

A 16-session series of studies to make disciples  
in small groups and congregations.



# Begin anew

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## Christian Discipleship Seminars

- Believe in God
- Belong in Community
- Become Mature
- Behave like Christ



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<http://mennoniteusa.org/resource/begin-anew/>  
<http://www.commonword.ca/go/797>

# Daily Meditations

# Introduction

Experience indicates that people need multiple encounters with a theme if it is to become a part of who they are. *Begin Anew* consists of four encounters with sixteen themes. Rather than having one agenda for an adult study class, another for your small group, and still another for your personal devotions, the course is designed to help you focus on one theme per week.

The materials in the course that will help you to have these encounters include:

- *Begin Anew*, a sixteen-session, ninety-six-page participant’s manual.
- *Begin Anew Leader’s Guide*, loaded with suggestions for each session.
- *Sixteen videos* that show the themes in practice.
- *Begin Anew Meditations*, which help participants apply the themes.

The first encounter occurs by reading the session to be discussed. The meditation marked “Saturday” will ask you to prepare for your study on Sunday (or at another time during the week) by reading through the session found in your *Begin Anew* participant’s manual.

The second encounter occurs via a video. At the beginning of your group session, you will be able to see how an individual or congregation has practiced the theme. The ten-minute video will focus on the “why” of the theme to be studied and will invite you to share what struck you in the video. It is designed to launch you into a stimulating discussion of the theme.

The third encounter occurs through the study and discussion itself. As a group, you will discuss several questions in the participant’s manual that will help you to grasp the “what” and “how” of the theme being studied. The *Begin Anew Leader’s Guide* will help you engage in vigorous, purposeful interaction related to the theme.

The fourth encounter occurs through the meditations in this guide, which will help you take a second look at each part of the session. These meditations will also help you to follow up and follow through on the thoughts and challenges that emerged during your discussion of the theme. (Some pastors and congregations may plan for a sermon to introduce the theme, which would constitute a fifth encounter.)

May your faith and life be renewed as you take a new look at what it means to believe, to belong, to become, and to behave like Jesus.

—Palmer Becker

## Unit 1 / Session 1

# Begin Anew to Believe in God

*Be still in the presence of the LORD, and wait patiently for Him to act.*

Psalm 37:7 NLT

**READ:** To prepare for the study of unit 1, review “Believing in God” on pages 9–13 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** Welcome to a new beginning in your devotional life! We wish you a joyful time of reflecting on the great themes and aspects of the Christian faith.

The purpose of a devotional is to help you increase your devotion or commitment to a subject or person being explored. Hopefully, in reading these meditations, you will become more devoted to God, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit, and to the grace of God.

In each of the meditations marked “Saturday,” you will be invited to prepare for the first session to be explored on Sunday, or during the week, by reading it. Note that there are no meditations marked “Sunday.” It is anticipated that reading the Scriptures and participating in the session will be your meditation for that day.

From Monday through Friday, you will be encouraged to go deeper and apply the main points of the session each day by reading the material related to one question in the *Begin Anew* manual. You will follow this by reading the meditation related to that question.

**RESPOND:** After receiving a new insight or challenge, it will be time to respond. Read the prayer that is given and then expand it so it expresses your current thoughts and feelings to God.

# Believing in God

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.”*

John 14:1 NIV

**READ:** “Believing in God” on page 9.

**REFLECT:** The students groaned as the teacher made the assignment: “Write your entire theology—your beliefs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, sin, suffering, salvation, and faithful living—in a ten-page paper.”

“Impossible!” we complained. “How can we possibly put it all down in just ten pages?”

The teacher was unsympathetic. “You should be able to state the key points of your theology in one page, or in your opening paragraph,” she responded. “In fact, your title alone should capture your key beliefs.”

As is often the case, what appeared to be an impossible task developed into one of the most useful things I have ever done. In my case, when I boiled it all down, I arrived at just three words: “God is love.”

