

Leader's Notes

2021

Suggested Preparation for Leaders



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From the earliest days of Christianity, faithful people have been gathering to read and discuss the scriptures and to try and make sense of them in the light of their experience of the world in which they live. For much of this time there were no experts and these small groups did not depend on the wisdom of a learned theologian or scholar: each person simply brought their own particular experience and wisdom to the text and then together the faithful would work out the implications of their reading for how they would live.

My hope is that these studies can function in much the same way.

While each session has some commentary on the Gospel reading set for that particular week, this commentary is not meant to provide all the answers and is not to be seen as the only way to understand the text. I hope that the commentary might be a jumping off point for wondering about the reading and how the text might be speaking to each member of the group.

Most importantly, having a complete understanding of the text is not the ultimate aim of the study.

“How then might we live?” is the question that informs each week’s session inasmuch as it is the practice of the faith that, as far as I am concerned, is ultimately more important than just what knowledge we happen to hold in our head.

Each week a particular spiritual practice is offered for people to try – to try first of all, in the group for a short time, and then to try during the following week. I hope that group leaders will help to create a space where people can give these practices a good try and perhaps to discover something that will assist, as Brian McLaren writes, in narrowing “the gap between who we are and who we are becoming.” It is important to note that not all of the practices will be useful for members of the group: some will find a

particular practice difficult, or boring, or unhelpful, others will have a completely different experience. It is in reflecting together on the experience of giving them a try that the group will find most benefit.

Below I have added some notes that I hope will assist the smooth running of the study and help people to get the most out of it.

Before you begin

It is important that the group leader is familiar with the session before the group meets. Read through the material and note anything you might need to prepare in advance. It is OK to bring your own questions to the group or to prepare some extra resources if you think the group might benefit.

Let people know that they will need to bring a pen and some paper or a small journal to use for some of the practices. Alternately people might use their iPad or phone if they are more comfortable with this. You may like to provide people with a small exercise book at the beginning of the first session that participants could personalize and use for taking notes and recording thoughts week by week.

Make sure the space in which you meet is comfortable. Most sessions ask participants to do some writing – some people may find this easier if they have a table to sit at. Some of the practices might be better experienced if the lighting is dimmed.

Think about whether you will provide refreshments: sometimes people feel more relaxed with a tea or coffee in hand. People could take turns in bringing biscuits or cake. If providing refreshments, will they be served as people arrive or just before people go home at the end?

Are there things you can do to set the tone or the mood of the session? Perhaps you might play a short piece of music once people have arrived to help settle and focus them in readiness for the prayers. The study book also suggests lighting a candle for the prayers – this is another thing to bring focus and to set the tone or mood.

Overview of the Structure of Each Session

1. “Check in” (15 mins) – People will be joining the group each week bringing all sorts of things with them – the stress or work, the busyness of family, great joys or deep sorrows – they might be tired, excited, bored, frustrated. “Checking in” allows space for people to name some of these things for the rest of the group. This not only signals that the group is a safe place where these things might be shared without judgment, but might alert others in the group to things to be held in prayer or people who need to be treated with extra kindness that week.

Before anything, even before you pray, it is important to check in with everyone in the group. This is the only time when everyone is required to offer something and the time spent checking in will inform not just the prayers of the group but the tone of the whole session. Each person shares with the group something about how they are going. It might be something of great joy. It might be something that has caused them difficulty. Perhaps it is a feeling. You could simply ask, “What are some words to describe how you are feeling as we gather this evening/morning?” or “What is one thing that has brought you joy since we last met?” or “Has there been anything in the news that has been on your mind this last week?”

As each person checks in the group listens without judgment and without commentary or advice. Perhaps the host will note anything that might usefully be added to the opening or closing prayers.

There is a check list you could use on the grassroots web site – **www.grassroots.com.au/lent2021.htm**. You will also find a pdf to print off for the “**Empty Chair**” sign. Place this on an empty chair as a reminder to each participant of the study to seek out another person to invite to the group.

2. Opening Prayers (5 mins) – Everyone has their own particular way of praying that is right for them. The gift of “common prayer” is that it allows people from different parts of the tradition to leave aside, for a moment, their own style or way of praying and join with one voice in offering prayers to God. The opening prayers offer a structure for prayer that includes both written prayers and space for extempore prayer if there are people in the group who are comfortable with that. A short piece of music to begin or end the prayers, or lighting a candle as a symbol of God’s presence or the light of Christ, might be helpful ways of focusing peoples’ attention.

Each week there is short liturgy provided that includes the collect for the week as well as the Sunday gospel. You might like to gather up some of the things from the “check in” during the opening or closing prayers. You could play some music and light a candle.

