

YOUTH GROUP GUIDE

The

GOD

We Can Know

Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus



ROB FUQUAY

YOUTH GROUP GUIDE

The
GOD
We Can Know

Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus

WHITNEY BOOTH

 UPPER
ROOM BOOKS®
NASHVILLE

The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus

Youth Group Guide

© 2014 Upper Room Books. All rights reserved.

Upper Room®, Upper Room Books®, and design logos are trademarks owned by The Upper Room®, a ministry of GBOD®, Nashville, Tennessee. All rights reserved.

Upper Room Books website: books.upperroom.org

Cover design: Marc Whitaker / MTWdesign

Interior typesetting and design: PerfecType, Nashville, TN

Cover photos: Jonathan Woon (sheep, grapes)
Shutterstock.com (bread)

At the time of publication all websites referenced in this book were valid. However, due to the fluid nature of the internet some addresses may have changed, or the content may no longer be relevant.

Scripture quotations not otherwise identified are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

See www.TheGodWeCanKnow.com for accompanying children’s and adult guides and other supporting materials for this worship and study series.

PDF #31

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Week 1. Knowing the Great “I AM”	5
Week 2. “I Am the Bread of Life”: Knowing God’s Satisfaction	9
Week 3. “I Am the Light of the World”: Knowing God’s Guidance	14
Week 4. “I Am the Good Shepherd”: Knowing God’s Care	19
Week 5. “I Am the True Vine”: Knowing God’s Power	23
Week 6. “I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”: Knowing God’s Way	27
Week 7. “I Am the Resurrection and the Life”: Knowing God’s Possibilities	32

INTRODUCTION

This youth group guide is part of a seven-session worship and study series called *The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus* with pastor and author Rob Fuquay. This guide provides instructions for seven weekly sessions for youth based on this resource. This worship and study series takes participants to the Holy Land to discover deeper meanings of Jesus’ “I Am” statements. The DVD includes seven brief videos featuring Fuquay’s travels to the places Jesus lived out his ministry. Looking closely at Jesus’ life helps us more fully see and experience the God we can know.

Each session includes viewing a video with discussion questions, in addition to experiencing a spiritual practice together as a group. As you lead this study, you will be more a facilitator than a teacher. Prepare for leading each week by becoming familiar with the material beforehand and by attending to your own spiritual disciplines during the week.

The sessions are designed for 45 minutes (the first session is a bit longer), but additional options are included if you have more time. The group guide is flexible and can be used during Sunday school, Wednesday night, Youth Group time, or at other times when small groups meet.

Each session includes instructions for:

- Gathering and check-in
- Opening prayer and scripture
- Viewing video and leading discussion
- Group spiritual practice
- Closing litany
- Optional extended-time activities

Be sure you are prepared each week with *The God We Can Know* DVD and a TV and DVD player on which to show it. Look through materials lists or for any special preparations needed for each session.

We recommend ordering enough copies of **devozine** for each member of your youth group to read daily during the course of this study—and beyond. **devozine**® is a **devotional** lifestyle magazine (devozine for short!) designed just for youth and published by The Upper Room® in Nashville, Tennessee. **devozine** is written by young people and by adults who work with them and love them. See the ad at the back of this guide for ordering instructions.

You can access this guide both on the DVD and on the website at www.TheGodWeCanKnow.com, where you will find other helpful resources for this worship and study series.



WEEK 1

Knowing the Great “I AM”



Introductory Meeting

The objective of this introductory session is focused on building group familiarity, establishing a covenant, and establishing the rhythm of the future weeks' sessions.

Materials

Bible
Whiteboard, newsprint, or poster board to write on
Markers
Paper and pens for “I am” statements
Copies of closing litany

Gathering/Check-In (15 MINUTES)

For the first week, we'll take longer to check in because it will be good for the group members to get to know one another. In future gatherings, we'll focus on one of these check-in questions to keep some consistency between weeks throughout the study.

Go around the table or circle, and invite everyone to answer the following questions:

- Name
- Grade/School
- Favorite Food (or favorite something else)
- Mad Libs: “I am . . . (noun)”—something that describes you, or how you are feeling right now, other than your name! (*Note: If you want to give a little bit more time for each person to think about this, it might help to have paper and markers for them to take time and write it and share that way, so that no one gets put on the spot.*)

During this exercise, the leader will want to set a sincere example. Some options to get you thinking would be “I am an ear” if you feel like you are always listening to other people or “I am a ping-pong ball” because you feel like you are always bouncing around from one thing to the next. Encourage them to get creative, but emphasize that this doesn’t have to be an incredibly deep or personally revealing image. It *is* just the first week, after all, and we are just getting started.

Possible script to explain this (leader may read aloud or improvise this section):

Maybe you’ve learned about this in English class, but there are expressions called similes and metaphors. Both of these are devices that we use to compare two things to each other. Similes are comparisons that typically use “like” or “as” to draw the similarity, while metaphors make a more direct connection. For instance, a simile would be “Life is like a roller coaster” because it compares the two without implying that life is actually a roller coaster. A metaphor makes this comparison differently, saying “Life is a roller coaster.” We know that life is not exactly a roller coaster, speaking literally, but we understand what it means when someone says that.

In the New Testament, Jesus speaks in a lot of interesting, cryptic, and sometimes confusing ways—especially when he’s talking about himself. Specifically in the Gospel of John, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples with these “I am . . .” statements. We are going to get at each of these in greater detail in the coming weeks, but you may be familiar with some of them—“I am the Bread of Life.” “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

At this point, you may want to start laying out the structure of each session as we move through it this first time, saying something along these lines:

After we’ve gathered each week, we’ll do a quick check-in to hear about your week and voice any prayer concerns or joys; then we’ll move into our weekly ritual.

Opening Prayer/Scripture (10 MINUTES)

The youth are always invited and encouraged to lead this opening prayer, but it is a good idea to have a backup prayer ready to go; so this is a good starting point. (It’s best to keep it simple and approachable so that the members of the group will see that this is something they can do too.)

Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite the person to have the text ready to read after the prayer and “I am” statements. This week, it’s from the Old Testament: Exodus 3:1-14

Dear God, thank you for bringing us all here to this place. Help us to open our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our spirits to understand who you are and to know you. Please be with us as we draw near to you and closer to each other. In your son’s holy name, we pray. Amen.

After the opening prayer, invite the group members to go around the circle again and share the “I am” statement they wrote about themselves. This will serve as a weekly litany but will change from week to week in most cases, depending on their weekly responses to the Mad Libs question.

Once the last person has said his or her “I am” statement, read the scripture for the week. This should make a nice connection between identifying ourselves and one another in this manner and the way that Jesus identifies himself to the disciples.

And then the scripture reader reads Exodus 3:1-14.

Video/Discussion (10–12 MINUTES)

Introducing the video: This video clip introduces us to Rob Fuquay, the writer of the book *The God We Can Know*. Rob takes us to Israel, to a spot near the Dead Sea, to talk about Moses’ meeting God in the wilderness. He also interviews Dennis Sasso, senior rabbi of Congregation Beth-El Zedeck in Indianapolis, Indiana, to help us understand why Jesus used images that related to his heritage and ancient Jewish tradition. (Play the track for Week 1.)

Discussion Questions

(You will probably not have time to discuss all of these questions; choose the questions you wish to use in the time allotted.)

1. What would you do if a burning bush (or any kind of inanimate object) began speaking to you . . . as God?
2. Have you ever suspected that God might be talking to you?
3. How do you think this story about God and Moses connects with Jesus?
4. What do you think of God’s response of “I AM WHO I AM”? What is God saying?
5. Do you think we learn more about God with this cryptic answer than we would have learned if the answer had just been “God”? Why is this? What is the difference between these two types of answers?

Practice (10 MINUTES)

This week’s practice centers on creating a covenant that the group will agree to follow during this journey together over the next seven weeks. Typically, we’ll be focusing on a spiritual practice/activity to do as a group each week. This week, however, our activity is more of an administrative task to get the group started on the right foot.

Because we'll be spending a lot of time together, we want to establish some ground rules and make sure everyone understands how we will be as a group for the next six weeks.

