



**A SET OF FIVE
BIBLE STUDIES ON
ST JOHN'S GOSPEL
FOR USE IN SMALL
GROUPS**



**BY PAULA CLIFFORD &
JOHN PRITCHARD**



THE LIVING FAITH PRIORITIES

1. SUSTAINING THE SACRED CENTRE

This is about encouraging and enabling clergy and lay people to deepen their enjoyment of God, and to recognise God's presence in everyday life.

2. MAKING DISCIPLES

This is about the core task left to us by Jesus. It usually takes the form of accompanying people on a journey to faith by the intentional use of nurture courses, mentoring, or simple friendship, and then encouraging them to follow Christ in everyday life.

3. MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

This is about recognising that in a holistic understanding of God's action in the world, social justice and prophetic witness cannot be put in a box as a specialism or an extra, but is at the heart of the calling of every Christian community in its own context.

4. CREATING VIBRANT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This is about shaping 'communities of grace' which exhibit the character of Jesus. Such attractive communities are genuinely hospitable, deeply engaged with their communities, and passionate about God.

5. SHAPING CONFIDENT, COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

This is about developing leadership using all the resources available to the local church. It will involve consolidation in some parishes and new work in others to build up shared ministry in teams, with appropriate training and support.

A vital, healthy church would look like this diagram:



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A SET OF FIVE BIBLE STUDIES ON ST JOHN'S GOSPEL FOR USE IN SMALL GROUPS

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LEADERS' NOTES

This series of five Bible studies is designed to explore the five components of the Oxford Diocese's **Living Faith** vision. This is briefly explained in Bishop John's December 2008 document, '**Living Faith** for the future: A vision for the next five years', which you can find at www.oxford.anglican.org

The foundation of **Living Faith** is our Christian lives within our churches or groups of churches. So the subject of the first study is 'Sustaining the Sacred Centre', and the other four studies all flow from it.

With the exception of the first, each study can be approached in two different ways. Track A is more interactive and begins with a group activity that leads into study of the biblical text. Track B opens with a short discussion of the **Living Faith** theme for the week, again leading into study of the biblical text, but there should be a little more time to explore the passage in greater depth. Both tracks have the same questions for discussion related to the **Living Faith** theme. These are followed by common suggestions for prayer.

We suggest you discuss with the group at the first session which track they would prefer to follow. While most groups will probably want to follow either Track A or Track B throughout the course, there is no reason why you should not try A one week and B the next, if you feel that suits the group.

These notes are written specifically for group leaders, not for the group as a whole. It is up to the leaders to present the material in a way that works best for the group. Each study is intended to last no more than an hour and a half, so be prepared to divide up the time appropriately between the different sections. The **Living Faith** questions and suggestions for prayer are available online as printable handouts.

The studies are all based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Encourage people to bring along their own copies if they have them, and try to avoid the distraction of having too many competing translations available. If necessary, photocopy the NRSV passages for discussion each week.

PREPARATION

The activities in Track A and the group prayer in both tracks will need a small amount of preparation, either by the leader alone, or by everyone. Make sure you look ahead to the following week in case group members need to bring something with them. You could of course ask them to bring some of the items suggested instead of providing them yourself.

LOOKING AT THE BIBLE TEXT

The comments and questions under the heading of ‘Exploring the biblical text together’ are meant as suggestions for the leaders, along with some of the responses you may try to elicit. They are not intended to be read out to the group, and you may well want to supplement them with ideas of your own.

If you are following Track B (with no activity) you may have time to take in some of the comments on the Bible passage in Track A as well.

PRAYER

Each study ends with an opportunity for praying together creatively (see ‘Preparation’ above). If you want to allow a longer time for prayer, you could also include some of the topics listed, or alternatively suggest some for group members to pray about before the next meeting. Groups that meet on a regular basis will also want to include personal prayer (depending on their usual practice), so be sure to make time for that as well.