3. The Reading – (Read by a member of the group at the study) **Wondering Time & Discussion** (40 mins) – as mentioned in the study booklet, “wondering” as a tool for exploring has its roots in Godly Play. Some useful introductions to both Godly Play and wondering can be found by following the links below:

<http://godlyplay.org.au/>

<https://www.godlyplay.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/The-Art-of-Wondering.pdf>

<https://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/wondering-skills/>

https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Guidelines%20for%20Wondering%20with%20Children%20in%20Godly%20Play_Gibson.pdf

I was first introduced to this sort of wondering through Godly Play. Since there are no right or wrong responses to wonderings, participants are unlikely to feel put on the spot. With many questions, there is an implied correct answer that everyone is to aim for. When participants do not feel they can give the “correct” answer with integrity, they might remain silent or even shut down.

4. The Discussion – Questions to consider. It is important to instigate the magic word “Pass”, (as the leader goes around the group), that any person can say if they would prefer not to offer a response.



There should be no pressure to respond to questions. This can make people more comfortable in the group especially if it is their first time.

Unless the conversation is going wildly “off-track” do not worry too much: it is important to let the conversation go where it will, and to be open to the leading of the Spirit. Some of the most valuable “nuggets” are sometimes found in those conversations that seem only tenuously connected to the focus of the study.

5. The Practice – Wondering Time & Discussion (20 mins) – (Read by a member of the group at the study) as important, or perhaps more important, than wondering about the Gospel reading and the commentary in this Study series is the particular Practice that is offered each week for people to try. It is important to make sure there is enough time for people to experiment with the Practice and then to talk about their experience and to wonder if it is something they might make part of their life of faith.

The group leader will need to ensure that they are familiar with each Practice before the session.

For Week 3 you will need to provide participants with a printed labyrinth or remind them to bring one along. If possible, print the labyrinth on A3 paper, otherwise A4 size should be ok. You can

find printable labyrinths at these websites:

<https://www.labyrinthociety.org/download-a-labyrinth>

<https://www.relax4life.com/download-paper-finger-labyrinths/>

I recommend the Chartres Cathedral design.

Each week a particular practice will be introduced. This is an opportunity to wonder about how the practice could be incorporated into the coming week and how it might inform or deepen the faith of those in the group.

6. Reflection Time (10 mins) – People will experience the sessions differently. For some people the Gospel reading and/or the commentary will have most resonance, for others it will be the Practice. Still other people will be bored or frustrated by what has transpired. The “Reflection Time” at the end of the session is a chance to hear and honour all of those different experiences – perhaps there will be hints about how the session might work better the following week.

Similar to the “check in” at the beginning, participants are invited to reflect on where the group has “travelled” during the session. One way of beginning this time of reflection might be to ask participants, “Is there one particular thought or phrase or word that struck you during the session?” or “What one thing will you take away from this session?”

7. Closing Prayers (5 mins) – Just as the session began with prayer, so it ends by gathering all that has been discussed, all that has been experienced, in prayer before God.

Don't forget to make up the sign for the “EMPTY CHAIR” . This is to be included on an empty chair every meeting as a reminder of the group members individual task of helping to grow the group.

SPECIAL LEADERS NOTES TO ACHIEVE THE BEST RESULTS FROM SECTION 5 EACH WEEK.

Study 1

No 5: The Practice – Have a group member read the background to “Contemplative Prayer” – Page 11. Then encourage the group to try five minutes of Contemplative Prayer. This is then followed by the suggested questions for discussion on Page 12.

Using an app, like the Centering Prayer App (Apple and Android versions available) allows you to set the timer for the allocated time and for the time to end with a gentle “gong” sound rather than a harsh “beep” of an ordinary timer. It also allows for the group leader to participate without having to keep watching the clock.

Study 2

No 5: The Practice – Have a group member read the testimony material 17-19. Then choose one or more of the suggestions on Page 19, and spend five minutes jotting down some responses. See if you can notice or name where God might be as you respond. Be prepared to share your “testimony” with the group. This is then followed by the suggested questions for discussion on Page 20.

Study 3

No 5: The Practice – Have a group member read the Prophetic Action material on pages 25-26. Choose one issue as the focus for your coming week. Consider how you would put into practice one “public” action and one “private” action each day. They may be small things but the practice is as much about changing your life so you are truly “walking the talk” as it is about changing the world. This is then followed by the suggested questions for discussion on Page 27.

