

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS

Biblical Reflections for Church Leaders

Healthy congregations and effective leaders in every place making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Mission of the North Carolina Conference
The United Methodist Church

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

- Acts 2: 42-47

This guide is offered to church leaders who desire to pray and meditate upon Holy Scripture as a means of discerning God’s will as it relates to living fully in The Body of Christ. Four themes are outlined as a means of identifying characteristics common to healthy congregations: (1) Being Centered in Christ; (2) Making Disciples of Jesus Christ; (3) Focused Spiritual Formation; and (4) Risk-Taking Mission & Ministry to the World.

The format for this guide provides a four-week Bible study for church leaders. If the leadership group is larger than twelve (12), it is suggested that the group meetings be done in several small groups, none of which is larger than twelve. Each week, beginning with Monday, scripture is offered to allow church leaders to reflect individually upon the same material. Each leader is encouraged to take notes and record questions as the daily scripture relates to his or her local church. Specific study questions to guide the entire study group are provided for each Sunday evening’s group meeting. If the local church desires to meet on some evening other than Sunday, simply adjust the daily readings to begin the day after the group meeting. This format allows each church leader to read and pray the daily scriptures for an entire week leading up to the group meeting.

The group facilitator guiding the four-week Bible study will want to share some of these commonly used suggestions for the daily readings:

1. Begin your Bible reading with prayer: “Lord, open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law,” Psalm 119:18.
2. Read the scripture slowly. Think about it. Relate it to your own congregation and reword it into a prayer for your church.
3. Take brief notes on what you read. Record questions about how each scripture relates to your local church. Perhaps you could keep all this in a small notebook or in a computer file.
4. Memorize scripture verses that speak powerfully to you as a church leader.
5. Remember: “All scripture is inspired of God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,” 2 Tim. 3:16.
6. Find ways as a church leader to highlight or use the weekly theme in church communications, perhaps to include it as a prayer offered in Sunday School or United Methodist Women.
7. At each gathering of church leaders participating in this study, the group facilitator will simply follow the suggestions outlined under “Church Leaders’ Meeting.”
8. Finally, the group facilitator will use the questions outlined for each week as a means of keeping the conversation focused around that week’s study.

WEEK ONE

Centered in Christ

The primary emphasis this week is to understand what it means to be immersed in the Spirit of Jesus Christ: to have the same mind in us that was in Jesus, and to see our lives, community and church through the eyes of Jesus.

Day	Scripture	Theme
Monday	Ephesians 2:1-10	Made Alive in Christ
Tuesday	2 Cor. 3:1-18	The New Covenant
Wednesday	Eph. 4:1-16	Unity in the Body of Christ
Thursday	Col. 3:1-10	Rules for Holy Living
Friday	Eph. 1:3-14	Spiritual Blessings in Christ
Saturday	Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3	The Church at Antioch

Sunday: Church Leaders' Meeting

As Church Leaders gather, light a candle that is visible to all the group as a reminder that Christ is present as you work (the Christ candle), and ask different members of your Covenant Meeting to pray for the following:

1. The Presence of The Holy Spirit within your local church.
2. The work and spiritual influence of your local pastor.
3. The local congregation, especially for spiritual worship, disciple making, and outreach.
4. The needs of your immediate community and how your local church can be a visible symbol of the Presence of Christ.
5. A spirit of faithfulness and commitment to remain in prayer and biblical reflection as church leaders for the next three weeks.

In addition, the following questions may help to facilitate conversation around what it means for your church to be “Centered In Christ”:

1. Which of the scripture passages we read this week stand out for you? Why do you think that particular scripture stood out for you?
2. What do you think it means to be “Centered In Christ”?
3. What were some of the signs of a healthy church reflected in the Acts 11:9-30 and 13:1-3 passages?
4. What evidence do we see of any of those activities in our own church?
5. When we think of our congregation and local community, is it realistic to reflect upon our ministry by asking, “Will we do what God is calling us to do?” Another question for reflection may be, “When have we seemed to measure our ministry without regard for God’s expectations?”
6. The Church has taught that to be made into the image of Jesus, we must be immersed in the Means of Grace (Prayer, Scripture, Worship, Sacraments, and Holy Conversation in covenant groups). In what ways are we faithfully creating invitations for people to practice these means of grace and is our congregation immersed in them?
7. Do we understand that the local church is changed into The Body of Christ by practicing these spiritual disciplines in the same way individuals are changed into the image of Jesus by practicing these disciplines?
8. What do these passages of scripture this week have to say to the Universal Church today? What do they have to say to our local church? What would I have to do differently to take these passages of scripture seriously for myself?