Some questions to get the group started:

- What are we hoping to accomplish in this group/study?
- What will we do if there is a disagreement?
- Other important aspects: being on time, taking it seriously, no cell phones, keeping things confidential, and so forth. . .

Write something of a promise to one another—hopefully with a theme of promising to help one another know God more fully.

Closing Litany (3 MINUTES)

Provide copies, and have one of the group members read the “One” statements, with the full group reading the “All” responses in unison.

One: Just as God spoke to Moses, God wants to speak to us. Let us open our hearts to God who wants to be known and who says,

All: **“I AM WHO I AM.”**

One: When life pressures us to care more for things than for God, remember that Jesus said,

All: **“I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”**

One: When we feel puzzled about which choices are right, we can ask for guidance from the one who said,

All: **“I am the Light of the World.”**

One: When we feel vulnerable and lost, we can find comfort in knowing that we are continuously being sought by the one who said,

All: **“I am the Good Shepherd. Come to me.”**

One: When we feel powerless and weary, we can find power offered to us by the one who said,

All: **“I am the True Vine. Abide in me.”**

One: When we wonder who's in and who's out with God, we can find reassurance in the grace embodied in Jesus who welcomed all, saying,

All: **“I am the Way. Follow me.”**

One: When we face loss and pain, we can find hope in the one who promised us renewed and abundant life, saying,

All: **“I am the Resurrection and the Life. Live in me.”**

WEEK 2

“I Am the Bread of Life”: Knowing God’s Satisfaction

The objective of this session is to ask the question “What is enough?” and to explore how God meets our needs. We will also discuss the practice of fasting and identify ways to engage more deeply with a practice that we hear about more during the season of Lent.

Materials

Bible

Whiteboard or newsprint/poster and markers (for extended session)

Gathering/Check-In (10 MINUTES)

Remind the group of the routine we began to develop in the first session and help them remember by walking through a rough agenda of how we will be spending our time together today.

Go around the table or circle and invite everyone to answer the following questions:

- Name
- Hi/Lo—Share a high point and a low point in your life from the week. Remind participants to pay attention to one another’s high and low points so that they can join one another in celebration and in prayer for the difficult moments.

- Mad Libs: “I am . . . (noun)”—something that describes you, or how you are feeling right now, other than your name! Remind them that this doesn’t have to be something original each week, nor does it need to be the same.

Invite participants to share any specific ways, other than the high and lows that they may have shared, so they can be in prayer for one another in the coming week.

Opening Prayer/Scripture (5 MINUTES)

Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite that person to have the text ready to read (not now). This week, it’s from John 6:27-35.

Invite a volunteer to pray (or use this prayer):

Dear God, thank you for bringing us all here today to learn more about you through your son Jesus. Help us to remember that even when we feel like we don’t do enough to honor you, you accept us just as we are because you made us and love us. Let us be constant reminders to each other that we are enough. As we begin this time together, we invite you to join us in this place, making your presence so evident in the community we share. In your name we pray. Amen.

After the opening prayer, ask the reader to read today’s scripture from John 6:27-35.

Video/Discussion (15 MINUTES)

Possible script for introducing the video: This video segment is filmed near the Mount of Beatitudes, in Capernaum, and on the bank of the Jordan River. Rob will be talking about the context of Jesus’ words “I am the Bread of Life.” Listen for the Old Testament background about God’s providing manna to the Hebrews and for how Rob connects the Hebrews’ experience with Jesus’ words. (Play the track for Week 2.)

Discussion Questions

(You will probably not have time to discuss all of these questions; choose the questions you wish to use in the time allotted.)

1. When you’re *really* hungry, what food can you always count on to hit the spot and take care of that craving?
2. Why do you think the story about Jesus’ miracle of feeding that huge crowd with just a few loaves and fishes is important enough to make it into all four Gospels? What does this tell you about Jesus?
3. Can you relate to the disciples’ need for more proof from Jesus? Have you ever felt like, even though you were given more than enough yesterday, you still need more today? In what ways do you experience this feeling of “never enough”?
4. What does it mean that Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life”? How can Jesus be this source of satisfaction for us?
5. In what ways do we have *so much more* than enough?

6. In what ways are you still hungry for more? What kinds of things do you want or need that cannot be met by bread but instead require the Bread of Life?
7. How does experiencing Jesus as “the Bread of Life” help us to know God more fully?

Practice (10 MINUTES)

This week, we’ll be exploring a practice that is common around the season of Lent—fasting.

Fasting

(Please be mindful in this discussion that you are working with an age group in which eating disorders are not uncommon. We are not promoting unhealthy habits, but you are encouraged to be mindful of this tendency for young people to struggle with body image to a point of starvation. This practice will mention the possibility of giving up a specific favorite food but will in no way advocate for giving up food in general for a certain amount of time.)

Possible script for Leader:

The word *fasting* may sound like a more extreme version of the type of sacrifice that we’re going to be discussing as this week’s spiritual practice. Fasting is a spiritual practice of living without, or making a sacrifice of, something that is usually a pretty common staple to your life. By intentionally going without something that is part of your daily routine, it is easier to focus your attention on God. When people of faith fast as a spiritual practice, we do so with the hope that when we notice the absence of what we’ve given up, we’ll fill that empty space with prayer, and focus our attention on God.

It is easy to slip into routines when we begin to take our many privileges for granted. Taking a step back and considering our twenty-first-century lifestyles in comparison with our brothers and sisters living in underdeveloped nations, or even those living in extreme poverty right around the corner from us, may give us a little more perspective on what is actually *enough* and how that word means different things to different people. When Jesus tells the disciples that he is “the Bread of Life”—the kind of bread that will never let us be hungry again—he takes material needs off the table completely. Sure, we all need certain things in order to survive, but by pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones of having as much as we want, we begin to understand this deeper hunger that only Jesus can satisfy.

There are many ways to fast. The point—rather than proving that you can go without something for a certain amount of time—is to create noticeable space in your life and invite God to come in and fill that space. Keep this in mind as you explore options for fasting.

If your group is using this study during Lent, encourage youth to embrace a “fast” of sorts for the next five weeks leading up to Easter Sunday. If this study is going on during a different time of the year, there is more flexibility in when you encourage the group to try this practice. It might be good to invite them to take on this fasting practice for the week until the group meets again. This is up to the leader and the group to decide how they choose to do this practice; but be mindful that we have committed to be active participants and that committing to a practice for the week should be taken seriously so that everyone can share in this experience.

Some options:

- Fasting from social media (giving up Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other forms of social media)
- Fasting from caffeine, sweets, a specific nonessential food that you eat every day
- Fasting from background noise (turning off the radio in the car, TV while you're doing homework . . . in order to welcome God into the silence)
- Fasting from shopping
- Taking on a specific daily practice instead of giving one up

(Adapted from *Alive Now*—<http://alivenow.upperroom.org/2011/04/11/fasting/>)

It's tempting to view fasting as a good excuse to give up a habit or food that's bad for you anyway. Often, the things that people give up for Lent are bad habits that they're already trying to kick. Fasting is not a self-improvement practice in the way that New Year's resolutions set out goals to be healthier or more disciplined. Fasting is a means of removing a distraction and inviting God to enter in and fill that space where you might be missing something. If you were to give up drinking coffee or soda as a part of your fast, you might notice every morning that a part of your routine was absent. When your body notices it later in the day, you might really be craving a cup. In the same way that your brain and body are struggling from the absence of the caffeine, you might be more intentional about taking a bite from the Bread of Life and allowing a moment of prayer with God to fill that space.

Also, if a fast involves not spending money on certain items, you might consider spending that money more intentionally elsewhere. Perhaps if group members choose to give up something they buy regularly, you can choose to collect the money you would have spent and make a donation to a local charity or non-profit organization together.

Discuss

Some questions to get started:

1. What are you considering letting go of as part of a fast?
2. How might fasting as a spiritual practice help you to understand more fully what Jesus meant when he said, "I am the Bread of Life"?

Closing Litany (5 MINUTES)

Invite a volunteer from the group to read the "One"—or maybe even pass the guide around and allow different persons to share the responsibility of reading the different lines of this prayer. After each line, instruct the entire group to respond with: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."

