to seek to understand what God is asking them to do in light of God’s current movement of the Holy Spirit. May the Holy Spirit move mightily as you engage this study!

Opening Prayer

“An Invitation to the Holy Spirit” (UMH 335)

Song

“Spirit of the Living God” (UMH 393)

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church?

Let it be understood that the Holy Spirit did not begin its work at Pentecost or when the Spirit came down like a dove at Jesus’ baptism. The Holy Spirit has been present since the time of creation, and if one looks closely throughout the Old Testament, the Spirit’s presence is visible throughout the work of the patriarchs to the prophets. But for the purposes of this study, let us concern ourselves with the roles of the Holy Spirit that present themselves in the book of Acts.

Luke paints a mosaic of roles in which the Holy Spirit engages. From the beginning the Holy Spirit is understood to be the powerful witness to Jesus Christ who draws searching souls into a

saving relationship. Then through their relationship with Jesus Christ this diverse group of people becomes a new community of faith. Barriers of class, gender, ethnicity and nationality that culturally and theologically would prevent an inclusive church suddenly fall away because of the work of the Holy Spirit. The faithful begin to share all they have, hold things in common, take care of the widows and orphans and subsidize missions both local and beyond their community. This same powerful Spirit that draws souls to Jesus, transforms their lives and unifies these distinct people also gifts faithful individuals for ministry. The Holy Spirit gives courage to them to face life threatening obstacles and proclaim faith boldly where before they were once afraid. They heal, teach, love and practice acts of mercy. The Holy Spirit is also credited in giving guidance to their daily movements and decisions and even works as a moral counselor who can give correction when needed. It can truly be said that the Holy Spirit empowers the Church in faith for mission and ministry.

Scripture Study

Read Acts 2:1-21, 37-41 out loud in class. People may want to take turns reading. Then answer the following questions.

Discussion Questions

The Pentecost story describes the Holy Spirit as a violent blowing wind and as tongues of fire. Certainly that is dramatic, and some people's experience of the Holy Spirit would qualify. Look at 1 Kings 19:11-13. The book of Kings tells that the wind, earthquake and fire preceded God's message in a gentle whisper. This is another example of a person's experience of the God's presence. Each of us experiences the Divine in different ways since we are all unique and God speaks in a variety of ways.

1. Have you experienced the Holy Spirit coming upon you?
2. What is your experience like?

The Holy Spirit can tell you the truth about the love of God and give you peace, encouragement, new insight, challenge, hope and assurance. John Wesley talked about his own encounter with the Holy Spirit giving him assurance in his diary. In his most famous entry on May 24, 1738 he talks about his heart warming experience on Aldersgate Street.

“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”¹

¹ An expanded excerpt from the diary of John Wesley, reprinted on the 100th anniversary of his May 24, 1738, conversion by *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review*, Volume XX. New Series, Vol. IX, 1838. New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, for The Methodist Episcopal Church, at the conference office, 200 Mulberry-Street; pp. 321-326. The United Methodist General Board of Discipleship worship website, <<http://www.umcworship.org>>

3. How has the Holy Spirit changed your life? Did the Holy Spirit change your heart, attitude, thinking or understanding?

A Word from Wesley

While Acts 2 shows the ideal, the challenge of unity amidst diversity is not a new problem. Luke shows an early church that constantly argued over issues of faith and practice. One of the most controversial was if one needed to become Jewish before becoming Christian. While the issues were different in John Wesley's day, he had a similar problem of unity amidst diversity. In his sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," he challenged the Church to be unified in love and good works, even though they disagreed over worship. John said,

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love." (1 John 4:7, 8) "Not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. (Verses 10, 11)

All men approve of this; but do all men practice it? Daily experience shows the contrary. Where are even the Christians who "love one another as he hath given us commandment?" How many hindrances lie in the way! The two grand, general hindrances are, first, that they cannot all think alike and, in consequence of this, secondly, they cannot all walk alike; but in several smaller points their practice must differ in proportion to the difference of their sentiments.

But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we cannot think alike, may we not live alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.²

1. If John Wesley were to come to your church and see and hear the issues you face, what would Wesley tell your church to do? Around what would he tell you to be united?
2. What role does the Holy Spirit play in helping us love God and neighbor?

Break

Scripture Study

Read Acts 10 in its entirety out loud in class. People may want to take turns reading. Then answer the following questions.

² John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit" (Sermon 39), *Global Ministries*, General Board of Global Ministries, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/39>.

Discussion Questions

1. How is Cornelius described in verse 2? What gifts does he have and what spiritual practices does he engage before ever becoming Christian?
2. How well do we receive others' gifts as they come into the church?
3. What roles did the Holy Spirit play in Acts 10? Pay close attention to verses 19 and 44 through 47.
4. What truth did God reveal to Peter in his vision? (See verses 15 and 28) How does this truth relate to the church today? If God was to grant a similar vision to the church today, what would God say?
5. In what ways did God's vision challenge Peter's theological and cultural beliefs? What habits and traditions did Peter need to unlearn? Do you think God still challenges some of our long held beliefs and traditions? If so, what?
6. In verse 47 Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" What barriers does the church erect that keep people from coming to know God?
7. What do you think is significant about Peter staying with the newly baptized for several days? What training does your church provide for the newly baptized and converts to the faith?
8. Peter's vision of the sheet coming down changed his life, theology and ministry profoundly. Do you ask for the Holy Spirit to come down in your life to change you every day? Have you asked the Holy Spirit to come down and change your church?

A Charge to Keep I Have

Have each member of the group take a moment to be in silent prayer asking the Holy Spirit to come down in his/her life. Following a moment of silent prayer, have the leader and/or various members pray for the Holy Spirit to come down and change the different items identified in discussion questions that exist in the life of your church.

Sending Forth

Let us close our time together by praying the prayer John Wesley used to conclude his sermon 141, "On the Holy Spirit." Let us pray:

*"O God, who in all ages hast taught the hearts of thy faithful people, by sending them the light of thy Holy Spirit; grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort, through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour; who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the same Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen."*³

³John Wesley, "On The Holy Spirit" (Sermon 141), *Global Ministries*, General Board of Global Ministries, <http://new.gb-gm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/141>.

Going Deeper

1. Spend some time reviewing the daily Bible readings with the class and see if there were any particular questions or issues raised which the Holy Spirit is leading the group to discuss.
2. Look at the history of your local church and see when and how it was founded. Are there any parallels to the Acts 2 church? What was the role of the Holy Spirit in planting your congregation?
3. Many churches struggle with attracting visitors, especially if they are of a different culture, race or economic class. If you are interested in scoring the hospitality level of your congregation, see the *2009-2012 Guidelines* series published by Cokesbury. In particular look at *Evangelism: Sharing the Good News* by Kwasi Kena in that series. On page 26 there is a good quiz titled, "Our Church's Hospitality to Visitors" first published by Suzanne Braden and Rick Kirchoff. It is a wonderful exercise to judge how prepared your church is for visitors.
4. Another resource to explore if you are interested in evaluating your church's effectiveness in welcoming can be found on the United Methodist Communications website. Go to <http://www.umcom.org> and click on "knowledge center," then on "welcoming." Under that there are a number of choices from "open house" to "small church." Under the "certification" choice there is a download for the one year worksheet on how to become a welcoming church. It is an interesting test to see how your church is doing in welcoming.
5. You may want to go the General Board of Global Ministries website and download John Wesley's sermon 39 on "Catholic Spirit" and discuss it as a separate class or part III of John Wesley's sermon 141 "On the Holy Spirit". Pay close attention to the last two paragraphs in each sermon and see John's challenge to the faithful. A link for each sermon is found in the footnotes.