1. SUSTAINING THE SACRED CENTRE

JOHN 1. 1–14

This initial study does not divide into Tracks A and B. At the end of the study, please discuss with the group which route they would like to take next time.

The method adopted here is a flow of **Story – Snaps – Study – Spin-offs – Stillness**. This represents a way of digging in and around the text and relating it to our own experience.

STORY

Reading: John 1. 1–14

- Brian Keenan was kidnapped in Lebanon and held prisoner for over four years, the first part of which was in solitary confinement and often in the dark. He scribbled words on every scrap of paper he could find, or on the walls, anywhere – to save himself from going insane, and to prove that he existed. Words kept him alive.
- At a genocide centre in Phnom Penh (one of hundreds set up by Pol Pot to eliminate his enemies) any sound was instantly punishable by death. The walls are covered with hundreds of photographs of those who were silenced. Some look blankly; others hopefully. But only one of them came out alive. Silence is a metaphor for death.
- Czeslaw Milosz, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980, said: ‘In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot.’

SNAPS

Where does this reading or where do these stories ‘snap’ with your own experience? What connections can you make? What ideas or memories come into your mind?

STUDY

If we dig a bit deeper we find:

- ‘The Word’ in John 1 is in Hebrew the Word of the Lord of which the prophets spoke, and in Greek is the rational principle behind the universe. Do you think you are more Hebrew or Greek in your way of thinking about ‘the Word’?
- Why does John put in the verses about John the Baptist (verses 6–8)? What is he trying to say?
- Why ‘grace and truth’ (v.14), and not, say, ‘forgiveness and courage’?

SPIN-OFFS

What does all this mean for evangelism in our day?

LIVING FAITH QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- How do we ‘receive Christ’ in our own lives (v.12)?
- If ‘receiving Christ’ is one way of describing the sacred centre, how do we sustain that centre? What do we find ‘works’ for us and those around us?
- What could we be doing in our own church to sustain the sacred centre of the church’s life?

STILLNESS.

1. Read John 1. 1–14 again.
2. Meditate on v.12: ‘To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God.’
3. While this is being done, play a quiet piece of music of your choice (try four minutes).
4. Prayer: Jesus, Word of the Father, help us to hear your Word amongst the cacophony of words in our culture. May we recognise the still small voice in the sacred centre of our lives, and respond with joy. And may that quiet voice send us out to live the faith for the future and to transform the world with your love. Amen.

Then choose Track A or Track B for next time.

2. MAKING DISCIPLES

JOHN 1. 35–51

Read John 1. 29–51.

ACTIVITY

The aim here is to get the group to think themselves into the characters of four disciples: Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip and Nathanael. Divide into pairs: one pair will be made up of Andrew and Simon, another pair will be Philip and Nathanael. Each person should think about how their character feels about the situation described in these verses and discuss this with their partner. For example, Andrew may feel a bit miffed that although he was the one to bring Simon to Jesus, Simon gets special treatment (and don't forget that Andrew appears to have been one of John's disciples); equally Simon might feel embarrassed by this. Encourage people to be really imaginative: let the character develop out of and beyond what the text tells us. Then bring the group together to discuss what they have learnt about the first disciples from this exercise.

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- Verses 35–36 are effectively the beginning of the end of the ministry of John the Baptist. What is John's role in verses 29–36 (recognising Jesus, acknowledging his own inferiority, and so on)?
- Faith is not about credulity (like the White Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* who could believe up to six impossible things before breakfast). Faith is about belief in a person – in Jesus, the Son of God. In these verses, in what different ways do people make a response of faith to Jesus (verses 36, 37, 41, 45, 49–50)?
- How does Jesus draw people to him (verses 38–39, 43, 48, 50–51)? How does this compare with the way in which John the Baptist (v.36), Andrew (verses 41–42) and Philip (verses 45–46) bring the others to Jesus?
- Nathanael is described as a 'true Israelite', that is, a Jew whose understanding leads him to Jesus. (The fig tree may refer to Nathanael studying there.) How does Jesus phrase his promise to Nathanael (v. 51 seems to refer back to Jacob's dream in Genesis 28.12)?

