Companions on the Journey
Small Group Study
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Adapted from the Upper Room curriculum
“Companions in Christ.”
Welcome to “Companions on the Journey.” This resource is written for the purpose of *Cultivating Christian Covenant Community*.

- **Cultivate**: To create an environment conducive to growth. No one can be compelled to grow. But the environment we cultivate, through our leadership and resources, can create climates of openness, exploration, curiosity, and passion. Growth goes beyond knowledge and learning. Growth implies transformation. As facilitator of this resource, consider yourself the “asker of questions” more so than the giver of answers.

- **Christian**: This study is focused on Christ: who he is, what he taught, and what he did. This resource is designed to make and mature disciples of Jesus Christ. It is not a study in comparative religions. It is not focused on social or political issues. Our response to these issues is grounded in our identity as followers of Christ. The questions we ask, the conclusions we reach, begin with our identity in Christ.

- **Covenant**: We are a covenant people. Covenant is the way in which we are in relationship with God and with one another. That’s why it is recommended that each group begin their time together with a written covenant. (See an example of the covenant on page 3 based on the Covenants provided in *Companions in Christ* resources.)

- **Community**: We were created for relationship. God created us to yearn for fellowship with our Creator and with one another. We share fellowship, interests and resources and; together, we reach our fullest potential as disciples of Jesus Christ.

**Weekly Format:**

Each week’s format will consist of a Participant Reading and a Leader Resource. Please distribute the first Participant Reading in advance. Distribute subsequent Participant Readings at the conclusion of each session to prepare for the following week. This resource was developed to target people who have not yet made the commitment to engage in small group discipleship. Therefore, one brief weekly reading begins the process of weekly study and reflection that will, hopefully, become habit. Certainly, our hope is for disciples to be immersed in spiritual practices daily. But for those who have no regular practice of spiritual development (outside of Sunday worship), this resource provides an easy, manageable starting point.

Along with the Participant Reading, there is a Discussion Outline for the group facilitator. You are encouraged to read this well in advance of the group meeting to better prepare for facilitating the group discussion and experience.

Some weeks, there will be group handouts. There may also be supplies necessary for the group meeting. These will be listed in each week’s Discussion Outline.

A Word about the Candles: Jesus said, “I am the light of the world” (John 8.12 & 9.5). Jesus also taught that we are to be lights to the world (see Matthew 5.14). Each week you are encouraged to light one large candle to function as the Christ candle within your group. Then, participants are invited, one at a
time, to light a small tea light candle representative of their presence within the group. In addition to the rich theological symbolism, this time of candle lighting serves as a time for centering, slowing down, and quieting ourselves. Our lives are busy and hectic and most of us focus far more on the skill of “speeding up” than we do on the spiritual discipline of “slowing down.”
GROUP COVENANT

Our group will abide by a covenant. A covenant is an agreement that defines how we’ll be in relationship with one another. For this group to be a safe and meaningful experience, we’ll need to all agree to:

- Be on time and be regular in attendance
- Be authentic in our presentation of ourselves
- Be respectful in communication by:
  - Speaking only on behalf of ourselves
  - Listening more than we speak
  - Receiving what others say and share, even if we disagree
- Appreciate, and not be anxious, with silence
- Maintain confidentiality
- Allow others to speak and share as they are willing and when they are ready
- Avoid the desire to “fix or correct someone.” Only God can change our hearts and minds. And only God really knows us and knows the areas of our life where growth and change are needed.
- Seek clarification and don’t make assumptions
- Only give advice when it is expressly requested (in other words, in response to another’s expressed request to receive rather than our desire to give)
- Pray for one another.
Early in our marriage, my husband and I took a trip out west. I’m a Pennsylvania native and I had never been any further west than Indianapolis. I purchased tickets on the Amtrak Southwest Chief. It originated in Chicago and ended in California. (We only had enough money to make it to Albuquerque, N.M.) I was enthralled with Chicago, especially the traffic. We had neither the time nor the money to go to the top of the Sears Tower. But it was pretty impressive even from street level. We boarded the train in the evening and journeyed through the night. Early the next morning, when the sun came up, I went up to the observation car. I had never seen prairie before (except on TV’s “Little House on the Prairie”!). It was breathtaking. So flat, you could see for miles; vast, open prairie filled with prairie grass and wild flowers. Every so often, we would roll past a cattle yard. But mostly, it was prairie grass and wild flowers. I put my feet up, put on my headphones and popped Copland’s *Rodeo* into my Walkman. It was an amazing experience.