Acts of the Apostles Bible Study

Lesson #2

What do Christian Leaders Look Like?

How Are They Developed?

Introduction

Developing Christian leaders in the life of the local congregation is not easy, and it is often neglected. Too many times, leaders are identified simply by the names that fill the positions on various committees, and a solid faith foundation, as well as abilities to provide leadership for disciple formation, are not present. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke introduces us to the roles of leadership, the characteristics of leaders, and the importance of prayer that surrounds the development of leaders. As you explore and discover new insights about leadership development, prayerfully consider the role that God may be asking you to play in leadership, or in developing new leaders in the life of your congregation.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, by the power of your Holy Spirit, open our eyes, ears, hearts and very lives to your presence so that today we may worship and serve you in faithfulness, be blessing and healing reminders of your love to all those whose lives we touch. We offer our prayers in the name of Christ. Amen. -- *A Guide to Prayer*

Suggested Song

“Be Thou My Vision” (UMH 451)

What do Christian Leaders Look Like? How Are They Developed?

In Mark 10:43-44, Jesus taught that the heart of spiritual leadership is servanthood. People are attracted to those who have served them and helped them in the past, and will often follow their advice. Leaders may often suggest nothing new or different from what people are already doing, but are leaders in that they bring a sense of urgency, excitement, or passion to those activities. Leaders' own passion becomes contagious. If we learn how to get passion and excitement in our own minds regarding the things of God, leadership is sure to show, and people will be influenced as a result. In the Christian context, leaders are those who take the time to think and pray deeply about the issues in which they lead. Thus, there is a distinct and critical connection between spiritual depth and Christian leadership.

We are all on a journey of discipleship, and we find ourselves at different levels and depths along this faith journey. Discipleship is a process, and if you were asked to plot your own faith journey on a chart, it would probably have ups and downs, indicating a gradual growth in relationship with God. Somewhere along the way—there was probably a time of new birth, of conversion, that “heartwarming” experience, in the words of John Wesley. For some, it’s a dramatic and memorable experience; for others, a more gradual awakening.

In the book *Deepening Your Effectiveness* by Dan Glover and Claudia Lavy, the stages of discipleship are introduced, using what the authors refer to as the Ocean Diagram. The different locations in or near the ocean represent where an individual is currently in his/her journey of discipleship. Life on the Beach represents the person that does not attend church. Life on the Shoreline represents the person who may sporadically connect in some way to a faith community, and who is curious. There are six stages of discipleship in the ocean diagram, with the most mature Christian represented as Life in the Deep.

Regardless of where a person is in his or her discipleship journey, there should be an intentional approach to leader development as an overlay to stages of discipleship.

Consider the inexperienced but excited Christian who is asked to teach a Sunday school class, given curriculum and logistical information, and then left to fend for him/herself. Sound familiar? Now consider the same person who is:

- Invited to shadow another teacher for a period of time
- Encouraged to lead the class with the teacher present
- Given the opportunity to pray about and determine if God is asking him/her to serve in this way
- Provided regular support and training from a seasoned teacher
- Mentored to build confidence to develop other new leaders

Does that feel a lot different?

In these Scriptures, we will find that Luke characterizes the Christian leader, emphasizes the role of prayer, and portrays specific examples where leadership is apparent. As you study these Scriptures ask yourself, ‘what do Christian leaders look like, and how are they developed?’

Scripture Study

Read Acts 6:1-7 aloud in class.

Highlights

- As the church grew, it began to encounter the problems of an institution.
- In the Christian church, there were two kinds of Jews: the Jerusalem and Palestinian Jews who spoke Aramaic, and the Jews from foreign lands, who had forgotten their Hebrew and spoke only Greek.
- The Aramaic speaking Jews looked down on the foreign Jews.
- This contempt affected the daily distribution of alms.
- There was a conflict that the widows of the Greek-speaking Jews were being neglected.
- This conflict was the first major division to confront the early church.
- The apostles believed they should not personally be involved, but knew it needed to be addressed.
- It’s interesting to note that the first office-bearers (leaders) to be appointed were chosen not to talk, but for practical service.
- It’s also interesting to note the leaders were chosen primarily because of their spiritual maturity.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are some of the most important characteristics of leaders as set forth by Luke in these Scriptures?
2. How do you intentionally develop disciples for leadership roles in the life of your congregation?
3. How should you develop leaders?
4. How well have you been prepared for leadership roles in which you serve, or have served?
5. What do you need to better fulfill the role?

A Word from Wesley

John Wesley clearly defines the role of a Christian Minister as “to watch over souls, as he that must give account,” including:

- (1.) To preach morning and evening. (But he is never to begin later in the evening than seven o'clock, unless in particular cases.)
- (2.) To meet the society and the Bands weekly.
- (3.) To meet the Leaders weekly.

He then declares that the role of the Helper is to feed and guide the flock in the absence of the Minister. Those specific duties and expectations are explained in detail and include, but are not limited to:

- (1.) Be diligent. Never be unemployed a moment. Never be triflingly employed. Never while away time; neither spend any more time at any place than is strictly necessary.
- (2.) Be serious. Let your motto be, "Holiness to the Lord." Avoid all lightness, jesting, and foolish talking.
- (3.) Converse sparingly and cautiously with women; particularly, with young women.
- (4.) Take no step toward marriage, without first consulting with your brethren.
- (5.) Believe evil of no one; unless you see it done, take heed how you credit it. Put the best construction on everything. You know the Judge is always supposed to be on the prisoner's side.
- (6.) Speak evil of no one; else your word especially would eat as doth a canker. Keep your thoughts within your own breast, till you come to the person concerned.
- (7.) Tell everyone what you think wrong in him, and that plainly, as soon as may be; else it will fester in your heart. Make all haste to cast the fire out of your bosom.
- (8.) Do not affect the gentleman. You have no more to do with this character than with that of a dancing-master. A Preacher of the gospel is the servant of all.
- (9.) Be ashamed of nothing but sin: Not of fetching wood (if time permit) or drawing water; not of cleaning your own shoes, or your neighbour's.
- (10.) Be punctual. Do everything exactly at the time. And in general, do not mend our Rules, but keep them; not for wrath, but for conscience' sake.
- (11.) You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore spend and be spent in this work. And go always, not only to those that want you, but to those that want you most.
- (12.) Act in all things, not according to your own will, but as a son in the Gospel. As such, it is your part to employ your time in the manner which we direct; partly, in preaching and visiting from house to house; partly, in reading, meditation, and prayer. Above all, if you labour with us in our Lord's vineyard, it is needful that you should do

that part of the work which we advise, at those times and places which we judge most for his glory.⁴

Questions for Discussion

1. How do the expectations of leaders according to Wesley differ from the expectations of our leadership today?
2. What things from Wesley should we recapture in developing Christian leaders?
3. Our churches are filled with Christians who do not see themselves as leaders. What changes take place in a person's heart that can create the willingness to lead?

