

RECONCILING & MAKING NEW:

Who is Jesus for the world today?



**The United Church of Canada
Committee on Theology and Faith
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We are not alone, we live in God's world.

We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus,
the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to live with respect in Creation,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.



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INTRODUCTION



Today is a time of spiritual dislocation for many Christians. A secular and consumerist spirit pervades public life. The shopping mall can be as much a Sunday morning destination as is church. Many people identify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious”. They choose not to identify themselves with any of the traditional churches of Canada. Greater knowledge of the richness of the world’s religions, together with the arrival of immigrants and refugees from all corners of the earth, has brought Canada greater cultural and religious diversity than earlier generations might ever have imagined. This is true not only in Toronto and Vancouver, but in Lac la Biche, Alberta and Shediac, New Brunswick.

The proximity of people of other faiths has served to break down stereotypes about other faith communities. We may even feel challenged by the spiritual and moral integrity of some of our newer neighbours. These developments have raised the question of how to relate the historic teachings of the church about Jesus Christ to the present pluralistic moment. As Christian people we want to witness faithfully to the salvation, wholeness and challenge we have experienced through the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time, and precisely because we know Jesus as God’s Word made flesh, we want to treat all our neighbours ethically. We want to acknowledge the value we see in them and in their own expressions of faith.

Recognizing this challenge, the 34th General Council mandated its Committee on Theology and Faith to **carry out an extensive consultation throughout the church on the saving significance of Jesus in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour.**

This resource for congregational study and response is the means by which we have chosen to carry out this mandate.

Our hope is that, in a church as theologically diverse as The United Church of Canada, all who participate in the venture will be able to hear their concerns and convictions raised with respect. Our goal has been to produce a resource that will treat pressing issues seriously and also be welcoming to all who participate. We dare to hope that this venture of study and reflection will be a transforming moment. Individuals and groups may be able to claim for themselves a more vital confession of Jesus as the Christ.

There are a variety of ways in which a group might undertake this venture. One approach would be a series of six sessions. However, the breadth of the material covered may lead some groups to spend more than one session on a particular topic. Others may utilize a weekend event format, focusing on sections that seem most important. Each leader or planning team is invited to consider the most appropriate way to proceed in the local context. Your responses will be important when the Committee on Theology and Faith makes its report to the 37th General Council.

NOTES FOR LEADERS:

- This resource is a leader’s guide containing ideas and suggestions for six study sessions, each two hours or more in length.
- The Committee on Theology and Faith believes that the resource covers important ground and that it faces issues that need to be faced. Not every suggestion in the resource will fit a given local context. We invite leaders and planning teams to use imagination in making adaptations.

- Background material for many of the sessions has been provided. This material is an essential part of the resource. Leaders and participants are encouraged to familiarize themselves with background material.
- You will not have to provide copies of the guide to participants; however, you will need to provide them with paper for journalling, taking notes, etc.
- You will note that throughout we have suggested Biblical passages as references. It is important to read these passages in their context.
- For the purpose of the session outlines, a “small group” may be defined as three to five persons.
- Each session ends with suggestions for advance preparation. Read ahead so that participants can be informed of any preparatory work they might need to undertake between sessions.
- Leaders may want to evaluate each session with the following questions:
 - What was helpful to you in this session?
 - What was the least helpful?
 - How would you correct or amend the session?
 - Is something missing here? If yes, what?
- We encourage you to adapt the resource for cross-generational use. Ideas about how to make this adaption can be found in the introductory sections of “The Whole People of God” curriculum.
- Quotations from the Bible are all from the New Revised Standard Version. A new adaption of the NRSV is *The New Testament and Psalms; an Inclusive Version*, edited by Victor Roland Gold and others (Oxford University Press).
- Since discussion has only begun about the most respectful way to refer to the Scriptures that we have in common with Judaism, the traditional designations of Old and New Testament are used in this resource. A new study by the Task Group on United Church-Jewish Relations, “Bearing Faithful Witness”, deals extensively with questions of anti-Judaism in the Christian use and interpretation of Scripture.
- Permission to use all major quotations in this resource has been sought.
- Our expectation is that the resource will be used in the fall of 1997 and the winter/spring of 1998. Responses from your group need to be sent to the General Council Office no later than May 1, 1998.

COMMITTEE ON THEOLOGY AND FAITH

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Easter, 1997.

I

CRUCIFIED AND RISEN: OUR JUDGE AND OUR HOPE

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Images of Jesus

OBJECTIVE: To explore a variety of images of Jesus and to examine the convictions found in these images.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

- This session will require two and a half hours if both sections A and B are used. Time may be reduced to two hours if only A is used. This session will take the most time and energy in advance preparation, especially gathering the images of Jesus and the varied resources suggested.
- The plan for the session calls for hymn-singing. You will need music and a musician or taped music. Or you may choose to read the hymns in unison.
- Showing the video *Who is the Christ?* is an option for the session. It will have to be ordered well in advance from the Audio Visual Education Library—AVEL.
- You may want to use taped background music during the “image walk” (Section B).
- The opening worship uses three readings. You might contact some of those whom you know will be coming to the first session, asking each of them to prepare in advance to take one reading.
- Give thought to the needs of the group as its members gather for the first time. You might want to provide name tags, a time for introductions, and refreshments.
- You will need to prepare materials for distributing and seek volunteers for Session 2. The notes are found at the end of this session.

ROOM SET-UP

- Chairs in a circle and a table in the centre, with several Biblical symbols of Jesus: Christ candle, bread, wine, water, vines, cross, fish symbol, crown of thorns, lamb, shepherd’s crook, star (morning star).
- Around the room could be posted titles and images of Jesus, such as: Prince of Peace, Storyteller, Sage, Healer, Judge, Martyr, Revolutionary, Hope, Wisdom/Sophia, The New Moses, The New Elijah, Lord of Lords, Living Word, Incarnate One, Prophet, Living Water, Lamb, The Word, Son of God, Human One, Emmanuel, Son of Man, The Way, Saviour, Miracle Worker, Messiah, Rabbi, Ordinary Man, Friend, Servant King, Suffering Servant, Liberator, Ichthus.
- A variety of pictures and posters of Jesus could be placed on flip charts, room dividers, smaller stands or laid flat on tables. These can be found in past study kits, e.g., “So You are the Christ” and “Who is Jesus?”; periodicals, e.g., *Life Magazine*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Compass*; World Council of Churches’ publications, etc.; confirmation class materials.
- Ensure that you have a diversity of images from a variety of cultures.
- There could be a book table as well. For suggestions, see the Bibliography.
- Creative table: felt markers, construction paper, etc., to create missing or new images.

SESSION

INTRODUCTION (15 minutes) After participants have had an opportunity to introduce themselves to one another, this, or something like it, might be spoken by the leader:

We are beginning a time together exploring what it means to affirm the saving significance of Jesus. Every pastoral charge and mission unit in The United Church of Canada has been invited by the General Council's Committee on Theology and Faith to participate in this study. The 1992 General Council mandated the study, calling on the Theology and Faith Committee "to carry out an extensive consultation throughout the church on the saving significance of Jesus in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour."

The Theology and Faith Committee has provided this resource for congregational study and response. It forms the basis of our time together. Most sessions include elements of Bible study, worship, use of a journal, small group discussion and theological reflection. At the end of the study, questions will be provided for your response to the Theology and Faith Committee. These responses will form part of the data out of which the Theology and Faith Committee will write a report to the 37th General Council.

In this introductory session, the goal is to open the discussion. We are invited to reflect on the images of Jesus that the Christian tradition and our own experience may carry. Whether these images are carried consciously or unconsciously, our confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ is implied in them. Our task is to reflect on the great variety of images that exist and to ponder their significance in the life of the church and in our own lives.

Anselm, a Christian thinker in the middle ages, once defined his spiritual journey as faith seeking understanding. In this spirit, let us begin our adventure with worship.

WORSHIP (10 minutes)

Readings

1. Mark 8: 27–29

2. Jesus made a terrific impact on the lives of those who knew him. Some loved him so much that they lived and died for him. Others hated and feared him so deeply that they lied and plotted to have him killed.

The common people flocked in great crowds to hear him preach. So eloquent was he that the temple guards sent to arrest him came back empty handed, excusing their failure by saying, "No man ever spoke like this man." His stories (parables we call them) are not only among the most beautiful the world has ever known, but they show us truth about God and ourselves with a clarity that leaves us amazed. The good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the sower who went forth to sow, the sheep and goats, the grain of mustard seed — these, and dozens more, have become part of the daily life of all of us.

The people brought their sick of every kind to him. Blind, deaf, lame, lepers, whether they were broken in mind or body or spirit, he healed them all. Even his enemies did not deny his great power but neither did they recognize it as the mark of the kingdom of God in their midst. He knew weariness and grief, joy and tears, yet he was not as other men. Genuinely one of us, he also had a quality of life, a divine energy that was unique.

Author Unknown

3. One Solitary Life

Here is a Man
who is born of a peasant woman ...
He never wrote a book.
He never held an office.
He never owned a home.
He never had a family.
He never went to college.
He never put foot
inside a city.
He never travelled two hundred
miles from the place
where he was born.
He never did one of the things
that usually accompany greatness.
He had no credentials
but himself ...

While still a young man
the tide of popular opinion
turned against him.
His friends ran away.
One of them denied him ...
He was nailed to a cross
between two thieves.
His executioners gambled for
the only piece of property
he had on earth ... his coat.
When he was dead
he was taken down
and laid in a borrowed grave
through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen wide centuries
have come and gone
and he is the centerpiece
of the human race and
the leader of the column of progress.
I am far within the mark
when I say that all the armies
that ever marched,
and all the navies
that were ever built ...
have not affected the life of humanity
upon earth
as powerfully as that
One Solitary Life.

Author unknown

Prayer: Holy and loving God, we gather tonight/this day to consider a question that has engaged past generations of believers. We know that each generation has brought its own experience and insight and wisdom. Be with us now! Open our hearts and minds and memories. Be in our thinking and hearing and speaking. Help us when we speak to show respect for others and for the convictions each holds. Help us also to listen, and to hear! We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

A. EXPLORING IMAGES IN HYMNS

JOURNAL TIME (5 minutes)

What images of Jesus do you carry? Where do they come from?

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Share with each other your responses to the journal questions.

GROUP SHARING: IMAGES THROUGH HYMNS (30 minutes)

In our hymns we find many different images of Jesus. These images reflect the changes that have taken place in our understanding of Jesus. To help participants reflect on these changes, share the introductory comments provided for each of the time periods. Then read or sing a verse or two of one of the suggested hymns and invite participants to identify the image of Jesus being portrayed.