One: When we feel hungry for more of something—even when we're not sure what that something is, we can remember that Jesus said,

All: "I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."

- One: When we feel distracted by other means of fulfillment in the world, help us to remember that Jesus said,
All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”
- One: When we find ourselves feeling inadequate or incomplete in our daily lives, remind us that we fill ourselves up on Jesus’ sustaining words,
All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”
- One: When we look around at friends and strangers, assessing how we measure up to others, help us to remember that we are enough and are satisfied by God’s grace when we hear Jesus say,
All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.”
- One: When we worry that the satisfaction we have now may one day run out, let us rest in the truth and fullness of Jesus’ promise,
All: “I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry.” Amen.

Optional Activity for Extended Session

Psalm 46:10—“Be still, and know that I am God!” prayer

As a way of practicing that God is enough to satisfy the needs of our hearts, pray this verse from Psalm 46 in a way that brings to life the struggle of stillness, of trusting that God will continue to be enough for us, while also reminding us of the comfort we can find in that satisfaction.

Invite the group to pray this verse in unison. It may be helpful to say it aloud together a few times just to make sure everyone knows it. Write it up on a board or poster in the room.

Start with the entire verse, then the next time it is said, say fewer of the words, as shown below. Read each phrase slowly, leaving at least 30 seconds of silence between each phrase, to allow time to reflect on that phrase.

- Be still, and know that I am God!
- Be still, and know that I am.
- Be still, and know.
- Be still.
- Be.
- Amen.

Discuss

- Which prayer line contained the words that most challenged you?
- Which prayer do you need most today?

Feel free to repeat this practice for a couple of times.

WEEK 3

“I Am the Light of the World”: Knowing God’s Guidance

The objective of this session is to demonstrate the presence of God in our midst through the metaphor of light. The spiritual practice creates an opportunity to grow closer as a group through an invitation to share personal stories of closeness to or distance from God, as well as prayer for one another in those places.

Materials

Bible

1 candle

Enough aluminum foil, cut into 12" x 12" square sheets, for each person to have one square

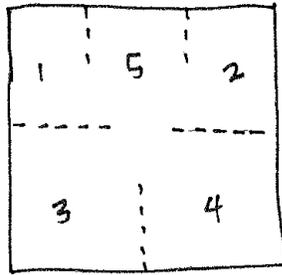
Lighter or matches

Do this ahead of time:

See diagram on next page for making cuts in the right place for the sheets of aluminum foil. Have diagram handy for the group practice with the “Tin Person,” so that each person can create his or her own Tin Person at that time.

HOW TO MAKE A TIN PERSON

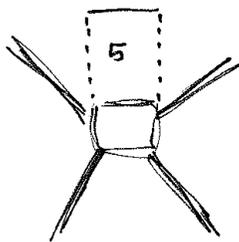
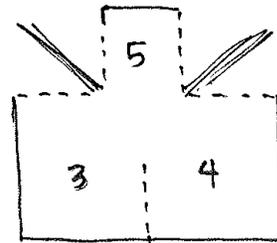
start with a square piece of aluminum foil



cut or tear it on the dotted lines

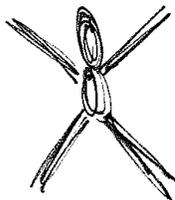
Sections 1 & 2 will be the arms. 3 & 4 will be the legs. 5 will be your tin person's head.

Crumple & roll 1 & 2 so they look like arms extending from the center of the sheet.



Do the same with 3 & 4,

then roll 5 down to make a head and mold the center to be the torso...



and there you have it!

Gathering/Check-In (10 MINUTES)

Go around the table or circle and invite everyone to answer the following questions:

- Name
- Hi/Lo—Share a high point and a low point in your life from the week. Remind participants to pay attention to one another's high and low points so that we can join each other in celebration and in prayer for the difficult moments.
- Mad Libs: "I am . . . (noun)"—something that describes you, or how you are feeling right now, other than your name! (Note: If you want to give a little bit more time for each person to think about this, it might help to have paper and markers for them to take time and write it and share that way, so no one gets put on the spot.)

Invite participants to share any specific ways, other than the highs and lows that they may have shared, so they can be in prayer for one another in the coming week.

Opening Prayer/Scripture (5 MINUTES)

Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite that person to have the text ready to read. This week, the verses are John 7:2, 14 and 8:12.

Invite a volunteer to open the group with prayer (or use this prayer).

Loving God, we come together today, rejoicing and dancing in the light that you shine on us that allows us to see you, know you, and find our way to you through your son Jesus. We know that you are with us in this place. Help us to open our eyes to see you, our ears to hear your Word, and our hearts to know your love. In your name we pray. Amen.

Invite the scripture reader to begin this week's passage.

Video/Discussion (15 MINUTES)

Introducing the video: This video segment is filmed in Jerusalem at the time of Sukkot, or the Festival of Booths. Rob reminds us of what happened during Sukkot in the Hall of Hewn Stones, where the Jewish Sanhedrin met. Rob will be talking about our tendency to forget God in both the comfortable and the dark places of our lives. (Play the track for Week 3.)

Discussion Questions

(You will probably not have time to discuss all of these questions; choose the questions you wish to use in the time allotted.)

1. What do the images and clips of modern celebrations of the Festival of Booths/Sukkot teach you about the significance of these earlier festivals and the Night of Grand Illumination?
2. Is it significant that the Sanhedrin met on this night to plot Jesus' death? Why?

3. What comes to mind when you think of things happening in dark, closed-off spaces? What role does the darkness play? (Think about movies and literature where the setting is dark—why is the darkness significant? What does it convey to us?)
4. Can you think of places or situations that seem overwhelmingly “dark” (global health, issues of social justice, and so forth, that may seem bleak or hopeless)?
5. Have you ever felt afraid in the dark? Think about what actually frightens you about darkness.
6. Why is it significant that Jesus tells the people, “I am the Light of the World”? What does light offer them?
7. How would Jesus’ light impact those dark places we mentioned earlier? How can we get that light to shine there?

Practice (10 MINUTES)

This week we’ll be doing an exercise together called “Tin Person.”

Tin Person

It may help to relocate to a circle on the floor, or be seated around a table where everyone can access the center of the circle. Be sure to have the diagram that shows how to fold the Tin Person from the sheet of aluminum foil.

Everyone should have a single square sheet of aluminum foil with cuts made, as described at the top of this lesson. We are creating a figure of a person out of the tin foil, so the top section in the middle will be the head, the top two sides will be crumpled down to create two arms, and the bottom corners will become the legs.

Give everyone enough time to create his or her Tin Person. When everyone is ready, try to soften the tone and draw attention to the middle, where you will light the candle and place it in the center of the circle.

Turn off the lights. There should be enough light from the candle to create a glow around the circle. At this time, take a few moments and invite the group to prayerfully imagine that this little Tin Person they have fashioned out of aluminum foil represents each individual in the group. The candle represents God, which we know because Jesus said, “I am the Light of the World.”

Read these instructions aloud to the group:

Jesus said, “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Imagine that this candle, the light in this dark room, is God and that the little person made of tin foil is you. Take a few moments and consider how you relate to the light. Ask yourself, “If God is in the center, where am I?” Mold your Tin Person into a distinct posture, if that helps you to express how you feel toward God right now. Take some time to think about and pray about this, and then we will go one at a time, sharing where your Tin Person is, maybe how it got there, or what you’re feeling about it. We aren’t going to put anyone on the spot, but everyone is invited to participate in this activity, whether aloud or silently.

Note: If a volunteer wants to go first, that’s great. If not, it will help for you to go first and set an example for the rest of the group. Focus on proximity of your Tin Person to the candle, posture (is your person standing before the candle with open arms, closed off and confused, and so forth) and any feelings about why

your person is in that position. This is intended to be formational for the participants in that it draws attention to a basic and crucial assessment of how close they feel they are to God. This can obviously change on a daily basis, so some participants will focus on how they feel that day or that week, while some may reveal an ongoing closeness to God or a struggle with experiencing God's love.