Break

So What?

Given your discussion around the biblical characteristics and selection of leaders, consider what next steps are appropriate for you personally and/or leadership within your congregation.

- What kind of intentional leadership development should we have at our church?
- What changes should we make in how we train and mentor our leaders (spiritual leaders)?
- What would be a first step to improving how we develop leaders?
- How can spiritual gifts inventories be effectively used to develop leaders?
- How is God calling you to raise the bar on leadership?
- Who are you mentoring in the faith? Who is mentoring you? What adjustment do you need to make in either of these areas?

A Charge to Keep I Have

Write down three specific things that should be implemented that would make a significant difference in the development of leaders in your church. Pick one of the three that you think is most critical, or that might have the greatest influence, and decide steps on how to implement in the near future in your approach to leader development.

Sending Forth

Hymn: "O Master Let Me Walk With Thee" (UMH 430)

Going Deeper Exercises

Complete a spiritual gifts inventory from the resources below. Read Blackaby's book, *What's So Spiritual About Your Gifts?* to discover your own natural spiritual gifts and how God may be calling you to strengthen other areas of service in your life.

Study the Ocean Diagram from *Deepening Your Effectiveness* to determine which of the six stages of discipleship you are currently in your faith journey. What is one adjustment you can make in your life that would help you take a step deeper in your relationship with God?

⁴ John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, vol. 8, CD-ROM, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

If you have not already done so, identify some role of leadership that you have (maybe in family, etc.) – if you knew you were leaving for an extended period of time, and could write a memo to your “staff” to equip them to go on without you, what would you tell them?

Going Deeper Resources

1. Blackaby, Henry and Melvin, *What's So Spiritual About Your Gifts?* (Mulnomah, 2004)
2. Covey, Stephen. *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Free Press, 1989
3. Glover, Dan & Claudia Lavy, *Deepening Your Effectiveness: Restructuring the Local Church for Life Transformation*, Discipleship Resources, Nashville, TN
4. Method X, The Way of Christ, Upper Room Ministries, *Spiritual Gifts Inventory* – <http://www.upperroom.org/methodx/default.asp>
5. Wesley, John, “*Minutes of Several Conversations Between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others,*” in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Vol. 8, CD-ROM of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

Acts of the Apostles Bible Study

Lesson #3

How Do We Talk About Faith with Other People?

Introduction

Talking about our faith with other people is not always easy, especially in a culture in which “religious” matters are considered private. Some people would have us believe that mentioning God or our faith in a casual conversation is inappropriate – that we should not impose our personal beliefs on other people. In contrast, Acts is full of faith-sharing stories. We hear the earliest followers of Jesus sharing their faith in public sermons and private conversations, in public squares and private homes and prison cells. Significantly, these early Christians came to believe that they were called to share their faith not only within their own circles of family and friends, but also with people who were not like them: Gentiles, women, Roman prison guards, the Ethiopian eunuch, people such as Saul who had been persecuting the Christians. Though it often took a great deal of prayer and a vision from God, the early Christians learned to reach out to people whose cultural practices differed from their own, often using elements of culture to proclaim the good news. In this session, we will consider various methods of sharing our faith with people who may be very different from us, and we will consider the core message of the faith that must stay the same even as we adapt to the culture around us.

Opening Prayer

LORD Jesus, you call us to be your witnesses in the world, just as you called the witnesses in the early days of the church. We confess that we have not always shared our faith openly. Sometimes we just don't know what to do or what to say. Speak to us today as we search the scriptures, and guide our conversation. Help us to rediscover our ministry of witness to all those in need of your touch. Amen.

Suggested Song

“Pass It On” (UMH 572)

Question of the Day

How do we talk about faith with other people?

- How do we talk about faith with other members of our church family?
- How do we talk about faith with people who are not yet part of our church?

Scripture Study

Read Acts 17:16-34, in which Paul visits Athens and delivers a message. As a group, discuss the following questions:

1. In this passage, what is Paul's initial reaction to the local culture of Athens? How does Paul later use that culture as a tool to explain the gospel? What do you think about his choice to interact with the popular culture in this way?
2. Those who heard Paul had one of three reactions: some refused to take him seriously ("scoffed," verse 32), some agreed to think about it further (said, "We will hear you again about this," verse 32) and some joined him as a believer (such as Dionysius and Damaris, verse 34). Would you say that Paul failed because not everyone accepted Jesus as Lord? Why or why not?
3. If someone who was not a Christian and had never been a member of a church asked you why you are a Christian (or why you go to church, or why you pray, or why you read the Bible . . .) what would you tell him or her?

Optional second reading: Acts 8:26-40, in which Philip witnesses to an Ethiopian eunuch. If the length of your session allows you to engage this reading as well, discuss the following questions:

1. Why did Philip begin his conversation with the eunuch?
2. What was it about Philip that prepared him for this conversation?
3. Although cultural considerations were somewhat different in the Roman Empire than they are today, it is still fair to say that Philip and the eunuch were of different cultures. Have you ever had an experience of sharing faith with someone from a different cultural or ethnic group? If so, share your story with the group.
4. When have you encountered someone who had questions that your faith could help you answer?

Question of the Day, Revisited

How do we talk about faith with people who are not already part of the culture of the church?

A Word from Wesley

In his 1751 "Letter on Preaching Christ,"⁵ John Wesley provides his opinion about some preachers who had by that time become very popular in the Methodist societies. It seems that these preachers gained their popularity by focusing almost entirely on the good news and promises of the gospel, while leaving out the parts dealing with the human inclination toward sin and the responsibility of servanthood that comes with discipleship. Wesley calls these preachers "gospel Preachers." In contrast, Wesley and a number of other Methodist preachers emphasized both the law ("explaining and enforcing the commands of Christ, briefly comprised in the Sermon on the Mount") and the gospel ("preaching the love of God to sinners, preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which, in consequence thereof, are freely given to true believers").

⁵ John Wesley, "Letter on Preaching Christ," *CGV (Christian Gospel Vanguard)*, http://www.christiangospelvanguard.org.uk/preaching_christ.php.

Wesley's main concern seems to be that those who follow this "new" type of preacher never become true disciples. In fact, they become resistant to the preaching of those (such as Wesley himself) who expect believers to live lives of discipleship. Here is how Wesley himself explained it in his letter:

Why, this is the very thing I assert: That the gospel Preachers, so called, corrupt their hearers; they vitiate their taste, so that they cannot relish sound doctrine; and spoil their appetite, so that they cannot turn it into nourishment; they, as it were, feed them with sweetmeats, till the genuine wine of the kingdom seems quite insipid to them. They give them cordial upon cordial, which make them all life and spirit for the present; but, meantime, their appetite is destroyed, so that they can neither retain nor digest the pure milk of the word. . . . Preachers of this kind (though quite the contrary appears at first) spread death, not life, among their hearers.

Clearly, Wesley had a problem. While the "gospel Preachers" brought large numbers of people into the Methodist societies, they were also complicating (if not outright destroying) the very purpose for which the Methodist movement began: personal and societal transformation leading to "holiness of heart and life" through the practices of Christian discipleship. And in the long run, Wesley found that the societies led by "gospel Preachers" declined both in numbers and in spirit.