What word or phrases do you use to describe your central beliefs about God? In the spaces of today, allow your mind to ponder that question. Do not judge your answers or lack of them. Live with the question, and then absorb what happens.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help me to be still and know that you are God.*

—Melissa Miller

# Is Your Concept of God too Small?

*“You are great, O LORD God. For there is none like you.”*

2 Samuel 7:22 NKJV

**READ:** “Is your concept of God too small?” on pages 9–10.

**REFLECT:** Draw a picture of God. You don’t have to be an accomplished artist to do this. In fact, if possible, invite a child or two to join you in the exercise. Children are not as encumbered in visually expressing their thoughts as grown-ups tend to be. What do you think God looks like? Is it the same as someone else’s vision, or are there differences?

What beliefs influence your picture of God? There are many biblical images for God—father, shepherd, hen, rock, judge, savior, creator—to name just a few. Are any of them present in your picture?

What influences your beliefs about God? Moses asked for a fresh encounter with God and received this message in response: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Exodus 34:6 ESV).

Take some time to ponder the sources of your beliefs about God. Were they acquired from childhood imaginations? From family or church teachings? To what extent are these beliefs trusted foundational stones upon which you can build? To what extent are they distortions of the God of the Bible and the God we see in Jesus?

**RESPOND:** *God, help me to see and know you as you truly are.*

—Melissa Miller

# How Can We Know that God Exists?

*“Be still, and know that I am God.”*

Psalm 46:10 NIV

**READ:** “How can you know that God exists?” on pages 10–11.

**REFLECT:** Today’s lesson described six ways you can know God and learn the truth about him. Some people encounter God most clearly through nature, moral laws, or inner experiences. Others are moved more by supernatural experiences, divine communication, and the life and ministry of Jesus. Using these means, God draws each of us into loving connection with himself.

God knows we are not all alike! So he works with our unique personalities and experiences to shape us into Jesus-followers. This is why, if you discuss these six ways with others, you will likely note differences. For example, I frequently encounter God in nature as I hike through a forest or dabble alongside an ocean. The God that I see in Jesus, whom I meet through Bible study and prayerful conversation with the living Lord, also wows me.

Reflect on how God is revealed to you. What is the strongest way you are drawn to hear and see him? What is the least likely way in which you meet God? There are no right answers—just a developing awareness of how God draws each person to himself.

Today, rest in the memories of your strongest one or two ways of meeting God. Allow those memories to deepen your belief in God.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help me to be still and know your love for me.*

—Melissa Miller

# What Does the Bible Tell Us about God?

*“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

John 4:24 NKJV

**READ:** “What does the Bible tell us about God?” on pages 11–12.

**REFLECT:** The Bible can be a great source of inspiration and comfort, but it also can be confusing and puzzling at times. In spite of the challenges, we can trust that God created the Scriptures for his own purposes. The Bible is one significant way that he reveals himself to us. He offered this gift using human bodies (their thoughts, histories, hands, and interpretive skills) to teach us about him and his ways.

Today’s lesson summarizes eight key characteristics of God that we find in Scripture. God is one . . . relational . . . creative . . . spirit . . . love . . . just . . . personal . . . timeless. Do you have a favorite Bible verse that illustrates one or more of these God-qualities? I do. Second Timothy 1:7 says, “God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (ESV). Note the contrast between fear and God’s power, love and self-control. When I am feeling fearful or anxious, this verse helps me turn toward God and claim his strength.

Do you have a favorite Bible verse to meditate upon? Perhaps you are drawn to one of the verses from the lesson that describes God’s nature. Let that verse or a word or phrase from it fill your heart and mind today.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, reveal your character to me as I am still in your presence.*

—Melissa Miller

# What Kind of Parent Is Your God?

*“Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored.”*

Matthew 6:9 NIRV

**READ:** “What kind of parent is your God?” on page 13.

**REFLECT:** My father was a strong, vigorous man of power and faith. He was also a pastor. He shaped my life in many ways, and he shaped my understanding of God. Our parents are our first examples of “big leaders” in our lives. They can’t help but influence how we see God.

