



*Seeking God's
Will Together*

A congregational study
on communal biblical discernment

by Central Plains Mennonite Conference

An area conference of Mennonite Church USA

Contents:

Introduction.....	page 1
Unit 1: Why we do it?.....	page 4
Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators...	page 4
Participant Program...	page 10
Notes for Table Group Facilitators...	page 12
Unit 2: By what authority?.....	page 16
Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators...	page 16
Participant Program...	page 22
Printables...	page 25
Unit 3: How do we read the Bible?....	page 31
Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators...	page 31
Participant Program...	page 36
Printables.....	page 38
Unit 4: Can we agree?.....	page 42
Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators...	page 42
Participant Program...	page 48
Printables.....	page 49
Unit 5: When we don't agree.....	page 51
Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators...	page 51
Participant Program A...	page 56
Participant Program B...	page 58
Unit 6: Inviting the Spirit to lead us....	page 60
Lesson Plan for Group Facilitator...	page 60
Participant Program...	page 66

Seeking God's Will Together: A congregational study on communal biblical discernment

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Introduction

Introduction for facilitators:

This study grows out of needs expressed by Central Plains Mennonite Conference delegates during table discussions during our annual meeting in June 2013. Our conference leaders decided that a congregational study would be the best way to equip congregations. They appointed Conference Minister Shana Peachey Boshart to lead a group of young pastors in creating this study.

This study will address why the church practices discernment, teach specific practices of discernment, and give congregations opportunities to practice what they have learned.

The goals for this study include:

1. Empowering our congregations and conference as a whole to build our competency for discerning matters of faith and life so that we can better proclaim and be a sign of God's reign in the world.
2. Outlining a process for biblical discernment in an Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective for congregations to learn from and practice applying to specific issues of our time.

Structure of the units

There are six units. Each unit has two parts, Teaching and Practice. In addition, each unit begins and ends with worship rituals and singing.

Steps through the lesson:

Introduction

Preparation in worship: Opening worship liturgy and song

Teaching video & questions for discussion

Practice exercises

Leaving in love: Closing worship liturgy and song

Groups who split the units into two sessions should structure their sessions like this:

Week One

1. Introducing the study
2. Preparation in worship
3. Teaching video & discussion
4. Leaving in love

Week Two

1. Recall Introduction & Teaching
2. Preparation in worship
3. Practice exercises
4. Leaving in love

Each unit follows a four-step process that we recommend as a process for discernment. These four steps are incorporated into the "steps through the lesson" named above, but they may appear in different parts of the lesson depending on the unit. By the end of the study, we hope your group will be able to recognize and use this four-step process of discernment.

- I. **Preparation in Worship**-We believe that good biblical discernment happens within the context of worship, and that we each need deliberate, prayerful preparation in which we commit to seeking God's will above our own agenda, desires, or needs.
- II. **God's Story, Our Story**-As we discern together, our emphasis is on the stories of God's people throughout time. In this section, the stories of God's people in the Scriptures inform and interpret our stories and experiences as God's people today.
- III. **Listening and Speaking in Love**-Discernment is hard work! Focusing on the ways that we speak

and listen to one another and making sure that we are communicating primarily in love is important. We trust that when we discern together prayerfully and carefully, the Holy Spirit will reveal God's will and guide us toward obedience.

IV. Leaving in Love-In the same way that deliberate preparation is essential to good discernment, so is deliberate leaving. So often the temptation is to save our annoyances, irritations, or hurts until after group discussions, and then to gather and share them with other like-minded individuals after the meeting. This practice hurts the gathered community, both because our conversations are richer when we can be open and honest with one another in the context of discussions and because annoyances, irritations, and hurts often escalate when they are allowed to fester and grow. Before we leave, we surrender to God the work we've done around the table as a way of putting our relationships with God and one another ahead of issues we may agree or disagree on.

Teaching Videos

Units 1-5 include a teaching video. Each congregation in Central Plains Mennonite Conference was given a DVD of the videos at Annual Meeting in June 2014. They can also be found at www.centralplainsmc.org/discernment-study as YouTube videos. Using a DVD is more reliable than live-streaming the videos over wi-fi from the web page. To request a DVD of the videos, contact shanaboshart@centralplainsmc.org.

Singing

We encourage you to sing together and to choose the songs you sing with care. The songs we sing are another form of prayer; they shape our community of faith and they speak to the soul on a deeper level. Singing is itself an act of unity and harmony. Choose songs your group knows and is comfortable with. We give you choices from *Hymnal A Worship Book*, *Sing the Story*, and *Sing the Journey*, with a chorus or two suggested as well. The songs listed in each unit are suggestions. If your congregation does not know the songs suggested, choose other songs that fit the lesson.

Your group may find it meaningful to learn *Sing the Journey* #57, *Mayenziwe (Your will be done)* and sing it at every session. This text from the Lord's Prayer beautifully summarizes the goal of all Christian discernment: That God's will be done. Singing it at each session gently reminds us to lay down our own wills as we "seek God's will together."

Considerations

- This study takes a greater commitment of time and participation than most church members are accustomed to. We are confident that the study is worth the extra effort! Each unit is designed to take 90 minutes, and you will need all 90 minutes. It is possible to break each unit into two sessions for a total of 12-13 sessions. If you take two sessions for each unit, plan on 50 minutes per session.
- Facilitating this study is a natural fit for the pastoral role, and we encourage churches to invite their pastor to lead it.
- This study will take a lot of preparation. One person or a team of two people should take responsibility to see that the study is one coherent experience from beginning to end and that each unit is carried out as intended. Consider appointing one or two people to work with the pastor to prepare the sessions.
- We recommend you do not assign different units to different leaders to facilitate. Each unit builds on the previous units, and Unit Six brings together all the skills and practices learned in the previous five.
- The facilitator will design Unit Six. We do not provide a lesson plan for Unit Six. We provide a guide for the facilitator to follow as he or she designs the unit around a specific topic for discernment. This topic will be one the facilitator or leadership group chooses that is relevant to your church.
- The six 90-minute units can easily be extended to eight or more sessions. If you need more than six 90-minute sessions:

- o First, extend Unit 3. For Unit 3A, do the entire lesson, making sure that people do each of the five R's, even if only briefly. For Unit 3B, begin and end with the worship liturgies and give the rest of the session to an in-depth study using the Five Rs.
- o Next, do Unit 6 twice, using a different question for discernment each time. Some discernment questions focus more around interpretation of scripture and some focus more around a life issue. You may want to choose one of each type of question for these two sessions.
- If you want more than eight sessions, you can repeat Unit 3B (or continue study of the same text from one time to the next) and Unit 6 as many times as you want to.

Facilitating the Sessions

One of your tasks will be to keep the group moving through the lesson by watching the clock and communicating clearly how much time people have for each section. Each lesson plan gives specific time frames to help you stay within the 90-minute total time frame.

Participant Programs

For each unit, there is a Participant Program. You will want to make copies of this program for every one or two participants.

Key Resources

These are the books we drew from the most as we wrote this study. We recommend that you have these books available for the facilitator and other interested people. They would be great additions to your church library.

Ervin Stutzman, *Discerning God's Will Together* (Unit 1)

Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Units 2 & 3)

Biblical Interpretation In the Life of the Church (Units 2 & 3)

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (Units 2 & 3)

Christine Eaton Blair, *The Art of Teaching the Bible* (Unit 3)

John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Unit 4)

A resource you may want as you prepare for Unit 6:

Cool Tools for Hot Topics: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright.

Other resources we recommend to our congregations:

David Ewert, *How to Understand the Bible*

David G. Benner, *Desiring God's Will*

Blessing

As Robert J. Suderman has said, "Discernment is the permanent vocation of the church." We wish you God's guidance and blessing as you seek God's will together!

—*The writers: Amanda Beachy, Nicholas Detweiler-Stoddard, Nathan Ramey, Matthew Troyer-Miller, and Shana Peachey Boshart*

Unit 1:

Seeking God's Will Together

Why do we do it?

Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators

Unit 1 Contents:

Lesson Plan for Group Facilitator...	4
Participant Program...	10
Notes for Table Group Facilitators...	12
Printables...	14

Introduction for facilitators:

The first unit in this study answers the question, “Why does the church seek God’s will together?” During the first half of this unit we will hear from David Boshart, Executive Conference Minister of Central Plains Mennonite Conference, as he explores biblical and historical justification for discernment. David will teach via video, with pauses built in for small group discussions based on the ideas he’s presented.

In the second half of this unit, there will be time for participants to practice scriptural discernment by utilizing a modified version of the “Swedish Method of Bible Reading.” This style of reading and discussion promotes good observations of the text, reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide our discussions, group participation, and self-guided discovery. Each person has the opportunity to discover for themselves what God says, and the group has the opportunity to clarify and further discuss what God is saying to the congregation through the passage.

Preparation:

What to print:

*For each person:

-Mark 10 Scripture printable
p.15

-1/2 sheet of Swedish Method printable *p.14*

*For every two participants:

-Participant program *p.10-11*

*For each Table Facilitator

-Notes for Table Facilitators
p.12-13

What to gather:

**Hymnal, A Worship Book* (or substitute) for each participant (these could be shared)

*equipment to play the teaching video

*a stone for each participant, piled in the middle of each table (Available out-of-doors or from home improvement/décor stores. Stones may also be purchased from Amazon.com. These should be larger than small pebbles.)

*pens/pencils for each participant

*a Bible for the leader

*tables and chairs for participants to gather around. Plan for 5-7 people per table.

Introducing the study to participants: (3 minutes)

Gather the group in with words of welcome, including whatever portions of the introductory comments might be helpful in your context and/or include more specific reasons that your congregation or group is participating in this study. If you are a pastor or leader of the congregation or group, you may want to share your hopes and dreams for discernment in your congregation. This should NOT include what outcomes of discernment you are hoping for!

I. Preparation/Worship (7 minutes)

Say something like:

“The early Anabaptists, our spiritual ancestors, believed that in order to understand the Word of God more clearly, they needed to be discussing, praying, and interpreting the scriptures together, in groups of committed believers. Today, we carry on that tradition by worshiping around tables and studying the scriptures together as a congregation.

“As we come together to talk and pray, we each come from weeks and lives that are full of commitments, worries, and joys. As we gather, we each bring baggage. Perhaps we come with anxiety or stress about work. Maybe we come today with apprehensions about sitting together and discussing scriptures. Maybe we come full of fear or concern about our families.

“Though we trust that God will be in our conversations, we sometimes allow God’s work and the Holy Spirit’s presence to be overshadowed by our own doubts, concerns, or anxieties. Take a moment to prayerfully consider the baggage that you might be bringing that will keep you from hearing the voice of God in our conversations, and ask God to help you release it.”

Prayer of release: *Pray this or other prayers asking God to help release us from the baggage that we’ve brought with us that will keep us from fully participating in these discussions.*

“God, we come together from many places to worship you this week. We have so much in our lives competing for our attention. We have fears and anxieties and stress. We have doubts that you will speak to us. We shy away from trying new things. We worry that this will not be a safe space.

“God, let us hold loosely these things that command our attention. Let us turn our hearts and minds instead to you, and let our time together be guided by the Holy Spirit, instead of our own agendas and concerns. Help us to trust that in our speaking together, we will hear your will and your words in our own lives, spoken to and for each of us, and for all of our gathered community. Bless our time together and help us to grow as we worship you. Amen.”

Scripture: Joshua 4:1-9

Say: In many ancient cultures piles of stone were created as monuments or memorials to major events that had taken place. The stories of major battles or events became a part of oral cultural or tribal history, and the piles of stones or cairns served as visual reminders that prompted the stories to be told and retold. In Joshua 4:1-9, God has Joshua build a stone monument, not to the strength or events of men, but as a monument or a sign that God has been with them.

Read Joshua 4:1-9 (NRSV):

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: “Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, and command them, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.’” Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.” The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua,

carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

Say: You see a pile of stones in the center of your table—a miniature version of the pile of stones that God had Joshua erect. Today, and in each session in this curriculum, we will use these stones as reminders that God is with us as we do this important work of discernment. As we begin to speak together, we will each take a stone from the pile. This stone will be our reminder throughout the remainder of our time together today, that we do weighty work, that our words and actions have consequences, and most importantly, that God is here among us, moving and shaping our experiences and conversations. At the end of this session, we will replace our stones in the center of the table and create monuments to the events of this day and to the protection, provision, and presence of God in this place and forever.

Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

Leader: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we are shaped by the Holy Spirit and our time in community.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out the rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight. Let us speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and of this task of finding God’s will for our lives.

L: Like stones that create permanent memorials to what God has done, we are living memorials of what God is doing in our lives.

All: We lift these stones as reminders that the work we are doing here will last.

L: As we speak together, hold the stone or set it in front of you to remind you of the task at hand. Let these stones be reminders to us as we speak and listen in love, that we are shaped by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these stones be reminders that we have gathered to listen and speak with one another in love.

Song suggestions:

Sing the Journey #57 *Your will be done*

HWB 26 *Holy Spirit, come with power*

HWB 16 *God is here among us*

HWB 418 *Move in our midst*

HWB 349 *Spirit of the living God*

Teaching (40 minutes)

Each participant should have access to the “Participant program” printable.

Each unit in this study begins with a session of teaching followed by a session in which participants do a discernment practice. Our teaching session today answers the question “Why does the church seek God’s will together?” We will hear from David Boshart, Executive Conference Minister of Central Plains Mennonite Conference, via video as he explores biblical and historical ideas of discernment. We will pause the video several times to discuss questions from the material David presents.

Questions for Discussion:

Section I: *Take 8 minutes for small group discussion. You may want to instruct groups to focus on whichever of these first questions are the most interesting to them.*

1. What issues or events have caused *you* to ask, “Which way forward?”
2. What things have caused *your congregation* (or other church-related group) to ask, “Which way forward?”
3. The central question for this study asks, “*How does the faithful church discern the way of Jesus as we engage the culture in which we find ourselves?*” What is your initial gut response to this question (hope, dread; energy, weariness; anticipation, ambivalence; etc.)?

Section II: *Take 5 minutes for small group discussion*

1. What do you hope the Holy Spirit will “make new” in your personal life? In the life of your congregation?
2. What concrete things do we need to learn or practice in order to make sure that we have given the Spirit what is needed to work among us?

Section III: *These are **optional** questions for deeper reflection.*

1. In what ways have you or your church experienced the tension of the Gospel being both *at home in* and *alien to* the world around us?
2. What kinds of things might your church do in order to have one ear to the people and the other ear to the Gospel?

Optional:

Time will likely be short, but if time permits, you may want to allow time for participants from each group to say a bit about any important thoughts that came up during their discussions. You may also want to spend a few moments summing up David’s teaching and its relevance for your congregation/small group.

Break/intermission:

You may want to allow a few minutes at the half-way point for participants to stretch or use the facilities. You’ll want to encourage promptness, as time is short!

Practice (40 minutes total)

Say something like: In the teaching session of this unit, we learned the “why” of discernment. This second session will feature a time of practice, focusing on the “what” of discernment. We will be using a modified version of the “Swedish Method of Bible Reading.” This style of reading and discussion helps us to pay attention to the text and to rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance, and it provides an outline for thinking about and sharing our observations. Our discernment practice will follow a four-step process moving from **Preparation and Worship**, to **God’s Story, Our Story** (engagement with the scriptures and reflection on its connection to our lives), **Listening and Speaking in Love** (small group discussion) and will end with us “**Leaving in Love.**” This four-step process will be repeated, in various forms, in every unit.