Regroup

Keep an eye on the time and make sure that this time isn't interrupted if it goes longer than expected so that everyone has an opportunity to share and participate in this exercise. Giving extra time to this exercise will be the extended time option for this session. Once everyone has shared, the room may feel a little heavy. Some barriers may have been broken down, and the group may feel a little closer now. There may be little left to say in the way of discussion questions or examining the scripture, but before getting up and turning the lights on, be sure to make this point:

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will *never* walk in darkness but will have the light of life." This doesn't mean that if we believe in Jesus and follow his ways that we will never again know darkness. It doesn't mean that we'll never be scared or feel confused or alone again. There may always be places that feel dark and empty, but the light is always shining. And even if I feel so far away from God that my Tin Person is balled up and tossed in the corner (you can demonstrate this if you want), the light still shines on it and reflects off of it. God is here. God is the light that shines in the darkest places. Let us go now and shine that light to the world.

But before we go, let us close in our responsive prayer. Leader, read the "One" parts this week, inviting the group to respond together saying, "I am the Light of the World."

Closing Litany (5 MINUTES)

- One: When we look around us and feel that only darkness and emptiness surround us, illuminate our hearts with Jesus' words,
All: "I am the Light of the World."
- One: When we look for God in the places of pain and suffering, pleading for that holy presence to be made evident even in the gloomiest of places, help us to see God at work through Jesus' promise,
All: "I am the Light of the World."
- One: When we feel far away from God, even when we try to create that distance ourselves, remind us that the love of God is always touching us through Jesus' words,
All: "I am the Light of the World."
- One: When we can't figure out where to go next, what to do, or who to be, help us to hear God's call and see the path illuminated for us by the one who says,
All: "I am the Light of the World."
- One: When we wonder how we will go out into the world and shine God's light, sharing God's love with all the earth, let us follow Jesus' lead as he reveals himself to us, saying,
All: "I am the Light of the World." Amen.

WEEK 4

“I Am the Good Shepherd”: Knowing God’s Care

The objective of this session is to bring God’s love into action in our lives, emphasizing that God’s love for us calls us to love one another, caring for and praying with our brothers and sisters as God cares for all of us.

Materials

Bible

Gathering/Check-In (10 MINUTES)

Go around the table or circle and invite everyone to answer the following questions:

- Name
- Hi/Lo—Share a high point and a low point in your life from the week. Remind participants to pay attention to one another’s high and low points so that they can join each other in celebration and in prayer for the difficult moments.
- Mad Libs: “I am . . . (noun)”—something that describes you, or how you are feeling right now, other than your name!

Invite participants to share any specific ways, other than the highs and lows that they may have shared, so they can be in prayer for one another in the coming week.

Opening Prayer/Scripture (5 MINUTES)

Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite the person to have the text ready to read. This week the verses are John 10:1-15.

Invite another volunteer to open the group with prayer (or use this prayer).

Holy God, we come to you today in gratitude for your love and care. We can become so busy and consumed with stress and deadlines that we need a reminder of who we are, whose we are, and why we are here. Thank you for loving us through all of it. We need your guidance and care to do the work you call us to do and to be the people you call us to be. Help us, Lord, as we seek to do your will as your beloved children. Amen.

Invite the scripture reader to begin reading this week's passage.

Video/Discussion (15 MINUTES)

Introducing the video: This video segment includes visits to a sheep ranch in Tiberius, to Qumran in the Judean wilderness, and to the Sheep's Gate in Jerusalem. Rob links the care Christ offers us now and continuously to Jesus' acts of healing and care. (Play the track for Week 4.)

Discussion Questions

(You will probably not have time to discuss all of these questions; choose the questions you wish to use in the time allotted.)

1. Think about the work of a shepherd. How long do you think it would take for a shepherd to train the flock to know his voice? How does the shepherd know which sheep are part of his or her flock?
2. If Jesus is the good shepherd and we are the sheep, what does this relationship tell us about our relationship to Jesus and God?
3. In what ways does God take care of us, the flock?
4. What does it mean that the good shepherd would "lay down his life" for the sheep? What do you think Jesus is talking about here?
5. Read Psalm 23. It's a familiar passage of scripture in which David calls God his shepherd. What do you hear in both texts that further illustrate what Jesus meant when he called himself "the good shepherd"?
6. What is Jesus protecting us from, as the gate and as the good shepherd? What are the thieves and robbers in our lives today?
7. How have you experienced God's care and protection in your life?

Practice (10 MINUTES)

This week, in the spirit of the care and protection that God gives us, we're going to introduce the practice of intercessory prayer and focus our attention on this prayerful way of joining God in caring for one another.

Intercessory Prayer

Intercessory prayer is a type of prayer in which we invite God to intercede, not in our own situations, but on behalf of another person. While many of our prayers ask God for help or guidance with a painful or scary situation of our own, intercessory prayer is a way of stepping in for a friend and asking God to enter into this pain for him or her. It doesn’t even have to be someone you know—you might ask God to intercede on behalf of a nation in extreme poverty or a people experiencing violence or war.

When we pray like this, we are doing more than loving one another as God commands us to do; we are joining God in this action. We take part in this role of protecting and caring for one another like the Good Shepherd that Jesus says he is in John 10.

Today we are going to pray for others. We practice intercessory prayer, asking God to intercede and care for those who need God’s protection.

Using this easy-to-remember “5 Finger Prayer,” we ask God to intervene in the difficult situations and complicated lives of various groups of people. Hold up your hand and, as you move through the people symbolized by each finger, invite the group to call out the names of individuals or groups of individuals that need prayer. Invite God to bring peace, healing, or comfort into that situation. Invite participants to share the reason for prayer if it is appropriate (“for my aunt Beth, who is undergoing chemotherapy”), as this is a safe space for sharing; however, participants can be as general or specific as is comfortable for them.

Begin with your thumb. The thumb is the “finger” closest to you, so pray for those closest to you—**your family and friends**.

Give plenty of time for participants to offer specific prayers before moving on to the next finger.

The index finger invites us to pray for **those who instruct us, teach us, and help us grow**. Pray for God to give them wisdom and support to guide us.

The middle finger is the tallest and calls us to pray for our **leaders**. This can be leaders in our government, schools, neighboring countries, and social groups.

Next, we move to the ring finger. Because this finger is the weakest finger on the hand, pray for **those who are weak**, sick, lonely, underrepresented, voiceless, or lonely.

Finally, the smallest finger reminds us to pray for **ourselves**. After praying for the other groups, we have a better perspective to see where we need God to intercede in our own lives.

After all have voiced their prayers, say “Amen.”

Regroup

1. What do we learn about ourselves when we pray for other people before we make our own requests?
2. Does praying for others teach you anything more about what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the Good Shepherd”?

Closing Litany (5 MINUTES)

As we close in prayer, invite the entire group to respond to each section with: “I am the Good Shepherd.”

- One: When we find ourselves wondering how we are expected to navigate this confusing, intimidating world, help us to remember that we are not alone because Jesus says,
All: “I am the Good Shepherd.”
- One: When we feel tempted to stray from our communities, to try to make it on our own without the help of those who care about us, remind us that we are never out of your care when Jesus tells us,
All: “I am the Good Shepherd.”
- One: When we take a risk and venture out alone anyway, remind us that there is no distance we can wander that God is not still guarding and holding us close when Jesus says,
All: “I am the Good Shepherd.”
- One: When we’re too tired to do or to think anymore, help us to remember to rest and feel safe under the keep of Jesus, who says,
All: “I am the Good Shepherd.” Amen.

Optional Activity for Extended Session

If you have extra time in your session or want to encourage the participants to continue the practice of praying for others or requesting prayer from others, check out the *devozine* Prayer Wall (<http://devozine.upperroom.org/prayer-wall/>). Teens from all over the world visit this page to request prayer and to ask God to intercede on behalf of one another. You can use this platform to pray and ask for the prayers of others—even complete strangers. In addition, you’re invited to scroll through the page, praying for these brothers and sisters in their times of trial or joy.