Study 4

No 5: The Practice – Have a group member read the “Pilgrimage” on pages 33-35. The Group Leader then invites members to try using the labyrinth (which the leader will have copied off for each member) using the pointers on page 35. Then the group is encouraged to “wonder” about what they have just experienced, and using the following prompts on page 36, share with the group this experience if they feel comfortable.

Alternatively there may be the opportunity to walk a labyrinth if there is one available nearby – some churches have permanent labyrinths in their grounds or have large canvas labyrinths that can be rolled out in a hall or on the lawn. For the really adventurous, a labyrinth could be set out inside or outside for the group to use.

Here are some resources for making an outdoor labyrinth:

<https://www.instructables.com/Build-a-Backyard-Labyrinth/>

<https://planetschooling.com/2019/09/29/how-to-make-a-labyrinth-garden>

Study 5

No 5: The Practice – Have a group member read “A Rule of Life” 41-43. Following this spend some time thinking about three practices you might include in a rule of life and jot down how you might include those practices in your daily routine.

Share your thoughts with the group if you feel comfortable using the suggested questions that follow.

Study 6

No 5: The Practice – Have a group member read pages 49-51. As an experiment regarding this week’s ‘practice’ using one of the Gospel readings we have explored over the course of this study, practice Lectio Divina using the steps One to Six over the next 10 minutes. This is followed by sharing your experience (questions on Page 52) in this experiment.

Sharing the responsibility (A Suggestion)

Whilst the following is not perfect for every group, it is a very good model to follow where possible, and helps share the responsibilities.

LEADER – Their task is to conduct the meeting and undertake sufficient preparation to ensure it runs smoothly. Remember the leader is not meant to be the theological expert. Their task is to see the meetings run smoothly and EVERYONE gets a chance for input. They need to make sure one or a small number don't hog the discussions.

HOST – This person organises the fellowship (food). They are not expected to provide the food, but rather ensure each member takes a turn to bring food. The host arranges the tea/coffee

PASTORAL -

A very important role is the pastoral leader. Their task is to follow up anyone who is not at the study to see they are OK and let them know they were missed. They also arrange a card and maybe a cake if the group members birthday or anniversary happens during the week following their birthday. (Or before if you are not superstitious) If there is an illness, they can arrange a visit and let the other group members know of this. NOTE: It is important to notify the Parish Priest/Minister about this.

Conclusion:

Be enthusiastic by the study, enjoy the people and allow yourself to be challenged, so that you will grow closer to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Wishing you a holy and enriching Lent.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THOSE WISHING THE GROUP TO CONTINUE AFTER LENT.

This could take the form of meeting...

(a) Weekly, fortnightly, monthly etc.

(b) Maybe for 6 weeks each term or fortnightly over 12 weeks each term. Time the meetings to suit the group.

MODEL IN THE THREE LEADERSHIP ROLES

Leader (Or facilitator)

Pastoral Leader - The care person and link[with Priest/Minister

Host - Arranges, co-ordinates supper. This could mean being host in another persons house (Assuming they will let them into the kitchen). The supper is always a shared effort.

CLERGY ROLE IN THESE GROUPS

Priest could attend on a night that best suits the group. This will be an opportunity for the priest to come at cuppa time (or for the whole night) and chat with the group informally. Also any member of the group would have the chance to talk with the priest or make a time to visit them.

ROLES

Leader

- * Prepares adequately for the studies.
- Run night/Day session
- * Not meant to be the theological expert
- * Refer back to your Priest/Minister your curly questions
- * Invite your Priest/Minister to attend group to talk about these questions
- * ENSURE THAT no one person overshadows or takes over the discussion and that all present get a chance to comment. Some people need to be encouraged to make a comment. Some need to be lovingly sat on. Others need the "Way out" of being able to 'pass' without feeling second rate group members.

Host

- * Organise Morn/Aft Tea or supper in own house or suitable location.
- * Welcome people as they come
- * Food provided not to be over kill, but can be something better than just biscuits
- * Each member of the group to bring supper in turn
- * Host to organise the supper roster etc

Pastoral Leader

- * Keeps a note of birthdays, anniversaries etc
- * Arrange cake or similar if birthday/anniversary actually happens during that week. Otherwise just have all members sign a card.
- * Follow up those not present that week and who did not apologise
- * Sickness notified to all the group so they can follow up and show a concern.
- * Notify your priest/minister if group feels this is necessary
- * If a sickness, consider if there might be a care need to show a care concern in a practical way - Eg: casserole, transport, odd jobs etc
- * Arrange a social function for the group once per school term and invite anyone from the parish who would like to join in. This could be useful to find new members to join the group.
- Maybe an informal service of Holy Communion could be arranged at the home group location.



Grassroots Resources

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