II. God’s Story, Our Story

In this section, facilitators will want to emphasize that the stories we read in the Bible are not old and dead, but instead, these are the stories of our spiritual ancestors and they become our stories as we read and internalize them. Facilitators are encouraged to gather more background information on this passage, but avoid telling the “point” of it, as that is what the group will discern. An excellent resource to consult on this (and other) scriptures is www.workingpreacher.org. You could also copy the following short commentary and give it to table leaders:

Short commentary on Mark 10:46-52

The scriptures in our Bible are the stories of God's relationship with our spiritual ancestors. As Christians, these stories become our stories too, as we tell, hear, discern, and live what we've found. Our scripture for discernment today is found in Mark. The gospel of Mark is the first retelling of the story of Jesus, the first written of our four Gospels. Each Gospel author retells and shapes the story according to their purposes and perspectives. Mark tells all the stories of Jesus with special attention to Jesus' death. Mark's purpose is to make sense of Jesus' crucifixion. This purpose is woven in and throughout all of the stories of Jesus' life.

Mark's Jesus is a mysterious figure who intentionally keeps people in the dark about who he really is. He silences those who know his identity as Messiah and would tell others. Even those who call him Messiah have trouble characterizing what exactly this means. Others looked for a Messiah of triumph and military power and greatness, but Mark exposes the disciples' discomfort (and often, our discomfort) with the kind of Messiah Jesus really is. In Mark's gospel, Jesus the Messiah had to die.

Mark often reveals his mysterious messianic intentions by telling the stories of people on the margins that identify who Jesus is, even while those who are with Jesus constantly often miss the point. Mark 10:46-52, our scripture for discernment today, tells the story of a blind man named Bartimaeus who sees Jesus and recognizes his healing power. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell of Jesus' healing the blind, but Mark is the only account that mentions Bartimaeus by name. While many along the way, including the disciples, seem clueless about Jesus' identity, Bartimaeus seems to grasp immediately who Jesus is, calling him the "Son of David," a unique Messianic title that suggests Jesus' link to Jewish royalty.

In the climax of our scripture, Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus in faith, "Let me see again!" and is healed. (Too often, we have linked faith and healing in unhelpful and even harmful ways in our faith communities, equating being healed with righteousness. This view persists even as we know that disease is indiscriminant and bad things happen to good people. How then, as we talk and listen together, can we pay special attention to the meaning behind this story?) How does this plea to "Let me see again!" apply to our communities and congregations? How does this story emphasize the mystery of Jesus' identity and point to Jesus' death and resurrection? What does this story say about who the "insiders" or "outsiders" are in the kingdom of God? How do we follow Jesus with the abandon of Bartimaeus, throwing our proverbial cloak as we rise up in faith to follow the Messiah?

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Participants should be sitting around tables in small groups. Each table should have a leader appointed, and the leader should be given a copy of the "notes for table facilitators" printable. Each person should have a 1/2 sheet of the "Swedish Method of Bible reading" printable and a whole sheet of the "Mark 10 Scripture" printable. This portion of the study should be led by the table facilitators, although the larger group facilitator may want to step in if needed. Table facilitators will need to keep things moving in groups and judge the time allowed for each portion of the study accordingly. It is preferable to have a time for whole group sharing at the end of the study, but due to the constraints of time, this may not be possible. Be sure to let your table facilitators know whether or not this larger group sharing will take place.

Introduce this activity by saying something like: Our discernment practice today will be based on a modified version of the Swedish Method of Bible reading. This style of reading and discussion promotes good observation of the text, reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide our discussions, group participation, and self-guided discovery. Each person has the opportunity to clarify and further discuss what God is saying to the congregation through the passage.

You may want to say a few words to give authority to the table facilitators to lead this time of discussion and exploration of the text.

Please note: The goal is that these table groups would be safe spaces for group members to explore these passages. Pat or matter-of-fact answers for heart-felt questions are not helpful. The questions and comments people give do not require answers. However, if people have ideas and would like to discuss them, facilitators could allow time for that.

IV. Leaving in Love (5 minutes)

It would be good for you to say a few words of summary from the conversations that you've heard around the room, paying particular attention to the question of, "What does this passage say to/about/for us today?"

Say something like:

As we've listened and spoken together, we've practiced discernment. Reading the scriptures in community and trying to hear in them what God has for us today is an essential task of the church. Sometimes these conversations will be easy, but more often, these conversations about scriptures and about the world will be hard work. They will require us to rub elbows with those in our community who come from different perspectives, cultures, or economic/educational/or social backgrounds. These conversations require us to interpret the scriptures and to go deeper with one another than surface conversations or small-talk. They strengthen our resolve as the people of God in this world, and our relationships with one another. This group discernment of the scriptures, of the world, and of the will and purposes of God link us to the stories of God's people in the Bible, to our spiritual ancestors throughout history, and to the global church today.

When we began this time of discernment, we released the things that we carried with us as we came, any hurts, anxieties, or fears. As we go, we hold on to the learning that we've done together and to the relationships that have been strengthened by talking with one another, but we release any tension or anxiety that we've felt in these conversations. We release the stones in front of us and prepare to go out into the world once again.

I Samuel 7:12 says, "Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer for he said, "Thus far the Lord has helped us." So, too, have we been helped by God.

Leader: Please hold your stone over the center of the table and join in the "leaving in love" liturgy on your Participant Program.

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, our conversations are often weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like sharp stones in the bed of our shoes that irritate our sensitive feet, these conversations may stick in our minds.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our irritations, anxieties, or fears as we leave.

L: Like the stone monuments that marked the work of God in the Old Testament, we are living monuments of the work of God in this world.

All: We lay down these stones as a memorial to the work that God has done here, in our midst.

Lay down stones in the center of the table

L: As we depart from this place, we place these stones in the center of our tables to remind us that our work today is done. Let these piles of stones be reminders to us that our time here has been shaped by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these stone monuments remind us that as we have spoken and listened in love, our leaving must be in love as well.

Song: HWB 521 *Come thou fount*

You may want to remind participants of the topic and time for the next session before dismissing them.

Unit 1:

Seeking God's Will Together

Why do we do it?

Participant Program

Teaching

David Boshart, Executive Conference Minister, Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Questions for thought and/or discussion:

Section I

1. What issues or events have caused *you* to ask, “Which way forward?”
2. What things have caused *your congregation* (or other church-related group) to ask, “Which way forward?”
3. The central question for this study asks, “*How does the faithful church discern the way of Jesus as we engage the culture in which we find ourselves?*” What is your initial gut response to this question (hope, dread; energy, weariness; anticipation, ambivalence; etc.)?

Section II

1. What do you hope the Holy Spirit will “make new” in your personal life? In the life of your congregation?
2. What concrete things do we need to learn or practice in order to make sure that we have given the Spirit what is needed to work among us?

Section III *These are **optional** questions for deeper reflection.*

1. In what ways have you or your church experienced the tension of the Gospel being both *at home in* and *alien to* the world around us?
2. What kinds of things might your church do in order to have one ear to the people and the other ear to the Gospel?

Practice

I. Preparation/Worship

Joshua 4:1-9

Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we are shaped by the Holy Spirit and our time in community.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out the rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight. Let us speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and of this task of finding God's will for our lives.

L: Like stones that create permanent memorials to what God has done, we are living memorials of what God is doing in our lives.

All: We lift these stones as reminders that the work we are doing here will last.

L: As we speak together, hold the stone or set it in front of you to remind you of the task at hand. Let these stones be reminders to us as we speak and listen in love, that we are shaped by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these stones be reminders that we have gathered to listen and speak with one another in love.

Song

II. God's Story, Our Story

Mark 10:46-52

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Activity: Modified Swedish Method of Bible Reading

I Samuel 7:12

IV. Leaving in Love

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, our conversations are often weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like sharp stones in the bed of our shoes that irritate our sensitive feet, these conversations may stick in our minds.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our irritations, anxieties, or fears as we leave.

L: Like the stone monuments that marked the work of God in the Old Testament, we are living monuments of the work of God in this world.

All: We lay down these stones as a memorial to the work that God has done here, in our midst.

Lay down stones in the center of the table

L: As we depart from this place, we place these stones in the center of our tables to remind us that our work today is done. Let these piles of stones be reminders to us that our time here has been shaped by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these stone monuments remind us that as we have spoken and listened in love, our leaving must be in love as well.

Song

Unit 1:

Seeking God's Will Together

Why do we do it?

Notes for Table Group Facilitators

Our discernment practice today will be based on a modified version of the Swedish Method of Bible reading. This style of reading and discussion promotes good observation of the text, reliance on the Holy Spirit to guide our discussions, group participation, and self-guided discovery. Each person has the opportunity to discover for themselves what God says, and the group has the opportunity to clarify and further discuss what God is saying to the congregation through the passage.

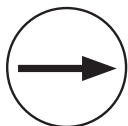
1. In table groups, have one person read the passage aloud. As the passage is read, instruct table members to look in the text for these three things:



A light bulb: This should be something that “shines” from the passage—whatever impacts the most or draws attention.



A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question you’d like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord. (This may include doubts, concerns, questions about the meanings of words, questions about the theology presented, etc.)



An arrow: A personal application for your life.

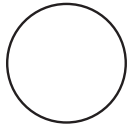
After the passage is read, give 5-8 minutes for personal reading/study of this passage. They can mark these symbols on a copy of the text (we’ve provided a printable that features several popular translations of the text), or write their answers on a separate piece of paper (we’ve provided a half-sheet printable with room to write). Everyone should mark at least one portion of text for each symbol.

2. After a time of silence, have each reader share any “light bulbs” or “question marks” that they’d like to with the group. Spend time discussing these and discovering what has impacted different members. You may want to allow time for each person to share first, then go back and discuss certain “light bulbs” or “questions” that have captured the interest of your group. While group members are sharing, there should be no interruptions (except on the group facilitators part to keep things moving).

Please note: The goal is that these table groups would be safe spaces for group members to explore these passages. Pat or matter-of-fact answers for heart-felt questions are not helpful. The questions and comments people give do not require answers. However, if people have ideas and would like to discuss them, you could allow space for that.

This should take roughly 2-3 minutes per person in the group. Feel free to move on to the next section if you finish with this early.

3. When all the light bulbs and/or questions have been shared (or people have passed), ask each person to share one of this passages applications for their lives (or, alternatively, reasons they think this passage does not apply). Once everyone who wishes to has answered, move the question outward and introduce the fourth symbol:



Circle: How does this passage apply to the life of this congregation?

As Mennonites, we believe that scripture is best read in the community of faith and for the community of faith. What does this passage say to/about/for us today? This portion of study should take 15-20 minutes.

****If there is extra time, plan to report briefly on what you've shared as a group. Each table benefits by hearing about the discussions in other groups.**

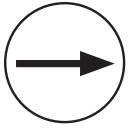
Mark the text with these symbols, or write your thoughts below.



A light bulb: This should be something that “shines” from the passage—whatever impacts most, or draws attention.

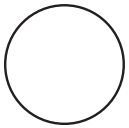


A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question you’d like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for your life.

Talk together about this question:



Circle: How does this passage apply to the life of this congregation?



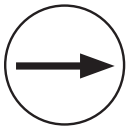
Mark the text with these symbols, or write your thoughts below.



A light bulb: This should be something that “shines” from the passage—whatever impacts most, or draws attention.

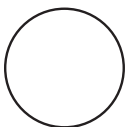


A question mark: Anything that is difficult to understand in the text, or a question you’d like to ask the writer of the passage or the Lord.



An arrow: A personal application for your life.

Talk together about this question:



Circle: How does this passage apply to the life of this congregation?

Scripture printable for Unit 1

Mark 10:46-52 (NIV)

Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.”

Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him.

The blind man said, “Rabbi, I want to see.”

“Go,” said Jesus, “Your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.

Mark 10:46-52 (NRSV)

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside.

When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Mark 10:46-52 (CEV)

Jesus and his disciples went to Jericho. And as they were leaving, they were followed by a large crowd. A blind beggar by the name of Bartimaeus son of Timaeus was sitting beside the road. When he heard that it was Jesus from Nazareth, he shouted, “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!” Many people told the man to stop, but he shouted even louder, “Son of David, have pity on me!”

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him over!”

They called out to the blind man and said, “Don’t be afraid! Come on! He is calling for you.” The man threw off his coat as he jumped up and ran to Jesus.

Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?”

The blind man answered, “Master, I want to see!”

Jesus told him, “You may go. Your eyes are healed because of your faith.”

Right away the man could see, and he went down the road with Jesus.

Unit 2:

Seeking God's Will Together

By what authority?

Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators

Unit 2 Contents:

Lesson Plan for Group
Facilitator... 16
Participant
Program... 22
Printables... 25

Gathering Materials:

What to print:

*For each person:

-Scripture printable p. 26

-half sheet of Lectio Divina (for Practice Option A or for use at home) p. 25

*For every two participants:

-Participant program p. 22-24

*For each household to take home:

-“Article 4. Scripture,” *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995) p. 29-30

-“Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church” p. 27-28

What to gather:

**Hymnal, A Worship Book* (or substitute) for each participant (these could be shared)

*equipment to play the teaching video

*a stone for each participant, piled in the middle of each table (Available out-of-doors or from home improvement/décor stores.)

*pens/pencils for each participant

*a Bible for the leader

*tables and chairs for participants to gather around. Plan for 5-7 people per table.

Introduction & Welcome (3-5 minutes)

Welcome, Review of larger study, Introduction to Unit 2, Opening prayer

Welcome the group. Introduce this unit by paraphrasing these paragraphs:

This is Unit 2 of a six-unit study which was crafted in response to CPMC congregations, delegates, and pastors asking, “**How does the faithful church discern the way of Jesus as we engage the culture in which we live?**” In the first unit Executive Conference Minister, Dave Boshart responded to the question, “*Why* does the church seek God’s will together?”

In this second unit we explore the follow-up question to the church, seeking God's will together, "By what authority do we discern?" When making decisions about what God's will for us actually is, what criteria do we weigh and what authorities do we consult? As people of faith deciding on life issues of faith according to the way of Jesus, how do we use the Bible (as one of those authorities) to know what God is truly saying to us about God's will?

In this unit we reflect on the use of various authorities such as *scripture, reason, church tradition, culture, political powers, and experience* as reference points for making decisions. The Anabaptist family of Christians (of which Mennonites are part) weights a plain reading of scripture as the primary source of authority above all others, particularly as it is interpreted through Jesus Christ (the Word of God) by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Before diving into these deep questions on authority and scripture, let us first prepare ourselves for discernment of God's will by worshiping the Lord whose will we seek. Let us pray!

Lead the group in prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to inspire and guide the group's study.

Preparation in Worship (5-7 minutes)

Faithful discernment and biblical interpretation is not just about correct methods and study, but is also connected significantly to our own repentance and obedience to what we hear God saying. (See 1 John 2:4 and 11 on disobedient knowledge as distorted and unloving knowledge as blind and dark.)

Early Anabaptists were skeptical about the faithfulness of the city councils and magistrates putting them on trial for their practices and interpretation of scripture and thus suggested that only those who have earnestly given themselves to the Savior in repentance will be able to perceive the light by the guidance of the Spirit. **In other words, without repentance and yielding our wills to God's, we will find in scripture only what we want to find or have already decided.**

So, we begin all times of biblical discernment by laying down our wills, prejudices, over-confidences, pet projects, and assumptions so that we can take on God's will. This does not mean we check our convictions and backbone at the door, but only that we enter with humility, knowing that we all have things to repent of and be converted toward by God's Spirit. We confess that no matter how strong our convictions and certainties are, in reality "we see through a glass darkly" and "know only in part" (1 Cor. 13:12). Yieldedness, humility, and repentance are prerequisites for scriptural interpretation specifically, and discernment of God's will more broadly. Further, if we truly believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the community of faith, we will be listening for the voice of the Spirit speaking through other members of our specific community of faith. So, let us begin today's session by yielding ourselves to God's will and way and by committing to listen carefully to those around the table.