If you’re interested in praying with a person on the phone, check out The Upper Room Living Prayer Center. The website is <http://prayer-center.upperroom.org/>. The Upper Room Living Prayer Center is a 7-days-a-week intercessory prayer ministry staffed by Christian volunteers. You can submit a prayer request on the website and your request will be e-mailed to their Covenant Prayer Groups. You can also call 1-800-251-2468 (7am–11pm CST), and a volunteer will pray with you over the phone.

If you’re interested in volunteering, you can become a phone volunteer or become a prayer partner. More information about both of these options can be found on the website.

You might also like to refer the group to the Resources section of the Prayer Center page, and then to the Prayer Methods, Articles on Prayer, and the Spiritual Types Test found there.

WEEK 5

“I Am the True Vine”: Knowing God’s Power

The objective of this session is to continue interpreting John’s Gospel story of Jesus and applying it to our lives, specifically using the metaphor of being connected to God like branches are connected to a vine. We will discuss how this bond allows us to do God’s work and explore what that work may look like for each of us.

Materials

Bible

Pencils and paper

Internet access for an online Spiritual Gifts questionnaire (for optional extended activity only)

Gathering/Check-In (10 MINUTES)

Go around the table or circle and invite everyone to answer the following questions:

- Name
- Hi/Lo—Share a high point and a low point in your life from the week. Remind participants to pay attention to one another’s high and low points so that they can join each other in celebration and in prayer for the difficult moments.
- Mad Libs: “I am . . . (noun)”—something that describes you, or how you are feeling right now, other than your name!

Invite participants to share any specific ways, other than the highs and lows that they may have shared, that we can be in prayer for one another in the coming week.

Opening Prayer/Scripture (5 MINUTES)

Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite the person to have the text ready to read. This week the verses are John 15:1-8.

Invite another volunteer to open the group with prayer (or use this prayer).

Dear God, thank you for bringing us all here together again. We have learned so much about you through the words of your son, Jesus Christ, and we hunger for a deeper sense of you and your love for us. Be with us as we continue on this journey; help us to love one another and to use the gifts you gave us for the building up of your kingdom. In your name we pray. Amen.

Invite the scripture reader to begin reading this week's passage.

Video/Discussion (15 MINUTES)

Introducing the video: This video segment is filmed at a vineyard at the base of Mount Tabor, near a modern-day replica of ancient Jerusalem, and in the “upper room” where Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples. Rob interviews a vineyard owner who talks about the importance of pruning vines so healthier fruit can grow. (Play the track for Week 5.)

Discussion Questions

(You will probably not have time to discuss all of these questions; choose the questions you wish to use in the time allotted.)

1. What is the purpose of pruning when gardening? How does this relate to the way that Jesus calls us to live?
2. Have you ever felt that you were being “pruned”? What kinds of things have been cut away from you that were painful at the time but brought about a beneficial change?
3. Have you ever felt “called” to a certain place or activity?
4. What kind of fruit are you bearing? What kinds of things are “good fruit”? “bad fruit”?
5. Are there any areas of your life that you think God wants to trim back or remove?

Practice (10 MINUTES)

To-Don’t Lists

When Jesus talks about himself as the vine and us as the branches, he speaks about how the vinedresser prunes the branches so they can bear more fruit. At times, this pruning can be uncomfortable, even painful. But pruning leads to greater growth and fruitfulness in our lives.

We may already know some things in our life that need to be cut out, but sometimes it helps to write down some of those areas where cuts need to be made. As you go through the week, in addition to the many lists of “To-Dos” you make to be productive, try keeping a list of “To-Don’ts” in order to be mindful of the areas in your life that need to be pruned in order to bear more fruit.

What are some things or activities that you need to remind yourself *not* to do? Do you notice that certain habits or choices make you feel distant from God? Make a list of at least four or five items that you’d like to try to stop doing in order to remain in close connection with God. If you feel so led, you can share a few of your personal “To-Don’ts” with the rest of the group, perhaps noting how eliminating this from your life will keep you more connected to the Vine.

Closing Litany (5 MINUTES)

As today’s session comes to an end, let us pray together our closing litany for this week. All participants are invited to respond to the Leader by saying, **“I am the True Vine; abide in me.”**

One: When we feel isolated, we can remember that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When we feel powerless, we can find strength in remembering that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When we are tempted to try to go it alone, we can reach out to other believers, remembering that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When life becomes so busy that time with God seems impossible to find, we can regain our focus by remembering that Jesus said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.”

One: When we stress about the quality of the fruit we are or are not producing, we can relax and trust the source of our life and growth, the One who said,

All: “I am the True Vine; abide in me.” Amen.

Optional Activity for Extended Session

Spiritual Gifts Inventory

When Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” we often wonder what kind of branches we will be. The vine is the source of our love, strength, wisdom, and abilities to do what God calls us to do. The vine is the piece that nourishes us and connects us to God. If we are separated from the vine, we can’t do anything. So what are we supposed to do since we *are* connected to the vine?

We are all called to great things that build up the kingdom of God. These activities are likely very different from one another, but they are all significant in the larger picture of God’s kingdom. Because each of us is created in God’s image, our gifts will look different from the other. Do you know what your gifts are? What equips you to serve and spread the love that God has given to you?

Today, each member of the group has the opportunity to take a brief Spiritual Gifts Inventory. This can be taken online, either within the group time or at home, depending on your resources and access to the web. The online questionnaire will automatically calculate the score and give the participant a result of the spiritual gifts for which he or she may be most equipped to serve. Here is the link to the online gifts inventory: <http://www.elca.org/en/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Faith-Practices/Assessment-Tools>

You will receive a chart of results showing which areas prove to be strongest for you. Feel free to compare with the group, helping others to interpret their own results. Sometimes it can be difficult to see these gifts in yourself, but others in your group may be able to shed some light on some practical evidence of those gifts.

Regroup

1. Go over everyone’s top three spiritual gifts—ask questions about how those might be executed in church, jobs, activities, and so forth.
2. Are you surprised about your results? excited? nervous?

WEEK 6

“I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”: Knowing God’s Way

The objective of this session is to consider the larger purpose of Jesus’ time on earth, discern what that means for us, and develop a practice to help us be intentional about walking closely in the way that Jesus shows us and invites us to follow.

Materials:

Bible

Pens and paper (or encourage participants to bring journals)

Gathering/Check-In (10 MINUTES)

Go around the table or circle and invite everyone to answer the following questions:

- Name
- Hi/Lo—*Share a high point and a low point in your life from the week. Remind participants to pay attention to one another’s high and low points so that they can join one another in celebration and in prayer for the difficult moments.*
- Mad Libs: “I am . . . (noun)—something that describes you, or how you are feeling right now, other than your name. *By this point, this will be a very familiar task and hopefully participants will come to the group prepared to identify or describe themselves using this “I am” practice.*

Invite participants to share any specific ways, other than the highs and lows that they may have shared, so they can be in prayer for one another in the coming week.

Opening Prayer/Scripture (5 MINUTES)

Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite the person to have the text ready to read. This week it's from John 14:1-7.

Invite a volunteer to pray (or use this prayer).

Dear God, thank you for working in our lives everyday and allowing us to gather together to learn more about you through your son Jesus Christ. We thank you for the work you have already done in our lives and in the life of this group, and we know you are not yet finished with us. Please be with us as we draw near to you and closer to each other. In your son's holy name, we pray. Amen.

Invite the scripture reader to begin reading this week's passage.

Video/Discussion (15 MINUTES)

Introducing the video: This video segment is filmed in several locations within Israel. Rob will be talking about the importance of roads and about the context for Jesus' statement, "I am the way." Listen to hear whom Jesus was speaking to and what the original context can add to our understanding of the meaning of this statement for us today. (Play the track for Week 6.)

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is this "I am" saying a passage that creates controversy? Do you find it controversial? Why or why not?
2. Rob says, "God knows what's in our hearts. We are all equally devout, and we each want to know and understand God." Do you agree or disagree?
3. Think about how many religions are practiced in the Holy Land—and in the rest of the world! Would Jesus get into a theological debate about whose religion is right and whose is wrong? What do you think Jesus would say? How would he explain what he meant by, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life?"