Fortunately, my father was a man of integrity who continually sought to grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus. But he was also human, and he had the same kind of flaws and insecurities that other humans have. As a child, I blurred my dad and God together in my understanding. All was fine when I was getting along with Dad, but when he was mad at me, I couldn’t help but think God was mad at me right along with my father.

It took a while for me to separate my relationship with my father from my relationship with God. Over time, I came to understand that my father and I were both well loved, treasured children of God, and that God held both of us in the same caring embrace. That was true when all was peaceful between me and my dad, when we were in conflict, and when God called my father home suddenly through a massive heart attack.

How has your picture of God been shaped by your father or mother? How has it been shaped by Jesus, who prayed, “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9 NIRV)? Give thanks today for what is good, and seek God’s healing where there are wounds.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help me see you clearly today as I am still in your presence.*

—Melissa Miller



## Unit 1 / Session 2

# Believing in Jesus

*“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”*

Acts 16:31 NIV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 2, “Believing in Jesus,” on pages 14–2 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** There are six key questions that you will cover in this session:

- Who is Jesus?
- What does Jesus reveal about God?
- What did Jesus come to do?
- What keeps you from a relationship with God?
- What brings you closer to God?
- From what does Jesus save you?

Christianity is not merely a philosophy or set of rules. Christianity is built around Jesus Christ, a divine-human person. Jesus is the center of our faith! Christians are those whose personal relationship with God through Jesus is central to their lives and who are committed to following him in their daily lives.

**RESPOND:** *God, I want to have a personal relationship with you through Jesus Christ.*

# Who Is Jesus to Me?

*“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”*

Matthew 3:17 NKJV

**READ:** “Who is Jesus?” on pages 14–15.

**REFLECT:** Years ago, one of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, published a book that became central to my understanding of Jesus and why he matters. The book was called *Life of the Beloved*, and it so moved me that I bought a stack of copies and gave them away.

The book was based on Matthew 3:16–17. After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, a voice from heaven said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (NKJV). Nouwen suggested the word “beloved,” as offered by God to Jesus, was hugely significant. As the Beloved, Jesus was empowered and encouraged to carry on his holy ministry among the people of God.

A second and equally profound observation that Nouwen made was that from that point on, Jesus went forth offering that same blessing to everyone he encountered. Nouwen observed, “When I find myself in a place of spiritual stillness—when I overcome my base need to do, to produce, to challenge, to accumulate—then I too can hear the voice and sense the presence of Jesus, anointing me with that same blessing. ‘You are my beloved.’”

Jesus holds out that blessing to each of us. Can we create the quiet space to hear it?

**RESPOND:** *Holy God, embrace me with your presence so that I too can know what it is to be beloved.*

—Ed Olfert

# What Does Jesus Tell Me About God?

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

Luke 10:27 NIV

**READ:** “What does Jesus reveal about God?” on pages 15–16.

**REFLECT:** I am a grandfather. As such, I have become aware of conflicting messages about humility. As a child, the lessons of humility were such that I was taught to never think I was “somebody.” It was biblical and good to measure myself as lower than all others. Meanwhile, I look to my grandchildren and delight in their grand pronouncements, “You are awesome!” It seems a healthy and delightful claim on their place in the world.

The Great Commandment in Matthew 22:34–40 helps me in my thinking. Jesus, referring to the holy reign of God, suggests that within this new way of living we are to love God with all of our being. But the second, overlapping challenge is to love our neighbors “as ourselves.” In our quest to approach the goodness and the perfection of God, self-love is crucial. We love each other as equals, not as inferior beings who deify superior ones.