2. MAKING DISCIPLES

JOHN 1. 35–51

DISCUSSION STARTER: How did you ‘become a disciple’?

Read John 1. 29–51.

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- John twice proclaims Jesus to be the Lamb of God (verses 29, 36). There are various overtones to this, in particular the Passover lamb and the lamb provided by God for Abraham to sacrifice (Genesis 22.8). Think about the significance of John’s faith right at the outset of Jesus’s ministry (e.g. he is recognising Jesus as someone who is already very different from the traditional idea of the Messiah). This is echoed by Andrew (v.41).
- The call of the first disciples must have been very important to the early Church. Look at how Mark’s Gospel deals with this (1. 16–20) and think about the differences between the two accounts. Does this have any bearing on our own discipleship?
- Philip tells Nathanael (v.45) ‘we have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote’; this is reflected in Jesus’s claim (5.39) that the scriptures ‘testify on my behalf’. Look at Luke 4. 16–21 (quoting Isaiah 61) for an example of this, again early in Jesus’s ministry.
- Nathanael is being challenged to grow in faith: he had expected a miracle worker who might come from a more important town than Nazareth. His response (which might at first sight appear cynical) may help us to examine our expectations as Christians and how we might change or develop them.

LIVING FAITH QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Andrew and Philip are the first people on record to bring others to Jesus with the simple invitation 'come and see'. What are we inviting people to come and see today?
2. Befriending and understanding people is an important part of making them disciples. What strategies does your church have for simply getting to know one another? How can these be improved?
3. What do you think are the most helpful ways of enabling people to grow in their faith? How will you do this during, say, the next six months?
4. How can we better support people in our congregations with particularly demanding or high profile jobs?

FOR PRAYER

GROUP PRAYER

Have some Bible verses about discipleship printed on pieces of paper. Invite group members to take one and read it out. Follow each reading with a short time of silence for reflection and silent prayer.

Verses could include: Matthew 10. 16 (mission of the twelve); Luke 10. 41–2 (Mary and Martha); Luke 10. 27 (loving God and our neighbour); John 21. 17 (Jesus and Peter); Romans 15. 14 (instructing one another); 2 Corinthians 6. 11–13 (opening our hearts); various verses from Ephesians 4; James 2. 17–18 (faith and works); Revelation 2. 3–4 (patient endurance and love) and other verses from Revelation 2 and 3.

SOME FURTHER TOPICS FOR PRAYER EITHER IN THE GROUP OR IN THE WEEK AHEAD

Give thanks for ...

- The people who first showed you Jesus
- The very many courses and published materials available to help us understand our faith better.

Pray for ...

- One another in our lives at work and at home

- Those in the local church with particular responsibility for mission and outreach
- Our friendships with people who are not Christians
- Special services or events that are an opportunity to invite people to come and see
- The Holy Spirit's guidance in planning for the future.

3. MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN SOCIETY

JOHN 13. 1–17

ACTIVITY

As a group you are going to re-imagine the washing of the disciples' feet at the Last Supper. The leader should begin the meeting in the usual way, e.g. with coffee and an opening prayer – whatever has been your pattern in the last couple of weeks. Then tell people that you would like the group to wash each others' hands. You will need to have a bowl of water and a towel within easy reach, and preferably some appropriate background music that you can switch on before you begin. Ask people to find John 13 and start reading verses 1–17 to themselves. While they are doing that, sit in front of the person nearest to you, with the bowl on your lap, and wash and dry their hands. Invite that person to do the same for the person next to him or her, and so on around the room.

When you have finished (i.e. when the last person in the group has washed the leader's hands), ask people how they felt about having their hands washed by someone else. Encourage them to be honest about their feelings. Overall, was it a positive or a negative experience?

