

Session D: Come to Know Jesus (Christian Formation)

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the faithful generations before us and those near to us who helped bring us to you. Thank you for the passionate people of our community who know their passion comes from you. Help us to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus so that we may accept what we have heard from you through many witnesses and so that we may become faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.

Scripture Reflection: Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Discussion questions:

Two disciples met Jesus on the road to Emmaus that first Easter afternoon (Luke 24:36b-48). While they were with Jesus, their eyes were opened and their hearts were burning; they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread at dinner; and they immediately got up and returned seven miles to Jerusalem to proclaim the good news to the eleven and their companions.

"Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road . . ." Luke 24:32

The two believers on the road to Emmaus practiced conversation because they were trying to figure out what had happened. "Was Jesus really raised? Do you remember when He said this? Do you remember when He said that? Didn't He promise this? Didn't He promise that?" Together they had a conversation that reconstructed their relationships with Christ. It encouraged them, even though they were sad because they thought Jesus was dead and gone forever. This whole story begins with a marvelous dialog.

Two friends, people who had known Jesus, who had walked with Him, talked with Him, and eaten meals with Him every day for three years didn't recognize Him even on a long walk down a dusty road. Have you ever wondered about that? I have. How could that possibly be?

The reality is: the disciples were looking at a man who happened to be traveling along the same road they were. They did not see Jesus because they did not expect to see Jesus.

How many times on our walks through life do we not see Jesus? How many times do we talk with a co-worker or a parent or a child or a friend or even someone we have never met before and fail to recognize that this person holds a precious piece of Our Lord and Savior within them?

Do we see Jesus in every single person we happen to walk down a path with in our day-to-day lives. When we look at another person, do we see someone who is worthy of Christ's message? Someone whom God loves beyond measure? Do we see Jesus Himself, lost, hurting, and alone? Or do we see just another person? I tell you truly, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Matthew 25:45

Has Jesus appeared in your life at unexpected times or in an unexpected manner?

How is Jesus revealed to us (word and sacrament)? See also Acts 2:41-42: "So those who welcomed Peter's message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were

added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

What stories from Scripture have been particularly meaningful to you in your spiritual journey?

What is the importance of asking Jesus to stay?

What is the experience of "eyes opened, hearts burning" like? How and where do people experience it?

Describe an adult education or formation activity where you personally felt most touched, excited or transformed? How did it feel? What did you learn? Why was it special? Could this happen at in our church community?

Why is Christian Formation Important?

Ask participants to explain, list on newsprint and then add to the list.

1. People need to connect or reconnect to the church community or they won't stay.
2. A church that helps Jesus make disciples will be transformed. Alice Mann describes a church that successfully forms disciples: "Over time . . . more and more adults in the congregation take part in the core faith development experience. When this number reaches about one-third of the active adult members, the congregation's culture 'tips.' Board meetings turn more regularly to questions of mission and include times of explicit spiritual discernment. Newcomers perceive the congregation's clear and positive faith identity, and they know how to 'get in.' Members become more confident about telling their own faith story as well as the congregation's." **(The important thing is to change the culture where adult formation is both valued and expected.)** When a church's passion for Christ increases, it will be evidenced in the atmosphere of the church and in the fruit of its ministry:
 - Expectancy and intimacy
 - A celebrative atmosphere
 - Joy, excitement, fervor
 - Hope
 - Expectance that God will show up
 - Joined together in evangelism
 - Patience with each other, recognizing God is at work in all of us
 - Shared conflict or difficulty
 - Generous giving
 - Commitment to the "one anothers" from Scripture:
 - Romans 12:10 - Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.
 - Ephesians 4:2,32 - Bear with one another in love; forgive one another.
 - Galatians 6:2 - Carry each other's burden.
 - Ephesians 5:21 - Submit to one another.
 - Colossians 3:16-17 - Teach and admonish one another.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 - Encourage one another and build each other up.
Hebrews 10:24-25 - Consider how to spur one another on toward love and good deeds.
James 5:16 - Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

3. Christian stewardship will only begin and improve with formation.
4. Christian formation helps people recognize the presence of Jesus in their lives.

Helping Jesus Make Disciples

Helping Jesus make disciples is central to all church activities. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples . . . teaching them to do everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). We need "to be a church of disciples who in turn are equipped to intentionally make new disciples."¹ We are called to help people connect to and grow along a Christian spiritual path.

A Christ-centered life is a journey where a person continually learns from and grows closer to Jesus. Disciples' "eyes are opened" and their "hearts are burning" when Jesus is with them (Luke 24:13-35). Helping Jesus form disciples through our church communities is a challenge. Our churches are finding that traditional Sunday adult forums and Bible study groups are not enough to help people develop a deep and solid understanding of their faith. Many congregations have asked for assistance with developing adult Christian formation processes.