God’s powerful work of transformation hides no dark and exclusive corners. No one is “less than.” We are all invited, blessed, and loved.

**RESPOND:** *Thank you, Jesus, for pointing us toward this wonderfully inclusive new kingdom!*

—Ed Olfert

# What Did Jesus Come to Do?

*"I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."*

Matthew 16:18 NKJV

**READ:** "What did Jesus come to do?" on pages 16–17.

**REFLECT:** There's a somewhat obtuse side to me (it's a genetic thing, I think) that stirs a little uncomfortably at this question, "What did Jesus come to do?" It's a similar response to the one I had when the "WWJD" ("What Would Jesus Do?") fad swept us up some years ago.

I would suggest a change in the tense: "What *does* Jesus come to do?" As the One who defeated death, Jesus continues to work in the present as powerfully as he worked in the past. He says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 NASB).

Jesus' Beatitude in Matthew 5:3 leads us to the heart of his message. Jesus is all about offering hope to the poor in spirit, and there are no limits to the *causes* of being poor in spirit. That is as true in these days as they were in biblical days. Daily we feel wounded, exhausted, cast aside, measured as wanting, grieving, and alone.

Jesus responds by saying, "Blessed are you. As the world turns against you, as your own feelings are judging you harshly, know that you are blessed in my kingdom." Can you imagine how radical that message was 2,000 years ago? Can you sense how radical that message is today? "Blessed are you" remains as true as it ever was, offering hope to the dispossessed.

**RESPOND:** *Holy God, help me to find my blessedness when I am weak and broken.*

—Ed Olfert

# What Keeps Me from God?

*Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*

Romans 3:23 NLT

**READ:** "What keeps you from a relationship with God?" on page 18.

**REFLECT:** I spend significant volunteer hours supporting offenders, both within penal institutions and in the community. It is life-giving work for everyone involved. And the guys teach me how to be humble.

Some time ago, one of the fellows challenged something I had done. Although this man (whom I'll call "Larry") had committed offenses that were judged most harshly, and though he had a limited number of friends who sat with him and loved him, he nevertheless taught me a holy lesson. He revealed something I had done that was hindering our relationship.

As we ate a lunch that Larry had provided and drank coffee that he had made, he gently but honestly explained my actions that had troubled him. I was astounded, both at his courage and at his skill, in creating this setting where holy conversation could happen.

I acknowledge that I make mistakes. Even more, I struggle to put myself into a place where I can hear the challenge of accountability that I so often need. Hearing words of admonishment is hard, but they can break down distances between me and another person and even between God and me. Distance is something that I create.

Thank you, Larry, for teaching me that holy lesson.

**RESPOND:** *Holy God, help me to put down my defenses as you offer the hard lessons of humility so that I can be drawn close to you.*

—Ed Olfert

# What Brings Me Closer to God?

*Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*

James 4:8 NKJV

**READ:** “What brings you closer to God?” and “From what does God save you?” on pages 19–20.

**REFLECT:** Once each year, my mother invited our pastor to join our family for Sunday dinner. It helped us get to know him more personally. One year when I was about twelve, he came outside to play with us. After a while, he asked me a very personal question: “Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?” In a somewhat bewildered voice, I said, “Yes, I have.”

I joined a church membership class with my older brother. But when they started talking about having a personal relationship with God through Jesus, I didn’t know what they were talking about. So I dropped out of the class.

A year later a visiting pastor on a Sunday night said, “If you want Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, invite him.” The next day while working in the field, I got off the tractor, knelt down in the stubble field, and simply prayed, “Jesus, I want to have a personal relationship with you. Please forgive me for going my own way. I want you to be my Lord and Savior....and I want to feel like a Christian.” It was kind of a silly ending to the prayer but it came from my heart. For the first time, I felt that I had had a personal conversation with God. It was a turning point in my life. I kept on talking with God and was drawn closer to him. The following year, I joined the membership class and told the congregation about my conversations with God.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, show me how to have a relationship with you.*

—Palmer Becker

## Unit 1 / Session 3

# Believing in the Holy Spirit

*The earth was formless . . . and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.*

Genesis 1:2 NASB

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 3, “Believing in the Holy Spirit,” on pages 21–24 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** The goal of this session is to help you understand, receive, and learn how to be transformed by the Holy Spirit. Note there are three key questions for this session:

- Who is the Holy Spirit?
- How can you receive the Holy Spirit?
- How might you be transformed by the Holy Spirit?