Then read John 13. 1–17 again, this time aloud.

Now ask the group how the disciples must have felt. What differences might there be between the group's experience and that of the disciples?

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- Jesus washes the feet of all the disciples, including Judas, despite knowing that Judas will betray him (verses 2–3 and, later, 26–27). Who are the 'traitors' today whom we are nonetheless bound to include in our servant ministry?
 - A ministry of service necessarily includes serving the poor and oppressed. (If in doubt, refer to Matthew 25.40, 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.')
- How can we understand washing one another's feet (v.14) in today's world?

- Jesus's comment in verse 16 suggests that the disciples are not to behave any differently from Jesus himself or expect to be treated any better. How do they subsequently behave (e.g. Peter denies Jesus, most of the disciples run away, but some are with him at the cross)?

3. MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN SOCIETY

JOHN 13. 1–17

DISCUSSION STARTER: How does our church actually make a difference to the community around us? And how does it engage with social justice issues locally and globally?

Read John 13. 1–17

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- The mention of Passover (v.1) would have reminded John's readers of the Passover lamb. Think back to your discussion last week on John the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God. Think about how our understanding of 'the Lamb' develops in the course of Jesus's ministry (e.g. in how he gives himself to others).
- By removing his outer clothing (v.4) Jesus takes on the appearance and duties of a slave. This might lead us to reflect on how we serve one another: do we like to preserve our appearance as different from the people we serve, while engaged in serving them? Or do we attach more importance to appearing to serve?
- Jesus's command to 'wash one another's feet' (v.14) sets up a chain of service from him to us and from us to each other. Think about how this echoes the relationship described in John 17 (session 1).
- A ministry of service necessarily includes serving the poor and oppressed. (If in doubt, refer to Matthew 25. 40, 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.')
- How can we understand washing one another's feet (v.14) in today's world?
- In some cultures this concept of serving everyone, particularly people of a different social class, is completely alien. What challenges does this pose for Christians in today's multi-cultural society?

LIVING FAITH QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why should we be concerned about social justice?
2. As a local Christian community (both the local church and the diocese as a whole) how can we best seek justice for people who are poor, hungry or homeless, for immigrants, for people who suffer as a result of conflict?
3. What are the consequences for us of serving people in need (e.g. speaking out on their behalf)?
4. How do we bring the needs of the world into the spiritual life of our church? How could we do it better?

FOR PRAYER

FOR GROUP PRAYER

Put a candle or cross where everyone can see it.

Have a few newspapers available. Ask people to tear out a headline, read it out and place it in front of the candle or cross. Pause for reflection and silent prayer after each headline.

SOME FURTHER TOPICS FOR PRAYER

EITHER IN THE GROUP OR IN THE WEEK AHEAD:

Give thanks for ...

- Local groups and activities that are dedicated to making a difference, either in this country or overseas.
- The burning sense of injustice on the part of young people.

Pray for ...

- A greater awareness of the causes of injustice and a greater willingness to address them
- The courage to speak out
- People who are poor and suffering in our link Diocese of Kimberley and Kuruman.

4. CREATING VIBRANT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

JOHN 15. 1–26

ACTIVITY

This activity needs a good supply of pens or felt-tips and large pieces of paper.

Divide the group into twos or threes. Ask each sub-group to draw an outline of your church building, together with any church hall or parish room on the same site. Think about what goes on in each part of the building. Then use the seasons or months of the year to help you describe whether these activities are thriving, and add captions or drawings to your outline. E.g. ‘bursting into life’ (spring), ‘flourishing’ (summer), ‘dull’ (February), ‘needs pruning’ (autumn), ‘past its sell-by date’ (winter).

Ingenuity and good humour are more important than artistic skill. Focus on how things are rather than how you would like them to be. When each sub-group has shown its efforts to the rest of the group and explained the thinking behind it, try to draw out any common themes and areas where activities can be developed (or stopped) in the future.