Wesley's answer to this dilemma was to propose a return to the "old way" of preaching. He describes a spiritually healthy society in Yorkshire that had nearly doubled in size, having never varied from the "old way":

From the beginning they had been taught both the law and the gospel. "God loves you; therefore, love and obey him. Christ died for you; therefore, die to sin. Christ is risen; therefore, rise in the image of God. Christ liveth evermore; therefore, live to God, till you live with him in glory."

So we preached; and so you believed. This is the scriptural way, the Methodist way, the true way. God grant we may never turn therefrom, to the right hand or to the left!

In light of this insight from John Wesley, discuss as a group the following questions:

1. In trying to attract people to our church, are we ever guilty of "destroying their appetite" for discipleship by portraying life with God as "all life and spirit" – as easy and happily-ever-after?
2. What is it about our faith which we should "never turn therefrom, to the right hand or the left"? In other words, what is the core message of the Christian faith that should not be changed, regardless of what methods we use to present it?

Question of the Day, Revisited

How do we talk about faith with other people in such a way that both the rewards and the responsibilities of a life lived in discipleship to Jesus Christ are made clear?

Break

So What?

Discuss one or more of the following questions as time allows:

1. Christian recording artist Greg Long once suggested that it takes fifteen times hearing about Jesus before someone believes. Assuming for a moment that this is true, and realizing that you may never know what position in that series of fifteen you hold, how does it make you feel about sharing your faith?
2. When we talk about sharing our faith with those who are not yet Christians, some people immediately think about launching into a rehearsed faith story or a series of scriptures, and ending with extending an invitation for the person to pray and invite Jesus into his or her heart. However, many people share their faith in other ways: by offering to pray for or with someone going through a difficult time, by being ready to offer a brief explanation of why they volunteered to help on a mission project, even by baking the cookies that are served at fellowship time to welcome newcomers to worship. How do you share your faith? Or how could you share your faith in ways that are true to your personality and spiritual gifts?
3. It is said that when he was young, Mohandas Gandhi tried to attend a Christian church while studying in South Africa, but was refused entrance because of his skin color. Gandhi came to understand Christianity as something “Western” – something that would not translate if he tried to practice it in India. Kent R. Hunter tells this story in his book *The Jesus Enterprise*, and asks this provocative question: “What would have happened if Gandhi had become a Christian?”

A Charge to Keep I Have

Personal: Write down at least three settings during the course of a typical week where you might have the opportunity to witness to your faith. Pick one of these and pray that God might give you an opening to talk about your faith in that setting.

OR: How do you participate in welcoming new people to your church? Perhaps you serve as an usher or greeter, or perhaps you volunteer to follow up with new visitors. Perhaps you regularly invite new visitors to come try out your Sunday school class. Write down one way that you do (or could) welcome new people to your church. Pray that God will bless your efforts, and that you will be open to those people who need your welcome and invitation.

Group: How is your church doing at equipping people to share their faith? How are you doing at showing hospitality to people who are not yet members of your church? Consider together as a group whether your church might need to offer learning opportunities to better equip people for these essential tasks. The resource list below offers some suggested reading in this area, as well as some curriculum materials that could be used as a church study. The *Catch* materials, developed by the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, as well as the Martha Grace Reese *Unbinding* materials, are particularly well-suited to this purpose.

Sending Forth

Sing together a song or hymn about witnessing to our faith, such as one of the following:

- “This Little Light of Mine” (UMH 585)
- “Sois la Semilla (You Are the Seed)” (UMH 583)
- “Rescue the Perishing” (UMH 591)

Pray together the following prayer (or one of your own):

Gracious God, you have blessed us with guides along our faith journey. We pause now to name in our hearts those who introduced us to you and nurtured our faith . . . And now, O LORD, reveal to us those opportunities you give us to guide others. Grant us the courage to talk about faith with those who are seeking. Bless our witness, that others may come to know your grace, mercy, and love. Amen.

Going Deeper Resources

Many of these resources are available to borrow from the United Media Resource Center in Springfield. Contact Jill Stone for more information (umrc@igrc.org; 217-529-2744; or visit <http://rqmweb.requestmanager.org/search.asp?q=igrc&adv=true> to search and reserve your materials online).

- Debi Nixon with Adam Hamilton, *Catch: Attracting and Connecting Visitors* (Abingdon Press, 2009)
This is a whole set of materials designed to do just what the subtitle says. It was developed by and for the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, but most of the principles and tips would apply to churches of any size.
- Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Zondervan, 2001)
This book discusses how to build bridges to reach those outside the church.
- Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Group, 2004)
Chapter 5 of this book, which discusses how important it is to build relationships with those outside the church whom we seek to reach, is particularly helpful. Each of the 11 chapters includes discussion questions and action steps, making the book useful as a small group study.
- Steve Sjogren, Dave Ping, and Doug Pollock, *Irresistible Evangelism* (Group, 2004)
This book gives practical tips for servant evangelism and beyond.

- Kent R. Hunter, *The Jesus Enterprise* (Abingdon Press, 2004)
 If you were intrigued by Paul's engagement with the culture of Athens in Acts 17, this book will help you dig a little deeper into issues of engaging today's culture. Chapter 2 includes a direct reference to the passage from Acts 17 (on pages 14-15), and chapter 4 challenges us to communicate in the heart-language of the culture.
- Stephen W. Sorenson, *Like Your Neighbor?: Doing Everyday Evangelism on Common Ground* (InterVarsity Press, 2005)
 This book talks about building relationships with people who are not Christians. It includes guidelines for using the book for a small-group study.
- D. Michael Henderson, *Making Disciples One Conversation at a Time* (Beacon Hill Press, 2007)
 If you have ever thought that your church is too small to make disciples, this book will be especially helpful. It challenges the notion of discipleship in large groups while describing the transformational potential of one-on-one discipling relationships.
- Henry H. Knight III and F. Douglas Powe, Jr., *Transforming Evangelism: The Wesleyan Way of Sharing Faith* (Discipleship Resources, 2006)
 Grounded in the Wesleyan tradition, this short book takes a relational approach to evangelism, focusing on the transformational power of talking about our faith. This book includes a guide for a 6-week study of this book with a small group, and includes reflection/discussion questions in each chapter.
- Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel Series (Unbinding the Gospel, Unbinding Your Church, Unbinding Your Heart, and Unbinding Your Soul)* (Chalice Press, 2008)
 This series, designed to be used by pastors, lay leadership, entire congregations and small groups, challenges and equips participants to talk about their faith and to share their faith outside the walls of the church.

Acts of the Apostles Bible Study

Lesson #4

When did we see you hungry?

Introduction

Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” Deut. 15:11

And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Luke 3:10-11

“We are the only bank account that God has to feed hungry people in the world. We’re the only hands God has to do the work of God in the world. And we’re the only feet God has to share the good news to the lost.” Rev. Mike Slaughter, Ginghamburg UMC pastor

Opening Prayer

All giving and forgiving God, help us discern the needs in our community. Convict our spirit. Open our eyes, heart, and hands to be Jesus to those around us. May our Master’s command *love your neighbor as yourself* be our action plan. Amen.