Questions

Answer the following questions on worksheets or note cards and then discuss questions 2 through 4 as a group:

1. What types of Christian education or formation do you participate in?
2. What types of Christian education or formation are offered by this church?
3. What types of Christian education or formation are most helpful to you or your family?
4. What additional Christian education or formation or changes in Christian education or formation would you like to see at this church?

Group Discussion

How are people formed in the faith in this community?

List: Nursery; Sunday school (curricula?); Junior High and High School; Adult education (curricula?); Confirmation; Bible study; Prayer groups; Other small groups; Family ministry (introducing caring conversations at home, family devotions and shared service projects)

¹ The 2020 Vision of the Episcopal Church. The 2020 Report describes a *Christian disciple* as a lifelong committed learner under the instruction of the Holy Spirit.

Are we providing Christian formation opportunities for church members at different stages of their life and spiritual journey?

Are we encouraging and assisting church members in the use of the Bible for personal and group study?

Consider Processes of Discipleship in the Church in Retreat Session B above. How do our discipleship processes follow or depart from this model?

In Raising the Roof: The Pastoral-To-Program Size Transition², Alice Mann describes an effective process for adult Christian formation. A church welcomes newcomers with a three-session explorations course about the ways the congregation can help them to connect with others and to grow spiritually. (Some congregations instead use Alpha or a similar program for an introduction.) The leader of the explorations course recommends that each person also take two core courses: a foundations course and a gifts discernment course. Following these courses, people often choose to participate in other learning and sharing opportunities – generally a small group, such as an Adult Journeys, Bible study or prayer group. Individuals also participate in ministries in the church and the community based on their unique gifts.

The objective of all formation activities is making relational connections, with other church members and with God, for pastoral care and spiritual formation. An individual should be able to join any course or small group in any order depending on his or her experiences, needs and interests and where the Holy Spirit calls.

Each person in the church, especially every church leader, should attend the core courses and focus on invigorating and deepening his or her faith journey. A foundations course is a reintroduction to Christian faith for all adults, especially newcomers and those being baptized or confirmed or preparing for marriage or for baptism of a child. This course explores questions Christians ask today about believing, belonging, and living our faith in daily life; it provides an overview and framework of the biblical story; church origins, traditions and beliefs; and basics of Christian living and spiritual practice. The gifts identification course explores the direction, purpose and meaning of one's life, identifying individual gifts and focusing primarily on ministry in daily life and secondarily on ministry within the congregation. Each course may include prayer, Bible study, faith sharing, short presentations, discussions, storytelling and role-plays of life situations.

Mann says, "There are many curricula from which a congregation may choose; the particular material is not nearly as important as the strategy of which it is a part."³ Consider contacting other congregations about the foundations and gifts courses they are using.⁴

² (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2001).

³ Mann at 27.

⁴ A good example is Mary Lee Wile, I Will, with God's Help: Episcopal Confirmation for Youth and Adults (Denver, CO: Morehouse Group, 2000). This program has a Leader's Guide, an Adult Journal and a Youth Journal. Some baptismal or confirmation courses include a gifts component, or consider Jean Trumbauer's Created and Called: Discovering Our Gifts for Abundant Living and Augsburg Fortress' Discovering the Gifts of People course or the Network series from Willow Creek Community Church.

A team of three or four committed lay people (not just the priest or pastor!) is needed to design and manage an adult formation process. Courses should be flexible: broken down into three or four units of three classes each and offered on different days and times each year to involve people with different schedules. Courses only need enough people for enjoyable group interaction. However, recruiting people into the core courses must become a major emphasis of the congregation.

Mann describes a church that successfully forms disciples: "Over time . . . more and more adults in the congregation take part in the core faith development experience. When this number reaches about one-third of the active adult members, the congregation's culture 'tips.' Board meetings turn more regularly to questions of mission and include times of explicit spiritual discernment. Newcomers perceive the congregation's clear and positive faith identity, and they know how to 'get in.' Members become more confident about telling their own faith story as well as the congregation's."⁵ Spiritual passion and energy comes from nurturing ever-closer relationships with God.

The Importance of Developing Small Groups

Perhaps even more important than the foundational courses are small groups. Small groups support the growth and quality of life of a Christian church. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20) Small groups are wonderful settings for relationships to develop and mature, for providing pastoral care, for promoting discipleship and for reaching out in evangelism. In small groups, we grow together and support and encourage one another in walking in relationship with Jesus.