EARLIEST IMAGES (approximately third to eighth centuries) Emphasize Jesus Christ sent from above (transcendence), and see humans as relatively passive. We are observers watching in awe what God is doing in Jesus. Hymn: “Of the Father’s love begotten.” (fifth century)

MEDIEVAL IMAGES (approximately twelfth to fifteenth centuries) God’s divine nature as known in Jesus is seen as the source and end of all human longing. Images show increasing human involvement with Jesus and more emotional expression; include images of atonement. Hymn: “Jesus, the very thought of thee.” (text from thirteenth century)

REFORMATION IMAGES (sixteenth century) Recovery of the image of Jesus as the sole mediator between God and humanity: “For by grace you have been saved “(Ephesians 2:8). Hymn: “Our God’s a fortress.”

PURITAN IMAGES (seventeenth century) The emphasis during this time was upon images of Jesus that could be found in Scripture. The emphasis is on singing only Scripture, especially the psalms and paraphrases of them. From the Scottish Psalter of 1650, “The Lord’s my shepherd,” where knowledge of God in Jesus Christ is at best implicit. A psalm which has invited paraphrase and in which Jesus is explicitly acknowledged as Israel’s Messiah is Psalm 72, though the paraphrases are from the eighteenth century— “Hail to the Lord’s anointed” and “Jesus shall reign.”

IMAGES OF THE EVANGELICAL REVIVAL (eighteenth century) Jesus Christ is seen as the source and the object of fervent love and as capable of transforming the world. Hymns show enrichment of biblical and theological images; they invite us to respond and to transform our lives in response to what God has done in Jesus. Hymns: “Love divine, all loves excelling”; “Hark! the herald angels sing”; “When I survey the wondrous cross”; “Come, thou almighty King”; “Amazing grace”; “All hail the power of Jesus’ name”; “Jesus Christ is ris’n today”; “O come all ye faithful.”

NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY Emphasis during this time is on the image of Jesus Christ calling us as disciples. Images of the Christian mission and of a victorious, triumphant church intensify: “We have heard the joyful sound”; “Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”; “The church’s one foundation”;

“Crown him with many crowns”; “Jesus calls us.” Hymns like “O Love that will not let me go”; “Blessed Assurance”; “Jesus loves me”; “I need thee every hour” emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus. New hymns from the social gospel movement: “Rise up, O men of God” (Rise up, O saints of God); “Where cross the crowded ways of life”; “Once to every man and nation” (To us all, to every nation); “O holy city, seen of John.”

TWENTIETH CENTURY Christ is seen as present in the midst of our human condition. The missionary theme becomes more deliberately inclusive of new believers around the world. It broadens to include concern for all humanity. Hymns: “In Christ there is no east or west”; “O Christ who came to share our human life”; “Jesus, Shepherd of our souls”. New images emerge for the mainline church with the widespread acceptance of African-American hymns: “Go tell it on the mountain” and “Let us break bread together,” and with alternative metaphors for Jesus’ life and ministry: “Lord of the Dance” and “I am the light of the world.”

LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY Another explosion of hymn-writing not unlike eighteenth century England, with a growing acceptance of fresh images and rhythms coming from around the globe: “May the God of hope” (Argentina); “The Virgin Mary had a baby boy” (West Indian); “In old Galilee” (Japan); “Eat this bread” (French); “Midnight stars make bright the sky” (Chinese). Christ is seen at the heart of concern for justice and peace in “Walls that divide”; “What does the Lord require of you?”; and “In loving partnership.” Feminine images for Jesus Christ appear in “Mothering God.”

JOURNAL TIME (5 minutes)

Name three favourite hymns that include an address or reference to Jesus.

What makes them meaningful to you? How do they shape your understanding of Jesus Christ?

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Share your responses to the journal questions.

B. EXPLORING VISUAL IMAGES THROUGH THE AGES (Choose 1 or 2) (30 minutes)

1. IN ART (15 minutes)

An Image Walk. Invite participants to wander and ponder, taking in the variety of images, titles, and symbols that are displayed in the meeting area. Suggest that if anyone feels a vital image is missing, he or she is welcome to make one (or more). You may want to use background music here.

JOURNAL TIME (5 minutes)

What are your favourite images and titles for Jesus? What makes them meaningful?

How do they inform your understanding of Jesus?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (10 minutes)

Share insights from your reflections on the questions above.

OR

2. VIDEO PRESENTATION (15 minutes)

“Who is the Christ?” (Audio Visual Education Library—AVEL)

JOURNAL TIME (5 minutes)

What are your favourite images and titles for Jesus? What makes them meaningful?

How do they inform your understanding of Jesus?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (10 minutes)

Share insights from your reflections on the questions above.

C. GROUP DISCUSSION (20 minutes)

Introduction

Colin Morris describes the search for Jesus this way:

“There is danger in all personal rediscoveries of Jesus. We may be dishonest or deluded in our portrayal of him and scale down his mandate for us to tie in with what we can comfortably meet. Basing all our action on a personal understanding of Jesus lays us open to the egotism and partiality in our nature that distorts our vision. Yet the necessary corrective is not to dash back into the thickets of dogma and take the word of other ages for who Jesus is and what he asks of us. The answer, surely, is to pursue the search for Jesus in the company of others who are asking the same questions and risking the same challenges; who will offer us the wisdom of their experience and counsel, strengthening us where we are timid and curbing us where we are extreme. Because the truth by its nature is healing and redemptive, the search for it will create genuine community rather than intensify individualism. Community for Christians is a working necessity, not a dogmatic requirement for faithfulness.”

Invite participants imaginatively and/or literally to “gather” favourite/popular images from the experiences of the hymn-sing/image walk/video. As you think about the images of Jesus:

What images are most meaningful?

What images are most comforting? What images are the most challenging?

What images will you take into the future? Are there images that need to be left behind?

EVALUATION OF THIS SESSION (refer to questions suggested in introduction)

CLOSING PRAYER (5 minutes)

Our time together ends, loving God; the discovery and the dialogue are set aside for now. Yet we take with us our certainties and our questions about Jesus and his meaning for us. Who do we say that he is? Is Jesus a burden for us or blessing; or both? Each of us has some answer, however tentative, and each of us has our own confession of faith in his name. Our thoughts and our ideas, our hopes and our longings may be as varied as the creation which you have given us!

We offer our gratitude—gratitude for this gathering and the community it represents, gratitude for the freedom to affirm and to question, gratitude for Jesus Christ whose presence and vision inspire us still. In his name we pray. Make fruitful the time we have spent together, Holy One. Keep us a blessing to each other and to others we will meet in the days ahead. Amen.

FOR THE NEXT SESSION ...

With the next session, background material is provided as reading to be done by the participants prior to the gathering. You will need to have copies of it to hand out at the end of this session. The glossary should also be copied and given to participants.

The opening worship calls for the use of a number of symbols and readings; you may want to enlist the help of some volunteers in gathering the symbols and leading the time of worship.

You will also need to gather art supplies, pictures for collage, etc.

Background Material for Session II

JESUS, THE WORD MADE FLESH

Our primary source for knowing Jesus is the four gospels of the New Testament. These were not written as a biographer might report the events in a famous person's life today. Rather, they report the events as interpreted from the point of view of writers who have experienced the impact of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They believe that Jesus is not only the carpenter's son, but also the Christ of God, risen from the tomb, eternally alive and present to believers.

Since the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, many scholars have tried to separate out from the gospel narratives the earliest strands in the story, those passages and phrases that appear to be "unglossed" by the glow of resurrection faith. These scholars sought to distinguish between those passages that appear to stem from Jesus himself and those that appear to have been added by the gospel writers or the early church. In the language of nineteenth-century scholarship, this was the quest for "the Jesus of history," as distinct from "the Christ of faith." Today scholars speak of "the pre-Easter Jesus" and "the post-Easter Jesus": Jesus as he might have been seen before the events of Good Friday and Easter Day, and Jesus as he was seen after the women came from the tomb bearing amazing news.

No historical investigation can achieve certainty about what the earthly Jesus said and did, let alone what his motives were. Our evidence about Jesus comes from an age and culture both different and distant from our own. How do we know that the "Jesus" constructed by some contemporary scholars is any more real than the "Jesus" whom the woman at the well called "Saviour of the world"? In the end the "real Jesus" escapes all our nets.

The gospel records help us locate Jesus in the landscape of his time, a first-century Jew in Roman-occupied Palestine. As a Jew, he learned the stories, hymns, and prayers of the Jewish tradition, and followed the rhythms of Sabbath and yearly festivals. During his childhood and early adulthood, he was immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures. First-century Judaism was the wellspring of Jesus' life and mission. Luke records at 4:16, "he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom."

At the heart of Jewish tradition is the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage which culminated in the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. The Exodus revealed God as One who is passionately present in human history, who comes to the side of the vulnerable as saviour, who keeps promises, and who is the governor of history and its goal. (Exodus 3ff.) In the covenant of Sinai, God called Israel to a relationship of faithfulness and accountability, expressed in thankful obedience to the divine will. (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:1–21) When Jesus gave his summary of the law—devotion to God and ethical conduct toward the neighbour—he found its content in the Scriptures stemming from these momentous events. (Deuteronomy 6: 4–5; Leviticus 19:18).

Crucial to Israel's identity was the conviction that through exodus and covenant God had chosen this people for a great destiny and for great responsibility: God would use their witness and obedience as a means of blessing and salvation for the entire world (Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 49:6). Israel's faithfulness was to be a beacon to the nations, alerting them to the coming perfect kingdom, or reign of God. In this culminating initiative, God's direct and complete rule would be extended over every nation and every human heart. This kingdom, or reign of God, would be ushered in by a deliverance of Israel like the deliverance from Egypt, and led by a Messiah, God's own anointed, a "son of David."

Expectation of the coming of the Messiah and of the full reign of God was high during the time of Pontius Pilate as Roman governor of Judea (26–36 C.E.). Heavy taxation, the arrogant disregard of Jewish traditions, and acts of tyranny and violence upon the subjugated Jews fanned the hope of a deliverer. John the Baptist brought this hope into sharp focus, calling on people to repent in preparation for an immediate judgement which would prepare the way for the Messiah. Jesus took his place among the crowds who gathered at the bank of the Jordan, and was baptized. The subsequent arrest and execution of John by Herod (Mark 6: 14–29) may have presented a profound crisis for Jesus. In the face of such grotesque and resolute evil, how should he understand his mission now?

The gospels are one in their view that at the centre of Jesus' life was an intimate and sustaining relationship with the Sovereign One whom he called "Abba" (Father, or more precisely, Daddy). Out of this relationship with God, Jesus created the image of the kingdom or realm of God as a wedding banquet made up of the wonderful diversity of people who would "break bread together."

Out of this communion came also the power to reinterpret the symbols of kingdom and Messiah, and to live out this renewed understanding in the face of fickle friends and determined adversaries. He did not face the challenge alone; all his ministry was offered in obedience to the purposes of God. In his passionate care and suffering were present the care and suffering also of his Abba. While Jesus came to understand that his vocation might lead to suffering and death, he did not regard his role as a passive one. It was a destiny he not only accepted but put in motion. Confronting the energies of violation that limit and distort human lives, Jesus lifted burdens of shame and isolation. He enabled the broken and bent to stand on their feet again, announcing forgiveness to all who would begin anew. He proclaimed the hope of a sovereign love, a love that will stop at nothing to reclaim its own. Jesus not only announced the reign of God, but also embodied it.