Speaking in tongues or performing miracles is not the greatest evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit. The greatest evidence is the transformation of your thoughts, feelings, and actions. When the presence and power of the Holy Spirit becomes central in your life, your thoughts, feelings, and actions are transformed.

**RESPOND:** *Holy Spirit, I earnestly desire to receive you into my life. Help me to fully admit my need and to surrender as much as I can to as much of you as I can understand.*

# Who Is the Holy Spirit? (Part 1)

*“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you.”*

John 14:16 NLT

**READ:** “The Holy Spirit is a person” on page 21.

**REFLECT:** “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation . . .” It is a familiar hymn to many people, and I have sung it countless times. Perhaps you even started humming the tune when you read those words. I can sing that same song a hundred times, and nothing about it changes. Then, in the midst of a crisis, something happens.

When we sang this song on Sunday, the words at the end jumped out at me: “Ponder anew, what the Almighty can do, if with his love he befriend thee.” The Holy Spirit highlighted these words that spoke directly to me, and I heard them as if for the first time. I was overwhelmed with the thought that the Almighty knew about me and was working in my situation. I felt safe and knew that no matter what happened in life, God’s tender love would carry me through. It was exciting to watch God work in the difficulty.

Has a familiar song ever spoken to you in a new and transformative way? As Paul wrote, “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26 NRSV).

**RESPOND:** *God of love, you are constantly speaking to us. Expand the ways in which we see you at work and hear your voice.*

—Lois Siemens



## Who Is the Holy Spirit? (Part 2)

*The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

Psalm 27:1 ESV

**READ:** “The Holy Spirit has the attributes and nature of God” and “The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus” on pages 21–22.

**REFLECT:** I was around thirteen years old. It was night, and very dark. I was sleeping alone upstairs when I suddenly became afraid. I had always been afraid of the dark, but that night there was no one to go to for comfort, except my brothers who were sleeping in the basement.

It took me a long time to get up the courage to get out of bed, turn on the light, and go downstairs looking for help. My brother was not happy that I had woke him, and he gave me, in my mind, an odd solution. Yet it was a solution I later recognized as the leading of the Spirit. “Go read your Bible,” he commanded.

I sullenly went back upstairs and pulled out my Bible. Where would I start? I had no idea and opened it randomly. The words from Psalm 4:8 leaped off the page: “I will lie down in peace and sleep, for though I am alone, O Lord, you will keep me safe” (TLB). The fear of the dark left me that night for good! The Spirit of God was with me.

**RESPOND:** *God of the Bible, who lifts the words off the page, open us to a lively encounter with your Word.*

—Lois Siemens

# How Can You Experience the Holy Spirit?

*In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.*

Psalm 22:4 NIV

**READ:** “How can you receive the Holy Spirit?” on pages 22–23.

**REFLECT:** During the Russian Revolution of 1917, my grandfather Peter found himself on the outskirts of a village when a fierce gun battle broke out. He and his friends were hiding in a garden when he heard his name being called from the village. God prompted him to follow the voice into the village and help whoever was calling. His friends tried to dissuade him, but Peter declared, “God will protect me!”

As Peter ran, he continued to hear his name being called out. “Peter! Peter!” He spied an open window in a house, where an elderly woman—out of her mind with fear—was leaning out yelling his name. With a start he realized it was his older sister, whom he had not seen in many years. He grabbed her and ran. Bullets whizzed around them as they ran for safety.