Depending on the group, these questions may spark a lot of debate. If you sense that this may be the case and want to spend less time on the potentially controversial interpretation of this chapter, you can focus more on the following questions. Hopefully the participants will have challenging questions and comments on this topic, possibly from conversations they have had in school or with friends of other faith backgrounds. A rich conversation of this type is encouraged, but keep an eye on time, as this may need to be continued after the official meeting time!

4. What does it mean to live the "Jesus way" of life?
5. What stands in the way of your walking along "the way" of Jesus?*

6. How does understanding Jesus’ saying, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” help us to know God more fully?

**This question will be helpful in preparing for this week’s spiritual practice.

Practice (10 MINUTES)

This week we’ll be exploring Ignatius of Loyola’s spiritual practice called the Examen.

The Examen

Read aloud this historical background of the Examen:

In Daniel Wolpert’s book *Creating a Life with God* (Upper Room Books, 2003), he writes that in 1521, a young Spanish man later known as Ignatius of Loyola had been wounded in battle, and as he “lay in bed, his thoughts alternated between the prospect of worldly glory and the following of Christ,” and he wondered which path he should take.

“When Ignatius of Loyola faced his moment of indecision, in a gift of sheer grace, he made a stunning realization. Surveying his options, Ignatius noticed that ‘the secular romances left a certain dryness and restlessness in their wake, whereas the sacred scenarios left him peaceful and contented’ (*Spiritual Exercises*, *xiv–xv*).”

The prayer that comes out of Ignatius’s experience is one that we call the Examen. In this prayer, we seek the nearness of God. We know that God is always with us, but there are times when this presence gets lost in the shuffle of our busyness or other distractions. We use this method of praying to bring to our awareness that God is in every moment of life.

Note to Leader: Familiarize yourself with these instructions and present the general notion and purpose of the Examen in your own words, but feel free to use an explanation similar to this one if it will make you feel more comfortable with the content.

The Examen is an ancient prayer practice that is used by many different people, often with distinct goals or intentions. As we learn more about it, I encourage you to engage this practice as it best suits you and to use it in whatever way helps you to feel closer to God. This week, we are going to be looking at the Examen as a spiritual practice for discernment, or interpreting what God is doing in your life and what God is calling you to be.

Unlike many of the tests we take in school, this Examen only has two questions. Ignatius meditated and prayed daily on two topics: consolation (moments of closeness with God) and desolation (places where he felt distant or separated from God). An easier way of asking yourself these questions would be to ask 1) At what point(s) in this day did I feel God’s presence? and 2) At what point(s) today did I feel that I was far away from God? (This is similar to sharing your “Highs and Lows” for the week with the group at the beginning of the meeting.)

The idea is that if we ask ourselves these questions daily, taking note of the places in our daily life where we felt near to God and the places where we felt far from God, then we will be more aware of God’s activity

in our lives and act accordingly. For example, if I consistently feel close to God when I am playing the piano, then Ignatius would encourage me to keep doing that and continue growing closer to God, taking advantage of the moments where God is near and noticeably working in me. On the other hand, if you consistently notice the absence of God when you are hanging out with certain groups of people or expressing excessive frustration with your parents or siblings, then Ignatius would encourage you to reflect on those moments and perhaps to move away from those behaviors that make you feel distant and spend more of your time and energy in the moments where you feel God's presence.

If you keep a journal, this would be a great venue for the Examen as a daily practice. You can simply write down notes about your day (“+ spent time with my small group, –took credit for someone else’s work on a group project,” for example). This is up to you. Writing it down is not required, but it may help you to look back through the previous days and notice helpful patterns in the way you are behaving and how those behaviors affect your relationship with God.

This section can be read verbatim to guide the practice, taking pauses for reflection throughout:

Today, we are going to take a few moments to practice the Examen. Feel free to move around the room and get comfortable. Spend some time in prayer and stillness and reflect on your day. Where have you felt God's presence in a very real and tangible way? When did you act and know that God was acting right alongside you? You are welcome to write down a note for yourself or to simply reflect this to yourself, whichever is more meaningful to you. Thank God for these moments, for drawing near and revealing that holy connection to you today. Now, answer this question for yourself: At what point during my day did I feel most separated from God? When was I acting in a way that I could tell God was not working through me? Again, you are welcome to either write this down for yourself or to simply meditate on this moment of distance from God.

Note to Leader: Allow time for participants to meditate prayerfully on these moments of consolation and desolation. The Examen does not have to be shared, but it should be noted that often others can be helpful in our discernment process. Many times we are too close to our own daily lives to see the patterns of perpetual consolation/desolation that come out of the same activities, and others may be able to help us see these things in ourselves, pointing us in the right direction. This is why community is important; however, the Examen is a practice that involves you and God and does not have to be shared with the group.

Optional Activity for Extended Session

Regroup

Some questions to get started:

1. Did this practice come naturally to you? Did you struggle? Feel free to share your experiences with the general practice and process—you do not have to share your realizations or results unless you would like to.
2. How might the Examen help you to understand what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”?

Note to Leader: Big answers may follow these questions; it’s also possible that no answers follow. This may suffice as a general response to the radio silence, while also connecting the scripture and the practice. You can sum up the conversation about the Examen with these thoughts (either read verbatim or put into your own words):

When he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” Jesus told his disciples that his way, his manner of living and breathing and moving on the earth, was *the* way. Practices like the Examen have been developed and used for centuries because knowing “the way” is far easier said than done. It is not as simple as it sounds to follow along the path that Jesus walked when he was on earth.

Part of walking the paths of Christ means constantly discerning, constantly checking ourselves for these points of consolation and desolation. Am I walking in the way of Christ? This answer, for many of us, is different every day. Practices like the Examen provide us with a consistent habit of striving to stay on this path. We need God’s help to understand what “the way” is, what that means for us as communities and as individuals, and how we seek to follow Christ on that path and fulfill God’s will in building up the kingdom of heaven.

Closing Litany (5 MINUTES)

As one person reads each line of the prayer, the group is invited to respond with, “**I am the Way.**”

- One: When we face a complicated situation that challenges us to see what God wants us to do, we can remember Jesus saying to his friends,
All: “I am the Way.”
- One: When we find ourselves wondering if we’re *really* accepted by God, we can take comfort in remembering the grace embodied in Jesus who said,
All: “I am the Way.”
- One: When we are tempted to believe that we know who’s in and who’s out, we can remember that Jesus welcomed outsiders and outcasts and said,
All: “I am the Way.”
- One: When we fall into the trap of thinking that faith is about rules, we can remember the call to relationship found in Jesus’ words,
All: “I am the Way.”
- One: When we wake in the morning and wonder what God asks of us in that day’s encounters, we can find our model and our answer in the one who said,
All: “I am the Way.”

WEEK 7

“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”: Knowing God’s Possibilities

The objective of this session is to live into the celebration of God’s gift of life that we receive in every new day. As we explore God’s gifts to us, we are called to respond to that grace by living with gratitude and praise for God’s undying love and care for us that is demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Materials

Bible

Gathering/Check-In (10 MINUTES)

Go around the table or circle and invite everyone to answer the following questions:

- Name
- Hi/Lo—*Share a high point and a low point in your life from the week. Remind participants to pay attention to one another’s high and low points so that they can join one another in celebration and in prayer for the difficult moments.*
- Mad Libs: “I am . . . (noun)”—something that describes you, or how you are feeling right now, other than your name.

Invite participants to share any specific ways, other than the highs and lows that they may have shared, so they can be in prayer for one another in the coming week.

Opening Prayer/Scripture (5 MINUTES)

Ask for a volunteer to read scripture and invite them to have the text ready to read. This week the verses are from John 11:17-26.

Invite a different volunteer to open the group with prayer (or use this prayer).

Dear God, thank you for your ever-present grace and love. Thank you for the beauty of new life that we see every morning. Even when we are unsure of what will happen next, help us to remember that you are with us, holding us in your hand and loving us no matter what happens. In your son’s name we pray. Amen.

Invite the scripture reader to begin reading this week’s passage.

Video/Discussion (15 MINUTES)

Introducing the video: This video segment is filmed near the traditional sites of Lazarus’s tomb and the garden tomb where Jesus was buried. Listen for how God offers us daily opportunities for new life and fresh possibilities. (Play the track for Week 7.)