While the gospels give strong evidence of Jesus' own conviction that his vocation would lead him to death, the disciples experienced the crucifixion as a crushing defeat and the end of their hopes. If they regarded Jesus as the Messiah, his death on the cross ended such belief. It is possible that someone executed for challenging the authority of Rome might be revered as a political martyr, but death at the hand of the oppressor would invalidate any claim to Messiahship. The Messiah was to be the conqueror not the conquered, the deliverer of his people.

Only a subsequent event of astonishing proportions could have led the followers of Jesus to believe in a crucified Messiah. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was such an event. When they encountered the one who was raised and then appeared to named eyewitnesses (I Corinthians 15: 5–7), they met again the Jesus who had walked with them during his public ministry and who had been crucified and buried. For them the resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus' person and work. It was an affirmation of all that Jesus had lived and taught, acted and suffered. It was God's "Yes" spoken in the face of the "No" of dominating evil. Within a very short time defeated men and women began to proclaim as good news the saving presence and work of a crucified and risen Lord. In him God was at work, overcoming the power of evil, sin and death, to bring liberation and salvation, not only to Israel, but to the whole world. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (II Corinthians 5:19)

Confronted by a love that gave all for them, a love that death could not defeat, the disciples experienced transformation of their lives. They could describe this transformation only in terms of radical renewal—”born of the Spirit” (John 3:6) and “there is a new creation” (II Corinthians 5:17). This spiritual revolution in their lives pushed the early Christian community to reinterpret the old, old story of salvation, and also the significance of the one who was bringing them “out of Egypt.” The one who had called them and walked with them in Galilee, they now began to call “Lord.” Full understanding did not come immediately. Stimulated by the presence of the Spirit of Christ, they remained together, and engaged in a fresh encounter with the Hebrew Scriptures. From such reflection and inspiration, the disciple community came to believe that Jesus was not only the long-promised deliverer but also “Son of God” (e.g., Mark 1:1 and Romans 1:4). For them, only someone who was divine in the same sense that we say God is divine could have brought about the reconciliation of all creation with God.

In Biblical wisdom tradition, the female figure Wisdom (*Hokmah* in Hebrew, *Sophia* in Greek) is present with God in the opening act of creation (Proverbs 8: 22–31). Later the writer of John’s gospel chose “Word” (a male noun), over the female “Wisdom.” Yet in Matthew 11:19, we see Jesus referring to himself and John the Baptist as “Children of Wisdom-Sophia.” Early Christians saw Jesus as both Wisdom and Word, images which encompass both male and female. They came to believe that the person encountered in Jesus of Nazareth had existed in the presence of God long before the birth of Jesus. When the Gospel of John affirms that, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (John 1:1), it was proclaiming Jesus as the pre-existent Christ who became incarnate. The Wisdom by which God had created the universe now had come in person to instruct them.

The Word had taken on our human form. This is the meaning of Christmas, the gospel of the Incarnation. The earliest believers found in Jesus of Nazareth the eternal Christ of God and confessed him as such: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Confessions such as this eventually led the church to the full development of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the assertion that Christ, the Son of God, is co-equal with the Father and the Spirit, one eternal God in three persons. The question addressed to disciples then and now gathers momentum: “Who do you say that I am?”

II

JESUS, THE WORD MADE FLESH

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The Biblical Witness

OBJECTIVE: To examine Biblical images/stories of Jesus Christ as they relate to the Christ we encounter in our daily living and the Jesus we encounter in the Bible.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

Have copies of the background material for Session 3 copied for the participants.
Ensure that you have all of the symbols to be used in the opening worship.
Be prepared to answer questions of clarification about the background material.
Bibles or copies of the passages will be needed for Bible study.
Gather art supplies, pictures for the collage, etc.
If the whole group is involved in the responsive reading, you will need to make copies of it.

ROOM SETUP

Chairs in a circle with a table in the centre on which to place the symbols.

SESSION

INTRODUCTION (15 minutes; allow for check-in time) Opening remarks by the leader:

Who is Jesus? In our first session we were encouraged to reflect upon a variety of images of Jesus. What makes us specifically Christian believers is that our faith in God is shaped by our encounter with Jesus Christ. How we portray and think of Jesus are the central shaping influences in our understanding of God, and of Christian faith and life. In Jesus Christ we see the heart of God laid bare in healing and redeeming love for the world.

In this session we will turn to the Bible, the foundational source of our understanding of Jesus. We continue to approach the question of the saving significance of Jesus in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour.

WORSHIP (10 minutes)

As we begin, we place at our centre several of the images/symbols Christians relating to Jesus. These are found in both the Old and New Testaments: (two people read and one places the symbol)

The Light of the World

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2
Symbol: a candle is lit
Scripture - John 8:12

The Bread of Life

Scripture: Exodus 16:4
Symbol: a loaf of bread is placed
Scripture: Luke 9:16-17

The Voice of Wisdom

Scripture: Proverbs 9:1,4-6
Symbol: an invitation card is presented
Scripture: Matthew 11:28-30

The Living Water

Scripture: Isaiah 12:2-3
Symbol: a pitcher of water is poured
Scripture - John 4:13, 14

The Cup of Salvation

Scripture: Psalm 80:8-11
Symbol: a goblet/chalice of wine is placed
Scripture: Mark 14:23-25

Hymn: One of the following: “Tell me the stories of Jesus”; “Fairest Lord Jesus”; “Lord of the dance”; “You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd”; “O love how deep”; “Jesus the Christ said”; “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds.”

Prayer: Holy One, grace our exploration and discussion with your energizing Spirit. Open our hearts and minds that we may feel the Spirit’s presence in our lives and in this community. In symbol, in Scripture, and in each other, may we know the Christ. May our lives be touched by the life of the one in whose name we offer our prayer. Amen.

JOURNAL TIME (5 minutes)

How would you describe Jesus, as a person, to someone who knew nothing about him?

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Discuss the question above.

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY (25 minutes)

Before beginning the Bible study, you may want to make some clarifying comments about the background material; certainly take time to invite questions. Then divide into groups for Bible study and have each group tackle one passage. Where there is only one group let them choose a passage. Invite groups to report key insights by preparing a short skit, collage or drawing.

Luke 4:16–30. How does Jesus’ message confirm or alter Israel’s understanding of the nature of God and of the mission of the Messiah? What does it mean to be God’s instrument of salvation? What does salvation look like?

Mark 8:27–33. Perhaps we can have some sympathy for Peter. Of what use is a crucified Messiah? Who wants to follow him? What is your response to Jesus’ reinterpretation of the mission of the Messiah?

I Corinthians 15:1–8. Paul’s letters are the earliest written of all the books of the New Testament. This summary of the Christian faith is likely the earliest account of the “good news,” the message preached by the apostles about God’s work in Jesus. How important do you think that the resurrection is to Christian faith?

Philippians 2:4–11 This passage contains an early Christian hymn, quoted by Paul to encourage mutual service in the Philippian congregation. The hymn indicates that the first believers had a profound sense of Jesus Christ as the servant Messiah/king. In what way does this hymn affirm that united in the person of Jesus were both divine and human natures?

Mark 16:1–8; Matthew 28:1–10; Luke 24:1–12; John 20:1–18. There are differences in circumstances and detail in each gospel’s description of the resurrection. What is the significance of each?

REPORTING AND RESPONSIVE READING (25 minutes)

Each group reports back in its chosen way. The following reading provides a transition as you move into a time of reflection and discussion:

Who do you say that I am?

A Jew

- of humble birth
- schooled in the synagogue
- rooted in the law and the prophets
- celebrating the Sabbath and festivals
- remembering the Exodus and the Covenant

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus of Nazareth

- child of Mary and of the carpenter
- baptized by John and tempted by evil
- teacher of wisdom and healer of pain
- proclaiming God's rule in our hearts
- rabbi of sinners and scourge of the pious
- eating and drinking with zest for discussion
- storm-stilling presence, disturber of peace

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus the Saviour

- obedient servant and palm-branches king
- critic of temple and foe of exclusion
- breaker of bread and pourer of wine
- anointed for death by extravagant love
- forgiving your enemies, grieving your friends
- tortured and crucified, laid in the grave
- Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews!

Who do you say that I am?

Living Redeemer!

- raised from the dead by your Abba in heaven
- appearing to Mary and Peter and John
- known in the breaking of bread and the cup
- passing through doors that are locked by our fear
- sending us forth to tell the good news

Who do you say that I am?

The Christ of God!

- Holy Wisdom
- Saviour and Lord
- Child of the Most High
- Son of God
- Word made flesh,
come to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit.

JOURNAL TIME (5 minutes)

How would you tell another person about who Jesus Christ is for you?

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Discuss your response to the question above.

EVALUATION OF THIS SESSION (5 minutes)**CLOSING** (5 minutes)

Hymns setting forth the paradoxical nature of the union of the human and divine in Jesus Christ would be appropriate in closing, e.g., *Christus Paradox* (“You, Lord, are both lamb and shepherd”) and “The love that clothes itself in light.” One of these could be sung, or spoken responsively or in unison. Other hymns for possible use: “Jesus Christ is risen today”; “Thine is the glory”; “Now the green blade rises”, and other Easter hymns.

FOR THE NEXT SESSION ...

Ask participants to read the following passages of Scripture: Mark 10:35–45; John 3:16–17; Romans 3:21–26; II Corinthians 5:16–6:2 (and perhaps also Luke 19:1–10 and John 4.1–30, 39–42.)

Give some thought to how you will handle the Scripture passage in the worship time; that is, will it be read, told in story form, dramatized in some way? You may want the help of volunteers.

Distribute copies of the background material.

Background Material for Session III TO RECONCILE AND MAKE NEW

Over the ages and in our own age, theologians and church councils have attempted to express in concepts and images the meaning of God's saving act through Jesus Christ. Before the theologians sought to define it, salvation was not so much an idea as a transforming experience in the lives of believers. For those who met Jesus in the flesh, or through the apostles' preaching, there was a dynamic which meant rebirth of the spirit, being born anew.

The experience of salvation (transformation, liberation, reconciliation, redemption) may take many forms. There is a broad category that includes all events in which God acts to reconcile and make whole. For the escaped Hebrew slaves, it was deliverance from Pharaoh's chariot division, and the journey into freedom. For individuals whose laments and praise are found in the Psalms, salvation is like coming into a broad and roomy place. For Levi of Capernaum it was the invitation to walk out of ostracism and into the challenge of a new life. For the woman who broke in upon the dinner party at Simon's house, it was forgiveness of her sins and the recovery of dignity. For the prodigal son it was welcome home even before he could get the words of repentance out of his mouth. For his elder brother it could have been leaving his resentments behind and joining the circle of celebration. For the rich man it could have been friendship with Lazarus, broken at his door.

