

How to lead a Bible study



The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11–13

“Help! We need someone to lead the Bible study! Could you do that?” Some of us hear this and instantly want to help out. Some of us are struck with terror.

Maybe you are intrigued by the idea of leading Bible study but are afraid you might fail. You think, “I don’t know enough about the Bible. And what if no one else in the group speaks up?” Or maybe you worry that you don’t have the time.

Whether you are a confident, experienced leader or identify with some of these less enthusiastic scenarios, this resource will offer some practical suggestions and will motivate and inspire you to claim—or reclaim—your role in building up the body of Christ through teaching.

You *can* lead Bible study!

Foundations for leading

Know your spiritual gifts

As the apostle Paul reminds us, *each one of us* has been gifted by the Holy Spirit, and these gifts are for one purpose only—to edify the body of Christ. It is interesting that in Hebrew, “service” and “ministry” are the same word. Our call to serve is to do ministry through our gifts, whether in our church, community or home.

To learn more about spiritual gifts, see the resource listing at the end. Also, there are several spiritual gifts inventories, including an online survey at <http://archive.elca.org/evangelizingchurch/assessments/spiritgifts.html>. If you haven't already discerned the nature of the gifts you've been given, consider taking the survey to help you better understand your gifts in relationship to your role as a Bible study leader.

Yes, *you* will be the leader of the lesson, the facilitator of the group and the equipper for ministry! But there are many roles for others, too. Consider it a "gift of gifts" to ask others to use the Spirit within them to do artwork, find images for a display, lead devotions, do online research, bring other versions of the Bible, lead music or whatever else will contribute to your study of Scripture.

Understand your job description

You've agreed to lead a Bible study and you have your materials, but what exactly are you being asked to do?

You are being invited to take an active role in nurturing and supporting the formation of Christian disciples. Take a look at one "job description" found in "Toward a Vision of Christian Education" (available at www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Discipleship/Christian-Education/Vision.aspx). It says, "In the educational process the Spirit of God encounters the people of God of all ages so that they are nurtured in the faith, grow in knowledge, and are inspired and empowered to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, proclaiming the Good News, serving God and others faithfully, and working for peace and justice in God's world." How awesome is that!

Engage in faith practices

Studying Scripture is a practice of faith—one of the seven faith practices named by the ELCA (pray, study, worship, invite, encourage, serve, give). As we read and study the Bible, we are encountering God and claiming God's story of love, forgiveness and salvation as our own.

As teachers and leaders in the congregation, we journey with fellow followers of Christ, mutually equipping and encouraging one another to grow as disciples in a fuller expression of a lifestyle that is Christ's-style. We do that best when we ourselves seek to grow in maturity in faith through regular prayer, worship, service, giving and sharing our faith with others. We participate in God's continuing activity in our lives in the ways we offer hospitality, show forgiveness, seek peace and justice, care for creation, honor Sabbath and even regard death and dying.

Women of the ELCA has a resource on those seven faith practices called "Lessons for Today's Disciples." Find it at www.womenoftheelca.org in the section "Growing in Faith" under "Program Resources for You and Your Women's Group." Use it individually or with a group. Also visit www.elca.org/Growing-In-Faith/Discipleship/Christian-Education/Discipleship.aspx to learn more about the ELCA's seven faith practices.

Foundations for learning

Know what adults need

Learning for adults should:

- affirm and honor life experience as a resource to draw upon.
- acknowledge established values, beliefs and opinions.
- recognize the ability to reflect and think critically.
- encourage them to be responsible for their own learning by actively preparing for and participating in the study.
- relate the learning situation to life situations.
- incorporate a sense of spirituality and other faith practices in the learning process.
- explore a diversity of perspectives and challenge learners to tolerate ambiguities and complexities.
- regard learning as a life-long adventure.
- celebrate relational learning and the collective wisdom of any group.
- be interactive and engage the senses.



Be familiar with our multiple intelligences

We all have at least seven kinds of smart. In 1983 Dr. Howard Gardner of Harvard University published *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. It has transformed teaching in both the public and religious sectors. In brief, his theory states that we are born with at least seven different intelligences, and each of us has a dominant or preferred way of learning.

When leaders fail to engage all the preferences, some in the group will be excluded. Take time to honor each area of intelligence and be intentional in varying the methods you use to lead the group.

Here are the seven intelligences and a few suggestions on how to include them in your leading:

Verbal/Linguistic: sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages. Include: writing, poetry, discussion, storytelling.