Remind everyone to remain faithful to the daily readings, keep notes, and write down questions as they think about the local congregation. Covenant to meet each time for the next three weeks, to participate by sharing individual thoughts, and to respect the thoughts of others as a “gift” that each person brings to the Covenant Meetings.

Close with prayer that you and your local church may be “Centered In Christ.”

WEEK TWO

Making Disciples of Jesus Christ

This week's meditations are focused on making disciples of Jesus. We can understand and communicate God's desire and will for our church. This is God's preferred future for our congregation. The importance of practicing hospitality as a sign of God's presence and grace among those with whom we share life.

Day	Scripture	Theme
Monday	Mt. 5-7	Sermon on the Mount
Tuesday	Jn: 3:16-21; 14:15-31	Jesus Promises the Holy Spirit
Wednesday	Acts 2: 42-47; Rom 12: 9-13	The Fellowship of Believers
Thursday	1 Jn. 3:11-24	Love One Another
Friday	Mt. 28:16-20; Mt. 16:21-28	The Great Commission
Saturday	Jn. 1:35-42	The First Disciples

Sunday: Church Leaders' Meeting

As Church Leaders gather, light The Christ Candle, and ask different members of your Covenant Meeting to pray for the following:

1. The Presence of The Holy Spirit within your local church.
2. The work and spiritual influence of your local pastor.
3. The local congregation, especially for spiritual worship, disciple making, and outreach.
4. The needs of your immediate community and how your local church can be a visible symbol of the Presence of Christ.
5. A spirit of faithfulness and commitment to remain in prayer and biblical reflection as church leaders for the next two weeks.

In addition, the following questions may help to facilitate conversation around what it means for your church to be “Making Disciples of Jesus Christ”:

1. What is the evidence that persons in our in our congregation know our mission?
2. How is our mission communicated?
3. Is there a “vision” or picture of how we will accomplish our mission?
4. Which of the scripture passages we read this week stand out for you? Why do think that particular passage stood out for you as you thought about our church?
5. Is our local church inviting non-believers?
6. In what ways are we making disciples of Jesus Christ?
7. What is the difference between making church “members” and making “disciples”? How have we gone about both of these tasks?
8. What are the signs of “hospitality” we see extended by our local church to non-believers?
9. Are “all” welcome in this place?
10. Is our average attendance in worship higher than it was 36 months ago?
11. Is our membership greater than it was 36 months ago?
12. Is it more important to have new confessions of faith and baptisms than it is to transfer Christians from other churches into our membership?
13. Who in our congregation has a “heart” for the least, the last and the lost?
14. What would it mean for our local church to follow such leadership?
15. Would we do what God is calling us to do, or would we want to do it our way?

Remind everyone to remain faithful to the daily readings, keep notes, and write down questions as they think about the local congregation. Covenant to meet each time for the next two weeks, to participate by sharing individual thoughts, and to respect the thoughts of others as a “gift” that each person brings to the Covenant Meetings.

Close with prayer that you and your local church may be “Making Disciples of Jesus Christ.”

WEEK THREE

Focused Spiritual Formation

The development and support of leadership, lay and clergy alike, is the primary focus of this week's meditations. Worship, formational gatherings, and faithful stewardship are all essential aspects of our growth in Jesus Christ.

Day	Scripture	Theme
Monday	Col. 3:15-17	Worship
Tuesday	Psalm 150	Praise the Lord
Wednesday	Hebrews 10:19-25	Draw Near to God
Thursday	Col. 3:12-14; 4:2-6;	Spiritual Growth
Friday	1 Cor. 12:1-31; Gal. 5:16-26	Life by the Spirit
Saturday	2 Cor. 9:6-15; Deut. 8	The Gift of Generosity

Sunday: Church Leaders' Meeting

As Church Leaders gather, light The Christ Candle, and ask different members of your Covenant Meeting to pray for the following:

1. The Presence of The Holy Spirit within your local church.
2. The work and spiritual influence of your local pastor.
3. The local congregation, especially for spiritual worship, disciple making, and outreach.
4. The needs of your immediate community and how your local church can be a visible symbol of the Presence of Christ.
5. A spirit of faithfulness and commitment to remain in prayer and biblical reflection as church leaders for the next week.