What is common in the Biblically recorded experiences of salvation is that, like the shepherd who goes out after the hundredth sheep, God takes the initiative to bring us home. Just when we don't deserve it, just when our need is greatest, just when we may least expect it, the surprise of grace gathers us in; the faithful mercy of God reaches out to grasp us. Amazing grace! for that is what grace is, the love of God freely given to those who are in no position to lay a claim on it. Salvation is a gift.

Trying to Grasp the Meaning of Salvation Through Theories of Atonement

There is, then, a broad category of "salvation" events in which individuals experience varying kinds of deliverance as coming from God's hand. There is also a narrower use of the word in Christian tradition. This refers specifically to the self-offering of Jesus Christ which transforms the whole world. In the historic understanding, the eternal Christ came to earth and took flesh to bring about our salvation, through both the "active obedience" of his whole ministry of truth-telling and healing, and the "passive obedience" of his suffering and death. Summing up the work of Christ, the Letter to the Colossians says: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." (Col. 1:19-20)

How is this peace established? In what way does Jesus' self-offering, culminating in the cross, bring about reconciliation with God? Over the centuries theologians have tried to find adequate ideas and images to explain how it was that "Christ died for our sins" (I Corinthians 15:3) and "came ... to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). The following are referred to as theories of the atonement.

"RANSOM" OR "CHRIST THE VICTOR" THEORY

The earliest attempt starts from an understanding of the human condition as one of domination and oppression by an evil power ("the devil"). The gospel accounts show Jesus casting out demons, and struggling with the Tempter in the wilderness. Texts like Colossians 2:12-15, I Corinthians 2:8, and Ephesians 6:12 also have given rise to this perspective. In the last and titanic conflict on the cross, Jesus became a ransom for us, exchanging his life for our liberty from captivity. In dying he drew evil's sting. In the resurrection he showed the empty pretension of evil's power, defying apparent defeat and conquering death. Humans who put their trust in this victorious Lord are thereby freed from the dominion and fear of evil.

“SATISFACTION” THEORY

If the earliest approach took up images of the battlefield and of heroic rescue, the images that prevailed in the middle ages were drawn from the court room. In this approach, humanity is in the prisoner’s dock under condemnation for its disobedience. God’s justice requires that some satisfaction be given to restore the divine honour and to free humans from the penalty of death. Since no human could offer an act of obedience sufficient to offset the original sin, only God’s own intervention can save us. It is then that Christ, appointed by God’s own yearning love for a lost humanity, steps forth as our advocate and representative. He offers the perfect obedience of his own life, including his death on the cross, as the fulfillment of the law. Thus humanity is justified or pardoned, and is restored to a relationship of peace with the Creator. Texts that can be seen to lend support to this “satisfaction” interpretation are Philippians 2:5–8; Romans 3:24–5 and 5:6–9; and Hebrews 5:7–10 and 9:11–14, 25–26.

“SUBSTITUTIONARY” THEORY

A later variation on the courtroom image stems from the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In it, when Christ steps forth on our behalf, it is not only to plead our case but also to take our place in the dock, and to take upon himself the punishment we deserve. Out of love, God sends Christ to bear on the cross, as our substitute, the divine judgement against human sin. Why doesn’t God just forgive without further ado? Because justice is integral to God’s being and will. God’s governance of a moral universe requires that justice be done and be seen to be done, and yet God “desires not the death of any sinner.” In both variations of the courtroom image, the final cause of human salvation is the great initiative of divine love. We do not have a tyrannical hanging judge, but a loving parent who longs to bring us home. Among supportive texts for this “substitutionary” approach of the Reformers might be the following: Galatians 3:13; II Corinthians 5:21; and Isaiah 53:4–6.

“MORAL” OR “SUBJECTIVE” THEORY

The images above all imply that the work of Christ has effected a change in God’s attitude to the world. A radically different point of view arose in the middle ages in the thought of Peter Abelard. He believed that the change effected by the atonement takes place in human hearts. The cross draws forth repentance from human beings by showing two things: the self-giving nature of God’s love (*agape*); and the suffering inflicted on that love by human hatred and violence. The cross is the symbol of love giving itself without reserve, and it changes the relationship between God and humanity by changing the lives of those who respond to its appeal. Among texts that can be seen to support this approach are Matthew 9:13; John 3:16, 6:51 and 15:13; Romans 8:31–32; and Galatians 2:20.

Fresh Questions Today

Each of these images and interpretations of salvation has the power to speak to some in the community of faith. Yet they are all less than adequate because they point to a mystery beyond our limited and fallible understanding. The Scripture passages cited above say both less and more than any of the images do. Who can express the depth of a love that will not let us go?

As valuable as these approaches may be for some, others express discontent with the traditional focus on sacrificial images, including the shedding of blood, to describe the saving work of Jesus. One concern is that a focus on Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross can lead to a glorification of suffering. This can have unfortunate results pastorally, as when the most vulnerable are led to accept unjust and avoidable suffering as part of their loyalty to a suffering Lord.

There is also concern with a single-minded focus on salvation as deliverance from individual sin. Clearly, the early church included in its witness to the risen Christ “that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sin through his name” (Acts 10:43). But for most of the world’s people, it is poverty, violence and repression which destroy human well-being and communion with God. People suffer and are broken by abusive individuals and oppressive groups, a violation that they do not deserve. For them, deliverance or

salvation means compassion and justice, made known in Jesus as he binds up the broken-hearted, and promises good news to the poor and liberation to the oppressed.

Another concern is that a traditional interpretation of salvation in Jesus Christ tends to leave us human disciples of Jesus in a largely passive role; i.e., we are invited simply to accept the death of Christ as the sufficient offering for our sin. But does not the gift of salvation also contain within it the invitation to grasp the promise and challenge of a new life? Set free from self-centred and self-abusive attitudes alike, we are called to respond to God's gift with gratitude, and with risk-taking involvement in God's love for the world.

Salvation Both Complete and Ongoing

The New Testament speaks of salvation both as an accomplished fact and as a process begun that will only reach completion on "the day of the Lord." Its authors generally use the past tense (salvation as completed act) wherever reference is to the work of Christ on our behalf, and to the restored relationship that believers now have with God. Jesus' words on the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), give powerful expression to this viewpoint. (Other references are Luke 19:9; Acts 2:47b; Romans 1:16 and 5:1; Ephesians 2:8; and Titus 3:5.) But in referring to salvation as applied to the lives of individuals and to the transformation of the creation itself, an author like Paul frequently views it as a process leading to the goal of the general resurrection, to the full redemption of humanity, and to our enjoyment of "glory" (face-to-face communion with God). "Not that I have already obtained this or have reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own." (Philippians 3:12. Also, see Romans 13:11 and 8:22–24; I Corinthians 1:18; and II Corinthians 2:15.)

Salvation is uniquely God's work and gift to us, and yet we are called to participate in the journey toward its fulfillment. Catching up in a single sentence God's sovereign initiative in salvation and our participation in its dynamic, Paul says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12–13)

III TO RECONCILE AND MAKE NEW

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The Transforming Work of Jesus

OBJECTIVE: To explore the understanding of “salvation” and what is meant when Jesus is named “Saviour.”

ADVANCE PREPARATION

- Prepare for the dramatization or the telling of Acts 16:11–34.
- Have music resources for the time of worship and for group discussion.
- Photocopy the pages with quotations for small group discussion.
- List the small group questions on a flipchart.

ROOM SET-UP

Place chairs in a circle. If you are dramatizing the Scripture passage, Acts 16:11–34, you will need to allow space for this. Allow space also for talking in twos and for small group discussion.

SESSION

INTRODUCTION (10 minutes; allow for check-in time) Opening remarks by the leader:

In this session we focus on “the saving significance of Jesus.” In other words, what does the word “salvation” mean to us, and what are we saying when we name Jesus as Saviour? Through worship, study, and discussion, we will seek a clearer and more confident understanding of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

WORSHIP (10 minutes)

Tell in story form or dramatize the narrative at Acts 16:11–34. This contains three different experiences of salvation.

Prayer: Loving God, we come together to know more about you and ourselves. Who are you? What is this salvation you offer? Who are we? What do we need to be saved from? These questions enter our minds and echo in our hearts. They are at the core of our being. Be with us as we explore them. Guide us, and help us to be open to your voice in our midst. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn: One of the following: “Amazing Grace”; “When I survey the wondrous cross”; “What a friend we have in Jesus”; “Blessed Assurance.” Other suggestions may be found at the conclusion of this section.

JOURNAL TIME (10 minutes)

When you hear the word “salvation,” what initial images, words, feelings are stirred within you? Take a moment to reflect on the encounters of Paul and Silas in the passage from Acts. How does each of those whom they met experience salvation—Lydia, the slave girl, and the jailer?

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Consider the following question with reference to the selected Biblical passages and background material: What is your understanding of salvation?

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (15 minutes) (Hand out page with quotations)

Working in small groups, assign one section to each group (Section A, B, C, or D).

Read the section, reflect on each quotation and then have each participant identify which quotation speaks most to him or her?

Which speaks the least?

What certainties are represented?

What questions?

GROUP DISCUSSION (15 minutes)

Report the highlights of your small group discussion to the large group.

SECTION A

1. 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." ... 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 to me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

John Wesley, *Journal*

2. Salvation and liberation are interconnected. Salvation is gratuitously given by God: it flows from the very essence of God—love. Salvation is the love between God and individual human beings and among human beings Our ongoing act of creation, our work to transform the world, is both cause and effect of the struggle to have a love relationship with others, including God. This work of transformation—to become a full person and to build the human community—is the work of salvation. There can be no salvation without liberation, though no single act of liberation can be totally identified with salvation in its fullness.

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Solidarity: Love of Neighbour in the 1980s"
in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*

3. Article VII. Of the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe in and confess the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Mediator between God and man, who, being the Eternal Son of God, for us men and for our salvation, became truly man, being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, yet without sin. Unto us He has revealed the Father, by His word and Spirit, making known the perfect will of God. For our redemption, He fulfilled all righteousness, offered Himself a perfect sacrifice on the Cross, satisfied Divine justice, and made propitiation for the sins of the whole world. He rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven, where he ever intercedes for us. In the hearts of believers He abides forever as the indwelling Christ, above us and over us all He rules; wherefore, unto Him we render love, obedience, and adoration of our Prophet, Priest and King.

Basis of Union of The United Church of Canada

SECTION B

1. The salvation/liberation that Jesus announces is not simply a gift which we passively receive. Rather, salvation/liberation is a process in which we become engaged. It has several levels:

- a) the level of the limited political-economic-social liberation in which greater justice is achieved;
- b) the level of personal transformation and historical actions in which people stop blaming their fate and take responsibility for their own destiny and the construction of a new society;
- c) the level of liberation from sin (the root of all injustice) and communion with God.