Visual/Spatial: potential to recognize and use the patterns of wide space and more confined areas. Include: guided imagery, color, sculpture, maps.

Logical/Mathematical: capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations and investigate issues scientifically. Include: symbols, outlines, charts.

Bodily/Kinesthetic: physical coordination and using one's whole body or parts of the body to solve problems and manipulate objects. Include: drama, mime, role play, body language.

Musical: skill in the performance, composition and appreciation of musical patterns, pitches and tones. Include: songs and other music (maybe on a CD or iPod).

Interpersonal: understands the intentions, motivations and desires of other people. Include: group projects, giving feedback, shared learning.

Intrapersonal: understands oneself, appreciates one's feelings, fears and motivations. Include: silent reflection, guided imagery, journaling.

Getting started

In most cases, your leader guide and the participant materials will be your primary resources. You might also bring other Bible translations, maps or other resources you can get from your pastor or church library. Consider the following tips to enhance any Bible study session or presentation.



Begin with prayer and be attentive to the Holy Spirit's activity as you prepare for the journey ahead. Your very first task as a leader is to get a wide-angle view of the task.

Read the leader guide and participant materials.

- How is each laid out?
- How many sessions or questions are there?
- What are the suggested components or activities in each session?
- What is missing? (for example, the direction to "Close with Prayer"?)
- Are suggested supplies or materials listed up front (for example: newsprint, poster board, video clips, music, etc.)?
- Compare the leader guide to the participant materials. What material is only in the guide? Is the participant material embedded in the leader guide?
- Will you need to do some research to have a comfortable grasp of the lesson?

Then you might create a visual image to help you see the scope and sequence of the material. Using the table of contents or the first few paragraphs of each chapter in your leader guide, draw a roadmap or some other illustration that shows how the theme and focus of each section are connected. Not only does this illustrate how all the sections are interconnected or build upon each other, it could give you a ready-made teaching tool to open and close each session.

If you haven't already had a lengthy conversation with the person or group who recruited you, it is crucial to be clear on a few things, such as:

- the length of your commitment (one session? the whole study?)
- the dates and times of each session, especially if the regular schedule might be changed for holidays or other church activities
- an estimate of the number of participants
- the room or space where the Bible study will be held (be sure to take a look at the space before you begin planning your lessons)
- audio/visual equipment that is available and how to get it. Determine who is responsible for setting it up.
- Is there flexibility in the seating arrangement? Are you able to request tables rather than just chairs? Will the room accommodate additional tables for displays, sacred space or small groups?
- If other supplies beyond pencils, pads and Bibles are required, how are they obtained?
- "How is this ministry acknowledged and blessed?" The entire congregation should recognize the importance of lifelong learning and celebrate its contribution to the fullness of faith formation in your community.

If your church has a library or a place where Christian education supplies are kept, become familiar with what resources are available. Look for biblical commentaries, maps, a concordance and other resources related to your topic.

Preparing for the first session

Paint yourself a mental picture of the learning space and the people in it. What might be some of the reasons people will gather for the study? In most cases, what motivates adults is learning something new, engaging in a process of discovery, a desire to act upon new knowledge or skills, and growing in relationship with others. In a Christian context, we add the dimension of vocation: "serving God and one's neighbor."

A quick and easy way to understand the process of faith formation is summarized in six words:

- invite and call
- equip and grow
- send and serve

Do you see your role in this process? As you move ahead in planning, strive for a balanced learning experience that pays attention to:

Environment: The environment should welcome, stimulate, support, honor differences and seek to do no harm.

Content: The content should provide information, facts and new insights, build skills and invite critical thinking.

Process: The process should use dynamic methods, interactive and multi-sensory engagement, repetition and review.

Discovery: The individuals and the group should be motivated to wrestle with concepts and information, to dig deeper and to assume responsibility for shared learning; the discovery process should offer choices and give permission to explore.

Relationships: The relationships that develop should invite storytelling, caregiving, emotional connections, praying, laughing and worshiping together.

Take-Away: At the end of the session, participants should be able to answer these questions: So what? How does this apply to my life and the people around me? What is God calling me to do?



Finally, claim the session as your own. Most Bible studies offer far more content and activities than can be covered in any given time period. These options invite you to pick and choose what you feel most comfortable with. Draw upon your own learning experiences to enhance how you engage others.

At the same time, be open and prepared to take advantage of those “teachable moments,” those situations that offer opportunities to challenge participants to think in a new way, wrestle with difficult discussions or advocate and act as the hands and heart of Christ in the world.