Read John 15. 1–26

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- The image of the vine is a vivid portrayal of the difficult abstract idea of oneness and inseparability that was the subject of the first study. Look at the positive ideas that emerge from verses 1–8 (e.g. verses 2b, 3–5, 7–8) and the negative ones (verses 2a, 6). What might they mean in a contemporary context?
- Bearing fruit is all bound up with love. Love enables us to ‘bear fruit that will last’ (v.16). We may need to remind ourselves that the familiar commandment to ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (v.12) is spoken within the context of growth and reaching out, not a holy huddle.
- A vibrant Christian community is likely to be set on a collision course with the secular world (verses 18–19). How can we take seriously the

idea that we don't belong to the world (v.19) while at the same time creating a community that will reach out to the world and offer it an alternative?

- 'Testifying' (verses 26, 27) is a distinctive feature of the Christian community, with the help of the Holy Spirit. What do you understand by 'testifying'?

4. CREATING VIBRANT CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

JOHN 15. 1–26

DISCUSSION STARTER: In what ways is our Christian community (church) ‘vibrant’?

Read John 15. 1–26

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- An African commentator says of this passage that the true vine is ‘dependable’. He gives the example of African traditional religions as having much to offer but without being dependable. Is this a helpful reading in a UK context?
- Think about the image of pruning. Does it simply mean being cut off and discarded? Or can we see it as a means (albeit an uncomfortable one) of reaching the stage where we can bear fruit? The disciples certainly went through a ‘pruning’ experience – Peter’s anguish following his denial of Jesus, Thomas and his feelings of doubt, and so on.
- What do we understand by fruit? Think of some precise examples, e.g. personal holiness, various forms of service, the prayer life of individuals and the church. What did the disciples’ fruit look like in the early life of the Christian community (e.g. in the early chapters of Acts)?
- ‘Testifying’ (verses 26, 27) is a distinctive feature of the Christian community, with the help of the Holy Spirit. What do you understand by ‘testifying’?

LIVING FAITH QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The dead wood referred to in verse 2 is not necessarily people, but also habits and attitudes. What is the dead wood that needs to be removed from your community in order for spiritual growth to take place?
2. What makes your church community distinctively Christian in your local setting? How could you do this better?
3. How do you relate to other Christian communities? Are you working with them or against them?
4. Depending on how you defined ‘testifying’, how can you and your church do this more effectively?

FOR PRAYER

FOR GROUP PRAYER

Put out a selection of material that your church has produced recently – magazines, weekly service sheet, sermon card, prayer cards, pictures of the church or people, and so on. Ask each person to choose one and pray for the people or activities represented, either silently or with another member of the group.

SOME FURTHER TOPICS FOR PRAYER

EITHER IN THE GROUP OR IN THE WEEK AHEAD:

Give thanks and pray for ...

- The work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our community
- The visible presence of the Christian church in our towns and villages.

Pray especially for ...

- Church communities set in difficult urban areas
- Rural church communities and their particular problems
- The courage of all of us to be seen and heard to be distinctive.

5. SHAPING CONFIDENT, COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

JOHN 21.1-22

ACTIVITY

Before beginning the study, bring in a pot of tea or coffee (whatever you usually have at the beginning of the meeting) and some cups. Invite a group member to serve it. Then blindfold him or her. This means that other members of the group will have to work with that person serving to get the coffee/milk/sugar safely into the cup and passed round.

When you have finished coffee, ask each person, including the server, what they have learnt from the experience.

Then divide people into pairs and ask them to think together about times they have been part of a team or group (this could be teams at work, church committees, sports teams, small groups working on local issues or activities, and so on). Ask them to identify their best experience – and their worst.

In the group each person feeds back their partner's experiences, good and bad. Think together about what makes for a good experience. How does that compare with serving coffee together?