Marie GIBLIN, *Liberation Theology: an Introductory Reader*

2. I believe understanding sin as damage enhances responsibility and healing instead of miring us in blame and guilt. I am suggesting that sinfulness is neither a state that comes inevitably with birth nor something that permeates all human existence, but a symptom of the unavoidably relational nature of human existence through which we come to be damaged and to damage others. ... Hence sin is a sign of our brokenheartedness, of how damaged we are, not of how evil, willfully disobedient and culpable we are. Sin is not something to be punished but to be healed.

Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart*

3. Article X. Of Faith and Repentance. We believe that faith in Christ is a saving grace whereby we receive Him, trust in Him, and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered to us in the Gospel, and that this saving faith is always accompanied by repentance, wherein we confess and forsake our sins with full purpose of and endeavour after a new obedience to God.

Basis of Union of The United Church of Canada

SECTION C

1. Just as in sin we separate ourselves from God, so God reconciles himself with us in grace. That is the basic Christian affirmation. God's turning to us is grace, which removes the obstacles to the relationship between God and human beings. If sin means separation, segregation, isolation and alienation, then grace is the reunion of the living with the origin of life—and thus precisely what God wills. It is simply the happiness of no longer being separated. The wish for reunion is one of the deepest human wishes, and it is precisely for that reason that separation is so destructive. To be with God means no longer to be separated.

Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking About God*

2. Increasingly, but with much disagreement and debate, Christian theologians are rejecting the traditional claim that “there is salvation only in Jesus Christ and his church.” Instead, they affirm that in Jesus Christ we are shown the living presence of a gracious God who is reaching out in a noncoercive love to all creatures everywhere and always. As we learn more of other people and their religions, we recognize that “the fruits of the spirit” are to be found among them as well, sometimes more clearly than in a great many of the persons and groups who call themselves “Christian.”

A New Handbook of Christian Theology

3. The theological lynch pin which makes sense of Jesus' dying in our place is the fact that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (II Corinthians 5:19). This isn't just the death of a good man. This is God experiencing torture and death. It is God who is accepting the fault and hurt of the world. You might say it's as if someone has hurt you badly but, instead of lashing back, you forgive them, absorbing the hurt into yourself. That's what God has done in the cross. The resurrection confirms that this was, in fact, the eternal Creator suffering with and for us.

Pat Wells, *Welcome to The United Church of Canada*
(Division of World Outreach publication)

SECTION D

1. Jesus is the Mediator between the Creator and the human family. He offered a way back for people who had strayed from the sacred way. In doing this he bridged the gap between the human family and the Creator. He mended the relationship among humans, God and the rest of Creation. He mended the brokenness. He fulfilled Jewish prophecies. He also followed and fulfilled the first teaching of Aboriginal ways, the law of obedience.

Nelson Hart, Nelson House, Manitoba

2. Jesus is the norm for our action in reforming our lives and renewing society. . . . He showed us that we cannot work toward our true humanity, our true liberation, unless we seek the true humanity, the true liberation, of all. Thus, efforts to transform the existing structures and patterns of domination that prevent the least of our sisters and brothers from living truly human lives and enjoying just reciprocal relationships, are moral actions.

Virginia Fabella, *Christology from an Asian Women's Perspective*

3. Article VI. Redemption. We believe that in the greatness of His love for man God has in Christ opened up a way of deliverance from the guilt and power of sin.

We believe that Christ, by living our life without sin, by dying at the hands of sinful men with faith unshaken and unflinching love, has done for man what man could not do for himself. On the Cross He bore the burden of sin, and He broke its power; and what He did there moves men to repentance, conveys forgiveness, undoes the estrangement, and binds them to Himself in a new loyalty.

We believe that by His resurrection and exaltation Christ stands victorious over death and all evil, and that He fills those who commit themselves to Him with such grace and strength that in Him they, too, are conquerors. His redemption of man is at once an awful mystery and a glorious fact; it is the Lord's doing and marvellous in our eyes.

So we acknowledge the unmerited love and mercy of our God in giving His only-begotten Son that we might not perish, but have everlasting life.

Statement of Faith (1940), United Church of Canada

JOURNAL TIME (10 minutes)

Write down your own definition of salvation. As you ponder your definition, think about the following:

From what do I need to be saved?

Where/when have I experienced salvation in my life?

In the experience of salvation, what role is played by God, by me, by Jesus?

What questions has this exploration left unanswered for me?

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Share with one another your responses and present convictions about the saving significance of Jesus.

GROUP DISCUSSION (20 minutes)

The United Church sings its faith. Reflection on the hymns we sing can give us insight into matters of faith that we may have difficulty expressing and explaining. Using the hymn resources available to you, sing three or four hymns that express the theme of the transforming work of Jesus. Afterward the leader may invite discussion about how they relate to our definitions of salvation.

Among the possible choices: “Jesus shall reign”; “All praise to thee”; “I bind unto myself today”; “Fairest Lord Jesus”; “O Love, how deep”; “Lord of the Dance”; “Jesus loves me”; “Crown him with many crowns”; “O sacred head, sore wounded”; “Ride on, ride on in majesty”; “Jesus, teacher and friend”; “All the way my saviour leads me”; “Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”; “Jesus remember me”; “Jesus, the very thought of thee”; “Rock of ages, cleft for me”; “My faith looks up to thee”; etc., and many Christmas carols!

EVALUATION (5 minutes)**CLOSING PRAYER** (5 minutes)

God of yesterday, today, and tomorrow, of all times and places: you are the God who came into our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. You came in a way that we still find difficult to fully understand and express. We know that you love us and that Jesus stands among us making your love real, so real that we can touch it, see it, hear it, taste it, and smell it. Continue to be with us, guiding God, as we leave this place and as we try to live the good news of salvation in all that we do and say. Amen.

FOR THE NEXT SESSION ...

- Background material is provided as reading to be done by the participants before the next session. This will need to be copied and distributed.
- Ask participants to read the following Scripture passages: Luke 10:29–37, Acts 4:32–35, Mark 8:31–38.
- Ask someone to prepare the prayer for opening worship. This might be based on the theme of discipleship.

Background Material for Session IV CALLED TO BE THE CHURCH

Discipleship has its beginning, continuation, and end in encounter with Jesus Christ. The claim that Jesus is the Christ of God can seem as scandalous and presumptuous today as it did for many of the people of his day. The idea that Jesus Christ has an ultimate claim on the public as well as the personal lives of Christians is as difficult in our time as it was in the time of the first-century disciples. The very first disciples were challenged by Jesus to follow him, leaving their nets, their custom booths, their household tasks. Not all those who followed “left all,” as we may imagine Peter and Levi and Mary Magdalene did. However, life was transformed for all who responded to the challenge to seek first the kingdom, or reign of God. To give God this central role in one’s life meant to enter, along with others, into the realm of God’s love—in Jesus’ words, “to deny oneself.” The new community in Jesus Christ arises with this willingness to open ourselves to the direct presence and will of God. This community is in direct conflict with any culture that would reduce our relationship with God to the realm of personal taste and private concern. The new community in Jesus Christ invites its members into the risk of creating new relationships of mutual assistance and life shared with others.

Those who met the risen Christ also experienced the summons to discipleship. On the Damascus Road, Paul encountered the same One who blessed and challenged Mary and Martha. In every generation since, it is the contemporary Christ who has met and summoned people to follow. In attempting to describe the integral relationship between Christ and Christ’s people, the Apostle Paul called the believing community the “body of Christ.” He repeatedly told the recipients of his letters that every one who is in Christ is connected thereby to the whole body of believers—in just the vital way that a limb or bodily member has its life in relation to the whole physical body. Paul believed that this is true in the local congregation and in the world-wide church. There is no other way that we can explain the energy and resolve with which he devoted himself to gathering the “great collection” from the Greek-speaking churches (I Corinthians 8,9) and the risk he took in bearing it to the saints in Jerusalem. Though separated from each other by distance, culture, and race, the believers in Corinth and the believers in Jerusalem were one body in Christ. “Kingdom” is also “kindom.” While the church is not the kingdom, it can be a foretaste of life in the commonwealth of God.

Kingdom and Church

In Jesus’ parables, the kingdom or reign of God appears as an upside-down world in which

- workers who come at the eleventh hour are paid equally with those who started at dawn
- outcasts go into the kingdom ahead of the self-righteous
- something as insignificant as a mustard seed is capable of producing shade for many
- God reigns in human hearts and in social structures; reversal of expectation abounds

For us today, as for those who met Jesus in the flesh, the reign of God is both present and yet to come. The church and our life in it are signs of the coming of God’s rule. In the Christian community we treasure experiences of generosity, mutual service, caring relationships among people of diverse background and interest, and grace-empowered new beginnings. However, we know that we have this treasure in earthen vessels; the church can never be identified simply with the reign of God. Even where the Christian community is faithful to God’s will, there may be divisions and failures that wound and disillusion people.

“Take up Your Cross”

More often than not, the world seeks and idolizes power that dominates and coerces. This power over others can lead to abuse and violence. In the New Testament, this is the power wielded by the “demons,” the energies of violation. Jesus came as God’s liberator to those oppressed by dominating and abusive power. He brought freedom through redemptive power, expressed in the message and deeds of a sovereign love. To those ready and able to welcome the reign of God, he offered the chance to participate in this redemptive work. The call came to adopt a lifestyle of self-giving service: “Take up your cross and follow me.”

A problem associated with the call to service is that some members of the Christian community have been made to hear the invitation in an unfair way. Women have been directed by religious and social standards to play helpmate and handmaiden to husbands and employers. Belief in suffering for the sake of others (e.g., aging parents, husbands, and children) has intensified this expectation. As a result many women have learned to accept denial of selfhood and even abuse as part of this role. Children have also been affected by the tendency to translate service into subjugation to those in power; too often this has led to child abuse.

God in Jesus Christ calls us to relieve and, wherever possible, to remove the causes of suffering. Suffering is not an intrinsic good. In his invitation to self-giving love, Jesus is not asking those who are already burdened unfairly by life’s circumstance to take on more. He is asking us to live by a power and love that are mutual in a world that worships oppressive forms of power and love. In a world of mutuality, grace abounds. Often the server is served—out of the strength and courage of those whose struggle is great.

The call to discipleship therefore must be seen as a call to affirm life and to struggle against life-denying forces. This struggle does not embrace martyrdom. It is a struggle of passionate commitment to a universal community of peace and justice. In some cases, this commitment to the realm of God will lead to costly witness and suffering, but such an outcome is neither intended nor sought.

As a case study on the meaning of suffering in the life of discipleship, consider this story of a young Peruvian woman. At age thirteen, Maria Elena Moyana moved with her family and other impoverished people to a stretch of desert land just south of the capital, Lima. So came into being another *pueblo joven*, or “young village.” As she matured, Maria Elena became politically active. First she worked with church-related youth groups, then as a promoter of public health, and, most important, with women’s organizations. She publicly opposed violent solutions to Peru’s problems and became a target of the Shining Path guerrillas.