We will again enter our time of worship and "laying down" by hearing an account of God's people setting up stone markers as reminders of God's help. In 1 Samuel 7:8-12 an Ebenezer stone is set up, to commemorate and remind the people of God's help to them in a time of need.

Read I Samuel 7:8-12 "Crying out to God, raising an Ebenezer (stone of help)"

Leader: Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by wind and water, we are shaped by the Holy Spirit and our time in community.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out the rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight: they can be destructive weapons or build something of value. Let us speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and of this task of finding God’s will for our lives.

L: Like “Ebenezer” stones that create permanent memorials to what God has done, we are living memorials of what God is doing in our lives.

All: We lift these stones as reminders that “God will help” the work we are doing.

L: As we speak together today, hold your stone or set it in front of you to remind you that as we speak and listen in love, we are shaped by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these stones be reminders that we have gathered to listen and speak with one another in love so that we may hear *God* speak. God will help us!

Song suggestions:

Hymnal Worship Book #594 Lord, You Sometimes Speak in Wonders v. 1, 4, 5.

Sing the Journey #57 Your will be done

Teaching

Our teaching session today addresses the role of scripture in our discernment. We will hear from Amanda Beachy, pastor of Washington Mennonite Church in Washington, Iowa. We will pause the video several times to discuss questions from the material Amanda presents.

Discussion questions from the video: *Take 7-9 minutes for each section. You may want to instruct groups to focus on whichever of these first questions are the most interesting to them.*

Section I

1. What have your experiences been with authority? What do you value and what makes you cautious?
2. Which sources of authority or influence do you refer to most frequently in making decisions at work, home, or in the church (such as Politics, Reason, Personal Experience, Cultural Trends, Tradition, Scripture)? If possible, give an example of their use in a decision.

Section II

1. How has the Bible been meaningful or life-giving to you? How has it been difficult or unpleasant?
2. Why do you consider the Bible important? When do you doubt its helpfulness?
3. What are some specific ways scripture has taught, rebuked, corrected, and trained you in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16)?

Practice

II. God’s Story, Our Story and

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Choose between the two options. We give you two options so that you may have more scripture study methods available. It does not matter which one you choose. You may want to give each participant the half-sheet handout “Lectio Divina” so they can use it at home, even if you use Option B.

For BOTH options, have everyone find a partner who is not their spouse, a family member, or a close friend. If there is an odd number of participants, there will be one group of three. You do not want more than one group of three, because it takes much longer for three people to share than two, and the whole practice portion will take much longer if there are several groups of three.

Option A

Lectio Divina (LEX-ee-oh div-EEN-ah) (38 minutes total)

Find a partner. Choose someone who is not your spouse, a family member, or a close friend. (3/38 min)

Prepare (2/38 min)

Facilitator: Take a moment to come fully into the present. Sit comfortably alert, close your eyes, and center yourself with breathing.

Allow people a few moments to become settled and alert. You may lead them in taking two or three deep breaths, exhaling slowly and focusing on entering the presence of God.

1. Hear the text. (6/38 min)

Facilitator: As I read the text, you may close your eyes and listen or follow along in your Bible, whichever you prefer. Listen attentively for the word or phrase given to you. Jot it down or repeat it softly to yourself during the silence after the reading. When I give the signal, share with your partner only that word or phrase, without elaboration.

The facilitator reads John 1: 1-18 aloud. Participants may listen with eyes closed or follow along in their Bibles. Allow silence of 30-60 seconds after you read the text.

Facilitator: Share with your partner your word or phrase, without commenting further.

People speak their word or phrase. This will not take long, so move to the next step after just a few seconds.

2. Ask, “How is my life touched?” (10/38 min)

Facilitator: I am going to read the text again. This time, listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. Consider the possibilities during the silence after the reading. When I give the signal, share with your partner how this passage touches your life, perhaps beginning with the words “I hear,” “I see,” or “I sense.”

The facilitator or a second person reads the text aloud. Participants may listen with eyes closed or follow along in their Bibles. Allow silence of 30-60 seconds after you read the text.

Facilitator: Share with your partner what you see, hear, or sense.

People share with their partners how their life is touched by the passage. Allow 3-5 minutes for their sharing, watching to see how much time they seem to need.

3. Ask, “Is there an invitation here for me?” (17/38 min)

Facilitator: I am going to read the text one more time. As you listen, ask God, “Is there an invitation here for me?” Ponder it during several minutes of silence. When I give the signal, share your sense of invitation with your partner.

The facilitator or a third person reads the text aloud. Participants may listen with eyes closed or follow along in their Bibles. Allow silence of 30-60 seconds after you read the text.

Facilitator: I invite you to share with your partner God’s invitation to you. When you have each shared, take a few moments to pray for one another that God would help you respond to the invitations you’ve received. I’ll let you know when you should transition from talking to praying.

People share the invitation they heard/sensed. Give ample time for sharing, watching the group to see how much time they need. Let them know when to transition from sharing to praying. Aim for 8 minutes of sharing and 4 minutes of praying.

Option B

Two-Fold Listening to the Word (40 minutes total)

“Two-Fold” can refer to the fact this is done in partners, the fact that we listen both to our partner and to God, and the fact that we are listening to the Word both individually and corporately.

Instruct the group, saying: Find a partner. Choose someone who is not your spouse, a family member, or a close friend. Take three minutes to allow people to find a partner. (3/40 min)

The facilitator reads John 1:1-18, then allows 30-60 seconds of silence to unfold as people let the words have their impact. (5/40 min.)

Say: Listen as your partner tells you what they heard in the passage. Perhaps it will be something that raises a question, gets their attention, or relates to their life. Listen well, because you will share with the whole group what your partner shares with you. When your partner has finished speaking, repeat or summarize what s/he has said and ask if you got it right. You may even want to jot down a few notes so you can remember correctly and share accurately what your partner said. (2/40 min to give these instructions.)

Now, give people 6-10 minutes to talk and listen. Notice how they are paying attention. (10/40 min.)

When you draw them back together to report what they have heard. If at all possible, ask everyone to share what they have learned from their partners. If the group is just too big, ask several sets of partners to share. (15/40 min.)

If everyone has shared and if there is time, consider together as a group what God might be saying to your group today through this text. (5/40 min.)

IV. Leaving in Love (5 minutes)

When we began this time of discernment, we released the things that we carried with us as we came, any hurts, anxieties, or fears. As we go, we hold on to the learning that we’ve done together, and to the relationships that have been strengthened by talking with one another, but we release any tension or anxiety that we’ve felt in these conversations. We release the stones in front of us and prepare to go out into the world once again.

L: Please hold your stone over the center of the table and join in the “leaving in love” liturgy on your Participant Program.

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, our conversations are often weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like sharp stones that stick to our feet, these conversations may stick in our minds.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our irritations, anxieties, or fears as we leave.

L: Jesus, the true light that enlightens everyone, has come into the world.

All: We lay down these stones as a reminder that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

(Lay down stones in the center of the table.)

L: As we depart from this place, we place these stones in the center of the table to remind us that our work today is done. Let these piles of stones be reminders to us that our time here has been guided by the Holy Spirit and illuminated by the light of Christ. Let these stones testify that as we have spoken and listened in love, we leave in love as well.

Prayer & Sending Hymn (Choose one)
HWB #334 *Christ is the world's true light*
Sing the Story #31 *Jesus, be the center*

Further Reflection

Give these handouts at the end of the session.

“Article 4. Scripture,” *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995)

“Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church”

For reflection at home:

1. What resonates with you in the Confession of Faith article?
2. What do you challenge or disagree with? What raises questions for you?

Please read “Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church” and bring along to the Unit 3 sessions.

Unit 2:

Seeking God's Will Together

By what authority?

Participant Program

Introduction & Welcome

I. Preparation in Worship

Read I Samuel 7:8-12 “Crying out to God, raising an Ebenezer (stone of help)”

(Each person holds a stone.)

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by wind and water, we are shaped by the Holy Spirit and our time in community.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out the rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight: they can be destructive weapons or build something of value. Let us speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and of this task of finding God's will for our lives.

L: Like “Ebenezer” stones that create permanent memorials to what God has done, we are living memorials of what God is doing in our lives.

All: We lift these stones as reminders that “God will help” the work we are doing.

L: As we speak together today, hold your stone or set it in front of you to remind you that as we speak and listen in love, we are shaped by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these stones be reminders that we have gathered to listen and speak with one another in love so that we may hear God speak. God will help us!

Song

Teaching

Amanda Beachy, Washington Mennonite Church, Washington, Iowa

Notes:

Questions for thought and discussion:

Section I: Authorities

1. What have your experiences been with authority? What do you value and what makes you cautious?
2. Which sources of authority or influence do you refer to most frequently in making decisions at work, home, or in the church? If possible, give an example.

Section II: Scripture as Our Authority

1. How has the Bible been meaningful or life-giving to you? How has it been difficult or unpleasant?
2. Why do you consider the Bible important? When do you doubt its helpfulness?
3. What are some specific ways scripture has taught, rebuked, corrected, and trained you in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16)?

II. God's Story, Our Story and

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Read and reflect on John 1:1-18 according to the method introduced by your facilitator

IV. Leaving in Love

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, our conversations are often weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like sharp stones that stick to our feet, these conversations may stick in our minds.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our irritations, anxieties, or fears as we leave.

L: Jesus, the true light that enlightens everyone, has come into the world.

All: We lay down these stones as a reminder that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it.

(Lay down stones in the center of the table.)

L: As we depart from this place, we place these stones in the center of the table to remind us that our work today is done. Let these piles of stones be reminders to us that our time here has been guided by the Holy Spirit and illuminated by the light of Christ. Let these stones testify that as we have spoken and listened in love, we leave in love as well.

Sending Song

Further Reflection

For reflection at home:

“Article 4. Scripture,” **Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective** (1995)

1. What resonates with you in the Confession of Faith article?
2. What do you challenge or disagree with? What raises questions for you?

Please read and bring along to the Unit 3 sessions:

“Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church”

Lectio Divina

Choose a passage of scripture and read the passage slowly and reflectively several times with the following questions and responses.

Preparation: Sit quietly for a few moments, being conscious of the presence of God.

Reading One:

- Read the passage aloud, slowly, once or twice.
- Listen attentively for a word or phrase given to you.
- Speak the word or phrase aloud or write it down.
- Sit in silence for a few moments.

Reading Two:

- Read the passage aloud.
- Ponder how this passage touches your life.
- Speak aloud or journal, responding with “I hear...” or “I see...” or “I sense....”

Reading Three:

- Read the passage aloud, asking, “Is there an invitation here for me to do something?”
- After reading the passage, remain in silence for a few moments.
- Speak aloud or journal, responding to the above question with “I feel invited to...” or “The invitation to me is...” or “I am being called/asked to...”

Prayer: Ask God to help you do or be whatever God is asking of you.

Lectio Divina

Choose a passage of scripture and read the passage slowly and reflectively several times with the following questions and responses.

Preparation: Sit quietly for a few moments, being conscious of the presence of God.

Reading One:

- Read the passage aloud, slowly, once or twice.
- Listen attentively for a word or phrase given to you.
- Speak the word or phrase aloud or write it down.
- Sit in silence for a few moments.

Reading Two:

- Read the passage aloud.
- Ponder how this passage touches your life.
- Speak aloud or journal, responding with “I hear...” or “I see...” or “I sense....”

Reading Three:

- Read the passage aloud, asking, “Is there an invitation here for me to do something?”
- After reading the passage, remain in silence for a few moments.
- Speak aloud or journal, responding to the above question with “I feel invited to...” or “The invitation to me is...” or “I am being called/asked to...”

Prayer: Ask God to help you do or be whatever God is asking of you.

Scripture printable for Unit 2

2 Timothy 3:16-17

(NIV) All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

(NRSV) All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

(KJV) All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

John 1:1-18 (NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church

A Summary Statement Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Interpreting the Bible

The *ultimate goal* in interpretation is to allow the Bible to speak its own message with a view to worship and obedience. In many cases what a passage says is clear. Then, the task of interpretation is concerned with discerning at what points the message touches life. However, in some cases the meaning of the passage must first be determined by careful study.

Letting the Bible speak for itself under the *guidance of the Spirit* is not at all that easy. Tendencies to impose our ideas and biases need to be set aside. For example, middle-class North Americans find it easy to disregard the perspective of any other racial, cultural, or economic view of the Scriptures. Although we will always read and study the Bible from our own point of view, knowing interpretations of others will aid responsible interpretation. While it is important, therefore, to both seek the guidance of the Spirit and consider insights of others, personal Bible study will make use of the following sound methods:

1. Observe carefully what the text says.

This approach to the Bible study is known as the *inductive method* of Bible study. Essentially this means paying careful attention to both the literary structure and context of a passage. This approach involves looking at words, sentences, paragraphs, and larger blocks of material, and asking questions such as who? what? where? when? and why? It means noticing recurring themes, causes and effects and relationships within the passage, as well as similarities and differences from other passages of the Bible. This approach to the Bible allows the conclusions to grow out of the text.

2. Be sensitive to different literary forms.

Because the Bible is made up of a variety of *literary forms*, responsible interpretation must respect the differences between narrative, parable, poetry, and discourse. Careful study will recognize the Bible's use of symbolism and imagery, striving to get the basic message without making it say more or less than it was intended to say. As various literary forms and images are understood, the puzzling features of the Bible often begin to make sense (as in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation). Thus, the Bible is seen as a living document bound up with the people of God and, as such, it is the message of God to and through His people.

3. Study the historical and cultural contexts of the passage.

It is necessary for us to take seriously the historical context of any given passage and the Bible as a whole. God revealed Himself in history to a particular people over a period of many centuries. The written Word reflects the process of God's revelation of himself. Hence, faithful interpretation requires careful consideration of the historical context of any given passage. Much misinterpretation has resulted from disregard for the historical context of the passage being interpreted. Study of the Bible is always a study of a people. It is necessary therefore to enter the world of the Hebrew people and the people of the early church. This includes understanding their ways of thinking, their cultural patterns, and their distinctiveness amid the surrounding cultures and nations.

When we do that we can expect to experience a degree of cultural shock, just as we experience when we cross cultural barriers today. The ability to cross such barriers is one of the callings of the Christian, both to understand the Bible and to communicate it to other cultures of the present day. In order to understand the cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts of a given Scripture, the various

4. Make wise use of various translations.

In addition to taking seriously the cultural context of the Bible we must understand the *language itself*. Today we read the Bible in our native language. The Bible, however, was written mostly in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). In recent years many translations and paraphrases of the Bible have become available. These attempt to use contemporary English and some take account of better knowledge of ancient languages and manuscripts. A comparison of alternate renderings of a passage may lead to a clearer understanding of the biblical text. A knowledge of the

biblical languages is necessary to evaluate the different translations of a verse. In general, versions made by committees (such as *KJV, ASV, RSV, NEB, NIV, NASB, JB, TEV— Good News Bible*) are more accurate and reliable than are translations and paraphrases made by individuals (such as *Weymouth, Phillips, The Living Bible*). Most paraphrases are so free that they are unreliable for serious Bible study. The use of a variety of translations by the congregation probably means that worship aids are needed (such as the Scripture texts printed in *The Mennonite Hymnal*). It would seem good to choose a committee-produced version for memory work and curriculum materials.