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus might have waited before going to Bethany where he might have been able to keep Lazarus from dying?
2. Have you ever been disappointed in God, as Martha was disappointed in Jesus?
3. Have you ever felt like you were being called to do something that didn’t make sense?
4. How has God shown you possibility when you thought all hope was lost?
5. What does Jesus mean when he says, “I am the Resurrection and the Life”?
6. What does new life mean to you?

Practice (10 minutes)

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is an ancient spiritual practice of praying the words of scripture. The words mean “divine reading.” Most of the time when we read scripture (or other literature), we read for information. We read the words, glean what’s important, and move on to apply what we’ve learned. *Lectio divina* takes it a step further and turns the reading into praying. This is an opportunity to slow down and take in every word as a gift from God to you.

You can do this with any passage of scripture. Today, since we’re in a group, we’ll use the passage that we read earlier, John 11:17-26, and the leader can read it aloud for the group. Let the participants know that this can also be done individually, by reading it alone.

Invite the participants to get comfortable, spreading out in the space provided. Let them know that this is not a test of memory or comprehension but a type of listening that does not demand efficiency, answers, or anything at all. *Lectio divina* is about prayerful listening.

You may want to read this part aloud:

I will read the passage three times. The first time, simply hear the words that are read and take note of a certain word or phrase that may jump out at you. If a word or phrase stands out for you, even if you are unsure of why, hold on to it as you hear the rest of the passage read aloud. (*Wait a few moments after you have read the scripture once.*) I now invite you to share aloud with the group the word or phrase that stood out to you in this first reading.

I will now read the passage a second time. This time, you may either listen for a totally new word or phrase or focus on the same word, asking yourself how it applies to your life today. How has this word or phrase touched your heart today? (*After reading, wait a few moments again.*) Now, I invite whoever feels like sharing to tell the group what you have heard or seen in this prayerful listening.

For the third and final reading, consider what God may be saying to you through this word or phrase. This may not be as clear as we may hope, as discerning God's call is not always obvious. We don't have to leave this space today with the answer, but that is why this is called a spiritual "practice"—we practice this life of listening for God through scripture with the hope that this will come more naturally to our every movement. (*Read scripture one last time, and wait a few moments.*) This time, take a few moments alone with God in thanksgiving for this experience and ask for God's ongoing presence with you as you continue to figure things out and hear God's words for you.

(Wait a few more moments and close, inviting the participants to make their way back to the circle or table.)

Extended Time Option

Regroup and Discuss

1. Were you surprised with the word or phrase that caught you during the *lectio divina* practice?
2. Did you find this exercise of "divine reading" to be a powerful one?
3. How is it different from regular Bible study or analysis of a passage of scripture?

Closing Litany (5 MINUTES)

Invite the group to respond to each line by saying, "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

One: When we find ourselves wondering why loss has come, we can remember Jesus' words as he faced death:

All: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

One: When we are tempted to give in to the lie that life will never change for us, Jesus says,

All: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

One: When life's disappointments cause us to stumble, Jesus reminds us,

All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

One: When we ask God to give us back something we’ve lost, Jesus reminds us to look forward, saying,

All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

One: God works on both sides of the grave, giving us life now and life yet to come, through Christ who said,

All: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Amen.

Optional Activity for Extended Session

Wrap up series:

At the end of this seven-week series, it may be helpful to recap the highlights of our time together. Go week by week and ask the group members what they remember and what was significant about each “I am” statement. Here is a list of the “I Am” sayings and the spiritual practices to help guide the conversation:

1. “I AM” (Moses)—Group covenant
 2. “Bread of Life”—Fasting
 3. “Light of the World”—Tin Man
 4. “Good Shepherd”—Intercessory prayer
 5. “True Vine”—To-Don’t Lists
 6. “The Way”—The Examen
 7. “Resurrection and the Life”—Lectio divina
-
1. Which of the “I Am” statements resonates most strongly with you? Why?
 2. Why do you think Jesus described himself using these types of symbols? Why so many different ones?
 3. Which spiritual practices helped you to feel the most connected to God? Can you see yourself continuing with any of these practices on your own?
 4. How has the group changed since the first week? (This is an opportunity to feel out any interest in continued community of this small group and begin discussion about plans to do so!)

Additional Resource Links

Week 1—Images and Reflections by Lori Scott

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/articles/images-and-reflections/>

Week 2

Unplugging by Gerrit Scott Dawson

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/articles/unplugging/>

Unplugging 2 by Kaylea Hutson

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/articles/unplugging-2/>

“Enough” by Chris Tomlin

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EW-toYBiF8o>

<http://christomlin.com/home>

Week 3—Shine by Danika Cooley

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/spiritual-practices/shine/>

Week 4—Praying 4 One Another by David McCoy

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/spiritual-practices/praying-4-one-another/>

Week 5—Activity

Take grape vine or pieces of sticks tied in clumps and set them on a worship table. Invite youth and/or adults to write on green paper leaves areas in their life where they need to abide in Christ and that they are willing to surrender to God. Have them tape them or tie the leaves on the vine with twine (prep ahead by punching a small hole in the leaves for the twine).

Week 6—The Jesus Prayer by Richard Lawton

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/spiritual-practices/the-jesus-prayer/>

Week 7—Listening with the Heart by Enuma Okoro

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/spiritual-practices/benedict-nursia-listening-heart/>

Audio Lectio by AliveNow—is listening to scripture in a slow and meditative way.

<http://alivenow.upperroom.org/audio-lectio/>

Next Steps—A Solitary Retreat by Daniel Wolpert

<http://devozone.upperroom.org/spiritual-practices/a-solitary-retreat/>



Starting Small Groups in Your Church **Craig Mitchell**

Small groups are one of the best ways to focus on genuine friendship, honest discussion, scripture study, and prayer can help keep the flame burning in young people's lives. Perhaps your church has never organized small groups such as this, or maybe your small groups need a boost. Here are some practical tips to get you moving in the right direction.

Share the Vision

Talk about the possibility of small groups with your pastor and other youth leaders. Be enthusiastic! Work through the following steps to draw up a plan and a timetable. Seek approval from your pastor to begin work on the plan right away. Most churches will be happy with this, and you can share your progress at regular intervals.

Recruit Small Group Leaders

Talk with your pastor and other key leaders about who could lead small groups. Also get input from the youth in your group about adults that they would like to see involved. The main qualities needed by small group leaders are a sincere faith, a love for young people, and a willingness to listen to and to encourage youth. These people can be adults of any age. Recruit leaders by personal invitation, not through the church bulletin or newsletter! Plan a get-together to discuss your plan with them. People will be most likely to say yes if you offer them continuing support, resources, and training.

Offer a Range of Meeting Times and Places

Young people have busy lives, so it's best to offer some choices about meeting times. If you only offer one meeting time, you will exclude some people. It's better to have several small groups meeting at different times than to try to keep everyone together in one group and end up excluding persons who can't fit into your schedule. Don't forget breakfast and before-school times as possibilities. It is best to meet weekly, if possible, although some small groups meet every two weeks.

Where to Meet

The meeting place may be at the church or in someone's home, as long as it is a comfortable setting and you can meet without interruption. One advantage of meeting in a home is that the young people get to interact with the adults who live there—perhaps over a meal at times. However, some groups meet in fast-food restaurants before or after school. Establish a regular meeting place so that group members and parents know where you will be.

Group Ages and Sizes

Small groups can have as few as three people and preferably no more than eight. Four to six people is a good size. If your group is larger than eight, you may want to meet together at the beginning and end of your session for prayer and announcements but form smaller groups for your sharing and discussion times. (NOTE: If it takes some time to recruit enough small group leaders to have groups of optimum size, use the option above with larger groups in the meantime.) Small groups tend to work best if group members are of a similar age. With younger teenagers, girls tend to be more socially mature than boys, so it may be worth considering separate groups for guys and girls.

Start with a Celebration

Plan an event explain the opportunity of small groups for ongoing support and spiritual growth. Schedule a time and place for interested people to meet. Be aware that some will say yes immediately, while others will want time to think about it. Come back to them later with another invitation. Once again, a personal visit is the best invitation.

The First Meeting

If you start with a combined gathering, it's better to make it an actual *experience* of small group life than a meeting to discuss small groups. Begin with some games and group-building activities; then move on to some personal sharing, Bible discussion, and prayer. Involve the adult leaders in planning this initial meeting. In the future you may involve the youth in planning as well. And don't forget to have some food!

Small Group Resources

A wide range of excellent small group resources is available for youth ministry. You may want to put together your own meeting models based on topics with which your youth are dealing. We recommend using **devozine**, a devotional magazine for teens from The Upper Room, and the weekly "**In the Habit**" **sessions**, a FREE companion resource for leaders.

The magazine will help young people to develop their daily devotional life and can be the springboard for your weekly group sharing. The "In the Habit" blog offers easy-to-use outlines for your small group sessions focusing on the **devozine** themes which the youth have been reflecting on during the week.

Support for Leaders

Leaders say that what they need most is encouragement. Ask your church to designate someone as the small group coordinator. This person can offer encouragement to leaders and help to recruit new members. Your groups will be most effective if leaders are given some clear expectations and guidance regarding preparation, group leadership, and confidentiality. It is important for the small group leaders to meet together every 6 to 8 weeks to see how

they are doing, to check on their group's progress, to share ideas and learnings, and to talk about issues of concern. Check with your pastor and other local youth leaders on training sessions for small group leaders offered in your area. Encourage your church to help pay for small group leaders to attend.

Share the Story

Youth ministry is a ministry of the whole church. Invite adults in the church to pray for small groups and their leaders. Find opportunities for young people to tell the story of how the groups are going. Put up a photo display of groups to encourage others to join. Seek the continuing support of your pastor. Try to keep the enthusiasm building so that small groups are seen as a vital dimension of your church's ministry with young people. Have faith that God will use your commitment and planning to enable young people to grow in their relationship with Christ and with one another. Go for it!



Craig Mitchell is the National Director—Formation, Education & Discipleship for the Uniting Church in Australia. In his spare time, he writes **devozine** articles and “In the Habit” blog sessions here:

<http://devozine.upperroom.org/?s=craig+mitchell>

—from **devozine**. Copyright © 2011 The Upper Room®. All rights reserved.
<http://devozine.upperroom.org/>



Facilitating Small Group Sharing by Craig Mitchell

You are being asked to stand beside young people while they are encouraged to take significant steps in their faith journeys. The spotlight is on *them*, not on you. From God's perspective, each of them has potential for greatness. Your role is not to take these steps *for* them but to travel *with* them, offering encouragement, support, and guidance.

Here are some pointers to help you make the most of the small group:

Find a Suitable Space

Try to set up your meeting space to suit the group. People communicate best when they are seated on the same level, close to each other, and can make good eye contact. Avoid a situation where people are spread out or where someone can huddle in the corner and go to sleep! If you are meeting in someone's home, ask group members to respect other people's belongings and to leave the space the way they found it—or even a bit cleaner!

If you plan to meet outdoors, be sure that everyone in your group knows when and where to gather.

If you have a large group, you may want to divide into smaller groups, appointing a leader for each group.

Create a Welcoming Space

Your group members may or may not know each other well. Help everyone to start on an equal footing by encouraging group members to welcome and care for one another.

Create a Safe Space

The adult leaders in your group are responsible for ensuring that your meeting times and places are "safe" spaces for your group members and yourself.

Adult leaders need to be intentional about when and where you meet with young persons. Adults have a responsibility to the young people (and to their parents) not to place them in situations that may appear compromising. For that reason, have two adults present at all times.

Raise the Group's Expectations

When we step out of our usual routine, we become much more open to growth and change. Spend a few minutes on the first night asking the young people to be open to what God wants to say and do in their lives during the small group. Encourage them to see this time as God's time, when they can hear God speaking in many ways and can seek direction for their lives. Invite them to take the risk of being open to one another and to God.

Prepare Yourself for Each Meeting

Leading a small group can be challenging and rewarding. Take time each day to look over the small group leader material for that night. Think about the kinds of answers and questions the young people are likely to raise so that you'll be better prepared to handle them. And pray for each of your group members by name.

Before your small group, prepare yourselves by taking five minutes for silence and prayer. If this is impossible, then try for one minute! Ask God to guide you as well as the group members. Begin each gathering with a short prayer.

Silences, Shrugs, and Show-offs

How do you cope with the kid who won't talk and the kid who won't stop talking? Here are ten tips:

- 1. Don't talk too much yourself.** Good leaders are better at asking questions than giving answers.
- 2. Silence is OK.** People need time to think. Ask people if they understand the question, or if they need more time to reflect.
- 3. Ask probing questions to deepen conversation.** Feel free to direct questions to particular individuals, provided that the questions are not too personal.
- 4. Ask the extroverts to give others a chance to answer.** Say something like this: *"Can we hear from some other people? Who else would like to share their thoughts?"*
- 5. Do some talking in smaller groups and in pairs.** Some people will never answer in a large group.
- 6. Allow people to write their answers.** This will help some folks to express themselves more easily.
- 7. Give feedback.** *"I find it hard to concentrate when people interrupt. Can we work at listening to what each person has to say before we respond?"*
- 8. Give encouragement.** *"Thanks for sharing that. I'm sure it took a lot of courage to be honest with the group."*
- 9. Watch for body language.** You can tell a lot about how people are feeling by the way they sit and by their facial expressions.

- 10. Take time outside the small group to be with those who are most difficult to deal with in the group.** Often the shy person needs encouragement and the overly talkative person is seeking special attention.

Sharing Our Commitments

During your small group, young people will have the opportunity to commit or to recommit their lives to Christ. This may happen at different times and in different ways. These commitments may be shared and celebrated in your small group times. It is important to affirm young people in the steps they have taken. Be aware that sometimes their experiences or the words they use will be different from yours. Accept their experiences without judgment. There will be plenty of time for guidance later on.

The group may join hands or lay hands on each person and share in prayer for him or her. It is helpful to give the young person the opportunity to express his or her own prayer. Be aware that making too much fuss over young people who make a public commitment or recommitment puts pressure on other young people to follow suit. God gives each of us the freedom to respond in different ways. Be careful about giving young people the impression that following Christ is only about “altar calls.”

Our faith journey consists of many commitments or steps to deeper faith. Look for signs of growth in *all* of the young people present and be prepared to celebrate these together.



Craig Mitchell is the National Director—Formation, Education & Discipleship for the Uniting Church in Australia. In his spare time, he writes **devozine** articles and “In the Habit” blog sessions.

—from **devozine**. Copyright © 2011 The Upper Room®. All rights reserved.

The life of a teenager...

TEXTING
STUDYING
DATING
SOCIAL
DREAMS
PEER PRESSURE
zine

COLLEGE PREP
FAST FOOD
GRADUATION
FASHION
WEIGHT
DEADLINES
BELONGING
FAITH
GPA
CLUBS
MISUNDERSTANDINGS
SOFTBALL PRACTICES
SAT
SIBLINGS

TRUTH
JUSTICE
FRIENDSHIP
LOVE
LEARNING
MATH
PARENTS
QUIZZES
GRADES

FIGHTS WITH PARENTS
BAND COMPETITIONS

SUMMER JOBS
INSTAGRAM
FACEBOOK
STRESS
SCHOOL
EMOTIONS

SLEEP
PARTIES
HOMWORK

DAILY DEVOTIONAL
VOLUNTEERING
AGREEMENT
STIGMAS
TWITTER

TESTS
YOUTH
GROUP
SOCCER GAMES
EXPECTATIONS
RELATIONSHIPS
PRAYER

FRIENDS

TUTORING
SPORTS
ACNE

VIDEO
GAMES
MUSIC

TEXT
BOOKS
HONORS
AP

COMPUTERS



Give your teens a devo break!

Order enough for the youth in your church plus a few extras to encourage teens in your community!

Save 55% off the cover price!

Special group-rate offer starting at \$2.25 per copy

Order a minimum of 10 copies of each bimonthly issue delivered to the same location.

www.devozine.org

Call **800.972.0433**

TODAY and ask for offer A4JT10.