Suggested Song

“They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love” (TFWS 2223)

Scripture Study

Read Acts 2:42-47. Life in the church is described as “all the believers were together and had everything in common.” As a group, discuss the following questions:

1. What does *in common* include?
2. What is the result?

Read Acts 4:32-37. As a group, discuss the following questions:

1. How do we interpret this text in light of our modern context? What do we understand God to be asking us to do?
2. What priority did the early church place on those who have need?
3. What prevents us from selling all we have and “laying it at the feet of the disciples”?
4. What can I do differently with my giving of time, talent, and treasure?

Read Acts 11:27-30. As a group, discuss the following questions:

1. What was the disciples' response to another's need?
2. How do you interpret "according to their ability"?
3. Is it easier to give to someone who says they believe in Christ Jesus? How wide is your compassion when significant needs cross your path?

A Word from Wesley

John Wesley wrote the following in his sermon, On Visiting the Sick, *Sermon 98*:

First, I would inquire, what is the nature of this duty? What is implied in "visiting the sick?"

1. By the sick, I do not mean only those that keep their bed, or that are sick in the strictest sense. Rather I would include all such as are in a state of affliction, whether of mind or body; and that whether they are good or bad, whether they fear God or not.

2. But is there need of visiting them in person? May we not relieve them at a distance? Does it not answer the same purpose if we send them help as if we carry it ourselves?" Many are so circumstanced that they cannot attend the sick in person; and where this is the real case it is undoubtedly sufficient for them to send help, being the only expedient they can use. But this is not properly visiting the sick; it is another thing. The word which we render *visit*, in its literal acceptation, means to *look upon*. And this, you well know, cannot be done unless you are present with them. To send them assistance is, therefore, entirely a different thing from visiting them. The former, then, ought to be done, but the latter not left undone.

One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is, that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart. "Indeed, Sir," said person of large substance, "I am a very compassionate man. But, to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in the world that is in want." How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way; and if he fell upon any of them unawares "he passed over on the other side."

Before and through the work, from the beginning to the end, let your heart wait upon him for a continual supply of meekness and gentleness, of patience and longsuffering, that you may never be angry or discouraged at whatever treatment, rough or smooth, kind or unkind, you may meet with. Be not moved with the deep ignorance of some, the dullness, the amazing stupidity of others; marvel not at their peevishness or stubbornness, at their non-improvement after all the pains that you have taken; yea, at some of them turning

back to perdition, and being worse than they were before. Still your record is with the Lord, and your reward with the Most High.⁶

In light of this insight from John Wesley, discuss as a group the following questions:

1. John Wesley posed three questions in Sermon 98: What is implied in visiting the sick? How is it to be performed? By whom? How do you answer these questions?
2. Where can you intersect with the poor in your community? Give specific locations (e.g. Laundromat, school, grocery store, late night shopping, second hand stores).

Break

So What?

Discuss the following:

1. What could it mean to be poor in the US today? According to the US Census Bureau, the poverty threshold for a family unit of one is \$10,991, two is \$14,051, three is \$17,346 and four is \$21,910.⁷ How do your own personal income and expenses compare with these poverty income statistics? What life-style changes might you have to make? What impact might these changes have?
2. In one sentence, describe what it means to be poor.
3. Activity: **Test Your Knowledge of the Hidden Rules of Class** (Go to <http://www.ahaprocess.com/files/Quiz-Hidden Rules.pdf>.)

(Group leader can present Circuit Rider article, discussion questions here or in Going Deeper section.)

As a group, complete the following graph.

⁶ John Wesley, "On Visiting the Sick" (Sermon 98), *Global Ministries*, General Board of Global Ministries, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/98>.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, "Poverty Thresholds for 2008 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years," *Poverty*, www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshld/thresh08.html (accessed Dec. 30, 2009).

Needs of Our Community	Resources in Community (food, medical care, housing, employment, etc.)	Assets our Congregation can offer

Bishop Gregory Palmer states that ministry is to “fill the gaps...create the opportunities.”⁸

What *works of mercy* is your church performing? How can your church respond to a need, either alone or in partnership with others?

If the poor are always among us, then the church must always be among the poor and seeking an end to suffering. What keeps us from being the church *among* the poor? What *works of mercy* is your church doing either alone or in partnership with others?

A Charge to Keep I Have

Select one or more of the following activities to do either individually or as a group:

1. Go online to Circuit Rider to Nov/Dec/Jan 09-10 issue. Read “Ministry with the Poor: Doing For, Doing With, Being With” article or browse other articles in this edition. http://www.umph.org/resources/publications/circuit_default.html. Choose one article and discuss in class.

⁸ Bishop Gregory Palmer, presentation at the LaMoine District Clergy gathering at Wesley Chapel UMC, Jacksonville, January 4, 2010.

2. Read a current news article on the topic of unemployment. Identify issues associated with joblessness. Draft a letter to the editor outlining your response to a local issue.
3. In order to gain an overview of how United Methodists respond to world needs through such initiatives as the Global Health Initiative go to www.umc.org and then click on the “our world” tab followed by the “Global Health Initiative” option. In it you will find out how The United Methodist Church has joined the fight against malaria, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, obstetric fistulas and more. There are also links about how you can get involved and how to develop a partnership.
4. The United Methodist Church has also organized efforts around hunger and poverty. To find out more go to <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/work/hunger>. There is web page that lists various efforts and how one can get involved.
5. Our Four Areas of Ministry Focus as a denomination are:
 - Creating new places for new people and revitalizing existing congregations
 - Developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world
 - Engaging in ministry with the poor
 - Combating the diseases of poverty by improving health globally

What is our congregation doing to live into the four areas of focus?

6. If you want to learn more about these four areas and how your congregation can try to live into them visit <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/work/focus>. You can also find the denomination’s goals around each area of focus and you could discuss about how your congregation can join the denominational effort.
7. Read *Our Social Creed* ¶166, pages 129-130, The Book of Discipline 2008.
8. Memorize the *General Rule of Discipleship* (¶1118.2a), the 3 Simple Rules or the 3 General Rules.

Sending Forth

Closing: *A Companion Litany to Our Social Creed*, pages 130-131, The Book of Discipline 2008.

Going Deeper

In spite of general affluence in the industrialized nations, the majority of persons in the world live in poverty. In order to provide basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, and other necessities, ways must be found to share more equitably the resources of the world. Increasing technology, when accompanied by exploitative economic practices, impoverishes many persons and makes poverty self-perpetuating. Poverty due to natural catastrophes and environmental changes is growing and needs attention and support. Conflicts and war impoverish the population on all sides, and an important way to support the poor will be to work for peaceful solutions.

As a church, we are called to support the poor and challenge the rich. To begin to alleviate poverty, we support such policies as: adequate income maintenance, quality education, decent housing, job training, meaningful employment opportunities, adequate medical and hospital care, humanization and radical revisions of welfare programs, work for peace in conflict areas and efforts to protect creation's integrity. Since low wages are often a cause of poverty, employers should pay their employees a wage that does not require them to depend upon government subsidies such as food stamps or welfare for their livelihood.

Because we recognize that the long-term reduction of poverty must move beyond services to and employment for the poor, which can be taken away, we emphasize measures that build and maintain the wealth of poor people, including asset-building strategies such as individual development savings accounts, micro-enterprise development programs, programs enabling home ownership, and financial management training and counseling. We call upon churches to develop these and other ministries that promote asset-building among the poor.