5. Consider how the text has been interpreted by others.

The endeavors of the early church, the medieval church, the Reformers, and contemporary Christians to understand the Bible will be instructive to us. Bible commentaries and Bible dictionaries can be valuable resources. A study of how the New Testament interpreted the Old Testament will also be helpful. As Mennonites, the impact of the biblical message upon the Anabaptists will be crucial to our own understandings. By considering how other Christians throughout history have interpreted the Bible, we may be able to understand it more clearly.

6. Consider the message of the Bible as a whole.

One of the major errors in biblical interpretations is failure to relate a given passage of Scripture to the overall message of Scripture. It is therefore necessary to take seriously the message of the Bible as a whole and compare Scripture with Scripture. This requires acquaintance with the unfolding drama of the Bible, its major themes, and how the various themes are related and integrated into a whole. The meaning of any part cannot be arrived at apart from the message of the whole. The theological views discussed below are crucial points in understanding how the entire Bible fits together.

7. Meditate upon the Word in the spirit of prayer.

As we learn what the passage says and means, we should meditate upon its message. We should ask ourselves: In what way does this Scripture speak to my life and our lives? How does it instruct me and my fellow believers? How does it teach, correct, reprove, and train in righteousness? (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Some specific topics of the Bible may not apply directly to us today, although they may be pertinent to Christians in other cultures; examples are circumcision, eating meat offered to idols, and the Christian's relation to the ceremonial practices in the Old Testament. However, the manner in which God's people of the New Testament worked through these issues will be instructive to us today.

8. Listen for the guidance of the Spirit, individually and congregationally.

The Spirit gives life to the written Word. The spirit uses the Word to convict us of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16:7-11). The Spirit likewise leads us into the truth, guiding our perception of the written words (Jn. 16:13). As new insights and convictions come through personal study, we should share and test them with other Christian brothers and sisters who are listening to the Spirit. The experiences of the Spirit, the interpretation of the Word, and the understanding of the church should agree.

9. Respond obediently to the Bible's message.

Interpretation of the Bible must include our own response to its message. The response may be praise or repentance, thanksgiving or confession, examination of inner attitudes or restitution to one wronged. The Scripture speaks to us only if we are open to its message. Sin in our lives, such as malice toward other people, hinders us from wanting to know and hear the scripture's message (1 Jn. 2:4-6; Jn. 8:31 IT.; cf. Mt. 5:22,23). Lack of love and commitment to one another will also hinder believers in their effort to arrive at unity in their understanding of the Bible. Through faithful response to the Word, we discover the power of the biblical message to upbuild the interpreting community — “to break and to heal, to wound and to cure.”

*Excerpted from the Proceedings of the Fourth Mennonite Church General Assembly
June 18-24, 1977, YMCA of the Rockies, Estes Park, Colorado*

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 1995

Article 4. Scripture

We believe that all Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit for instruction in salvation and training in righteousness. We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life. We seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the church.

We believe that God was at work through the centuries in the process by which the books of the Old and New Testaments were inspired and written. [1] Through the Holy Spirit, God moved human witnesses to write what is needed for salvation, for guidance in faith and life, and for devotion to God. [2]

We accept the Bible as the Word of God written. God has spoken in many and various ways through the prophets and apostles. [3] God has spoken above all in the living Word who became flesh and revealed the truth of God faithfully and without deception. [4] We also acknowledge the Scripture as the fully reliable and trustworthy Word of God written in human language. [5] We believe that God continues to speak through the living and written Word. [6] Because Jesus Christ is the Word become flesh, Scripture as a whole has its center and fulfillment in him. [7]

We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture. [8]

The Bible is the essential book of the church. Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guides the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship. We commit ourselves to persist and delight in reading, studying, and meditating on the Scriptures. [9] We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. [10] Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community.

(1) Jer. 30:2; Jer. 36; 2 Tim. 3:16.

(2) 2 Pet. 1:21.

(3) Exod. 20:1; Jer. 1:9-10; Gal. 1:11-12; Heb. 1:1-4.

(4) John 1:14, 18; Rev. 19:13.

(5) Prov. 30:5; John 10:35.

(6) Isa. 55:10-11; John 20:31.

(7) Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27; Acts 4:11.

(8) Mark 7:13; Acts 5:29-32; Col. 2:6-23.

(9) Ps. 1:2; 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 3:15-17.

(10) Acts 15:13-20; Heb. 4:2-8, 12.

Commentary

1. According to Scripture, the term “the Word of the Lord” or “the Word of God” or “the Word” refers to:
- a message that God has communicated through persons in the Old and New Testaments, especially through Moses, the prophets, and the apostles (for example, Exod. 20:1; Jer. 1:9-10; Acts 13:44-47);
 - Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God (for example, Luke 4:43-5:1);
 - the preached gospel of Jesus Christ (for example, Acts 8:25; 18:5; Col. 1:25-27; 1 Thess. 2:13);
 - the living Word of God who became flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14);
 - a word or words from God that have been put into writing (for example, Jer. 36:4; John 15:25; Heb. 4:1-12).

Referring to the Bible as the Word of God therefore means, first of all, emphasizing the richness and scope of “the Word” in the Bible. Limiting the term “the Word of God” to its written form blinds us to the total witness of Scripture. Second, in referring to the Bible as the Word of God written, we are acknowledging its authority for the church. All other claims to represent an authoritative word on matters of faith and life must be measured and corrected by Scripture through the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith.

2. The authority of Scripture has its ultimate source in God, who has inspired (“breathed”) it for specific purposes in the life of the church and its members (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The church confesses and recognizes the authority of Holy Scripture; it does not take upon itself the right to give the Scripture its authority. Precisely how God has inspired the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit is not explained in the Bible. We therefore content ourselves with the assurance that Scripture is fully reliable and trustworthy because the One who has inspired it is faithful and true.

3. We recognize the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of New Testament as belonging to inspired Scripture. What we call the Old Testament was accepted by Israel as the standard for faith and life in three stages over several centuries: the law, the prophets, and the writings. The Old Testament, the Gospels, the Pauline letters, and gradually the rest of the New Testament were broadly recognized by the church as Holy Scripture by the fourth century.

4. Since the beginning of the Anabaptist reformation in sixteenth-century Europe, Mennonites have sought to be a biblical people in ways that both borrowed from the Protestant reformation and differed from it. Mennonites have shared the traditional Protestant emphasis on the authority of Scripture for doctrine. In addition, Mennonites have underscored the following emphases:

- the authority of Scripture for ethics, for the relation of the church to society, and for church polity.
- the interpretation of Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ, in the sense that his life, teachings, death, and resurrection are essential to understanding the Bible as a whole.
- the congregation of believers as the place where individual understandings and interpretations of Scripture are to be tested.

This confessional statement assumes and affirms these emphases.

Adopted by the delegates of Mennonite Church General Assembly, and of the General Conference Mennonite Church Tricentennial Session, July 28, 1995, Wichita, Kansas. Copyright © 1995 by Herald Press Scottdale PA 15683. Used by permission. Order print copies of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, and *Summary Statement, Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, From Herald Press, Scottdale, Pa. Worship resources based on this confession, and translations are also available.

www.mennolink.org/doc/cof/

Unit 3:

Seeking God's Will Together

How do we read the Bible?

Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators

Unit 3 Contents:

Lesson Plan for Group
Facilitator... 31
Participant
Program... 36
Printables... 38

Introduction for facilitators:

In Unit 2, we learned that scripture is the authority by which all other authorities are measured. This means that the way we study and interpret the Bible is of critical importance. In Unit 3, we learn a trustworthy method of Bible study which enables us to build our competency for reading and interpreting the Bible well.

Preparation:

What to print:

*For each person:

- Participant Program *p.36*
- Five Rs Method of Bible study *p.38-39*

*For every two participants:

- “Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church” *p.40-41*

What to gather:

*Tools and resources for interpreting the Bible. ***These resources are critical to the success of this unit. Think ahead. Ask people to bring specific items, and do not leave it to chance that every table has access to each of these tools.***

- a commentaries on Matthew and Mark, preferably the *Believers Church Bible Commentary* **1 per table**
- a concordance for the most common Bible versions used by your group **1 per two tables**
- a Bible dictionary **1 per two tables**
- maps of Palestine during the time of Jesus **1 per two tables**
- several translations of the Bible (each person can be encouraged to bring two different translations and/or study Bibles) **several per table**
- a trustworthy study Bible such as *The Harper-Collins Study Bible* or the *Oxford Study Bible* or *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* **one per table**

*Hymnal, A Worship Book (or substitute) for each participant (these could be shared)

*equipment to play the teaching video

*a stone for each participant, piled in the middle of each table

*pens/pencils for each participant

*a Bible for each participant

*tables and chairs for participants to gather around. Plan for 5-7 people per table.

To prepare table leaders:

*Simply let them know that their role for this session is to encourage a tone of openness and curiosity and to keep the group moving through the five steps so they complete them all.

Introducing the study to participants: (10 minutes)

Welcome the group. Introduce this session by saying, “In Unit 2, we learned that scripture is the authority by which all other authorities are measured. This means that the way we study and interpret the Bible is of critical importance. In Unit 3, we learn a trustworthy method of Bible study which enables us to build our competency for reading and interpreting the Bible well.”

I. Preparation in Worship:

Facilitator (F): We believe that good biblical discernment happens within the context of worship and that we each need deliberate preparation for the spiritual work of discerning together what God has for us.

Like the early Anabaptists, our spiritual ancestors, we believe that the faithful interpretation of scriptures happens best in community with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

As we prepare to practice a new method of studying the Bible, let’s invite the Holy Spirit to guide our learning.

F: When we practice communal biblical discernment, we must begin with the practice of yieldedness. We want to know and follow the will of God MORE THAN we want to have our way, more than we want to be right. We lay down our own hopes, desires, needs, and egos in favor of seeking only the will of God in the matter at hand. This is the practice of yieldedness or *Gelassenheit*. We yield to the will of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which also sometimes means yielding to one another.

F: As we prepare to lay down our own desires, hear these words of scripture:

From Exodus 31:18: When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

The giving of the Ten Commandments was a pivotal moment for the children of Israel. These words from God would govern their behavior and shape their identity as God’s people. Yet, the Israelites would demonstrate again and again the inadequacy even of words written on stone to turn their hearts toward God. So God spoke through Jeremiah, saying:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, [says the Lord:] I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33)

These words were fulfilled through Jesus, who summarized all the commandments like this:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-40)

Today, the stones on our tables remind us of the gift of God’s word, first written on tablets of stone with God’s

own finger. As we practice Bible study together today, may these stones also remind us that Bible study is weighty work, that words matter, and most importantly, that God is here among us, ready to write on our yielded hearts.

Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we wish to be shaped by our encounter with the Word of God.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Word of God wash over each of us and smooth out the rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight. Let us speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and the weight of the task of seeking God's will for our common life.

L: In the days of the Exodus, God wrote his word on stone tablets; today we invite God to write God's word on our hearts.

All: We lift these stones to invite God to write on our hearts.

L: As we study together, hold the stone or set it in front of you to remind you to yield your heart to the word of God. Let the stone remind you to speak and listen in love, trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Song suggestions:

Sing the Journey #57 *Your will be done*

HWB #303 *Come, gracious Spirit*

HWB #564 *I am trusting thee, Lord Jesus*

Teaching: (20 minutes)

Each participant should have a Participant Program which includes an outline of the Five Rs.

*Participants will practice this method during the **God's Story, Our Story** segment.*

*Play the video of Shana Peachey Boshart teaching the Five Rs Bible study method. This method is from the book *The Art of Teaching the Bible* by Christine Eaton Blair (Geneva Press 2001). We highly recommend this book to Sunday School teachers and Bible study leaders.*

Practice: (60 minutes total)

In Unit 3, the teaching and practice sessions do not take equal amounts of time. If you are doing each unit in a 90-minute block, this won't make any difference. However, if you are doing each unit in two 45-minute sessions, for Session 1 you should abbreviate the 50-minute God's Story, Our Story section to 10 minutes in which table groups review together how they would apply the Five Rs to a specific text. They will use this time to prepare for the next session in which they will DO the Five Rs. They should choose their scripture text, figure out how to obtain the right commentary and the other Bible tools (Bible dictionary, maps, etc.) and assign who will bring which items. In Session 2, do the opening and closing worship rituals but give as much time as possible to practicing the Five Rs at table groups with specific scripture texts. It is absolutely necessary that each table group have the interpretive tools and resources named above when they do the practice session.

II. Listening and Speaking in Love 2 min

Participants should be sitting around tables in small groups. Each table should have a leader appointed. The role of the leader is to keep the group moving through the five steps so they complete them all, and to encourage the tone of openness and curiosity.

Each participant should have a Bible (preferably their own!), their Participant Program, the Five Rs outline and access to “Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church” printable.

You may want to explain that while the Five Rs is a step-by-step method of Bible study suitable for Sunday school and other group settings, the Biblical Interpretation document is a set of general principles that guides the interpretation of scripture in a Mennonite perspective. It is intended to be a helpful reference for Mennonite groups as they study the Bible. This is important because Christians often differ in their principles of biblical interpretation.

Introduce this activity by saying:

F: You are encouraged to approach this exercise with openness and curiosity. **Be open** to hearing the Holy Spirit speak through the Word and open to being shaped by the Word into the image of Christ. **Be curious** about the text, about what we will learn from others in our group, and about what the Holy Spirit will teach us through our study of this text. Our goal is not to find the “one and only faithful interpretation” or even to agree on our interpretations. As we study the Word, let us remember that it “hangs on” love of God and love of neighbor.

III. God’s Story, Our Story 50 min

F: Time to practice! We are here to learn what the text meant to the author and first readers then to discern together what it means for us today.

This method of Bible study takes a lot of time and could even stretch over several typical Sunday school or Bible study sessions. Our practice today will give us just enough experience with each step to introduce the Five Rs method, but not enough time to go in depth. We suggest Mark 10:35-45 and Matthew 14:13-21.

Table facilitators will need to keep things moving and judge the time allowed for each of the five steps. It is very important that the group practice each step, especially the last step.

Each table group works together, following the steps outlined on the handout and using the Bible study tools (commentaries, Bible dictionary, atlases, etc.) and printables mentioned above.

You may need to encourage table groups to move on to the next step if they are giving too much time to earlier steps.

If you don’t have many Believers Church Bible Commentaries (BCBC), you might choose additional scripture texts from books of the Bible for which you DO have the BCBC and give one commentary and one text from that book of the Bible to each table. Keep the texts short: 8-12 verses is ideal. In addition, you could print commentaries on specific texts from workingpreacher.org

IV. Leaving in Love 5 min

It would be good for whole group facilitators to say a few words of summary from the conversations that they’ve heard around the room. Comment on the way people are learning as they use the interpretive tools and interpretive principles as well as their reactions to the method itself.

“As we’ve studied these scripture texts, listening and speaking in love, we’ve been practicing discernment. Reading the scriptures in community and trying to hear in them what God has for us today is an essential task of the church. Reading the scriptures in this way is invigorating, challenging our minds, hearts, and spirits.