Many of us have experienced the power of small groups by joining in regular Bible studies, prayer groups, pastoral care groups or other small church groups. The technical term for small groups that are intentional in their ministries is "cell groups." A "cell" is the smallest organic unit in a living body. A church cell group usually consists of six to twelve people who meet regularly for spiritual support and encourage one another through worship, prayer, outreach activities and the application of the Bible's message to life.

Small groups were the basic building blocks of the early church. "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46-47). By the Fourth Century, however, the focus of the church had moved from home meetings to programs centered in a building. Some people became more of an "audience" than active participants in the body of Christ. In this larger setting, love, community, relationships, ministry and evangelism spring up less naturally, personally and powerfully than in small groups.

Healthy, growing churches are discovering that the Holy Spirit is moving them back into relational Christianity. If each member of a church belongs to a small group, the church is assured that a small community of faithful people is looking after the spiritual and pastoral needs of each member. The church can grow without sacrificing responsibility and accountability to individual members.

⁵ Mann at 30.

Many of you have experienced of the Holy Spirit's presence in small groups. What do small groups offer their members? Ask what people have experienced in small groups such as Bible studies and prayer groups. Begin a list of the important things that happen in small groups.

In small groups, individuals may discover the love of a supportive community, become rooted in the gospel and scriptures, center their lives in prayer, experience the power of God's presence in their lives, discern and follow their unique vocations, and, eventually, gain experience in witness and ministry. In the larger church setting, love, community, relationships, ministry and evangelism spring up less naturally, personally and powerfully than in small groups.

Small groups are wonderful settings for:

Relationships to develop and mature: we build relationships with one another as a family.

Providing pastoral care: a small community of faithful people is looking after the spiritual and pastoral needs of each member.

Promoting discipleship: we grow together and support and encourage one another in walking in relationship with Jesus. We become more disciplined by becoming accountable to one another for our faith journeys.

Growing the body of Christ: we affirm that all Christians are ministers and that the work of ministry is performed by each of us.

Discerning spiritual gifts and God's call: we help each other live out faith in everyday life and discern and follow our unique vocations.

Reaching out in evangelism and witnessing: As we develop true community with each other we are also enabled to reach out together to others in the world and help the church grow. Active small groups tend not just to focus inward on their members, however. Their excitement in their faith causes them to ask, "Whom do we know who would enjoy being part of a group like ours?" As we develop true community with each other we are also enabled to reach out together to others in the world. Small groups thus help the church grow. If most church members belong to a small group of about six members and if each small group adds one new church member per year, a church will double in size within five years.

Christian formation: we learn about God through faith sharing, becoming rooted in the gospel and scriptures and centering our lives in prayer. We might also discover opportunities for leadership development and gain experience in witness and ministry.

Building a strong foundation for the church: Churches find that attendance percentages are much higher in cell groups than in common worship. When cell groups are strong, a church can survive and even grow and thrive in spite of any political, economic, social or internal turmoil. This was true of First Century churches and many others since.

Each of us needs the inspiration, instruction and universal vision of the larger Church; and each of us needs to integrate and express our relationships with God and one another through a closer interaction with other growing Christians. Small groups are an essential part of our Christian journey.

How do We Create Effective Small Groups?

What do we need to have effective cell groups in our church?

First, a clear understanding of the objectives of cell groups. The objectives of each cell group are to build relationships with one another as a family, to help each other live out faith in everyday life, to use each of our spiritual gifts for helping one another, and to reach out to others to grow the group. Cell groups affirm that all Christians are ministers and that the work of ministry is performed by each of us. Cell groups operate as forums and instruments for equipping, ministering and evangelizing. Each cell group needs to be relationally oriented rather than program or agenda oriented; the emphasis in a cell group Bible study is more properly on application and action than on theory and knowledge. True cell groups recognize that they do not exist for or belong exclusively to their members, but for and to the Lord. The members are committed to incorporating new people and to multiplying and dividing into new cells as the cell grows.

Second, effective leadership at each level. The leaders of the church must encourage every person to experience love, support and spiritual development through a cell group. Each cell group needs a leader who is spiritually gifted as a pastor and trained to lead. Over time, each group also needs to select and develop apprentice leaders who are trained through experience to lead groups of their own. Clergy or other designated leaders need to guide group leaders and coordinate the work of cell groups. The effective cell group model therefore lends itself very well to the development of church leaders. (See Exodus 18:17-24.)

Third, a variety of cell groups. People's needs vary and more people are reached through group ministries when the church varies the choices of cell groups. Some groups are called together based on a shared need or interest (such as the experience of a particular life stage or loss) and others are simply located geographically. Cell groups are terrific for youth ministries, prayer, Bible study and outreach ministries. Members of cell groups need to have fun together, to share their needs, hurts and encouragements and to pray for one another.