“Friends,” she said, “revolution means affirmation of life, of the individual and collective dignity; it means a new ethic. Revolution does not mean death or coercion, nor submission or fanaticism. The revolution is new life. It means to fight for a just society of dignity and solidarity created by our own people, respecting internal democracy.” On February 14, 1992, Shining Path called for an “armed strike” in Lima, ordering the entire population to stay home under threat of execution. Maria Elena led a peace march in defiance of the strike that day. The next day she was gunned down by a masked woman, a member of the Shining Path, while attending a fiesta. Shining Path then dynamited her body as an act of “exemplary justice.”

Days later, at a service of communion in a small mining town 500 kilometers south of Lima, two women brought forward a large poster bearing Maria Elena’s picture. “Please explain your action,” said the priest. One of them replied, “Maria Elena is not dead. She lives in us and we shall continue her work.”

How would you describe Maria Elena’s discipleship? We may view her life as one of passionate love for her people and of resistance to the evil of violence. Would you also say that it included a willingness to suffer for

her community, and to suffer unto death, if need be? Or would you choose entirely different words and ideas to speak about the significance of her commitment to follow Jesus?

Here is another story. In the spring and summer, the Out of the Cold program of Toronto churches takes the form of a “street patrol.” Volunteers take coffee and sandwiches around to various places where homeless people sleep at night. Karen tells the story of her first shift, travelling with George, one of the key figures in the Out of the Cold program. They had stopped near two figures huddled under blankets on a heating grate.

George bent down to touch the shoulder of one of them, and Eddie came up swinging. He stopped in shock as he saw that it was George and immediately apologized. “Sorry, George. I have to take care of Ernie. You know, there’s weird people on the streets these days.”

After getting out the coffee and sandwiches, Karen had a chance to chat with Eddie. What she remembers best about the conversation is Eddie’s conviction, “Jesus sleeps with us every night. He’s not holed up in those churches, you know. He sleeps with us on the grates every night.”

Who is this Jesus who is present to all sorts and conditions of humanity, and to all ages?

IV CALLED TO BE THE CHURCH

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Followers of Jesus

OBJECTIVE: To consider what it means to be called to discipleship and to life in the community of the church when we live in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

Prepare opening worship.

- Decide how you will form groups for the Bible study and small group discussions.
- Prepare materials for the Bible study and small group discussions.
- You may want a flip chart and markers to record insights from the Bible study and small group discussions.
- You will need music resources for the closing.

ROOM SET-UP

Begin by having the participants sit in a circle.

Allow space for talking in twos and for small groups for the Bible study and discussion.

SESSION

INTRODUCTION (10 minutes; allow for check-in time) Opening remarks by the leader:

According to the Bible, an encounter with Jesus Christ usually proves to be a transforming experience. One result of the encounter is to become a disciple, or learner of Jesus, and then to unite oneself with the company of believers. The Christian church is made up of all those who are connected to Christ and to each other. Paul calls this “the body of Christ.” Our focus in this session is on the call to discipleship and to life in the community of the church. As we continue to follow our overall theme, we will deal with these concerns conscious that we live “in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour.”

WORSHIP (10 minutes)

Hymn: One of the following: “The Servant Song”; “Jesus calls us”; “We are called to follow Jesus.”

Scripture Passages: Mark 8:27–38 and/or Matthew 5:1–16

Story (tell the following story)

A former professor at the University of Toronto recalls the day when he was walking in front of Hart House on the campus. Walking toward him was a man wearing a sandwich board. On the front board was printed, in large letters, “A Fool for Christ.” The young professor felt critical of what seemed to him to be an intrusive display of naive faith. He hurried by the man. Curious, however, about what might be written on the back of the sandwich board, he stopped long enough to turn around and read the question, “Whose Fool Are You?”

Prayer on the theme of discipleship This may have been prepared by a member of the group.

JOURNAL TIME (10 minutes)

Reflect on the Scripture reading(s) and the story of the sandwich board. What does being a Christian mean for you?

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Share your response to the question above.

SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION (35 minutes)

Invite participants to consider one or more of the following sections in relation to Scripture passages and the background material. Either assign groups or form small groups by inviting participants to choose which theme they want to engage: A, B, or C.

A. THE NEIGHBOUR

The question of loving the neighbour comes into sharpest focus at Luke 10:29–37. One way to enliven a story well known to many would be to imagine the characters in a present day setting and retell, or dramatize the story. (According to Numbers 19:11–13, touching a dead body made one ritually unclean. This portion of the law may have prevented the priest and Levite from helping the victim.)

In the group, discuss the following questions:

How are the actions of the Samaritan different from the other two men?

What are some possible reasons the priest and Levite did not respond?

What can we learn from this parable about both the cost and the joy of discipleship?

What does it tell us about the role of the Christian church in the world? Reflect particularly on the relationship of our proclamation about Jesus to the experience of people who have been “mugged” by heartlessness and violence.

Other related Bible passages: Mark 1:14–15; John 4:1–42; Romans 12:1–21; Galatians 5:13–26; 1 Corinthians 12; Philippians 2:1–11.

B. THE KINGDOM OR REIGN OF GOD

The reign of God was central to Jesus’ preaching. Over the centuries countless books have been written on its significance. Perennial questions include

Is the reign meant to be understood as taking shape on earth or in heaven?

Is it here and now, or is it yet to come?

Whom is it meant to include? Faithful believers? Outcasts and sinners? The poor and oppressed?

Is it purely spiritual in nature, or does it also have political, economic, and social dimensions?

The answers to these questions can be “both/and” as well as “either/or,” and they continue to be debated. The answers are of critical importance. Our convictions about such questions help to shape how we live the Christian life as individuals and collectively in the church.

Bible passages helpful in exploring the questions include: Acts 4:32–37; Luke 14:15–24; Matthew 6:7–15, 25:31–46; John 4:1–42, 15:1–17; Romans 12:1–21; Galatians 3:27–28; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, 12:1–31; Colossians 2:12–15.

C. SERVANTHOOD AND SUFFERING

With further attention to Mark 8:31–38 and the discussion on suffering in the background material, share your response to the questions raised by the two stories.

Other Bible passages that you might want to consider are: Luke 9:21–27; Mark 9:33–37, 8:31–9:1; John 15:1–17; Romans 12:1–21; Galatians 5:13–26; I Corinthians 1:18–31, 4:10–13; Philippians 2:1–11.

SHARING BIBLE STUDY INSIGHTS (20 minutes)

Have each small group share its insights with the whole group.

JOURNAL TIME (10 minutes)

Reflect on the following questions:

In what way has your commitment to follow Jesus been a transforming experience in your life?

In what way has your commitment to follow Jesus made a difference in your participation in the life of your community of faith?

EVALUATION OF THIS SESSION (5 minutes)

CLOSING (10 minutes)

Close with prayer and a hymn. Or use several hymns on the theme of discipleship; reflect on their message and meaning.

Among possible hymn choices are: “Take up the cross”; “Just as I am”; “We are pilgrims” (The Servant Song); “Take my life”; “Jesus calls us”; “I am the light of the world”; “I feel the winds of God today”; “In loving partnership”; “Who would true valour see”; “Lift high the cross”; “Seek ye first the kingdom of God”; and “O breath of life.”

FOR THE NEXT SESSION ...

- Background material is provided as reading to be done by the participants before the next session. This will need to be copied and distributed.
- Ask the participants to read the following Scripture passages: Genesis 9:8–17; Psalm 148; Luke 12:16–34; Romans 8:18–23; Colossians 1:15–20.
- If you have it available, an article in the July/August 1996 *United Church Observer*, “Words for What We Believe,” will be useful for your group to read in preparation. It focuses on the recent change to “A New Creed” to include the phrase, “to live with respect in Creation.” This is also used as the title for the next session.
- Ask members of the group to bring symbols or pictures representing both the wonder of creation and humanity’s impact on it.

Background Material for Session V

TO LIVE WITH RESPECT IN CREATION

Events or developments in life can cause us to examine anew who we are, what we believe, and what our relationships and responsibilities are. Sometimes we emerge from these moments having reclaimed our beliefs and values. Sometimes they result in major shifts in our thinking. As members of a church, a country and a world community, we are being made aware that we may have polluted our planet beyond its ability to renew itself. This has left us with considerable soul-searching to do. An integral part of our theology today is reclaiming our responsibility toward Earth our home.

By action of the 34th General Council (1994) and its Executive, “A New Creed” (often called “The United Church Creed”) was amended to include the line, “to live with respect in Creation.”¹ Affirming the Biblical insight that “the earth is the Lord’s,” this new line recognizes our human responsibility before God to be good stewards within Creation. The specific wording which was chosen also reflects key Aboriginal teachings. Specifically, humans do not stand outside Creation but rather live within it, as within a womb. Accordingly, humans are to live with respect for all of life.

Genesis begins with a resounding affirmations of the Holy One as Creator. As Christians we have sought to emphasize the quality of human relationships. Humankind is also given responsibility for the care of the earth and its creatures: yet Christians have not understood their responsibility to protect creation from exploitation. In our present generation, all life on this planet is threatened—if not by nuclear destruction, then by the slower, yet as devastating, effects of environmental pollution and disruption. This escalating global crisis presses us to re-examine our theology; to identify the gaps that have allowed us as Christians to disregard, or even justify, the destruction of the earth. Perhaps we are being called to repent of our sin against Creation and to work for its healing. What actions might that require of the Christian community? How might that invite us to rethink our Christology and discern how Christ relates to all of Creation, as well as to humankind?

As people of Biblical tradition, we see ourselves as a covenant people. In the sign of the rainbow we recall God’s covenant with all creatures never to destroy the earth again (Genesis 9:8–17). We can remain complacent or hear the challenge to be alert. While we have God’s promise never to destroy the earth (at least by flood), the possibility exists that humans might do so.

Stan McKay is a minister of Cree ancestry and a former moderator of the United Church. He believes that locating “the Holy Land” exclusively in the Middle East does a grave injustice to the sacred land that is Turtle Island (an Aboriginal name for North America). He maintains that designating one distant land as holy has contributed to devaluing this continent. McKay asserts that blindness to the sacred nature of this land has resulted in the despoiling of the land and its original peoples. If this is true, then in our theology and actions we need to renew our relationship with the earth, the land, and all living creatures. According to Leviticus 25, the earth is included in the covenant of Sinai. The covenant clearly stated that there was to be a Sabbath rest for the land. God’s law for Israel, which includes the Ten Commandments, called for right relationship not only among people but also in relation to living creatures and the earth.