Read John 21. 1–22

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- Look at the actions described in these verses: which of them depend on people doing something together (verses 3, 8, 12)?
- Look at the different relationships between Peter and the disciples (verses 3, 11, 21) and between Peter and Jesus (verses 7, 15–17): what elements of leadership can we see here?
- The threefold command to Peter (verses 15–17) is generally taken to balance Peter's threefold denial of Jesus (John 18. 15–27). Note

that the 'other disciple' who Peter asks Jesus about in 21. 21 had been present when Peter denied Jesus (18. 15–16) and at Peter's suggestion he had raised the question of betrayal at the Last Supper (13. 23–24). What might lie behind Peter's question 'what about him'? What does verse 22 have to tell us about difficult relationships in leadership?

- A key purpose of confident leadership is to bring people to faith. Look at how this outcome is portrayed in verses 6 and 11 – an almost absurdly large number: what does this suggest about Christian leaders' relationship with God?

5. SHAPING CONFIDENT, COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

JOHN 21.1-22

Read John 21. 1–22

DISCUSSION STARTER: What have been your best experiences of being part of a team? What made the team work so well?

EXPLORING THE BIBLICAL TEXT TOGETHER

- Jesus's appearance here is not restricted to the well-known disciples: there were 'two others' who are unnamed (v.2). They may well also have witnessed Jesus's conversation with Peter (verses 15–19). What might this suggest about how leadership will work in the future?
- The scene on the shore shows us Jesus as hosting a meal: he has provided the bread and the disciples bring the fish. Think about the symbolism of this – for example the disciples go fishing because of their need to eat, yet Jesus already has the preparations in hand for feeding them himself. He allows them to be part of that preparation as well, although he has also miraculously provided the fish. Again, what can we learn both about shared leadership and our life as a community?
- The threefold command to Peter (verses 15–17) is generally taken to balance Peter's threefold denial of Jesus (John 18. 15–27). Note that the 'other disciple' who Peter asks Jesus about in 21. 21 had been present when Peter denied Jesus (18. 15–16) and at Peter's suggestion he had raised the question of betrayal at the Last Supper (13. 23–24). What might lie behind Peter's question 'what about him'? What does verse 22 have to tell us about difficult relationships in leadership?
- Note that Jesus addresses Peter by his old name, Simon. He is not yet the rock. Think about Jesus's attitude: is he indirectly condemning Peter or simply reminding him (if he needed it) of his weakness? In repeating the question, Jesus is helping Peter to deepen his understanding of what it means to love. How can we see this as encouraging a confident ministry?

LIVING FAITH QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Some people find it very hard to share leadership and responsibility. How can they be encouraged to work collaboratively?
2. Think of how leadership in your own church is currently structured. What works well? What could be done differently?
3. What resources do you think should be made available to your leaders: diocesan training courses, 'secular' management training, discussion groups or something else?
4. How are you encouraging and developing future leaders in your church?
5. Think back over these five sessions. As a result of these studies, what in particular do you intend to take forward in your church?

FOR PRAYER

FOR GROUP PRAYER

Put out a few copies of Rublev's icon (downloadable at www.wellsprings.org.uk/rublevs_icon/rublev.htm). Play some quiet music and ask people to reflect on the 'collaborative team' of the Trinity.

SOME FURTHER TOPICS FOR PRAYER

EITHER IN THE GROUP OR IN THE WEEK AHEAD:

Give thanks and pray for ...

- Church leaders at every level (local, diocesan, national)
- Lay people exercising gifts of leadership within the local church, diocese and national and international church bodies
- Those who devise and deliver leadership training programmes.

Pray especially for ...

- Clergy and lay people who find collaborative leadership difficult
- Leaders experiencing a loss of confidence, whether in their own abilities or in their faith
- Congregations that lack appropriate leadership
- The continuing development of, and enthusiasm for, **Living Faith**.



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