Fourth, planning. Cell group ministries do not develop on their own. The church needs to deliberately create and manage cell groups – carefully identifying community needs, selecting and supporting leaders, choosing locations and materials, and monitoring group progress.

The objectives of each cell group are to build relationships with one another as a family, to help each other live out faith in everyday life, to use each of our spiritual gifts for helping one another, and to reach out to others to grow the group.

Ask participants to list characteristics of successful small groups. Talk about how to bring about these characteristics.

To be effective, cell groups need to:

- Meet at convenient times during the week and not less often than twice per month.
- Begin with a core group and grow to 7 to 12 members.
- Be permeable to new members and have an actual intention to invite new people into the group. The members are committed to incorporating new people and to multiplying and dividing into new cells as the cell grows. (Ways to do this: state an expectation; apprentice leaders; meeting outside the church.)
- Have good leaders chosen based on pastoral skills more than expert knowledge. Leaders convene the group and make sure everyone participates. Leaders encourage every person to experience love, support and spiritual development.
- Develop apprentice leaders who will go on to start new groups with members of the current group.
- Be simple, open, growing, changing and flexible, and adapt to members' needs.
- Have a focus, topic, shared need or interest (rather than just being social groups). Examples would be a men's Bible study or a parenting education/support group. Common life stages or experiences often work well. Cell groups are terrific for youth ministries, prayer, Bible study and outreach ministries. Members of cell groups need to have fun together, to share their needs, hurts and encouragements and to pray for one another. Each cell group needs to be relationally oriented rather than program or agenda oriented; the emphasis in a cell group Bible study is more properly on application and action than on theory and knowledge.
- Create an atmosphere of prayer, openness, trust, safety, honest respect, tolerance and love.
- Involve faith sharing and help people inwardly digest their spiritual experiences.
- Be prepared to make handoffs (to and from formation offerings that support an individual's spiritual development). This will mean starting some new small groups.
- Develop intentionally. Cell group ministries do not develop on their own. The church needs to deliberately create and manage cell groups – carefully identifying community needs, selecting and supporting leaders, choosing locations and materials, and monitoring group progress. Clergy or other designated leaders need to guide group leaders and coordinate the work of cell groups.

Goal Starters

The church governing board needs to set detailed goals for the congregation. Some goals will come from fully answering the following questions:

What does God seem to be calling the congregation to do at this time? (It may be that the ministry of the past few years is affirmed and continued. It is also possible that while the former direction of ministry is affirmed, the congregation will recognize that new challenges call for new resources.)

What resources do we bring to the mission of the church in the area of formation and what resources do we need to bring?

What outside resources do we need (skills, networks for sharing, consultants, workshops, training, funding, support)?

What are the main goals of the church?

When will they be accomplished?

Who is responsible for accomplishing these goals?

Goals might look like this:

Goals and strategies	When	Whom	Benchmarks
We will worship God by becoming disciples who help Jesus make new and stronger disciples			
Formation Goal: Help each Christian grow in a process of moving to greater spiritual commitment by living with and coming to know Jesus.			
Continue and expand Newcomer's (Inquirer's) course	Quarterly	Adult Christian Formation Ministry Team	___ participants per year; develop some lay leadership
Continue and expand foundations course	Semi-annually	Adult Christian Formation Ministry Team	___ adult participants per year; develop some lay leadership
Develop spiritual gifts course	Semi-annually	Adult Christian Formation Ministry Team	50-60 adult participants per year; develop some lay leadership; spotlight ministry and mission opportunities; create gifts inventory

Develop Small Groups		Adult Christian Formation Ministry Team	Do inventory (including program and ministry groups) to determine need; establish ___ small groups per quarter; Identify and train leaders and apprentice leaders; encourage multiplication; support expectation that all members participate; consider 40 Days of Purpose or 50 Day Adventure to establish habit; consider small groups for marriage journey, Alleluia Amen, etc.
Continue and expand Adult formation class offerings			List options

Resources for Further Study

The Discovery Series: A Christian Journey (Developed by the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, this series includes five courses, each with a video, facilitator’s guide and participants’ guide, designed to provide comprehensive training for baptism, confirmation, spiritual gifts assessment, discipleship and worship. Courses include: The Path to Episcopal Worship, A Journey of Faith, A Path to Spiritual Maturity, Our Spiritual Gifts and the Great Commission.)

Network Kit : The Right People, in the Right Places, for the Right Reasons, at the Right Time by Bruce L. Bugbee, Don Cousins and Wendy Seidman.

Wile, Mary Lee. I Will, with God’s Help: Episcopal Confirmation for Youth and Adults. Morehouse Group, 2000.