In addition, the following questions may help to facilitate conversation around what it means for your church to be “Focused in Spiritual Formation”:

1. Which of the scripture passages we read this week stand out for you? Why do think that particular passage stood out for you?
2. In what way did you think about our local church as you read these passages of scripture?
3. Would you describe our worship services as “passionate”?
4. What would it mean for us to think of worship as something we are passionate about?
5. In what ways do we teach spiritual formation? Is it enough?
6. Is there a natural rhythm and balance between the Means of Grace (Prayer, Scripture, Worship, Sacraments, and Holy Conversation in small covenant groups) and the Means of Mercy (acts of kindness and compassion toward the least, the last and the lost)?
7. What would it mean for our church leadership to train new leaders to practice the “Fruit of the Spirit” (Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Gentleness, and Self-Control) as we work with each other?
8. Do you think our church leaders see “generosity” as a spiritual gift?
9. Do we feel our church family contributes financially to our church because of duty and commitment, or do we feel most church families contribute to increase ministry, disciple making, and addressing real human hurts?
10. What does mutual ministry and partnership mean to our leadership?
11. What would it mean for our church to take these passages of scripture seriously? What would I have to do differently?

Remind everyone to remain faithful to the daily readings, keep notes, and write down questions as they think about the local congregation. Covenant to meet next week to participate by sharing individual thoughts, and to respect the thoughts of others as a “gift” that each person brings to the Covenant Meetings.

Close with prayer that you and your local church may be “Focused in Spiritual Formation.”

WEEK FOUR

Risk-Taking Mission & Ministry to the World

Interpreting ministry, leading change and responding to inevitable conflict is the primary focus of this week's study.

Day	Scripture	Theme
Monday	Micah 6:8; Lk. 10:1-12	The Church's Mission
Tuesday	James 1:19-27	Doing Ministry
Wednesday	1 Cor. 13; Rev. 3:14-22	Interpreting Change
Thursday	Col. 2:6-23	Freedom from Regulations
Friday	2 Pet. 1:3-11	Reasons for Failure
Saturday	Acts 15:5-11	Conflict and Agreement

Sunday: Church Leaders' Meeting

As Church Leaders gather, light The Christ Candle, and ask different members of your Covenant Meeting to pray for the following:

1. The Presence of The Holy Spirit within your local church.
2. The work and spiritual influence of your local pastor.
3. The local congregation, especially for spiritual worship, disciple making, and outreach.
4. The needs of your immediate community and how your local church can be a visible symbol of the Presence of Christ.
5. A spirit of gratitude and praise to God for what we have learned and what the Holy Spirit has revealed to us about ourselves and our church.

In addition, the following questions may help to facilitate conversation around what it means for your church to be engaged in “Risk-Taking Mission and Ministry to the World”:

1. Which of the scriptural passages we read this week stood out for you? Why do you think that particular passage stood out for you?
2. Which of our ministries would you identify as “Risk-Taking”?
3. Are there any ministries where we can say we offer Jesus Christ to the world?
4. We know change is inevitable. Do you think our congregation resists change? If the answer is “yes”, has this been helpful to our church, or has it kept us from doing what God would call us to do?
5. If the Apostle Paul speaks to us of being “new creatures in Christ Jesus,” what would it mean for our local church to become a “new creature in Christ Jesus”?
6. What would have to happen in our local church to be born anew?
7. Why do you think we read the passage from 1 Corinthians 13 this week as we thought about change, conflict and ministry?
8. What would it mean for our church to use the language of reconciliation and the “Fruit of the Spirit” (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control) as we discussed difficult decisions?
9. How is it that too many churches think in terms of “mediation” and “conflict resolution” rather than reconciliation, forgiveness, and kindness?
10. What did you think of the Council of Jerusalem’s conflict (Acts 15:5-11) and the phrase, “after much debate (or discussion)”?
11. If Matthew the Tax Collector and Simon the Zealot, who hated each other, could walk together with Jesus as his disciples, is it possible for those who don’t agree to walk together in the spirit of Jesus?
12. What would it mean for our local church to take these passages of scripture seriously? What would I have to do differently?
13. What new insights have I gained about myself, our church leadership, and the Early Church (*from Holy Scripture*), as a result of this prayerful journey?”

Thank each church leader for their faithfulness and sincerity with which they have approached this time of listening to The Holy Spirit. Close with prayer that you and your local church may be engaged with “Risk-Taking Mission and Ministry to the World.”