¶163E Poverty pages 120-121 *Book of Discipline 2008*

Going Deeper Resources

Beth Lindsay Templeton, *Loving Our Neighbor: A Thoughtful Approach to Helping People in Poverty* (IUniverse, 2008) – Available from the United Media Resource Center in Springfield, this book provides a theological basis for helping the poor as well as practical tips for responding to the needs of those living in poverty.

Ruby Payne and aha! Process, Inc. (<http://www.ahaprocess.com/>) – aha! Process, Inc., provides resources, many of which are available as free downloads, that may help your church engage the struggle against poverty in your community in new ways.

Ginghamsburg UMC (<http://ginghamsburg.org/>) – click on the “Get Assistance” option to explore what Ginghamsburg does to help its neighbors, or on “The Sudan Project” to explore their long-standing commitment to this impoverished region of the world.

www.umc.org – At the official website for The United Methodist Church, you can find additional information about the Global Health Initiative and Imagine No Malaria. If you type

“poverty” in the search box, you can find additional articles regarding our denomination’s stance and efforts in the area of poverty.

Sermons of John Wesley (24 & 98) – available online at <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/>

Videos:

Servant or Sucker (UM Communications, 2008) – available from the United Media Resource Center in Springfield

The Pursuit of Happiness (Columbia, 2006) - true story

The Soloist (DreamWorks, 2009) - true story

Opening Ourselves to Grace (Discipleship Resources, 2007)

Group Leader preparation

1. Obtain *Circuit Rider* for Nov/Dec/Jan 2009-10 (magazine form or on line at www.circuitrider.com). This volume, entitled “Ministry with the Poor”, contains several articles covering various topics on poverty and each includes a textbox *Action Step*. Read the articles and select one to focus discussion relevant to your congregation. Consider such questions as: Where are we (local church)? Do we know what poverty is (i.e. markers)? Do we know who the poor of our community are? What programs are we participating in to address poverty?
2. Become familiar with *Four Areas of Focus* (especially #3 *Engaging in Ministry with the Poor* & #4 *Stamping Out Killer Diseases of Poverty by Improving Health Globally*). To learn about these four areas and how your congregation can try to live into them visit <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/work/focus>. You can also find the denominations goals around each area of focus and you could discuss about how your congregation can join the denominational effort. Also, www.umc.org provides description as well as a sampling of planned initiatives.
3. Read *Our Social Creed* ¶166, pages 129-130, The Book of Discipline 2008.

Acts of the Apostles Bible Study

Lesson #5

What Does Healing Look Like?

Introduction

Acts is filled with examples of healing. In some instances, an individual is healed of a physical disability or illness. Other stories report that many people in a particular location are healed, without disclosing the specifics. The responses of bystanders to these healings vary widely. Some are amazed, some want to put the apostles to death, some want to offer sacrifices to them as if they were gods, and some are led to believe the message proclaimed by the apostles – that the same Jesus in whose name these healings are performed is eager to give new life, healing whatever is causing separation from God.

In our day, we are often moved to pray for healing. Sometimes we pray for a friend or loved one who is struggling with an illness or chronic condition. At other times we pray for large groups of people affected by natural disasters, which cause injuries and various public health concerns. We also pray for the success of efforts like “Nothing But Nets” and “Imagine No Malaria” which seek to eradicate diseases that disproportionately strike those living in poverty. Even as we continue to pray, we may be challenged to reflect on our own expectations of prayer for healing. What do we expect God to do in response to our prayers? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in healing? Beyond prayer, what other role might we play in the healing of a loved one, a friend, a stranger on the other side of the world? What is the role of the church in such healing? In this lesson, we will consider some of the healing stories of Acts and how they might inform our own understanding of healing today.

Opening Prayer

Heal us, hands of Jesus, and search out all our pain; restore our hope, remove our fear, and bring us peace again. Amen.⁹

Suggested Songs

Sing or read one of the following:

“Heal Us, Emmanuel, Hear Our Prayer” (UMH 266)

“There Is a Balm in Gilead” (UMH 375)

Question of the Day

What does healing look like?

- Are there different types of healing?

⁹ Adapted from “Heal Me, Hands of Jesus,” *United Methodist Hymnal* #262

- Is God responsible for all kinds of healing?
- Does healing look different today than in Acts?

Scripture Study

Read Acts 3:1-12, in which Peter and John visit the Temple and Peter heals a beggar, aloud in class. As a group, discuss the following questions:

4. What does healing look like for the beggar?
5. Why do you believe Peter healed him?
6. What had the “church” (religious community) done up to this point in this man’s life?
7. What was the role of the bystanders in this healing?

Read Acts 9:32-42, in which Aeneas and Tabitha are healed. As a group, discuss the following questions:

5. What does healing look like for Aeneas? for Tabitha?
6. What is Peter’s role in these healings?
7. What is the result of both healings on those who witness their results?
8. What would be the effect of such healings on the faith community? What role is the community called to play?

A Word from Wesley

Read this excerpt from John Wesley’s “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists.”¹⁰

XII. 1. But I was still in pain for many of the poor that were sick; there was so great expense, and so little profit. And first, I resolved to try, whether they might not receive more benefit in the hospitals. Upon the trial, we found there was indeed less expense, but no more good done, than before. I then asked the advice of several Physicians for them; but still it profited not. I saw the poor people pining away, and several families ruined, and that without remedy.

2. At length I thought of a kind of desperate expedient. "I will prepare, and give them physic myself." For six or seven and twenty years, I had made anatomy and physic the diversion of my leisure hours; though I never properly studied them, unless for a few months when I was going to America, where I imagined I might be of some service to those who had no regular Physician among them. I applied to it again. I took into my assistance an Apothecary, and an experienced Surgeon; resolving, at the same time, not to go out of my depth, but to leave all difficult and complicated cases to such Physicians as the patients should choose.

3. I gave notice of this to the society; telling them, that all who were ill of chronical distempers (for I did not care to venture upon acute) might, if they pleased, come to me at such a time, and I would give them the best advice I could, and the best medicines I had.

¹⁰ John Wesley, "A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists," in *The Methodist Societies History, Nature, and Design*, vol. 9, *The Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Rupert E. Davies (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976--), 275-276.

4. Many came: (And so every Friday since:) Among the rest was one William Kirkman, a weaver, near Old Nicholstreet. I asked him, "What complaint have you?" "O Sir," said he, "a cough, a very sore cough. I can get no rest day nor night."

I asked, "How long have you had it?" He replied, "About threescore years: It began when I was eleven years old." I was nothing glad that this man should come first, fearing our not curing him might discourage others. However, I looked up to God, and said, "Take this three or four times a day. If it does you no good, it will do you no harm." He took it two or three days. His cough was cured, and has not returned to this day.

In light of this insight from John Wesley, discuss the following questions as a group:

3. Would you consider Mr. Kirkman's healing miraculous?
4. Can healing that comes through medical science still be a miracle?
5. Does healing have to be miraculous to come from God?

Break

So What?

Parish Nurses and others challenge us to consider how the church can function as a healing community. Given the many medical resources at our fingertips in the United States today, why should the church engage in healing ministry? One United Methodist pastor explains that the church:

1. Is able to present all of Christ's ministries: teaching, preaching, and healing;
2. Engages in whole person healing (Body, mind, spirit, relationships);
3. Encourages a lifestyle of prayer;
4. Emphasizes the role of faith in healthy living;
5. Deals with the root causes of illness (*separation from the true source of life*);
6. Can function as an extended family giving care, love and support
7. Is able to practice one-on-one ministry;
8. Cooperates with health care professionals (see Parish Nurse);
9. Advocates and promotes the health of our natural environment;
10. Offers spiritual therapies, such as the sacraments, prayer and meditation, biblical insights and values, forgiveness, worship opportunities, spiritual companionship, and the healing of a relationship with Christ.¹¹

¹¹ James Wagner, *Healing Services* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007). Also included in *An Adventure in Healing and Wholeness*. Upper Room Press, 2007.

Discuss one or more of the following questions as time allows:

1. What healings have you experienced before?
2. What does healing look like? What does it mean to be healed?
3. What would healing of body and spirit do for you?
4. How do we create our own illness?
5. Is healing a personal experience or a community event?
6. What does or should our church do in the area of healing?

A Charge to Keep I Have

Together or individually, commit to one of the following responses to what you have learned in this session:

- Working with your pastor, arrange to offer a healing service, either during your regular Sunday worship service or at another time. Resources may be found in The United Methodist Book of Worship, pages 615 (Service of Healing I) or 622 (Service of Healing II), or in *Healing Liturgies for the Seasons of Life* (see Going Deeper Resources, below, for further information).
- Read the introduction to the services of healing, beginning on page 613 of The United Methodist Book of Worship. Develop a plan to share this information about healing ministry with at least one group in your local church.
- Engage in further study of ministries of healing. Potential resources may be found below under “Going Deeper Activity” and “Going Deeper Resources.”
- Raise funds for a ministry such as “Nothing But Nets” or “Imagine No Malaria” that works to eliminate the killer diseases of poverty. Additional information about “Nothing But Nets” may be found at <http://www.nothingbutnets.net/>. Additional information about “Imagine No Malaria” may be found by visiting www.umc.org and clicking on “Learn More” under “Imagine No Malaria” (found in the section headed “Initiatives of the Church”).

Sending Forth

Sing together a song or hymn about healing, such as the following:

- “Jesus’ Hands Were Kind Hands” (UMH 273)

Pray together the following prayer (or one of your own): Gracious God, we give you thanks that our time of living can be both holy and healing. We have gathered here seeking your presence among us. Fill us with your healing power, that we may be channels of your love. Amen.¹²

¹² Adapted from: Abigail Ryan Evans, *Healing Liturgies for the Seasons of Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 266.

Going Deeper Activity

Individually or with a group, read as many of the following passages about healing in Acts as you can. As you reflect on each passage, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What does healing look like in this passage?
2. What is the role of the disciples in this passage?
3. What is the role or effect of the healing on the bystanders?
4. How does this story challenge me to action?
5. How does this story challenge the church?

Individual Healings by the Apostles

<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Passage</i>
The man lame from birth	Acts 3: 1-12
Paul regains his sight	Acts 3:10-22; 22:11-13
Aeneas the paralytic	Acts 9: 32-35
Raising of Dorcas	Acts 9: 36-42
Crippled man by Lystra	Acts 14: 8-18
Girl with the spirit of divination	Acts 16: 16-18
Eutychus restored to life	Acts 20: 7-12
Paul healed of snakebite	Acts 28: 1-6
Father of Publius healed	Acts 28: 7-8

Multiple healings by the Apostles

Many wonders and signs	Acts 2:43
Many sick healed in Jerusalem	Acts 5: 12-16
Stephen performs many miracles	Acts 6:8
Philip heals many in Samaria	Acts 8: 5-13
Paul and Barnabas work signs and wonders	Acts 14:3
Paul heals at Ephesus	Acts 19: 1-12
Sick healed at Melita	Acts 28: 9

Going Deeper Resources

All of the following resources are available to borrow from the United Media Resource Center in Springfield. Contact Jill Stone for more information (umrc@igrc.org; 217-529-2744; or visit <http://rqmweb.requestmanager.org/search.asp?q=igrc&adv=true> to search and reserve your materials online).

DVD:

- *Responding to People in Pain* (Church Communication Network (CCN) broadcast date: August 31, 2006)
Small groups are uniquely suited to be the place where the support, comfort, and hope of Christ can be experienced on a personal and authentic level. This presentation discusses how to come alongside someone who is experiencing a crisis in life. Presenters: Dr. Henry Cloud and Bill Donahue. Includes guide. Part of the 'Groups that Grow' Small Group Leadership Series.
- *Start Becoming a Good Samaritan*.
This six-session DVD study is designed to take you out of your comfort zone and help you live out Christ's love in world-changing ways. Session titles: 1) Becoming a Good Samaritan; 2) Caring for the Sick; 3) Seeking Justice and Reconciliation; 4) Honoring the Poor; 5) Tending to God's Creation; 6) Loving the Forsaken. Contributors include John Ortberg, Eugene Peterson, Philip Yancey, Desmond Tutu, Joni Eareckson Tada, Rob Bell, and Shane Claiborne. DVD segments approx. 30 minutes long. Includes leader's guide and sample participant's guide. Closed captioned.

Books:

- McNamara, Jill Westberg. *Health and Wellness: What Your Faith Community Can Do*. Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Chapter titles: Faith communities and health; From suffering to strength; Valuing gifts; A brief history of medicine and the Christian tradition; The health cabinet; Models for health ministry.

- Patterson, Deborah. *Essential Parish Nurse: ABCs for Congregational Health Ministry*. Pilgrim Press, 2003.

This book is a practical and useful resource for churches that are interested in developing a parish nurse program. Covering a broad range, it discusses the need for such a ministry, a brief history of parish nursing, the role of the parish nurse, and other details of interest to those wishing to establish a parish nurse program. Includes sample worksheets, surveys, etc.

- Patterson, Deborah. *Health Ministries: A Primer for Clergy and Congregations*.
Addresses health ministries in the church; parish nursing; parish nurses as teachers in the congregation; health ministries as outreach; health and wholeness for adults, babies, young children, teenagers, and families; aging in community; caring for the caregiver; caring for the dying; addressing mental health needs; and health advocacy.

- Evans, Abigail Rian. *Healing Liturgies for the Seasons of Life*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

According to this book, God's gift of healing is available during all seasons of a person's life and the power of hope and healing may be affirmed and redirected through liturgical services, sacraments, and rites. Chapters in the book include specific liturgies for Seasons of Life (children, adolescents, early/middle adulthood, late adulthood/elderly) and Seasons of Crisis (healing, hospitalization, AIDS, cancer/stroke, death and dying, disabilities, mental

illness, addictions, domestic violence, community need, prejudice/racism, criminal justice, tainted creation, deliverance, and more).

- Ewers, Duane A. *Ministry of Caring: Leader's Guide and Participant's Workbook*. Discipleship Resources, 1999.

This study is grounded in the belief that God calls all Christians to be caregivers. This course will help them discover and explore that call. Eleven sessions include: Foundations for caring; Listening as caring; Speaking in caring ways; Caring for persons who are homebound; Illness and caring; Caring for persons living with HIV/AIDS; Bereavement and caring; and more. Sessions are designed for 90-minute classes.

Acts of the Apostles Bible Study

Lesson #6

Has adversity caused us to lose focus on the main thing?

Introduction

Living the Christian life is not easy. God never promised a life free of difficulty. This is true not only for the individual believer but also for the faith community. Often it is through our trials that we discover what is most important, and as we exercise our faith we find that some trials actually strengthen our faith. While this is not true for all believers in all circumstances, Luke records in Acts a series of amazing stories in which the Church manages to not only stay focused despite a number of trials and persecutions but also manages to grow through them. This lesson is geared to help individuals and churches acknowledge the barriers that are before them in living out the faith and also to challenge and encourage them to stay focused on the mission of the church: to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Opening Prayer

“For Overcoming Adversity” (UMH 531)

Suggested Songs

“When Our Confidence Is Shaken” (UMH 505)

“Through It All” (UMH 507)

Has adversity caused us to lose focus on the main thing?

There are a number of obstacles for individuals and churches that keep us from living out the mission of the church. While Christianity is not illegal in the United States and does not face the same trials as the apostles, such as imprisonment and death for preaching and teaching the gospel, we do face a number of circumstances that can easily distract us from our mission, challenge our faith or put our faith on hold while we address other “seemingly” important issues. A few of these circumstances have caused some churches to focus only on themselves and withdraw from the mission field unless the mission field comes into its doors. Even then, some seekers are met with disdain rather than seen as an opportunity given by God to love someone. Some within our faith communities, often by no fault of their own, do not even know how to share the faith story, let alone be willing to stand up for it, due to the church’s lack of teaching and practice.

The scriptures in this lesson paint a picture of church and its leaders that passionately carry the gospel to whoever will listen and that will not let any barrier deter it from its mission. But lest

we dismiss these stories as the work of a few gifted individuals a long time ago, Luke reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit that is credited in transforming frightened and ordinary individuals into useful vessels of the gospel message, and that same Holy Spirit is the most key player in any individual and church transformation. When the Holy Spirit moves, prison guards ask prisoners what they must do to be saved, outcasts find real community, and barriers that would stop any ordinary human become a means by which God reveals divine power. As you study these scriptures ask yourself, “Has adversity caused me to lose focus on the main thing?”

Scripture Study

Read Acts 16:16-34 out loud in class. People may want to take turns reading. Then answer the following questions.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Paul and Silas stayed focused on the mission throughout their persecution?
2. Why do you think they were able to sing even when their mission to that point was seemingly a failure?
3. Would you have been discouraged if you tried to share the gospel and found yourself unsuccessful and in prison?
4. Have you tried to tell someone about your faith with seemingly unsuccessful results? Did you try more than once?
5. What keeps people from telling their faith story today? Is it fear? Is it a feeling of inadequacy? Is it we do not associate with many unbelievers? Is it we are too wrapped up in our own issues and so we lose focus? Is it because we have lost passion?
6. What specific barriers are prohibiting your church from sharing the good news?
7. What spiritual practices can help us stay focused on the mission of the church despite the obstacles?
8. Have you asked the Holy Spirit to work through your church? Have you asked the Holy Spirit to work through you?
9. When you pray do you ask the Holy Spirit to move and shape you?

Spend a moment in prayer in class and pray that the Holy Spirit move among your congregation and pray for the issues that emerged in this discussion.

A Word from Wesley “What is the main thing?”

John Wesley believed that the Holy Spirit plays an integral role in prevenient grace (God’s love for us wooing us to be in love with God from the moment we are born), justifying grace (the work of the Holy Spirit to make us right with God) and sanctifying grace (the Holy Spirit continuing to work in and through our lives to move us closer to God following our acceptance of Jesus Christ). So throughout our lives, it was Wesley’s belief that the Holy Spirit was actively involved molding and shaping our lives to the degree we allow. One of the greatest works of the Holy Spirit is to perfect us in love of God and neighbor.

In his sermon “On Zeal”, Wesley challenged the Methodists by saying

...of all holy tempers, and above all others, see that you be most zealous for love. Count all things loss in comparison of this – the love of God and all mankind. It is most sure, that if you give all your goods to feed the poor, yea, and your body to be burned, and have not humble, gentle, patient love, it profiteth you nothing. O let this be deep engraved upon your heart: “All is nothing without love!”¹³

For Wesley, love was the main thing that Christians are to practice and nothing is to get in the way of this command. No hardship is to slow us from our zealousness for holiness and no worldly pursuit is to deter us from fulfilling the great commandment.

Spend a moment with the discussion questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you believe that the great commandment should be the main thing in our Christian lives?
2. If so, how do you and your church fulfill this commandment?
3. Do you fulfill it to the degree that the Holy Spirit is calling you to fulfill it?

Break

Scripture Study

Read Acts 18:5-11 out loud in class. People may want to take turns reading. Then answer the following questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul worked in a team with Aquila, Priscilla, Timothy and Silas. Despite this combined effort, what happened to their mission at Corinth?
2. Were they successful with the Jews?
3. Did they give up the mission in total as a result?
4. What did they do next?
5. Where did the Gentile live according to the text?
6. Has your church gone next door to its building to proclaim the gospel?
7. Paul worked hard to convince the Jews in the synagogue. When that didn't work, he sought and found those who would be receptive. Do you know who and where the receptive people are in your community? Do you know how to reach them?

¹³ John Wesley, “On Zeal” (Sermon 92), *Global Ministries*, General Board of Global Ministries, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/92>.

8. Was there a time when you found someone receptive to the Gospel that initially you thought wouldn't be? Give an example if you have one.
9. God reassured and encouraged Paul not to be afraid. Of what is God asking you to not be afraid?
10. Are you willing to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit despite the possible risks?

A Charge to Keep I Have

Hand each participant a small piece of paper on which to write one or two things he/she thinks God is calling him/her to do in response to this lesson. Be as specific as you can. These will not be shared in class. Once the paper is distributed, have the class go to God in silent prayer asking God what it is God wants them to do and have them write it down. If nothing comes to mind during the silent prayer time, have them write, "I will keep praying about my call." When the leader feels a sufficient amount of time has been given to this exercise, have the group come together for the closing song.

Song

"A Charge to Keep I Have" (UMH 413)

Closing Prayer/Sending Forth

"A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition" (UMH 607)

Going Deeper

1. After being honest about the barriers your congregation has to overcome and leaning heavily on the guidance of the Holy Spirit and prayer, develop a plan with your congregation about how you are going to reach the un-churched in your community.
2. Conduct a prayer walk in your community and ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the needs in your community.
3. Replace the closing prayer with the entire Covenant Renewal Service found on page 288 in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*.
4. Go to the General Board of Global Ministries web site, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/92/> and download John Wesley's sermon number 92 title "On Zeal." In it Wesley challenges the Methodists to keep the "main thing" the main thing.
5. Go to the General Board of Global Ministries web site, <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons/2/> and download John Wesley's sermon number 2 titled "The Almost Christian." In it Wesley lays out what he feels a Christian should be and do. His words bring a challenge to almost any church. You may want to spend an entire class discussing this sermon and its implications. One resource that may help with this is *Reclaiming the Wesleyan Tradition: John Wesley's Sermons for Today* by Douglas M. Strong, et al. (Discipleship Resources, 2007), Lesson 5.