Life is a journey; a journey of joys and sorrows, calm and storms, successes and loss, solitude and companionship, doing and being. Likewise, our spiritual life is also a journey. Our relationship with God is dynamic; continually changing as our experiences and emotions provoke us to engage with God in different and deeper ways.

In scripture, God’s people are continually on the move. In the Old Testament, God speaks to Moses from a burning bush and calls him to lead the Israelite people out of their enslavement in Egypt. They are to journey through wilderness land toward a new land, a good and fertile land called Canaan. As the people journey through the wilderness, God gives them commandments (directions) to live by; instructions on how to worship him, guidelines for how to be in relationship with one another. Sometimes the people grumble and sometimes they give thanks; sometimes they listen and sometimes they disobey; sometimes they trust and sometimes they doubt.

When we read the gospel of Luke, we are invited to journey with Jesus and his disciples as they travel toward Jerusalem, the place where Jesus will be put to death. Along the way, the disciples lead others to Jesus and learn how to live as faithful disciples. At times the journey is successful and exciting; at times they are confused and fear what the future holds.

Near the end of Luke’s gospel, after Jesus is resurrected, we read the story of two disciples on a journey to Emmaus. As they walk, they encounter a fellow traveler. They do not realize that it is Jesus in their midst. They do not recognize him. He teaches them, comforts and challenges them. Later as they sit down to eat a meal together, Jesus offers a prayer of thanks. Suddenly they recognize him and as soon as they do, he disappears. They are astonished that he had walked with them all along the road; yet, they did not comprehend his presence!

How has your journey with Jesus changed through the years? Perhaps you were brought up in the church and cannot recall exactly when your journey began. Or, perhaps you remember that very moment when you first made the commitment to follow Jesus. Along the way, you have likely
experienced joy and sorrow, calm and strife, sickness and health, success and failure. Perhaps, at times, it was hard to keep on keeping on; while at other times the journey seemed smooth and easy. Perhaps at times you were keenly aware of Jesus’ presence with you; while at other times you felt alone.

Our spiritual journey begins with grace; God’s undeserved, unsolicited movement toward us. God yearns to be in a relationship with us; in big and little ways, God moves within our lives to demonstrate his love and care for us. God’s grace even precedes our awareness of his presence.

Our journey can feel like aimless wandering until that time when we respond to God’s overtures of love shown to us through Christ. Paul tells the Roman Christians, “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” Jesus humbled himself to death on a cross so that we might have the opportunity to enter into relationship with God when we trust in who Jesus is and in what he has done for us. By trusting in Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we receive a companion for our journey, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit makes a home within us and guides us along the way. The Spirit guides and directs us, comforts and corrects us.

So too, we experience the comfort of fellow travelers, sojourners. The Church is a body in motion. We journey together and help one another to stay on course. And that is what we will do together in the weeks to come. Together, we will read and pray, think and discuss, challenge and comfort one another. We’ll be invited to open our lives to one another and to the one who calls us to follow. Let the journey begin.

Before your group meets together, look at the scripture below and reflect on the questions that follow. You may also wish to journal or make some notes of your thoughts so that you will be able to share them with other members of your group.

  Abram (whose name was later changed to Abraham) is the father of the Jewish nation. God promises Abram that all the families of the earth will be blessed through him and his descendents. But to receive all the blessings that God promised, Abram had to take the first step of faith and be willing to travel into unfamiliar territory. Have you ever felt God leading you? Have you ever felt God urging you to change the course of your life and move in a different direction? Have you ever felt God calling you to leave your comfort zone and move into unfamiliar territory? The bible writer tells us that Abram journeyed on by stages. What have been some of the stages in your life’s journey?

- What’s the most interesting journey you’ve ever taken? What made it so interesting? Take a picture or souvenir from your journey with you when your group meets and be prepared to share with them a little about your trip.
Session One: Facilitator Discussion Outline

(Items needed – candles, stones, and copies of the group covenant; you will need one per participant of all the items listed above)

- Explain what the format will be each week. We’ll...
  - light candles
  - hear a word of scripture
  - take a few moments to breathe deeply and relax
  - have a time of prayer that will conclude with the Lord’s Prayer

That will be our opening format each week.

- As you begin, light a candle and explain that it is a reminder to us of Jesus’ presence with us since Jesus is the light of the world. Invite members to come forward at their own pace and light a candle.

- Share this scripture from Psalm 139:
  *O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.*

- Invite members to take a few moments to close their eyes and breathe deeply and slowly using these few moments to begin to relax and let go of the day’s tensions.