“This practice can even challenge our relationships, but as we will see in the next two units, when relationships are challenged, there is also opportunity: opportunity to relate on a deeper level, to strengthen trust and foster intimacy. Reading scriptures together inspires us to live as the people of God in this world. This group discernment of the scriptures, of the world, and of the will and purposes of God link us to the stories of God’s people in the Bible, to our spiritual ancestors throughout history, and to the global church today.”

Concluding ritual 5 min

“When we began this time of discernment, we released our own desires so that we might care about nothing more than knowing the will of God. As we go, we hold on to the learning that we’ve done together, and to the relationships that have been strengthened by studying with one another, but we release any tension or anxiety that we’ve felt in these conversations.

“Psalm 131 says,

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

“Let us agree with the psalmist to not occupy ourselves with things too complicated for us or things God can take care of. God will provide wisdom, guidance, and insight as our congregation needs it. So we practice the prayer of quiet trust that God is leading us individually and as a congregation.

As we leave here, let us put down any anxiety and leave it with God, trusting in the Lord to be at work in each other.”

L: Please hold your stone over the center of the table and join in the “leaving in love” liturgy on your Participant Program.

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, interpreting the Bible can feel weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like a stone that gets stuck in the sole of our shoe, some of our questions about the text remain unanswered.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our questions to God.

L: As God wrote the commandments on stone tablets, God writes his commandments on our hearts.

All: We lay down these stones as a sign of our trust that God is at work within and among us.

L: As we depart from this place, we place these stones in the center of our tables to remind us that our work today is done. Our God, we thank you for this time together, for all we are learning about communal biblical discernment, and for your guidance in our discernment. We trust you to be at work within and among us. Write your word on our hearts, God, that we may be your faithful people. Amen.

Song: HWB 301 *Joys are flowing like a river*, v 1, 4, 5

You may want to remind participants of the topic and time for the next session before dismissing them.

Unit 3:

Seeking God's Will Together

How do we read the Bible?

Participant Program

Introduction & Welcome

I. Preparation in Worship

Exodus 31:18: When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Jeremiah 31:33: But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Matthew 22:37-40: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it; "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

(Each person holds a stone)

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we wish to be shaped by our encounter with the Word of God.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Word of God wash over each of us and smooth out the rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight. Let us speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and the weight of the task of seeking God's will for our common life.

L: In the days of the Exodus, God wrote his word on stone tablets; today we invite God to write God's word on our hearts.

All: We lift these stones to invite God to write on our hearts.

L: As we study together, hold the stone or set it in front of you to remind you to yield your heart to the word of God. Let the stone remind you to speak and listen in love, trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Song

Teaching

Shana Peachey Boshart, conference minister for Christian formation in Central Plains conference, presenting from the book *The Art of Teaching the Bible*, by Christine Eaton Blair (Geneva Press 2001)

Notes:

The Five Rs:

- Remembering
- Revisiting the Text
- Reflecting Critically
- Reinterpreting
- Responding

II. Listening and Speaking in Love

Approach this exercise with openness and curiosity. Be **open** to hearing the Holy Spirit speak through the Word and open to being shaped by the Word into the image of Christ. Be **curious** about the text, about what we will learn from others in our group, and about what the Holy Spirit will teach us through our study of this text.

Our goal is not to find the “one and only faithful interpretation” or even to agree on our interpretations. As we study the Word, let us remember that it “hangs on” love of God and love of neighbor.

III. God’s Story, Our Story

Practice the Five Rs method of Bible study, using either of these texts:

Mark 10: 35-45

Matthew 14: 13-21

IV. Leaving in Love

Leader: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, interpreting the Bible can feel weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like a stone that gets stuck in the sole of our shoe, some of our questions about the text remain unanswered.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our questions to God.

L: As God wrote the commandments on stone tablets, God writes his commandments on our hearts.

All: We lay down these stones as a sign of our trust that God is at work within and among us.

(Lay down stones in the center of the table.)

L: As we depart from this place, we place these stones in the center of our tables to remind us that our work today is done. Our God, we thank you for this time together, for all we are learning about communal biblical discernment, and for your guidance in our discernment. We trust you to be at work within and among us. Write your word on our hearts, God, that we may be your faithful people. Amen.

Sending Song

The Five Rs Method of Bible Study

from *The Art of Teaching the Bible* by Christine Eaton Blair

Begin with Prayer

Remembering

Make a list of things you already “know” about the scripture text. List both memories from your life and references from culture. Don’t worry about whether these things are good interpretations.

Revisiting the Text

1. Read the text silently to yourselves (make notes, jot questions) then again as a group.
2. Ask questions about the text. Follow your curiosity; ask “what did this mean to the original hearers?” Ask Behind-the-Text questions and In-the-Text questions.
3. Find answers to your questions using interpretive tools, including the handout about interpretation.

interpretive tools = commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances, Bible atlases, Sunday school lessons, several Bible translations, etc.

We ask the historical and contextual questions in two ways: We ask Behind-the-Text Questions, and In-the-Text Questions.

Behind-the-text questions
are historical:

Who
What
When
Where
Why

In-the-text questions
are literary:

key words
actions
dialogue
narration

4. Refer to your document entitled “Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church” during this step and the next step. Revisiting the Text is also the first move toward *interpreting the text*.

Reflecting Critically

“to discern, to make careful judgments”

This is where we are actively addressing the question: *How do we discern the way of Jesus as we engage the culture in which we find ourselves?*

In this step, we think carefully about two texts and how they meet: the text of our lives and the Bible text we are studying.

There are three parts to this step of Reflecting Critically:

1. Use principles of interpretation relevant to the Bible text we are studying.
 - Consider what you learned about the text during Revisiting the Text and think about what it means for us in today’s world.
 - Begin to draw some conclusions and test them as a group. Ponder them prayerfully for a few minutes.
2. Examine the issues present in the text of our own lives.
 - You could list issues present in your personal lives, community, region or nation.
 - You could peruse newspapers, watch a news video clip, refer to prayer lists, etc.
 - You could journal about issues that concern you.

3. Reflect together on the intersection of the first two:

- You could review the list from step one, deciding which items are valid and which are not, based on your study of the text.
- Have a lively discussion of how we apply this text to our lives in practical ways.
- Keep in mind the goal of understanding the Bible and being changed by it; we do not all have to understand and apply it in exactly the same way.

Reinterpreting

“Retelling the story in our own language.”

- Allow the Holy Spirit access to your imaginations and emotions.
- Use your imagination to retell the story as an interview, mediation, skit, blog post, email, poem, Twitter feed, PowerPoint, song—whatever seems good.
- Express the message of the text in your own terms.

Reinterpreting can spark new understanding as we hear the text retold by others.

Responding

Hermeneutics = our method of interpreting the Bible

To say that “we have a hermeneutic of obedience” means “we believe that obeying the Bible is the best way to help us understand its meaning.”

Refer to #7-9 on the Biblical Interpretation handout.

- Ask together: “What does this text call me--or us--to be and to do?”
- Respond to the text through both action and prayer.

Concluding thoughts

If we are to become skilled at discerning the way of Jesus in our congregations and communities, we must invest in equipping Bible study leaders.

Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church

A Summary Statement Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Interpreting the Bible

The *ultimate goal* in interpretation is to allow the Bible to speak its own message with a view to worship and obedience. In many cases what a passage says is clear. Then, the task of interpretation is concerned with discerning at what points the message touches life. However, in some cases the meaning of the passage must first be determined by careful study.

Letting the Bible speak for itself under the *guidance of the Spirit* is not at all that easy. Tendencies to impose our ideas and biases need to be set aside. For example, middle-class North Americans find it easy to disregard the perspective of any other racial, cultural, or economic view of the Scriptures. Although we will always read and study the Bible from our own point of view, knowing interpretations of others will aid responsible interpretation. While it is important, therefore, to both seek the guidance of the Spirit and consider insights of others, personal Bible study will make use of the following sound methods:

1. Observe carefully what the text says.

This approach to the Bible study is known as the *inductive method* of Bible study. Essentially this means paying careful attention to both the literary structure and context of a passage. This approach involves looking at words, sentences, paragraphs, and larger blocks of material, and asking questions such as who? what? where? when? and why? It means noticing recurring themes, causes and effects and relationships within the passage, as well as similarities and differences from other passages of the Bible. This approach to the Bible allows the conclusions to grow out of the text.

2. Be sensitive to different literary forms.

Because the Bible is made up of a variety of *literary forms*, responsible interpretation must respect the differences between narrative, parable, poetry, and discourse. Careful study will recognize the Bible's use of symbolism and imagery, striving to get the basic message without making it say more or less than it was intended to say. As various literary forms and images are understood, the puzzling features of the Bible often begin to make sense (as in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation). Thus, the Bible is seen as a living document bound up with the people of God and, as such, it is the message of God to and through His people.

3. Study the historical and cultural contexts of the passage.

It is necessary for us to take seriously the historical context of any given passage and the Bible as a whole. God revealed Himself in history to a particular people over a period of many centuries. The written Word reflects the process of God's revelation of himself. Hence, faithful interpretation requires careful consideration of the historical context of any given passage. Much misinterpretation has resulted from disregard for the historical context of the passage being interpreted. Study of the Bible is always a study of a people. It is necessary therefore to enter the world of the Hebrew people and the people of the early church. This includes understanding their ways of thinking, their cultural patterns, and their distinctiveness amid the surrounding cultures and nations.

When we do that we can expect to experience a degree of cultural shock, just as we experience when we cross cultural barriers today. The ability to cross such barriers is one of the callings of the Christian, both to understand the Bible and to communicate it to other cultures of the present day. In order to understand the cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts of a given Scripture, the various

4. Make wise use of various translations.

In addition to taking seriously the cultural context of the Bible we must understand the *language itself*. Today we read the Bible in our native language. The Bible, however, was written mostly in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). In recent years many translations and paraphrases of the Bible have become available. These attempt to use contemporary English and some take account of better knowledge of ancient languages and manuscripts. A comparison of alternate renderings of a passage may lead to a clearer understanding of the biblical text. A knowledge of the

biblical languages is necessary to evaluate the different translations of a verse. In general, versions made by committees (such as *KJV, ASV, RSV, NEB, NIV, NASB, JB, TEV— Good News Bible*) are more accurate and reliable than are translations and paraphrases made by individuals (such as *Weymouth, Phillips, The Living Bible*). Most paraphrases are so free that they are unreliable for serious Bible study. The use of a variety of translations by the congregation probably means that worship aids are needed (such as the Scripture texts printed in *The Mennonite Hymnal*). It would seem good to choose a committee-produced version for memory work and curriculum materials.

5. Consider how the text has been interpreted by others.

The endeavors of the early church, the medieval church, the Reformers, and contemporary Christians to understand the Bible will be instructive to us. Bible commentaries and Bible dictionaries can be valuable resources. A study of how the New Testament interpreted the Old Testament will also be helpful. As Mennonites, the impact of the biblical message upon the Anabaptists will be crucial to our own understandings. By considering how other Christians throughout history have interpreted the Bible, we may be able to understand it more clearly.

6. Consider the message of the Bible as a whole.

One of the major errors in biblical interpretations is failure to relate a given passage of Scripture to the overall message of Scripture. It is therefore necessary to take seriously the message of the Bible as a whole and compare Scripture with Scripture. This requires acquaintance with the unfolding drama of the Bible, its major themes, and how the various themes are related and integrated into a whole. The meaning of any part cannot be arrived at apart from the message of the whole. The theological views discussed below are crucial points in understanding how the entire Bible fits together.

7. Meditate upon the Word in the spirit of prayer.

As we learn what the passage says and means, we should meditate upon its message. We should ask ourselves: In what way does this Scripture speak to my life and our lives? How does it instruct me and my fellow believers? How does it teach, correct, reprove, and train in righteousness? (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Some specific topics of the Bible may not apply directly to us today, although they may be pertinent to Christians in other cultures; examples are circumcision, eating meat offered to idols, and the Christian's relation to the ceremonial practices in the Old Testament. However, the manner in which God's people of the New Testament worked through these issues will be instructive to us today.

8. Listen for the guidance of the Spirit, individually and congregationally.

The Spirit gives life to the written Word. The spirit uses the Word to convict us of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16:7-11). The Spirit likewise leads us into the truth, guiding our perception of the written words (Jn. 16:13). As new insights and convictions come through personal study, we should share and test them with other Christian brothers and sisters who are listening to the Spirit. The experiences of the Spirit, the interpretation of the Word, and the understanding of the church should agree.

9. Respond obediently to the Bible's message.

Interpretation of the Bible must include our own response to its message. The response may be praise or repentance, thanksgiving or confession, examination of inner attitudes or restitution to one wronged. The Scripture speaks to us only if we are open to its message. Sin in our lives, such as malice toward other people, hinders us from wanting to know and hear the scripture's message (1 Jn. 2:4-6; Jn. 8:31 IT.; cf. Mt. 5:22,23). Lack of love and commitment to one another will also hinder believers in their effort to arrive at unity in their understanding of the Bible. Through faithful response to the Word, we discover the power of the biblical message to upbuild the interpreting community — “to break and to heal, to wound and to cure.”

*Excerpted from the Proceedings of the Fourth Mennonite Church General Assembly
June 18-24, 1977, YMCA of the Rockies, Estes Park, Colorado*

Unit 4:

Seeking God's Will Together

Can we agree?

Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators

Unit 4 Contents:

Lesson Plan for Group
Facilitator... 42
Participant
Program... 48
Printables... 49

Preparation:

What to print:

*For each person:

-Participant Program *p.48-50*

-Engaging Conflict in the Matthew 18 Model *p.49*

What to gather:

*Bibles

**Hymnal, A Worship Book* (or substitute) for each participant (these could be shared)

*tables and chairs for participants to gather around. Plan for 4-5 people per table.

*a stone for each participant, piled in the middle of each table

*equipment to play the teaching video

*Total time: 90 minutes

To prepare table leaders:

Today we will practice communication skills. Your goal is to make your table group a safe space (relaxed, experimental, curious) for group members to explore these exercises. Encourage the group to try the exercises with good humor but without losing sight of the seriousness of the topic. It would be easy to overplay and make light of some of the exercises.

Introducing the study to participants (10 minutes)

Welcome the group. Introduce this session by saying, “In Unit 2, we learned that scripture is the authority by which all other authorities are measured. This means that the way we study and interpret the Bible is of critical importance. In Unit 3, we learned a trustworthy method of Bible study which enables us to build our competency for reading and interpreting the Bible *well*.” Today, we seek a biblical model of reconciliation, based on Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18.

I. Preparation in Worship

In order for the church to effectively discern the will of God in times of conflict, it is necessary to submit our passions and emotions to God, and to commit ourselves to the things God wants for us. We seek to be obedient to the Word of God as the primary source of authority for discernment in the church.

Gelassenheit is a German word that means “yieldedness.” It is a concept that has historically been used by Anabaptists to describe our posture towards God and each other. It means yielding to God in a way that allows direction to be provided by the will of the Lord, rather than the will of people. Part of listening for God’s word is disciplining our bodies and minds to be quiet for the spirit to speak to us. Today, we carry on that tradition by worshiping around tables and studying the scriptures together as a congregation. As we begin to practice the tools for handling conflict, we invite the Holy Spirit to guide our learning.

We seek to cultivate this attitude of yieldedness within us as disciples of Christ so that we more clearly and faithfully walk the path he gave us. Let us enter into a minute of Holy Silence to pray for open minds and hearts and that the love and wisdom of God would fill that opening today.

Silent prayer.

Today the stones represent the weight of power and influence that our relationships in the church have on each other. Jesus says in Matthew 18:18, “Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This is certainly one passage that needs corporate discernment! Many scriptures speak to the importance of listening well to each other and watching closely what we say. These Godly concepts will become very important in today’s focus on conflict.

These texts are on the Participant Program. Ask five different people (perhaps table facilitators) to read one of the following scripture texts aloud.

Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! *Psalms 141:3*

He who answers before listening — that is his folly and his shame. *Proverbs 18:13*

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

James 1:19

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. *Matthew 15:18-19*

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. *Ephesians 4:29*

Leader: Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we wish to be shaped by the Holy Spirit.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to allow the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out our rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight.

All: Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!

L: We lift these stones as a sign of our desire to speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: Save us, Lord, from the folly of giving an answer before listening!

P: My beloved brothers and sisters, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

All: God, we yield our hearts to you. We want nothing more than to know and do your will. Amen.

Song suggestions:

Sing the Journey #57 *Your will be done*

Sing the Journey #67 *Let there be light, Lord God*

Sing the Story #45 *Calm me, Lord*

HWB #308 *I love thy kingdom, Lord*, verses 1 and 2

II. God's Story, Our Story *(Facilitator's introduction and video: 25 minutes)*

The stories we read in the Bible may be written in a specific context, but they still hold relevance for God's people today. In our scripture text today, we see some very practical guidance from Jesus about the procedures for when brothers and sisters in the church disagree. Note that Jesus assumes conflict will happen; it is normal. There are very few places where Jesus speaks to the organizational aspect of faith communities, but in Matthew 18 we are given clear steps of instruction. Let's read Matthew 18:15-22 aloud together.

Teaching:

Our teaching session today answers the question "How can the church come to agreement when there is conflict?" Each participant should have a copy of the Participant Program: Engaging Conflict in the Matthew 18 Model.

Play the video that teaches an elaboration of the process of Matthew 18 and how it can apply to the church today.

After the video, you may want to allow a few minutes at this point for participants to stretch or use the facilities. You'll want to encourage promptness, as time is short!

Break (5 minutes) *At this point, 40 minutes have passed.*

Practice:

In the teaching session of this unit, we learned the biblical steps Jesus lays out for handling conflict between sisters and brothers in the faith. In the practice session, we explore listening and speaking skills that sharpen our effectiveness and make us able to carry out the Matthew 18 process. We will learn several trusted techniques and have time to practice them with each other. These exercises will build our capabilities for clear communication in situations of conflict, where sometimes heated emotions interfere with our ability to communicate clearly and constructively.

First, we will explore together some "bad listening" habits, and how these affect conversations. Second, we will practice two other healthy communication skills: I-statements and paraphrasing.

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Being a good listener is a crucial skill in the Matthew 18 process. Even if we are approaching a sister or brother with a way they offended us, we should still seek to listen and hear their perspective. Today, you'll practice these techniques with your table group. They may seem a little awkward or forced in the beginning, but when we become used to them, they increase our aptitude for listening and speaking in love. Ideally, we will get to the point where listening and speaking in love are our natural responses as Christian disciples.

"Listening is a spiritual discipline. If we can listen to others, we are more ready to listen to the voice of God." — Richard Blackburn, director, Lombard Mennonite Peace Center (LMPC)

The material below is adapted from the LMPC Mediation Training Manual.

Practice bad listening. (8 minutes)

Have each person imagine a situation where they did not feel listened to. Have them keep this in the back of their mind while they do this exercise.

Break into small groups of no more than four.

Each person will take turns talking about “things that people do that are irritating to me.” The rest of the group can respond with common listening responses that are often unhelpful:

- Advising: Why don't you just...Maybe you should...
- Interrupting: Don't I know it. I was just saying the other day...
- Analyzing: What's really bothering you is....
- Judging: Don't get so uptight...
- Questioning: Are you really being as nice as you could?

Try not to “overplay” this. It is easy to overdo it!

After each person has had a chance to talk for a minute, bring the groups back together, if you have a small group. If you have a big group, then have people discuss in their small groups (they will physically stay with their small group, regardless). Have them reflect on the exercise. How did it feel to be listened to in this way?

Practice “I” Statements and Paraphrasing (35 minutes)

As facilitator, choose one of the issues from the list below. You may write the issue on a whiteboard if desired. Each person will take a position on one of the following:

- A local sports coach that should or should not be fired, or a local player that should or should not be let go.
- Chocolate or vanilla (or swirl or another?) is the best flavor of ice cream.
- Ford or Chevy? (or Toyota, Dodge, etc.)
- Sunday school before the worship service, or Sunday school after the worship service?
- Other low-intensity issues that people are likely to have strong opinions on.

I-statements

One of the important concepts covered in the video is something called an “I-statement.” An I-statement is a statement that takes responsibility for your emotions. “I am upset because you left the towel on the floor after you showered,” rather than, “You make me so mad when you leave the towel on the floor after you shower.”

Another example: “I feel Coach _____ should be fired from coaching because...” which is a better statement than “Coach _____ is no good and he should get run outta town! You're a bum if you don't think that too.” While reasonable people may disagree on whether or not the coach should be fired, the first statement invites the opportunity for the other person to state their opinion, allowing for more clarity on the disagreement.

With your groups of four, take turns expressing your opinions again, this time being careful to take responsibility for your own thoughts and feelings. While this may feel awkward, please make sure each person clearly takes a position (even if it's not a strong one). They should also list several reasons why they feel this way. This may feel awkward, especially in the beginning. But I-statements are foundational to good communication. They allow for clear communication and invite the other person to hear the concern and also to respond with their own I-statement. (*Instruction and practice of I-statements: 12 of 35 minutes*)

Paraphrasing

This time, instead of responding negatively, the group will practice another helpful listening skill, **paraphrasing**. One person should summarize (do not repeat word for word!) back to the speaker their main idea and their reasons why they believe it. The goal of the paraphrase is to show the speaker that they have been heard correctly. The paraphraser should not express their own opinions at this time. Even if they disagree, the paraphraser should only summarize the speaker's main ideas.

To go back to the earlier example, “I feel Coach _____ should be fired from coaching because he has been coach for a long time and has not been able to win a conference championship, and his players have graduated

at below-average rates.” A possible paraphrase would be, “I hear you saying Coach _____ has had long enough to prove his merits, but he hasn’t been able to graduate players or win a conference championship.” Again, this may feel awkward, because people do not always communicate in this way. Yet it is a skill that needs to be practiced in everyday situations, in order to use these skills during disagreements. They allow people to express their opinions clearly, while also inviting the other person to express their opinions clearly. These skills also can help people to take ownership of their emotions, while also helping them to be more comfortable with people who feel differently. Clear, honest, and open communication is a necessity if a group is to deal constructively with disagreements!

Choose another issue from the list above. Each person should take a minute to express his/her opinion on another issue from the list, as well as several reasons for their opinions. After one person has had a chance to make an I-statement, one person in the group should try paraphrasing what the person said (in a minute or less). If the speaker agrees that this was an accurate paraphrase, then move on to the next person. If the speaker does think the paraphraser got it quite right, the speaker should correct the misunderstanding. The paraphraser should try again, and repeat the process until the speaker feels that the paraphraser has understood them correctly.

Repeat the process until each person has had the chance to make an I-statement and paraphrase. If you think it is appropriate, the facilitator may choose a partner and give examples of I-statements and paraphrasing. (Instruction and Practice of paraphrasing: 18 of 35 minutes)

Come back together as a group. Reflect together: How did it feel to communicate this way? What are the advantages and disadvantages? (Group discussion: 5 of 35 minutes)

Please read or summarize for the group to conclude the Listening and Speaking in Love portion of our lesson.

As we’ve listened and spoken (and laughed) together, we’ve strengthened our “fundamentals” of communication. Clear communication is necessary *if we are to discern God’s will together. Reading the scriptures in community and trying to hear in them what God has for us today is an essential task of the church.*

Sometimes these conversations will be easy, but sometimes these conversations about the scriptures will bring out different and strong opinions. They may require us to rub elbows with those in our community who come from different perspectives, cultures, or economic/educational/or social backgrounds. These conversations require us to interpret the scriptures and to go deeper with one another than surface conversations or small-talk. They strengthen our resolve as the people of God in this world, and our relationships with one another. This group discernment of the scriptures, of the world, and of the will and purposes of God links us to the stories of God’s people in the Bible, to our spiritual ancestors throughout history, and to the global church today.

IV. Leaving in Love (7 minutes)

Concluding ritual:

L: When we began this time of discernment, we laid down our own desires so that God’s will would be more clearly revealed to us. We can assume conflict as a normal part of our church life together, as even the most sincere of Christians come to different conclusions in studying the Bible. In scripture Jesus gives the corporate gathering of believers steps for when the inevitable conflicts arise. It is amazing the tremendous spiritual power Jesus authorizes the church to exercise:

Matthew 18: 18-19

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

We dare not take such an opportunity and responsibility lightly! By working at our congregational discernment abilities, we are strengthened for faithfulness. As we put down the stones and leave them here, let us put down any anxiety and leave it with God, trusting in the Lord to be at work in each other.

L: Please hold your stone over the center of the table and join in the “leaving in love” liturgy on your Participant Program.

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, obeying Jesus’ instructions can feel weighty.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering Jesus’ invitation to give our burdens to Him.

L: Sometimes the right thing to do looks more like a stone in the path that we’d rather avoid.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our doubts and trust the steps Jesus gave us.

L: Jesus promised that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

All: We lay down these stones as a sign of our trust that the Spirit of Jesus is sufficient for our need.

L: Please lay down your stones in the center of the table.

Our God, we thank you for this time together, for all we are learning about communal biblical discernment, and for your guidance in our discernment. We trust you to be at work within and among us. Amen.

Song: HWB #6 *Here in this place*, verses 1 and 4

Preparation for next unit.

Remind participants of the topic and time for the next session before dismissing them.
Ask participants to read Romans 14 and 15:1-21 before Unit 5.

Unit 4:

Seeking God's Will Together

Can we agree?

Participant Program

Introduction & Welcome

I. Preparation in Worship

Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips! *Psalm 141:3*

He who answers before listening — that is his folly and his shame. *Proverbs 18:13*

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. *James 1:19*

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. *Matthew 15:18-19*

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. *Ephesians 4:29*

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we wish to be shaped by the Holy Spirit.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to allow the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out our rough places.

L: Like the heft of a stone, our words have weight.

All: Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!

L: We lift these stones as a sign of our desire to speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: Save us, Lord, from the folly of giving an answer before listening!

L: My beloved brothers and sisters, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

All: God, we yield our hearts to you. We want nothing more than to know and do your will. Amen.

Teaching

Matthew Troyer-Miller and Nathan Ramer teach on Matthew 18 and how it can apply to the church today.

Engaging Conflict in the Matthew 18 Model

Genesis 3 introduces human sin. Sin affects many things but broken RELATIONSHIPS are the most critical consequence. Jesus assumes conflict will be part of the believing community. **Matthew 18** tells us how to deal with sin in the church.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”
Matthew 18:18-19

Steps for Engaging Conflict in Matthew 18:15-22

1. Going directly
2. Taking one or two witnesses along
3. Telling it to the church
4. Relating as with a Gentile and tax collector

II. God’s Story, Our Story

In our scripture text today, we see some very practical guidance from Jesus about the procedures for when brothers and sisters in the church disagree.

Matthew 18:15-22

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Today we practice listening and speaking skills that equip us to carry out the Matthew 18 process. These exercises will build our capacity for clear communication in situations of conflict.

Bad listening

“I” statements

Paraphrasing

IV. Leaving in Love

Closing Ritual

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, obeying Jesus’ instructions can feel weighty.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering Jesus’s invitation to give our burdens to Him.

L: Sometimes the right thing to do looks more like a stone in the path that we’d rather avoid.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release our doubts and trust the steps Jesus gave us.

L: Jesus promised that, “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

All: We lay down these stones as a sign of our trust that the Spirit of Jesus is sufficient for our need.

L: Please lay down your stones in the center of the table.

Our God, we thank you for this time together, for all we are learning about communal biblical discernment, and for your guidance in our discernment. We trust you to be at work within and among us.

Amen

Song

Preparation for next unit.

Please read Romans 14 and 15:1-21 before Unit 5.

Unit 5:

Seeking God's Will Together

When we don't agree

Lesson Plan for Group Facilitators

Unit 5 Contents:

Lesson Plan for Group
Facilitator... 51
Participant
Program A... 56
Participant
Program B... 58

Preparation:

What to print:

*For each person:

-Participant Program *p. 56-57 or p. 58-59*

*Whether you use Option A or Option B, at your discretion, one per household:

-Commentary on Romans 14 and 15 (included below) *p. 55*

What to gather:

*Bibles

* For Option B: Tools and resources for interpreting the Bible. ***These resources are critical for this option. Think ahead. Ask people to bring specific items, and***

do not leave it to chance that you have the tools you need.

- a commentary on **Romans**, preferably the Believers Church Bible Commentary ***1 per table***
- a concordance for the most common Bible versions used by your group ***1 per two tables***
- a Bible dictionary ***1 per two tables***
- several translations of the Bible (each person can be encouraged to bring two different translations and/or study Bibles) ***several per table***
- a trustworthy study Bible such as *The Harper-Collins Study Bible* or the *Oxford Study Bible* or *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* ***one per table***

**Hymnal, A Worship Book* (or substitute) for each participant (these could be shared)

*equipment to play the teaching video

*tables and chairs for participants to gather around. Plan for 4-5 people per table.

*a stone for each participant, piled in the middle of each table

*Total time: 90 minutes

To prepare table leaders:

Today we will hear teaching on how to approach deep disagreements in the church and we will study Romans 14 and 15 for insight on this topic. You will facilitate this Bible study and discussion at your table.

Introducing the study to participants

Welcome the group. Introduce this unit by saying, “In the first four units, we discussed the authority of scripture, how to study and interpret the Bible, and how to apply Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18 for reconciling relationships. Today we consider how to handle the kind of disagreements in the church that threaten relationships. What do we do when we have applied the Matthew 18 steps but still disagree?”

I. Preparation in Worship (*intro and worship, 5 minutes*):

When we are experiencing deep disagreement in the body of Christ, it becomes vitally important to remember that we are seeking the will of God. We are challenged in those times to be able to submit our opinions, our need to be right—even our convictions—to God. It is vital to the unity of the body that each member be indifferent to anything but the will of God in the matter.

Again, we think of the practice of *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness). We take a step back from the arguments, the emotions, and the temptations these things bring. We step back, stop, and let go of every desire but to know God’s will.

Leader: Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we wish to be shaped by the Holy Spirit.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to allow the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out our rough places.

L: In the world, words are hurled like stones. Let it not be so among you.

All: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity.

L: We lift these stones as a sign of our desire to speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We will be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.

L: Let us then pursue what make for peace and mutual upbuilding.

All: God, we yield our hearts to you. We want nothing more than to know and do your will. Amen.

Song suggestions:

They’ll know we are Christians by our love

Sing the Journey #57 *Your will be done*

Teaching & Practice:

Depending on the time allotted and the interest of the participants, there are two options for proceeding through the Teaching and Practice portions of this unit. Option A gives more time to discussion of historical congregational patterns informed by the Romans text. Choose this option if your group seems ready/inclined toward honest reflection of how the congregation has dealt with conflict in the past and how Romans 14-15 and our teaching video inform how we might deal with conflicts in the future. If your church is currently going through a conflict, it may be best to do Option B. It is often difficult to see the big picture while you are in the middle of the conflict. Option B is an in-depth Bible study on Romans 14-15:1-21. Choose this option if you prefer a Bible study or if it seems the group needs this background before diving into specific historical patterns. As a facilitator, read through the commentary on that passage (p. 55) to familiarize yourself with the scriptural context. For further background, see the links below.

OPTION A (60 minutes)

Before the meeting, please read the short “commentary on Romans 14 and 15:1-21” on page 55, and be prepared to summarize the relevant contextual information for your participants. If you would like further study as you prepare to lead this session, you may be interested in several short essays on-line:

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=130

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1072

<http://mordenmennonitechurch.wordpress.com/2013/09/23/when-everyones-biblical-and-we-all-disagree/>

For more in-depth study, please see the Romans commentary in the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series. (10 minutes of 60 to read Scripture and introduce context)

In the session: Begin by giving people time to re-read or skim Romans 14-15:1-21 to themselves. After people have reviewed the Romans text, teach the material from the commentary and your own further study. Next, show the video of Elizabeth Troyer-Miller of Wood River Mennonite Church and Professor David B. Miller of AMBS. (25 minutes of 60 for video)

Table discussion (25 minutes of 60)

Please spend minimal time with question 1. The important questions are numbers 2-5. Break the participants into small groups of 5-7 people if your group is not a talkative one. If you plan to break into small groups, please bring a bell or whistle to keep them moving along. Tell the group that they have 25 minutes to get through questions 2-5, and ring a bell every five minutes to make sure they get through each question. Read the group’s body language, and adjust times as necessary. Bring the groups back together, and have groups share their learnings with each other. Proceed to the “Listening in Love” portion of the study.

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. What stuck out to you as you listened to Elizabeth and Dave?
2. What was the last church conflict you experienced? How did you handle it?
3. What are some of the “habits” of conflict in your church’s past?
4. Out of the list of positive conflict habits that Elizabeth gave, what are some habits that our congregation can encourage/develop?
5. What are some habits that the Apostle Paul is calling believers to develop?

OPTION B (60 minutes)

Option B is an in-depth Bible Study on Romans 14-15:1-21. For this option, you do not need to teach the material from the commentary below because the participants can discover this as part of their study. You may wish to give each table two or three copies of this commentary as one interpretive tool.

Begin by watching the video of Elizabeth and Dave, and have a *brief* time of discussion afterwards. Save most of your time for the in-depth Bible study on Romans 14-15:1-21. (30 minutes of 60 for video and discussion)

Table discussion (30 minutes of 60)

This will not be enough time to get completely through this session! Please warn people before hand, so they can plan accordingly. Have them spend 15 minutes on questions 1 and 2, and 15 minutes on question 3. Be aware of the groups; if they need more time, you may borrow some time from the group discussion in **Listening and Speaking in Love**. Please leave at least ten minutes for the entire group to discuss their learnings.

Hopefully, most people have read Romans 14-15:1-21 before the session. If you doubt many have, you may want to give people time to read or skim this text on their own. Break into four groups of approximately the same size. Assign one of the following sections to each group: Romans 14:1-12, 14:13-23, 15:1-13, and 15:14-21. Each group follows these instructions:

1. Scan the portions of chapters 13 and 15 before and after your passage.
2. With interpretive tools available, ask Behind-the-Text and In-the-Text questions from Unit Three.

Spend time with the resources to discover further information:

- a. Behind-the-text questions are **historical**: who, what, when, where, why
 - b. In-the-text questions are **literary**: key words, actions, dialogue, narration
 - c. Group study: What does the text mean to us?
3. Reflect on what you have studied: What learnings from today help us to find instruction in this passage? You can use these questions as starting points:
- a. How is our church similar to the prescriptions Paul gives? What areas would he challenge?
 - b. How can we learn to distinguish *our preferences* from *God's will* for our church? How can we learn to submit our desires and seek God's will?
 - c. Appoint a representative in each group to report some of the communal study to the larger gathering.

III. Listening and Speaking in Love (20 minutes)

Gather back in the full group and take turns letting groups share. The facilitator can make some observations or comments based on what emerges in conversation. Pursue conversation threads in areas that seem to energize the larger group, based on timing and relevance.

IV. Leaving in Love (5 minutes)

In Romans 14 and 15 we find practical instructions to help us remain together in the face of conflict. We have been learning about the attitudes and practices that will help us navigate future disagreements in a Christ-like way.

As we put down the stones and leave them here, let us put down our unanswered questions and leave them with God, trusting in the Lord to be at work in each other.

L: Please hold your stone over the center of the table and join in the “leaving in love” liturgy on your Participant Program.

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, acknowledging and carrying our conflicts can be burdensome.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering Jesus' invitation to give our burdens to Him.

L: Let us resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a sister or brother.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering that the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

L: May God grant you to live in harmony with one another as you follow Jesus.

All: We lay down these stones because we trust that the Spirit of Jesus makes us able to glorify God with one voice.

L: Please lay down your stones in the center of the table.

Our God, we thank you for this time together, for all we are learning about communal biblical discernment, and for your guidance in our discernment. We trust you to be at work within and among us. Amen.

Song: HWB #407 *We are people of God's peace*

Seeking God's Will Together: When We Don't Agree

Commentary on Romans 14 and 15:1-21

In previous sessions you have spent time together reflecting on the authority of Scripture and were exposed to various approaches and methods Christians use in Scriptural study. Today you have the chance to further practice communal biblical interpretation within the Church body in working through Romans 14 and 15 together. Paul's words build and circle back on each other through these two chapters so while we will break text into sections, we will want to focus on exploring how they fit together.

In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul tells us about how he "went off" on Peter, because Peter was afraid of the believers who required Gentiles to be circumcised. The requirement of circumcision had been dropped for Gentiles after the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Yet in Galatians, Paul angrily confronts Peter for not standing up to those who are still requiring circumcision. Says Paul about the encounter, "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong" (Galatians 2:11).

The Letter to the Romans was written approximately ten years later, and Paul's tone changes significantly. The church leadership in Rome does not seem to be "requiring" circumcision and Jewish dietary laws the way that the Galatians were. It is also likely that Paul did not feel that dietary laws were replacing the saving work of Christ, the way that they seemed to doing in Galatia. Yet there were still significant divisions in the Roman Church. But for Paul, the "lifestyle issues" (eating meat, observing one day as more sacred than others, and possibly drinking wine) were not as important as the attitudes that were dividing the church. Paul's comments make it pretty clear that the "strong" were despising the "weak," and the weak were condemning the "strong."

This section of Paul's letter is about more than "opinions," however, and we miss something important if we think that the Romans are arguing about things that don't really matter. These were the compelling issues of the day. These issues were threatening both the church and the Gospel. Paul's response to the Roman conflict is significant and profound. Paul is an opinionated man, with strong feelings on this matter. Yet in his counsel to the Romans, he does not take sides. He does not say, "Look here, folks. This group is right, and everybody who disagrees needs to change your mind or leave." He also does not call for everyone to adopt a middle position that is the bare minimum that people can agree to but is unsatisfactory to everyone. He also does not call for a weak tolerance of each other: "Can't we all just be friends?"

To the Jewish traditionalists, Paul says, "...and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him (Romans 14.3)." To the Gentile progressives Paul says, "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not...(14.3)." And to the whole group Paul says, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. (14.13)," and "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (15.7).

In his pamphlet, "What is an Anabaptist Christian?" Palmer Becker lays out the three "core values of Christians in the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition." The first value is "Jesus is the center of our faith." This belief is especially strong in Paul's words from Romans 14-15. At key points throughout his argument, Paul appeals to Jesus' saving work and his way of Love (14.9, 15.3, 15.7). Paul wants the Romans to understand that Jesus, who was born as a human, who taught us how to live and be saved, who died on the cross, and who was resurrected on the third day is the center of our faith. *And the center will hold.*

It is easy to be afraid of pursuing the unity-in-diversity that Paul calls for. Yet we are not doing this of our own power. Jesus Christ is our center, and the center will hold. We trust that the Spirit will be present among us during challenging times. We trust that God will make things clear in his time, and we are to wait patiently in unity until a mighty, rushing wind moves among us.

Do we trust God enough to wait patiently for clarity when we disagree? In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says, "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained" (Philippians 3:15-16).

So what happens when we don't agree? Take a deep breath. This is not something new. God will make it clear to us in time. Wait patiently while keeping our eyes on Jesus the center of our faith. *The Center will hold.*

Unit 5:

Seeking God's Will Together

When we don't agree

Participant Program Option A

I. Preparation in Worship

Leader: Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we wish to be shaped by the Holy Spirit.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to allow the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out our rough places.

L: In the world, words are hurled like stones. Let it not be so among you.

All: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity.

L: We lift these stones as a sign of our desire to speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We will be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

L: Let us then pursue what make for peace and mutual upbuilding.

All: God, we yield our hearts to you. We want nothing more than to know and do your will. Amen.

Song

Teaching

Elizabeth Troyer-Miller of Wood River Mennonite Church and David B. Miller of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

II. God's Story, Our Story

Review Romans 14 and 15: 1-21. Listen to your facilitator's commentary on the text. Discuss these questions in your table group. Please spend minimal time with question 1. The important questions are numbers 2-5.

Questions for thought and discussion:

1. What stuck out to you as you listened to Elizabeth and Dave?
2. What was the last church conflict you experienced? How did you handle it?
3. What are some of the “habits” of conflict in your church’s past?
4. Out of the list of positive conflict habits that Elizabeth gave, what are some habits that our congregation can encourage/develop?
5. What are some habits that the Apostle Paul is calling believers to develop?

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Gather back in the full group and take turns letting groups share.

IV. Leaving in Love

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, acknowledging and carrying our conflicts can be burdensome.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering Jesus’ invitation to give our burdens to Him.

L: Let us resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a sister or brother.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering that the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

L: May God grant you to live in harmony with one another as you follow Jesus.

All: We lay down these stones because we trust that the Spirit of Jesus makes us able to glorify God with one voice.

L: Please lay down your stones in the center of the table.

Our God, we thank you for this time together, for all we are learning about communal biblical discernment, and for your guidance in our discernment. We trust you to be at work within and among us. Amen.

Song

Unit 5:

Seeking God's Will Together

When we don't agree

Participant Program Option B

I. Preparation in Worship

Leader: Please pick up a stone and join in the liturgy on your programs.

L: Like stones that have been smoothed and shaped by water, we wish to be shaped by the Holy Spirit.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to allow the Holy Spirit wash over each of us and smooth out our rough places.

L: In the world, words are hurled like stones. Let it not be so among you.

All: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity.

L: We lift these stones as a sign of our desire to speak and listen with compassion and love.

All: We will be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

L: Let us then pursue what make for peace and mutual upbuilding.

All: God, we yield our hearts to you. We want nothing more than to know and do your will. Amen.

Song

Teaching

Elizabeth Troyer-Miller of Wood River Mennonite Church and David B. Miller of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary

II. God's Story, Our Story

Review Romans 14 and 15:1-21. Break into four groups of approximately the same size. Each group will study ONE of the following sections: Romans 14:1-12, 14:13-23, 15:1-13, and 15:14-21. Each group follows these instructions:

1. Scan the portions of chapters 13 and 15 before and after your passage.
2. With interpretive tools available, ask Behind-the-Text and In-the-Text questions from Unit Three. Spend time with the resources to discover further information:
 - a. Behind-the-text questions are **historical**: who, what, when, where, why
 - b. In-the-text questions are **literary**: key words, actions, dialogue, narration
 - c. Group study: What does the text mean to us?
3. Reflect on what you have studied: What learnings from today help us to find instruction in this passage? You can use these questions as starting points:
 - a. How is our church similar to the prescriptions Paul gives? What areas would he challenge?
 - b. How can we learn to distinguish *our preferences* from *God's will* for our church? How can we learn to submit our desires and seek God's will?
 - c. Appoint a representative in each group to report some of the communal study to the larger gathering.

III. Listening and Speaking in Love

Gather back in the full group and take turns letting groups share.

IV. Leaving in Love

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, acknowledging and carrying our conflicts can be burdensome.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering Jesus' invitation to give our burdens to Him.

L: Let us resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a sister or brother.

All: We lay down these stones, remembering that the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

L: May God grant you to live in harmony with one another as you follow Jesus.

All: We lay down these stones because we trust that the Spirit of Jesus makes us able to glorify God with one voice.

L: Please lay down your stones in the center of the table.

Our God, we thank you for this time together, for all we are learning about communal biblical discernment, and for your guidance in our discernment. We trust you to be at work within and among us. Amen.

Song

Unit 6:

Seeking God's Will Together

Inviting the Spirit to lead us

Lesson Plan for Group Facilitator

Unit 6 Contents:

Lesson Plan for Group
Facilitator... 60
Participant
Program ... 66

Introduction for facilitators:

This final unit of our study is a framework for extended practices of discernment within your congregation or small group utilizing the form, techniques, and ideas that have been taught throughout the study. *This is not designed or recommended to be used as a time for the “big issues” for your congregation.* As when we learn any skill, we need lots and lots of practice! Our hope is that this time will be used for careful discernment about one of the myriad of issues or topics that each congregation faces on a weekly basis, but that may not ever come up in times of discussion or discernment. This study has been a way of introducing and defining discernment, and our hope is that discernment would continue to be practiced well after this study is over in preparation for conversations in the future in which emotions are high and stakes are greater.

The flexible nature of this unit allows it to be used to frame times of discernment any time in the future. Let it be a resource to guide your discernment time together, but please, please, practice flexibility and thoughtfulness as you put together discernment sessions for your particular context!

As a facilitator, you can expect this unit to take considerably more time and effort on your part to plan and arrange than any of the previous ones. Hopefully the hints and suggestions to work ahead in the previous units have alerted you to the hard work that is anticipated in the planning and implementing of this unit.

As with each unit in our study, we will use a four-step process.

1. **Preparation/Worship**— We believe that good biblical discernment happens within the context of worship, and that we each need deliberate preparation for the weighty work of discernment together what God has for us.
2. **God's Story, Our Story**— As we discern together, our emphasis is on the stories of God's people throughout time. In this section, the stories of God's people in the Scriptures join our stories and experiences as God's people today.
3. **Listening and Speaking in love**— Discernment is hard work! Focusing on the ways we speak and listen to one another and making sure that we are communicating primarily in love is important. We trust that, if we work together prayerfully and carefully, the Holy Spirit will guide our conversations.
4. **Leaving in Love**— In the same way that deliberate preparation is essential to good discernment, so is deliberate leaving. So often the temptation is to save our annoyances, irritations, or hurts until after

group discussions, and then to gather and share them with other like-minded individuals after the meeting. This practice hurts the gathered community, both because our conversations are richer when we can be open and honest with one another in the context of discussions and because annoyances, irritations, and hurts often escalate when they are allowed to fester and grow. We practice surrendering the work we've done around the table to God before we leave as a way of putting our relationships with God and with one another ahead of issues we may agree or disagree on.

Choosing a topic:

As you embark on the important task of choosing a topic, let us encourage you with the assurance that the Holy Spirit has a topic for you. Trust the Spirit to help you know what it is! We believe your topic will emerge organically, but we also offer these guidelines as assistance.

- As a facilitator, you must be prepared to assess your group's "discernment aptitude" in advance of this unit. As stated elsewhere, this study is designed as a *practice*. It may be, as one curriculum developer called it, "the end of the beginning." To assure continued involvement and/or enthusiasm for discernment within your congregation or small group, it is important to choose a topic that will allow for some discernment success. *Choose a topic or issue that does not bite off more than your group can chew.*
- In addition, as a facilitator, it is important to consider the relative comfort or anxiety level of your group with various topics. Issues that would seem irrelevant for some groups will be perfect (and important) discernment fodder for others.
- The topic you choose should relate to the key question this study attempts to address: "*How does the faithful church discern the way of Jesus as we engage the culture in which we find ourselves?*"
- You may start with a specific question (How is the Christian household distinct from the other households in our culture?) or with a general topic from which the question emerges organically during discussion (Christianity's relationship to culture). Many times during discernment, the question or issue shifts as a group enlists the help of the Holy Spirit to engage the scriptures and context in discussion.
- You may wish to allow some of the questions of this study to shape this time of discernment. In Unit One, David Boshart asked several questions related to congregational discernment that you may want to look back and reflect on as you search for a topic.
- At the 2013 Annual Meeting for Central Plains Mennonite Conference, delegates identified an extensive list of issues and topics that they would like to see discussed and discerned at the congregational and denominational level. This list may be an excellent starting place for you to begin looking for a topic. The list can be found on the Discernment Study page at www.centralplainsmc.org.

Again, we encourage you to allow the Spirit to speak as you choose a topic for your study, keeping in mind that the Spirit will not guide you to threats, ultimatums, or lines in the sand. In addition, we cannot emphasize enough that this six-unit study alone is not designed to lead you directly to the discussion of highly sensitive topics or issues. This unit is designed to be a practice on the road to discernment proficiency, merely one stop on this journey. Please choose your practice topic accordingly.

Gathering Materials:

- *Print necessary documents, including a Participant Program (p. 66-67) that you have filled in with relevant information for your study and any other documents you may need for this time of discernment.
- *We **strongly** urge you to purchase a copy of *Cool Tools for Hot Topics: Group Tools to Facilitate Meetings When Things Are Hot* by Ron Kraybill and Evelyn Wright. This book is available on Amazon.com for around \$5.
- **Hymnal, A Worship Book* (or substitute) for each participant (these could be shared)
- *One large stone or boulder (a cornerstone) for each table.
- *A stone for each participant, piled in the middle of the table.
- *pens/pencils as needed
- *tables and chairs for participants to gather around. Plan for 5-7 people per table.

Introducing the topic:

Welcome:

Gather the group in with words of welcome, and remind them of the purposes of this study as a whole and of the specific goals/reasons your community has chosen to do this study. If you are a pastor or leader of the congregation or group, you may want to share your hopes and dreams for discernment in your congregation/community/conference/denomination (This introduction should NOT include what outcomes of discernment you are hoping for related to this specific topic or issue!)

I. Preparation/Worship:

The early Anabaptists, our spiritual ancestors, believe, that in order to understand the Word of God more clearly, they needed to be discussing, praying, and interpreting the scriptures together, in groups of committed believers. Today we carry on that tradition by worshiping around tables and studying the scriptures together as a congregation.

As we begin to talk together about what God has for us, we invite the Holy Spirit to guide our conversations.

Song suggestions:

Sing the Journey #57 *Your will be done*

Sing the Journey #29 *You are all we have*

HWB 26 *Holy Spirit, come with power*

HWB 16 *God is here among us*

HWB 418 *Move in our midst*

HWB 349 *Spirit of the living God*

As we come together to talk and pray, we come from weeks and lives that are full of commitments, worries, and joys. As we gather, we each bring baggage:

- Perhaps we come with anxiety or stress about work or about our families.
- Maybe we come today with apprehensions about sitting together discussing scriptures.
- Maybe we come distracted by other things we need to get done.
- Perhaps we come holding tightly to our convictions about our topic today,
- or perhaps we come feeling indifferent.

Though we trust that God will be in our conversations, we sometimes allow God's work and the Holy Spirit's presence to be overshadowed by our doubts, concerns, or anxieties. So, let's take a moment to prayerfully consider the weighty things that you might be bringing that will keep you from hearing the voice of God in our conversations. Ask God to help you release it and to be prayerfully impartial and attentive to the Holy Spirit in this discernment time.

Prayer of release/yieldedness:

Facilitator: Feel free to pray this or your own prayer asking God to help release us from the baggage that we've brought with us that will keep us from fully participating in discussion and discernment.

God, we come together from many places to worship you today.

We have so much in our lives competing for our attention.

We have fears and anxieties and stress.

We have doubts that you will speak to us.

We shy before trying new things, we worry that this will not be a safe space.

God, let us hold loosely these things that command our attention.

Let us turn our hearts and minds instead to you,

and let our time together be guided by the Holy Spirit,
instead of our own agendas and concerns.
Not my will but yours be done. Not my will, but yours, God. [*Quiet pause*]

Lord, help us to trust that in our speaking together we will hear your will and your words in our own lives, spoken to and for each of us, and for all of our gathered community. Bless our time together and help us to grow as we worship you. Amen.

Read Scripture: 1 Peter 2:1-10

(Of course, you may choose a different scripture and adapt this section around it.)

Throughout scripture God is referred to as our rock, a solid sure foundation. In the letters of the New Testament Jesus is given this role as our sole foundation (1 Cor. 3:11), our rock, the key cornerstone for all we are and do (1 Peter 2). As a church following Jesus, our life together is built on this solid but lively stone. Peter also describes us, the church, as living stones which God is building into his dwelling on earth. We as God's people are being built into God's very residence in this world, "so that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light!"

But yielding to Jesus is difficult, and Peter and Paul both remind us in their letters that he is a stone many of us trip over. The word for this stumbling block is *skandalon*, related to scandal. Jesus can either be our firm, life-giving foundation or we may be scandalously tripped up. In the litany in your programs, let us prepare ourselves today to be built on Jesus rather than *stumble over* Jesus.

Please join in the **bold text** portions, holding the stones that are on your tables:

(Each person takes a stone)

L: Like these stones that have been carved by the Creator's natural elements,
we are *living* stones shaped by the Holy Spirit and our time in Christ's community.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Holy Spirit shape and carve each of us to become building blocks of God's home in our world

L: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and deeds;
We "rid ourselves of all malice, and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind."
Let us speak and listen instead with compassion and love.

**All: Like the heft of these stones, our words and actions have weight.
We can cause others to stumble, or we can build a holy house.**

L: Like stones that create a permanent house for God,
we are living stones being built by Christ into God's spiritual house,
a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.

All: We lift these stones as reminders that the work we are doing here is so that we "may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light."

L: Place all the stones together in a group in front of you. As we listen and speak together, let these stones be reminders to that we are being built up by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these inert stones be reminders that we are living stones gathered to listen and speak with one another and with God in love.

Song suggestions:

HWB 420 *Heart with loving heart united*

HWB 567 *How firm a foundation*

(or repeat a verse or refrain of the hymn sung at the beginning)

II. God’s Story, Our Story

In this section, facilitators will want to tell the story of the issue put forth for discernment. Facilitators may want to begin by defining the question or issue for discernment, but allowing the space for the question or issue to be changed as groups consult the scriptures and their context. This introduction to the issue should include a congregational/denominational history of engagement in this topic if applicable. What decisions have been made (or in contrast, avoided) in the past about this issue? Are there points at which disagreements about these issues have come to a head? Has discernment about this topic or issue been attempted before in the congregation? What brings this question to light at this time in the congregation’s history? It may also be helpful to emphasize that each of us and the church (local and universal) are on journeys of discovery and faithfulness that connect us forward and back to the whole body of Christ. We engage in this work of discernment as disciples of Jesus trying to find hopeful and helpful ways forward.

Please note: The purpose of this overview is NOT to suggest a particular bias or way of thinking about the issue. Individuals’ stories will be brought to light during discernment, but telling an overview of the story helps people to approach the text at the same level of understanding. Can “new attenders” understand the impetus for this discussion? Can the very young or the very old engage in this conversation? What is at stake in this discussion? This is a time to be frank and honest about congregational history and involvement in this issue.

Another note: You may choose to simply narrate this story—or you may choose a more creative way of communicating some of this information and allowing engagement in it. This is your prerogative!

Just as our discernment should be rooted in the Scriptures, so too should the telling of the story of this issue. Facilitators will want to provide an overview of several biblical texts that are relevant to this question or issue, and give any important information about these texts to prepare the group to consult, discuss, and discern these scriptures in reference to this topic or issue. It is important to refrain from suggesting one reading in particular of these texts; as facilitators, we want to be sure that we are not attempting to do the very work that we are to be entrusting to the discernment group!

II. Listening and Speaking in Love

*Listening and speaking in love is, in many ways, the meat of this discernment time. We recommend the book *Cool Tools for Hot Topics* (see the “Gathering Materials” section for more details) as a reference for different practices of group process that you may wish to use. Various group processes will be appropriate for your group and topic, but each process or practice will need to be evaluated and chosen according to the groups discernment aptitude, relationships, conversational competencies, and personality.*

Some communication practices that we have utilized throughout this study that you may wish to use include, active listening skills, specifically the use of “I” language and paraphrasing, engaging in an “attitude of curiosity,” and placing ourselves on a continuum.

*Methods of Bible study/meditation we have used are: a modified version of the Swedish Method of Bible study *Lectio Divina*, *Two-Fold Listening*, and *Blair’s Five Rs Bible study*.*

Some things to keep in mind as you formulate a process:

- Be mindful of the necessity of keeping the Scriptures at the center of the conversation! The process you choose should engage scripture. Remember to be aware of and to name the other sources of authority group members are using.*
- Ask open-ended questions. “Yes” or “no” questions are rarely helpful in times of discernment. An open-ended question is one for which you cannot possibly know the answer and for which you certainly do not have a “right” answer in mind.*
- You may wish to combine several different group process practices. Do what will facilitate a good discussion and thoughtful engagement from your participants!*
- Think about how to use both small and large group discussion to engage the topic. Usually, small groups encourage honest sharing while large group time is needed to keep the group “on the same page.” Generally, begin and end with the whole group, and make time for reporting from small groups.*
- Plan what rooms you will use, how you will set them up, and whether your activities fit the spaces available.*
- Be clear in your expectations for what the group will accomplish. Will the issue come to a decision? What if the group isn’t ready to move on? Can you be flexible enough to suggest alternatives like meeting again, like appointing a task group, etc.? Your expectations should be modest for this first step; more processes and activities can be added later.*

- *Keep in mind that we are not just flexing intellectual muscles—our discernment is not just so that we can “have some good conversations.” The larger question of “What is God’s desire for our community?” must always be in our minds as we discuss issues and must be engaged specifically before we are “done” discerning*

IV. Leaving in Love

As we’ve listened and spoken together, we’ve practiced discernment. Speaking and listening together in community and trying to hear what God is saying to us today is an essential task of the church. Sometimes these conversations will be easy, but more often, these conversations that bring together our lives in this world, the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and tradition will be hard work. They will require us to rub elbows with those in our community who come from different perspectives, cultures, or economic, educational, or social backgrounds. These conversations require us to interpret our context and the scriptures and to go deeper with one another than surface conversations or small-talk. They strengthen our relationships with one another, and thus, our resolve as the people of God in this world.

When we began this time of discernment today, we *released* the things that we carried as we came— any hurts, anxieties, or fears. As we go, we *hold on* to the learning that we’ve done together, but we also *release* any tension, anxiety, or even anger that we’ve felt in these conversations. We release the stones in front of us and prepare to go out in to the world once again.

I Samuel 7:12 says, “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah, and named it Ebenezer for he said, ‘Thus far the Lord has helped us.’” So too, have *we* been helped by God.

Please *pick up* a stone from the table and join in the “leaving in love” liturgy:

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, our conversations are often weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like sharp stones in our shoes that irritate our sensitive feet, these conversations may stick in our minds.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release to God our irritations and anger, anxieties, and fears as we leave.

L: Like the stone monuments that marked the work of God in the Old Testament, we are living monuments of the work of God in this world.

All: We lay down these stones as a memorial to the work that God has done here, in our midst.

L: Like Jesus Christ, our living foundation stone, we also are living stones .

All: We place these stones as a sign that Christ is building us into God’s home on earth.

(Lay down stones in the center of the table.)

L: As we depart from this place, we place these stones in the center of our tables to remind us that our work today is done for today. Now we rely on God in Christ through the Holy Spirit to continue the work. Let these piles of stones be reminders to us that our time here has been shaped by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these stone monuments remind us that as we have spoken and listened in love, our leaving must be in love as well.

Song

Unit 6:

Seeking God's Will Together

Inviting the Spirit to lead us

Participant Program

Facilitators: Replace the gray text with the activities you determine for these steps.

Question for Discernment

Articulate your question here.

Scripture texts

Print or list texts here.

Preparation in Worship

We believe that good biblical discernment happens within the context of worship, and that we each need deliberate, prayerful preparation in which we commit to seeking God's will above our own agenda, desires or needs.

Song

Opening Ritual

Please join in the **bold text** portions, holding the stones that are on your tables:

L: Like these stones that have been carved by the Creator's natural elements,
we are *living* stones shaped by the Holy Spirit and our time in Christ's community.

All: We lift these stones as reminders to let the Holy Spirit shape and carve each of us to become building blocks of God's home in our world

L: We lift these stones as reminders of the weight of our words and deeds;
We "rid ourselves of all malice, and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind."
Let us speak and listen instead with compassion and love.

**All: Like the heft of these stones, our words and actions have weight.
We can cause others to stumble, or we can build a holy house.**

L: Like stones that create a permanent house for God,
we are living stones being built by Christ into God's spiritual house,
a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.

All: We lift these stones as reminders that the work we are doing here is so that we “may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

L: Place all the stones together in a group in front of you. As we listen and speak together, let these stones be reminders to that we are being built up by the love of God, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and by the voices and experiences of those around this table. Let these inert stones be reminders that we are living stones gathered to listen and speak with one another and with God in love.

Song

God’s Story, Our Story

As we discern together, our emphasis is on the stories of God’s people throughout time. In this section, the stories of God’s people in the Scriptures inform and interpret our stories and experiences as God’s people today.

Listening and Speaking in Love

Discernment is hard work! Focusing on the ways that we speak and listen to one another and making sure that we are communicating primarily in love is important. We trust that when we discern together prayerfully and carefully, the Holy Spirit will reveal God’s will and guide us toward obedience.

Leaving in Love

In the same way that deliberate preparation is essential to good discernment, so is deliberate leaving. So often the temptation is to save our annoyances, irritations, or hurts until after group discussions, and then to gather and share them with other like-minded individuals after the meeting. This practice hurts the gathered community, both because our conversations are richer when we can be open and honest with one another in the context of discussions and because annoyances, irritations, and hurts often escalate when they are allowed to fester and grow. Before we leave, we surrender to God the work we’ve done around the table as a way of putting our relationships with God and one another ahead of issues we may agree or disagree on.

Closing Ritual

Please *pick up a stone* from the table and join in the “leaving in love” liturgy:

L: Like boulders that are too heavy to carry, our conversations are often weighty.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders that we cannot carry heavy burdens alone.

L: Like sharp stones in our shoes that irritate our sensitive feet, these conversations may stick in our minds.

All: We lay down these stones as reminders to release to God our irritations and anger, anxieties and fears as we leave.

L: Like the stone monuments that marked the work of God in the Old Testament, we are living monuments of the work of God in this world.

All: We lay down these stones as a memorial to the work that God has done here, in our midst.

L: Like Jesus Christ, our living foundation stone, we also are living stones .

All: We place these stones as a sign that Christ is building us into God’s home on earth.

(Lay down stones in the center of the table.)

Song