The gospels reveal Jesus to be deeply attentive to the wonder of the creation around him and its witness to God’s continued care. “In Jesus we see an affirmation of the small things of life. He drew inspiration from them in his teachings and ministry—a lily in the field, a stone, a child, a mustard seed, grains of wheat, fish and loaves of bread, pigs, spit and mud, the birds of the air.”²

Several New Testament texts focus on the relationship of Jesus Christ to Creation. These include John 1:1–5, Colossians 1:15–20 and Romans 8:18–25. In the Romans text, the Apostle Paul recognizes the need not only of humans but of the entire creation for renewal, for redemption. “The creation itself will be set free from its

bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.” Paul hears the cry of creation as an eager longing for liberty and fullness of life.

In many passages the Scripture speaks of the glory of God in the wonders of Creation. Jesus assures us little sparrows are precious in God’s sight (Matthew 10:29). The Aboriginal wisdom that all things in Creation are interconnected is now becoming obvious, whether to astronauts in space looking at the shining blue planet or to students of quantum physics, or to any, in Jesus’ words, “with eyes to see and ears to hear.” The Aboriginal saying “all my relations” recognizes that we are not only related within the global human family. We are related to all living things within Creation: trees, rocks, insects, earth, stars, wind, fire, and water. This pulsing web of life is a shimmering, seamless garment.

In Colossians, Jesus Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,” the One through whom all things were created, in whom all things hold together, and through whom all things are reconciled to God (1:15–20). Christ is inseparable from Creation, from all that is good and life-giving, restorative, and wonderful.

In Hebrew Scripture, salvation is seen primarily in terms of the whole people of Israel. In contrast, Christian tradition has tended to emphasize the salvation of the individual. Yet in an age when life on earth is at risk, both options may be too limited if they ignore the salvation/redemption of the earth. When we pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we need to remember that we need an earth in which God’s will may be done.

In an effort to alert us to the irreplaceable worth of the creation, some theologians are experimenting with new images, including that of the world as “God’s body.” As a metaphor, it is not to be understood literally. It invites us to see all things in God, and God in all things. While God is not reduced to these things, the Holy One may be seen to know the world, not just from outside, but intimately, just as we know our own bodies. Thus, the universe is filled with God’s presence and is “expressive of God’s very being.”³ From this point of view, to wound the creation is to wound God.

Critics of this metaphor are concerned that it tends to confuse the creature with the Creator, contrary to their understanding of the first two chapters of Genesis and of the first and second of the Ten Commandments. More traditional theological approaches have viewed the creation and all creatures as gifts of God. They were not to be seen as if they were part of the Creator. Traditional theological approaches also have seen a certain intimate quality in the God-world relationship, believing that God sustains the whole of Creation at every moment of its existence.

How can we make “living with respect in creation” an integral part of our faith journey as “the body of Christ” on this earth? Walking this path may be the only way to see more clearly the relationship between Christ and Creation.

¹ Everywhere that the word “Creation” appears without the definite article, it is capitalized to signify a proper name.

² Aruna Gnanadason. “Women, Economy and Ecology” in David Hallman, ed., *Ecotheology; Voices from South and North*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, p. 183.

³ Sallie McFague, *Models of God; Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987, p. 61. See also pp. 69-78.

V

TO LIVE WITH RESPECT IN CREATION



Christ and Creation

OBJECTIVE: To explore the relationship of Christ and Creation and what it might mean for followers of Jesus Christ to “live with respect in Creation.”

ADVANCE PREPARATION

- A number of objects and photographs will need to be gathered to enhance the suggested opening litany.
- Arrangements will need to be made to make the “Litany for Creation” available to participants (photo copies or flip chart).
- If you are using it, make yourself familiar with the reflection to be used before the Scripture reading.
- You may want a flip chart and markers to record insights from the small group discussions.
- You will need music resources for the closing.

ROOM SET-UP

Arrange a worship centre that includes chairs in a circle and a table at the centre. On the table, place (1) symbols representing aspects of creation, e.g., bowl of earth, jug of water, lighted candle, plant, stone, feather; and (2) pictures of both the beauty and wonder of creation and the impact of human habitation upon it, e.g., cities, agriculture, environmental damage.

Allow space for talking in twos and for small group discussion.

SESSION

INTRODUCTION (10 minutes; allow for check-in time) Opening remarks by leader:

In this session we continue our exploration of the saving significance of Jesus in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour. Our goal will be to explore the relationship between Jesus Christ and Creation, and what it might mean for followers of Jesus “to live with respect in Creation.”

WORSHIP (15 minutes)

Hymn: One of the following: “For the beauty of the earth”; “God who touches earth with beauty”; “As comes the breath of spring”; “Now the green blade rises.” (See also “Creation” in the Index of Topics in *Voices United*.) During the singing of the hymn invite people who have brought symbols or pictures to place them on the table.

Scripture Passage

Colossians 1:15–17. Before reading the passage you might want to try this reflection:

Invite participants to close their eyes. Ask them to imagine a thin, shining golden cord uniting them to one another, running out then from the circle, so that it can be seen to connect all people one to another. Imagine that it connects all creatures, humans to deer, to trees, to snow, to wind, to stars. Imagine further still that the cord is nothing other than the affirming, encouraging, gracious love we meet in Jesus Christ. The author of Colossians is saying something like this! (Read passage and then invite participants to open their eyes.)

LITANY FOR CREATION

- One: Creator, we give you thanks for the elements of earth, air, fire and water. We give you thanks for the life they sustain and symbolize.
- One: (A HANDFUL OF EARTH IS LIFTED UP.) We give you thanks for earth, for the bounty that flows from it, the astonishing regeneration every spring of flowers and fruit, grass and grain. We lament that earth is also exploited, taken from many, given to a few.
- All: We confess our sin against the earth. Guide us to seek life, we pray.
- One: (A FEATHER IS LIFTED UP.) Spirit of Life, we give you thanks for air and wind and breath, for sky and bird. We lament city smog, fumes of cars and industry, threatening to choke the breath of creation.
- All: We confess our sin against the air. Guide us to preserve life, we pray.
- One: (A CANDLE IS LIFTED UP.) Holy One, ever-burning love and pentecostal flame, we give you thanks for the fire that warms and for the sun that lights our days. We confess our lack of inner fire and passion for your will to be done; for your peace shared on earth.
- All: We confess our coldness of heart and apathy. Breathe into us your enlivening spirit, we pray.
- One: (A JUG OF WATER IS LIFTED AND POURED.) Fountain of Living Waters, we give you thanks for all that refreshes and cleanses, for rivers and lakes, rain and sea. We lament water pollution, erosion and flood.
- All: Forgive us when we have followed the easy course. May we become agents of healing, watering the earth with our sweat and tears. We pray for the healing of our beloved planet home. Amen.

FOCUSING EXERCISE AND JOURNAL TIME (10 minutes)

From among all the pictures and symbols of Creation, have each person choose one that speaks to her or him.

- (1) Reflect on why you chose this particular picture or symbol. How does it relate to your Christian faith?
- (2) In Christ “all things on heaven and earth were created” and in Christ “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:16–17). In this understanding, Christ is present everywhere in the universe. What light does this shed on how you see your picture or symbol?
- (3) In what ways are we called to help renew creation?

TALKING IN TWOS (15 minutes)

Share your responses to the questions above.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (15 minutes)

How would you describe the relationship between Christ and Creation? How do you see the line “to live with respect in Creation” in “A New Creed” as adding to our profession of Christian faith?

Reporting and Group Discussion (30 minutes)

Share insights from the small group discussions. Then discuss: “What are the implications of the relationship between Christ and Creation for our discipleship?”

EVALUATION (5 minutes)

CLOSING (10 minutes)

Sing “I see a new heaven”; “All praise to you”; “Creation’s Lord we give you thanks”; “When long before time” (“The Singer and the Song”); or another hymn celebrating creation and our relationship to it. Invite participants to share in a circle prayer.

FOR THE NEXT SESSION ...

- Background material is provided as reading to be done by the participants before the next session. This will need to be copied and distributed.
- Ask the participants to read the Scripture passages that are cited to support each approach that describes the relationship of Christianity to other faiths.
- Ask two readers to participate in the opening litany.
- For the closing worship, invite participants to bring some bread that reflects their own heritage, or another culture with which they have had some significant contact. Participants may also wish to bring symbols of other faiths and cultural groups for the session’s reflections.
- Give some thought to the circle prayer suggested in the closing.

Background Material for Session VI

WORKING IN US AND OTHERS

From the beginning the disciple community was surrounded by different cultures and faiths. This community made its way in that multicultural world and grew through its life and witness. The life of Christ, who lived and died and was raised, was present in the power of the Spirit in the life and deeds of the early church. From that life, the early Christians were empowered to serve God's world and to love their neighbour as they had been loved by Jesus Christ.

With the acceptance of Christianity by the reigning powers there came the temptation to allow those powers to reshape the gospel. As a result, Christians have a sadly chequered history in their attitudes towards their non-Christian neighbours. It was fitting that in 1986 the General Council of the United Church offered an apology to its Native members for the suffering that resulted from confusing European culture with the gospel. In November 1996, at the World Council of Churches' Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, the Conference affirmed, "the gospel is always expressed through culture." In other words, culture (where we live, language, customs, traditions, etc.) affects the way we experience and express the gospel. The way we experience and express the gospel also has its affect on culture.

How are we to understand the saving significance of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour? It would seem that we have two obligations in this matter: first, to affirm that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself; second, to love our neighbour as Christ loved us.

As we come in contact with neighbours, co-workers, or casual acquaintances who embrace other faiths, we see that the same capacity for good and ill that shapes us, shapes them. We are often struck by the "Christian" quality of their lives. How are we to understand our own convictions and commitment to Jesus Christ in relation to them? Can we proclaim God's salvation in Jesus Christ in a way that respects the convictions of those whose faith is different? Can we understand Christ in a way that values other religions and God's work in them? When we say, "Jesus is Saviour," does it mean a clear line is drawn between who is saved and who is not?

There are many ways to describe the relationship of Christianity to other faiths. Here are four approaches (listed alphabetically). You may find that no one approach fits your own understanding.