- Explain to the group that you will open with prayer. They can then name anyone or any situation for which they desire prayer. All they need to do is speak the name of the one in need since God already knows every need. Let them know that the prayer time will conclude with the Lord’s Prayer. [If you are not confident that all participants attend worship regularly, then be sure and provide printed copies of the Lord’s Prayer to everyone in your group to prevent any awkwardness for those who do not know the prayer.]

- Explain to group participants what this group will be like...
  We’re entering into relationship not only with Jesus, but with one another. Together, we’ll focus more on formation and discovery than on information and answers. We will do so through weekly readings and reflections; and through our group sharing and conversation together. Our group will abide by a covenant. A covenant is an agreement that defines how we’ll be in relationship with one another. For this group to be a safe and meaningful experience, we’ll need to all agree to:
  - Be on time and be regular in attendance
  - Be authentic in our presentation of ourselves
  - Be respectful in communication by:
    - Speaking only on behalf of ourselves
    - Listening more than we speak
    - Receiving what others say and share, even if we disagree
  - Appreciate, and not be anxious, with silence
  - Maintain confidentiality
  - Allow others to speak and share as they are willing and when they are ready
  - Avoid the desire to “fix or correct someone.” Only God can change our hearts and
minds. And only God really knows us and knows the areas of our life where growth and change are needed.

- Seek clarification and don’t make assumptions
- Only give advice when it is expressly requested (in other words, in response to another’s expressed request to receive rather than our desire to give)
- Pray for one another.

- During the week members were invited to reflect on the most interesting trip or journey they’ve ever taken. Invite members to introduce themselves by saying their name and talking about the most interesting journey they’ve ever taken. (Some might even have pictures or souvenirs.)

  Encourage them to share what made the journey so interesting. In particular, be attentive to noticing if individuals had companions on this journey and how that made their journey more meaningful. Listen to notice if there were parts of the journey that were especially surprising, beautiful, anxiety-producing, etc. After everyone has shared, take a few moments to summarize some of what you heard as it relates to the items listed above (journey companions, surprises, beauty, anxiety). Ask group members if they heard any connections among our experiences (i.e. shared experiences).

  Then, share briefly something about your own journey of faith. What has it meant to you to have companions on your faith journey? When have there been times and experiences that have been surprising, beautiful, anxiety-producing?

- Read the scripture for this week, Genesis 12.1-9. Point out some key points in the story:

  - In order for Abram to receive the blessing God promises, he must step out in faith, leaving his current home to go to a new and unfamiliar place.
  - Abram was old and he and his wife had never been able to conceive. They had no children and yet, God makes a promise that is for Abram’s descendents (“To your offspring I will give this land” – Gen. 12.7)! Abram responds to God’s promise of blessing by worshipping God (he builds an altar and invokes God’s name).

- Invite group members to share:

  - Have they ever felt called to step out in faith? Have they ever felt that it was God, specifically, who was calling them to take a risk and step out in faith; to move beyond what was familiar and comfortable to something new and strange? How did they respond to that call?
  - Have they ever felt God encouraging them to do something they felt was impossible? Something that defied all logic?
  - Have they ever felt that God was present with them and speaking to them? How did they respond when that happened?
  - Ask: In our day and age, does God still speak to us? Does it seem right or practical that God would invite us to take a risk in order to receive blessings God has prepared for us?
  - At this current time, do you sense God placing a call on your life? And, if so, how might this group assist you in discerning or understanding that call?

- Invite members to share anything from this week’s reading that was particularly meaningful, troubling, or just something they would want to talk more about as a group.

- Read Mark 1.16-20. When Jesus called his first disciples, they immediately dropped their nets
and followed him without really knowing where it was that they were headed. Ask participants:

- Have they ever encountered or experienced something so compelling that it warrants an immediate change/response in their life?
- What might it have been about Jesus and his call that caused these fishermen to respond so immediately?

- Invite participants to close their eyes as you read these verses of Mark again. Invite them to imagine themselves in the story. Invite them to imagine that Jesus is calling them to drop whatever it is in their life that defines them. Invite them to imagine what it might feel like to drop everything for Jesus. What would be hardest for them to release?

- In the Old Testament, at various times, God’s people would erect stones as altars in places where they had encountered God in real and life-changing ways. Pass out a small stone to group participants. Invite them to place the stone somewhere in their home or workplace where they will see it frequently and allow it to remind them that God is stirring and moving within their lives and inviting them to follow him wherever he may lead.

- Invite members to come forward, as they are ready, to blow out their individual candles.

- End with a prayer of blessing from Numbers:  
  The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen.