



Envisioning the Church:

How do I see others?

Bible studies and activities to help us
think about our attitudes and prejudices



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INTRODUCTION

One of the questions we often ask church members embarking on the 'Stories on the Street' journey is 'What do you think community members feel about Church and Christians? The answers generally include words such as 'superior, judgmental, hypocritical, boring, out-dated, irrelevant.

We received similar answers a few years ago when we asked a group of homeless young people at a hostel that a small team of volunteers from the church had been visiting on a weekly basis for several years. We asked them what they used to think about church and Christians before these weekly visits. They used some of the words mentioned above. However, due to the consistency and relationships built by the volunteer team, the young people also said that their opinion of church and Christians had completely changed over the years. The negative perception of the church had disappeared- they looked forward to the visits and the church became the first port of call for some of these young people when they hit a crisis.

When asked about the cause of this change of perception, they talked of feeling accepted and listened to, they appreciated the desire to help them help themselves, without being pushy, and the joy found in each other's company and in the simple things in life.

So having spent time reflecting on our identity as children of God, this section is about the attitudes and character we show as we step out to love our communities and how these can change negative perceptions and bring a new sense of community.

Our first Bible study in this section is the passage about Jesus washing the disciples' feet at the last supper. This is such a good bridge from the Identity Bible studies as the Bible passage, taken from John's gospel, chapter 13 contains these words:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

Jesus' act of humility came from his confidence in his own identity and his relationship with his Father and in so doing he invites his disciples and us to do the same.

So this first Bible study helps us reflect on Jesus' heart of humility as we build relationships with those in our community. We have also selected two other Bible studies that explore other attitudes that might be a barrier to fruitful relationships with our communities.

Peter and Cornelius challenges us with regard to our fixed views and prejudices and encourages us to be more open minded.

The woman caught in adultery is a story about judgment and hypocrisy, and challenges us to dispel this image that some have of the church and model a different way of being.

HEART OF HUMILITY

Introductory activity: Quotes on humility and community engagement

On the following pages are several quotes on the themes of humility and community engagement. Print them off and cut them out and then lay them on a table or tables and ask your group to walk around them and choose one that they like or one that speaks to them in some way. You could play some music at the same time. When everyone has chosen one, ask each person to share in turn why they chose their particular quote.



And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Matthew 22:37-40

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:

1 Peter 4:8-11

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble.

1 Peter 3:8

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 2:46-47

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

Acts 4:32

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Philippians 2:3-16

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human."

Henri Nouwen

"Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we use our wounds in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."

Henri Nouwen

"When we honestly ask ourselves which people in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares."

Henri Nouwen

"This is what life is about. It is being sent on a trip by a loving God, who is waiting at home for our return and is eager to watch the slides we took and hear about the friends we made. When we travel with the eyes and ears of the God who sent us, we will see wonderful sights, hear wonderful sounds, meet wonderful people ... and be happy to return home."

Henri Nouwen

"Compassion- which means, literally, "to suffer with"- is the way to the truth that we are most ourselves, not when we differ from others, but when we are the same. Indeed the main spiritual question is not, "What difference do you make?" but "What do you have in common?" It is not "excelling" but "serving" that makes us most human. It is not proving ourselves to be better than others but confessing to be just like others that is the way to healing and reconciliation."

Henri Nouwen

"Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines."

Henri Nouwen

"We are all healers who can reach out and offer health, and we are all patients in constant need of help."

Henri Nouwen

"Compassion can never coexist with judgement because judgement creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other."

Henri Nouwen

"We can begin by doing small things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbours. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously."

Grace Lee Boggs

"Every moment and every action is potentially transforming. We will never know what God uses for change until he does it. Everything we do carries a message. The only question is what that message is. Every action can heal or harm. In this sense, every action is a silent offering to God, a potentially transforming moment."

Bryant L Myers

"True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

Rick Warren

"As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on thing and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you."

C.S. Lewis

"No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility."

Orson Whitney

Heart of humility

Bible passage

John 13: 1-17

Purpose

To reflect on Jesus' sense of identity and his example of humility as we think about stepping out into our communities



Method

Read the passage John 13: 1-17

Imagine you are one of the disciples at the last supper. Imagine Jesus is kneeling before you, about to wash your feet. How do you feel? Do you speak to him? What do you say? Does he answer? What does he say to you?

Questions

1. Can you think of a modern day example of Jesus washing the disciples' feet? Perhaps an act of humble service by someone you know or someone you've heard about? What effect did this have?
2. How does humility help to build trust and relationships?
3. How can we show Jesus' love to others practically? Is there someone in our church or community whose feet we need to wash in a spirit of humility?

Worship activity

"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

Have a ceremony of washing each other's feet. If possible, play some appropriate music at the same time.



Peter and Cornelius

Bible passage

Acts 10: 1-48

Purpose

To explore the benefits of letting go of our prejudices and fixed views as we engage with our communities

Method

Read the passage

Ask two people to perform or read the 'back to back' sketch of Peter and Cornelius on the following pages and then choose from the following questions.



Questions

- What were the fundamental differences between Peter and Cornelius that made this an unusual meeting?
- What was the impact of Peter changing his mindset?
- Do we hold views that we find difficult to be challenged on?
- What are the barriers to us seeing another person's perspective?
- In what ways has God challenged you about your views on an issue or a person?
- When we think about working with our communities, what is the effect of seeing things from other people's perspectives?
- How do we get the balance right when it comes to standing up for what we believe and seeing other people's views?

Sketch: Peter and Cornelius

The two readers/performers share a stage but do not interact with each other

Cornelius

I am proud to be a Roman.

Peter

I am proud to be a Jew.

Cornelius

I have grown through the ranks and now have a position of authority - and the responsibility that comes with it.

Peter

I was called by my Lord to be his friend and his follower - and with that comes responsibility.

Cornelius

Unlike many of my people, ever since I was young I have been sure there is a higher power, a God who is essentially good and wants the best for all people. In my position I feel it is my duty to care for those less fortunate than myself. So every day I pray to my God and every day I try to reach out to the poor.

Peter

Since I was young I have known the redeemer was coming. I would never have dreamed he would walk this earth with me. Now I need to share this news, to make known to all the Jews that they are saved by his blood – even those who cried out for his crucifixion. So I pray to my Lord and ask for his strength to spread the good news to his people.

Cornelius

I was praying when it happened

Peter

I was praying when it happened

Cornelius

It was about 3 in the afternoon. I was at home – on my own

Peter

It was about midday. I was in Joppa – on the roof of Simon's house

Cornelius

I had a vision –an angel, calling my name

Peter

I had a vision - a large sheet descended from heaven. It was full of all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds.

Cornelius

What is it Lord? I said

Peter

I heard a voice

Cornelius

Your prayers and gifts to the poor are an offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner in a house by the sea.

Peter

'Get up Peter' the voice said – 'kill and eat'

Surely not, Lord, I have never eaten anything impure or unclean

'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean,' the voice said.

Three times this happened.

Then the vision was gone

Cornelius

Then the angel was gone

I called one of my soldiers and two of my servants and sent them to Joppa to the house by the sea.

Peter

I stared out to sea wondering what all this could mean.

Cornelius

I looked out at the city, wondering what was the meaning of it all.

Peter

I heard the spirit say, "Simon, three men are looking for you. Go with them for I have sent them to you."

Cornelius

I prepared for their return – I gathered my family and friends together

Peter

Three men were at the gate. "We have come from Cornelius the centurion," they said, "a righteous man, respected by the Jews. He is inviting you to his house to hear what you have to say."

Cornelius

Two nights past - I could hardly sleep with anticipation. I kept seeing the angel's face and hearing his words.

Peter

As we set off with some of the believers from Joppa I kept seeing the vision and hearing those words

Cornelius

"Your prayers and gifts to the poor are an offering before God."

Peter

"Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Cornelius

As Peter entered the house, I fell to my knees.

Peter

"Stand up!" I said, for I am just a man as you are.

Cornelius

The room was full of people, the Jews from Joppa sat with my family and my friends.

Peter

"Why did you send for me, Cornelius?" I said

Cornelius

I told Peter of the angel's visit.

Peter

I said to Cornelius, "Our law says Jews should not visit or associate with Gentiles, but God has shown me a different way to be. He does not show favouritism but accepts anyone from any nation who fears him and does what is right."

Cornelius

And then he spoke of Jesus – Jesus of Nazareth, the man who had healed so many – who had been crucified – and then on the third day..

Peter

God raised him from the dead, and was seen, not by all but by some - by me. We ate and drank with him and then he left us – commanding us to preach to the people, to testify ..

Cornelius

That Jesus Christ is God's son – and everyone who believes in him will be forgiven through his name.

Peter

The Holy Spirit came on all who were there, Jews and Gentiles, all speaking in tongues and praising God.

Cornelius

All were baptised, as one people, filled with the Spirit of God – transformed!

Peter

Transformed – maybe I more than anyone else that day. This man who called me, walked with me, forgave me, died for me; Jesus, my Jesus - he came not just for me, not just for the Jews, but for the whole world!

The woman caught in adultery

Bible passage

John 8: 1-11

Purpose

To be challenged as individuals and as a church about judgmental and hypocritical attitudes.

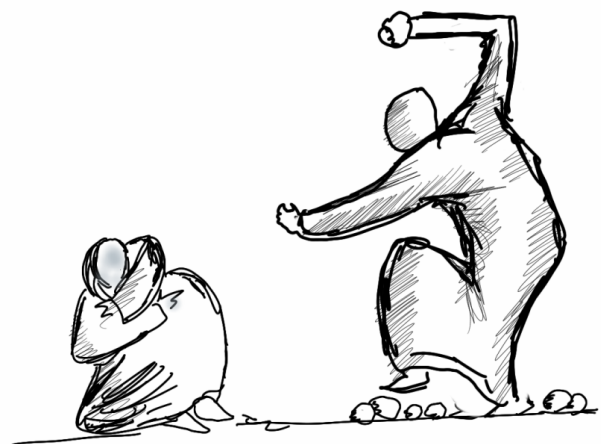
Method

Read the passage.

Ask someone to read or perform the monologue of the woman caught in adultery on the following pages. Ask your group for any insights or reflections following the monologue, and then ask the following questions

Questions

- What can we learn from Jesus' response to this situation?
- How did Jesus change the focus during this episode? What can we learn from this?
- Do we consider some sins worse than others?
- In what ways are we as a church guilty of hypocrisy?
- How can we avoid being hypocritical?
- In what ways can we challenge hypocrisy?



Monologue: Woman caught in adultery

I don't generally go for married men, but Simon was different. He had status; he was in with the Pharisees and teachers of the law and when he showed an interest in me, it was exciting. At first, it was just a glance, a look, But then we became bolder; a brief encounter round a corner or in an alley. Exciting, dangerous – I was hooked. This important man had singled me out! It left me wanting more and more time with him and then the opportunity came. The wife was away – a whole night together.

I knew it was wrong but I never dreamed we would be caught. But dawn came and with it came an interruption of the most violent kind. A group of men – outside the house and then somehow inside the house. I was terrified! I felt for my clothes – threw something over my head – it hardly covered my shame. Then there they were surrounding us. Simon was frantic!

"It's ok – relax," they said to him, "we just want her." And then, like a knife wound, I heard Simon say,

"Ok, – just take her! Don't mention my name!"

Then they dragged me away.

I never hated myself more than at that moment. I was alone, rejected. I was going to die, in the pursuit of someone who didn't care for me at all.

I was dragged to the temple courts, a very public humiliation. My captors charged towards a crowd of people and threw me on the ground. Then one of them shouted,

"Hey, teacher! This woman was caught in adultery! The law of Moses says she is to be stoned. What do you say?"

I looked at the scene in front of me. In the centre of the crowd stood a man. I was beginning to realise what was going on. This must be Jesus, the teacher who healed people. Simon had spoken of him. He didn't like him. He was attracting a lot of attention and the Pharisees hated him – they wanted to get rid of him. He was too popular, and he had no respect for them or their position. I could feel that hate now as I lay half naked, trembling in the dust. I was being used again – to catch this man out. These men were prepared to kill me to get to him.

I had never given Jesus much thought when Simon spoke of him – I was too caught up with the excitement of the affair. Now it seemed my life was in this man's hands. It was a hopeless situation – this man was a good man – he changed the lives of those who were suffering through no fault of their own. I was here in front of him because of my own wickedness. He would have no time for someone like me. I looked up slowly, dreading to see his face looking back at me with what could only be contempt.

But he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at them, my captors. The men around me were picking up rocks in anticipation. Jesus watched them for a while, but then said nothing. He just turned and crouched down and started writing with his finger in the dust.

The men around me were infuriated now, and just shouted louder,

"The law says she should be stoned! What do you say?"

'What would he say?' I thought. I was numb with fear.

Eventually he straightened up and turned calmly and said,

"If any one of you is without sin, let him cast the first stone." Then he turned his back on them again and continued writing in the dust.

Silence. Uncomfortable silence. I closed my eyes and waited for the impact of that first stone. But nothing came. There was muttering – I couldn't make out the words. I was starting to sweat now and my heart was racing. I said a prayer – to whom I don't know. Still nothing. Eventually, I raised my head to face my accusers. Some of the men looked murderous – some kicked the ground in frustration. Rocks were passed from hand to hand but none were thrown at me. I bowed my head again in exhaustion and as I did so I heard the thud of stones hitting the dust. One by one these angry men turned and left the scene, until there was just me and the healer man, still writing in the dust.

It was then the tears began to fall – tears of shame and relief. My bruised bloodied body ached with the shock of being so close to death. This man had saved me- but I had no words to say. I felt numb, embarrassed, exhausted.

Once again Jesus straightened up and turned. This time he did look at me, he really looked at me. And then he spoke.

"Where are they now? Has no one condemned you?"

"No-one, sir."

"Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

I don't know how long I spent looking into his face – it seemed an eternity but his eyes never left mine. I was expecting contempt but there was none. He did not condemn me. He had saved my life, and left me with a clear message for how I was to live from that day on. Why should he care if I sinned again? What was it to him? But I could see and feel that he did care. As I walked away I could feel that something inside me was changing- a realisation that the life I was living was hurting me, and others, whether I got caught or not. And that mattered to him – this stranger who I have only seen once, and may never see again.

Principles for working with our community

Having explored and examined our identity in Christ and our attitudes through studying scripture, ask your group to identify some principles that have come from the time spent in creative Bible study. Below are a list of quotes from *'Building Kingdom Communities'* written by Livability and the Church Urban Fund. You may want to refer to these after people have shared their thoughts.

- Every person is made in the image of God and the world, therefore, is not completely lost, waiting for us to bring it salvation. Rather, God is at work in the world ahead of us, and he works through the most unlikely people.
- Human beings, whether Christian or not, are made in God's image and, therefore, have the potential to display elements of his character. This being the case, every person, of any faith or none, has something to teach us about God, whether they are conscious of it or not, and has potential for great good in the world.
- We all have something to give and we all need each other's help.
- Working with and not for gives ownership and means everyone has a voice. It removes the us and them barriers and brings in more insights, perspectives and creativity.
- By sharing our gifts with one another on an equal basis, we discover that relationships, not programmes, bring healing. The strength of relationships enables needs to be met and resources to be shared. Therefore, programmes may prove helpful, but only where they serve the overarching aim of building and sustaining healthy relationships.
- The church's presence in the community, working for the good of all will change the perception of the church from being thought of as remote, out of touch, boring, and irrelevant to being a dynamic catalyst for good, in touch with the real world, to be trusted and celebrated.