EXCLUSIVIST APPROACH

- the only path to God and salvation is an explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord
- Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity
- God's revelation and saving work in the incarnate Christ possesses finality in determining the destiny of all creatures
- this approach proclaims the importance of membership in the Christian community
- this approach believes that evangelistic mission is vital
- those who do not make an explicit confession of faith in Jesus Christ may be excluded from the love and ultimate purposes of God
- texts such as John 14:6 and Acts 4:12 are cited in support of this position

INCLUSIVIST APPROACH

- the reconciliation of the world takes place uniquely through Jesus Christ
- the saving work of Christ is essential for peace with God
- there is room for the salvation of those who make no explicit profession of faith in Christ
- grace is experienced and Christ is present wherever people experience the goodness of God's creative love and redemptive mercy

- Jesus Christ is the Wisdom/Word through which all things were made and through whom all things will be restored and perfected
- the purpose of evangelistic mission is not so much to save as to enlighten
- John 1:1–5 and Colossians 1:15–20 are cited in support of this position

PLURALIST APPROACH

- there are many paths to God
- there is no absolute “court of appeal” by which to evaluate the different paths
- Jesus is the way for Christians, but not necessarily the path for all
- no single religious tradition can speak with finality about God/spiritual truth/ultimate truth
- our relationship with other faiths is to be one of respectful dialogue
- co-operation with other faiths is for the sake of the common global good
- Isaiah 55:8 and I Corinthians 13:12 are cited in support of this position

TRANSFORMATIONIST APPROACH

- no single religion has a monopoly on truth
- from its beginning, Christianity has been a constantly evolving expression of faith
- respectful dialogue and mutual learning may lead to transformation for all participants
- Christian faith may be transformed by such encounters in ways that we cannot imagine
- Christians can expect to experience Christ in their encounter with people of other faiths
- Mark 7: 24–30 and Acts 10:1–16 are cited in support of this position

The four approaches above are not exhaustive. Participants may find themselves in agreement with some aspects of several of the approaches. You are encouraged not to be limited by these approaches, but to identify those aspects that fit with your understanding of Christian faith. To offer an example, the 1989 San Antonio Conference on World Mission and Evangelism (sponsored by the World Council of Churches) took a position that might be characterized as mid-way between the “Exclusivist” and “Inclusivist” approaches and which avoids final definition. The Conference said:

We cannot point to any other way to salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God... We are well aware that these convictions and the ministry of witness stand in tension with what we have affirmed about God being present in and at work in people of other faiths; we appreciate this tension; we do not attempt to resolve it.

VI

WORKING IN US AND OTHERS

.....

Christ in the World

OBJECTIVE: To examine the relationship between Christ and other faiths and what it means for followers of Jesus Christ to love our neighbour in a world of diverse peoples and convictions.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

- You will need music resources for both the opening and the closing.
- To aid in the opening worship reflection, you may want to gather symbols from each of the previous sessions for the worship centre.
- A litany is provided for the opening worship. You will need to make it available to participants.
- Prepare the final prayer or develop a process for inviting participants to share in the final prayer.
- You will need to make copies of the response sheet available.
- You will need to make copies of “*A New Creed*”. (inside front cover)
- This session may require more than 2 hours if all of the suggestions are followed in the worship sections.

ROOM SET-UP

Chairs in a circle with a worship table in the centre. On the table can be placed the symbols from each of the previous sessions and the bread which has been brought by the participants.

SESSION

INTRODUCTION (5 minutes) Opening remarks by the leader:

During our time together we have considered the meaning for Christians of the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. We have done this from a variety of perspectives. The question before us now is, what does it mean for followers of Jesus to love our neighbour in a world of diverse peoples and convictions? In preparation for this discussion of the relationship between Christ and other faiths, we will revisit through worship our explorations to this point.

WORSHIP (10 minutes)

Choose a hymn from one of the previous sessions.

Litany

Reader 1. We began by exploring a variety of images of Jesus and examining the convictions found in these images.

Reader 2. "... and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?'" (Mark 8:27)

All: We proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

Reader 1. We examined Biblical stories of Jesus Christ as they relate to the Christ we encounter in day to day living and the Jesus we encounter in the Bible.

Reader 2. "When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'" (Luke 4: 16-19)

All: Jesus, the Word made flesh!

Reader 1. We explored our understanding of the word "salvation" and what is meant when Jesus is named "Saviour"—the transforming work of Jesus.

Reader 2. "On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul." (Acts 16: 13–14)

All: Jesus, reconciling and making new!

Reader 1. We considered what it means to be called to discipleship and to life in the community of the church when we live in a pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour.

Reader 2. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (I Corinthians 12:27)

All: We are called to be the church . . . to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil ...

Reader 1. We explored the relationship of Christ and Creation and what it might mean for followers of Jesus Christ to "live with respect in Creation".

Reader 2. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible" (Col. 1: 15–16)

All: We are called . . . to live with respect in Creation.

Reader 1. In our time together now we will examine the relationship between Christ and other faiths and what it means for followers of Jesus to love our neighbour in a world of diverse peoples and convictions.

Reader 2. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matthew 22:39)

All:

O God,
enlarge my heart
that it may be big enough to receive the greatness of your love.
Stretch my heart
that it may take into it all those who, with me around the world, believe in Jesus Christ.
Stretch it
that it may take into it all those who do not know him, but who are my responsibility because I know him.
And stretch it
that it may take in all those who are not lovely in my eyes, and whose hands I do not want to touch;
through Jesus Christ, my Saviour. Amen.

JOURNAL TIME (10 minutes)

Reflect on what questions, ideas or images have remained with you from the last 5 sessions.

TALKING IN TWOS (10 minutes)

- a) Share insights from your reflections.
- b) As we begin to consider what it means to love our neighbours when they are of different faiths and cultures, share some of your own experience with people of other faiths and cultures.

BIBLE STUDY IN TWOS (10 minutes)

Isaiah 25:6–9

How does this passage relate to those that you explored as you looked at each of the four approaches in the background material?

JOURNAL TIME (15 minutes)

Before proceeding into this journal time and discussion, provide an opportunity for questions of clarification, to ensure that people have a clear understanding of the four approaches.

- 1) Decide which of the approaches outlined in the background material comes closest to your own approach, and describe why you have chosen it.
- 2) Record the approach you least favour, and why. If you find none of the approaches helpful, describe your own.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION (15 minutes)

Share responses recorded in your journals, as you feel comfortable. Remember to listen with respect as people share different views on this subject.

GROUP DISCUSSION (20 minutes)

Invite feedback from the small group discussion. Then ask, “How do we live as Christians in this pluralistic world in which we are called to love our neighbour?” Encourage the group to consider what specific and concrete actions this might involve for you as individuals and as a community.

RESPONSE SHEET (10 minutes)

Provide time to fill in the final response sheet. Then discuss briefly your overall impressions of the study, and ideas about where to go from here. Will you share reflections with your congregation?

CLOSING WORSHIP (15 minutes)

Prayer (gathering together the six sessions)

Affirm together A New Creed

Sharing Bread -Share informally, with joy and thanksgiving, the variety of ethnic breads that participants have brought, keeping in mind the traditions, experiences and learning they represent.

Hymn: One of the following: “Praise with Joy”; “In Loving Partnership”; or “Walls that Divide.”

Blessing

Glossary of Terms as Used in This Resource



ABORIGINAL. Having to do with the indigenous or original people of a land; otherwise known as First Nations, Natives, InnuIt, and Indians.

ANALOGY. A comparison that uses an image from one setting to point to the truth in another.

ATONEMENT. The action of making peace with God through a costly or sacrificial offering.

C.E. Common Era

CHRISTOLOGY. Christian teaching about Jesus as the Christ.

CONDEMNATION. The declaration of guilt and the passing of sentence on an offender.

CONFESSION. “Confession” is often used to mean confession of sin; it can also mean, and is so used in this resource, a confession of faith; that is, a public declaration of faith.

CORPORATE. Having to do with the whole body of the church, or the community of faith, rather than with individuals in it.

COVENANT. A solemn agreement, with promises and penalties attached, binding God and human agents together.

CULPABLE. Guilty; responsible for wrong-doing.

CULTURE. The inter-weaving of language, geography, customs, history, art, and traditions which shapes a distinct people.

DESPOILING. Forcibly taking from others what belongs to them.

DIALOGUE. Sustained discussion with someone whose beliefs are different from one’s own.

DOMINION. Rule or authority over a territory, or the territory itself.

ENLIGHTENMENT. The emergence in eighteenth-century Europe of the point of view that only reason should rule in human affairs and that any appeal to supernatural powers is superstitious by nature.

ESTRANGEMENT. The state of being separated from someone with whom a good relationship once existed.

EXALTATION. The elevation of Jesus Christ, after his resurrection, to the right hand of God.

EXODUS. The action of going out; in the Bible, the departure of Israel from Egypt through God’s intervention.

GODSELF. This pronoun avoids the use of the gender-specific “herself” and himself” in reference to the deity.

GRATUITOUSLY. Freely.

HEBREW SCRIPTURES. The biblical books written in Hebrew; those books making up what Christians call the Old Testament.

INTEGRAL. Essential.

INTRINSIC. Belonging to something by its very nature.

JUSTIFY (justification). To declare just or free from accusation and condemnation. (The state of being justified.)

MARTYRDOM. The action of suffering willingly for the sake of one's faith.

MEDIATOR. The one through whom a relationship is restored.

MUTUALITY. A relationship of shared participation and responsibility.

ONLY-BEGOTTEN. Describes the unique relationship of Jesus Christ as the only Son of God.

OSTRACISM. The action of deliberately excluding someone from community life.

PARADOXICAL. Describing a single truth arising from two apparently opposite points of view.

PASSION. The name given to Jesus' suffering and death.

PLURALISM/PLURALISTIC. A form of society in which many groups maintain independent traditions and points of view.

PROPITIATION. An offering made to restore an individual or group to God's good favour.

RANSOM. The price paid to free a slave or hostage.

RECIPROCAL. Having to do with relationships that are mutual, shared, showing a balanced give-and-take.

REDEMPTION. The act of buying back, of ransoming a hostage.

RECONCILIATION. The restoration of peaceful relations.

RELATIONAL. Having to do with the inter-action of persons.

REPENTANCE. Turning away from wrong-doing and beginning to live a new way.

SABBATH REST. The command of God for humans and animals to avoid work on the seventh day, and for humans to let land lie fallow in the seventh year.

SACRIFICE/SACRIFICIAL. A costly offering to God.

SECULAR. Without relationship to God or the holy.

SOLIDARITY. Commitment to share the cause of another.

SOVEREIGN. Referring to an unfettered and complete freedom to act (adjective).

TEN COMMANDMENTS. The ten rules of life given to Moses by God; found at Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

UNMERITED. Undeserved.

VOCATION. The work to which one is called by God.

Also, although the words are not necessarily used with a strict consistency, the following definitions may be helpful:

JESUS. Usually referring to the historical Jesus and his human nature.

JESUS CHRIST/JESUS THE CHRIST. A contraction of the Christian conviction that Jesus is the Christ (“Messiah”, or anointed one, of God). Both expressions usually indicate a specifically Christian understanding of the person of Jesus, pointing to both his human and divine natures and to his reconciling work. Jesus Christ is the one who lived and died and lives again, and through whom we have communion with God.

CHRIST. Usually refers to the eternal and pre-existent Word/Wisdom of God, and to the presence of the risen One.

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OTHER RESOURCES FOR GROUP STUDY:

- “Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church-Jewish Relations Today.” (A photocopied study document available from the Inter-Church Inter-Faith Relations Committee, General Council Office) 1997.
- Kerygma: The Bible and Theology*, Book One, Themes 1 and 2 (Christology). Pittsburgh: Kerygma Programme, 1993.
- “Mending the World: An Ecumenical Vision for Healing and Reconciliation” (A photocopied study document available from the Inter-Church Inter-Faith Relations Committee, General Council Office) 1997.
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