Preparing with “seven creative days”

A college professor and mentor once suggested preparing a Sunday school lesson using “seven creative days.”

On Sunday, spend 10 minutes skimming next’s week lesson, looking for a central theme or hook. Then throughout the week, devote a little time each day to the lesson.

On Monday, do a little theological digging in your Bible dictionary, commentaries and maps

On Tuesday, look at newspapers, magazines, TV, the Internet and movies. Make notes of anything related to your theme.

On Wednesday, consider your own personal experiences with the theme in mind.

On Thursday, now that you’ve gathered current, daily life input, consult your leader guide to see what the writer suggests.

On Friday, map out the lesson.

On Saturday, pray and play.

On Sunday, invite the Holy Spirit to stir hearts and minds.

This method is a little idealistic given today’s busy lifestyles, but by looking ahead to your goal and intentionally watching for God’s presence in the ordinary, you will have plenty of discussion ideas.



The Internet is an incredible source of information, resources, stories, maps and illustrations. Take time explore what is on the ELCA, Women of the ELCA, and Book of Faith Web sites. Also visit sites hosted by ELCA seminaries, synods and outdoor ministries, the National Council of Churches and our full communion partners.

Keep in mind that beyond those suggested sites, you may uncover material that is not in line with our Lutheran understanding of Scripture and practice or that is not accurate. When in doubt, consult your pastor or other church staff.

More tools and tips

Shape the learning experience to reflect your own personality and style and the needs and preferences of your group.

Have fun; allow playfulness to enter wherever possible.

Teach from the heart with joy.

Be careful to listen.

Encourage others to share personal stories, as appropriate.

Remember that learning begins the moment people enter the room. What can you do to create an environment where people immediately think, “Hey, something interesting is going to happen here tonight”? Stimulate discussion and reflection: post quotes or questions on the door or chalkboard; use simple props or decorations; wear a hat or costume related to the theme; have a slide show running; bring in a photograph and ask early arrivers to suggest a caption; on your white/black board or newsprint, create a chart with three columns—Outrageous, Inspiring, Challenging—and then let participants write in examples they found this week in the news, on TV or on Facebook.

Include a time for prayer or brief worship in the session. Create a sacred space marked by ritual and celebration of God’s presence in the midst of the lives and the learning of those present.

Don’t be afraid to express your vulnerabilities. You are not expected to have all the answers or to achieve a gold medal in leading or teaching. In most cases, your honesty and transparency models a learning environment that is safe, welcoming and forgiving.

Adults often are starving for wonder and imagination. We don’t always need precise, correct answers. Bible study is the most perfect venue for “What if?” questions, “I wonder” daydreams, or “Imagine what” opportunities.

Be aware of situations where one person dominates the conversation. Intentionally invite others to respond. Or honor the voice of each person by having participants turn to a neighbor (or in groups of three) for discussion; give a specific amount of time and encourage participants to make sure each person in the group is given opportunity to speak.

All learning is undergirded by the notion of “repeat, review, reclaim.” Always begin your session with a simple reference to the key learning of the last session. If you have time, do a very brief review of the overall study to this point. Use the roadmap or constellation visual image referenced in the “Getting started” section. Conclude the lesson with another quick review. Perhaps ask a question such as, “What one thought will you be wrestling with in the days and weeks to come?” or “What will you do this week as a result of what we’ve explored?”

Additional resources

Seven Ways of Teaching the Bible to Adults, by Barbara Bruce (Abingdon Press, 2000)

Book of Faith www.bookoffaith.org or www.augsburgfortress.org

Don’t Know Much About the Bible: Everything You Need to Know About the Good Book but Never Learned, by Kenneth C. Davis (HarperCollins, 1999)

Equipping the Saints: Teacher Training in the Church, by Sara Juengst (Westminster John Knox, 1998)

Rediscovering Our Spiritual Gifts: Building Up the Body of Christ through the Gifts of the Spirit, by Charles Bryant (Upper Room Books, 1991)

How to Teach God’s Story, by Joseph Glass (Parish Life Press, 1981; no longer in print but will be on many church library or Christian education shelves)

Teaching the Bible in the Church, by John M. Bracke and Karen Tye (Chalice Press, 2003)

Triangular Teaching, by Barbara Bruce (Abingdon Press, 2007)

Lutheran Study Bible, published by Augsburg Fortress (2009)

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