A few days later, Peter returned to the village and encountered a soldier who told him he had repeatedly shot at two people as they ran through the village, but he had been unable to kill them. Peter realized the soldier was talking about him and his sister.

Although we do not live in a time of war, God speaks through the Holy Spirit and invites us to trust and obey him even when we do not know the outcome.

**RESPOND:** *Living God, who continues to speak into our lives, give us the courage to obey, even in the midst of great risk and uncertainty.*

—Lois Siemens

# How Can You Receive the Holy Spirit?

*“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*

Luke 11:13 ESV

**READ:** “How can you receive the Holy Spirit?” on pages 22–23.

**REFLECT:** Bill Bright gave me three pictures that have helped shape my understanding of what it means to be committed to Jesus and filled with the Spirit. The first view represents secular people who need to be in control of what they think, feel, and do. Letting Jesus be in control isn’t even on their radar.

The second picture describes ideal followers of Jesus who have made a commitment to Christ and want him to be in control. They begin each day by bringing their thinking, emotions, and actions into sync with what God wants to happen—and somehow they receive the Spirit and guidance to do so.

The third picture represents individuals halfway between these two positions. They have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but they are still holding on to control of their lives.

One day, I recognized I was in this third group. I wanted to do God’s will, but I wanted to do it my way. In despair, but with new desire, I prayed, “Lord, I’ll do whatever you want me to do, and *do it your way.*” I felt a new sense of peace come over me. I also gained a new ability to help others become the people they were meant to be, rather than become clones of myself.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, it’s never better not to do your will. Help us to know your will and to do it.*

—Palmer Becker

# How Might You Be Transformed by the Holy Spirit?

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Acts 1:8 ESV

**READ:** “How might you be transformed by the Holy Spirit?” on pages 23–24.

**REFLECT:** Driving to work on a cold day, I passed a woman I’ll call “Wanda.” When I saw her, the thought flitted through my mind, *Pick her up*. I dismissed it and drove on. *She walks everywhere*, I said to myself. *It’s not that cold*, I rationalized. The truth was I didn’t know what to say to Wanda or how to handle her endless questions.

I fretted about my decision all day. As I look back on the incident, I wonder if this was the prompting of the Holy Spirit, calling me to take a risk, inviting me to be a neighbor. As Revelation 2:7 says, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying” (NRSV).

Since that day, I have encountered Wanda on several different situations and have tried to be more friendly and give her the attention she needs. I am grateful the Holy Spirit has not given up on me and continues to invite me to take risks as I encounter friends and neighbors.

**RESPOND:** *God of hope, you call us into uncertainty. Send your Holy Spirit to advocate for the gospel as we find our courage to risk the unknown encounter.*

—Lois Siemens

## Unit 1 / Session 4

# Believing in the Grace of God

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Ephesians 2:8–9 NIV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 4, “Believing in the grace of God,” on pages 25–28 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** During this week, you will be looking at ways in which God gives you what you need. God offers these precious gifts to you through his *grace*, and they are free of charge. You don’t need to pay for them, nor can you ever be good enough to deserve them. They are largely intangible but very real.

What God gave you, and continues to give you, in Jesus Christ is too great to be contained in one concept or theory of atonement. However, the meditations in this session will introduce four of God’s greatest gifts that are available to you through Jesus: *divine love, an example of how to live, forgiveness of sin, and victory over powers that seek to control you*. At times, one of these gifts will stand out more than the others or will be more important to one person than another.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, show me what I really need, and then help me understand what you have to offer.*

# God's Gift of Love

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:16 NIV

**READ:** “What are examples of God’s grace?” example 1, on page 25, and also “Sharing your story” on page 26.

**REFLECT:** Like many young people, I went through a period in my life when I was afraid of God. I had the impression that he was a harsh, judging God who was out to get me. My impression of God caused me to be afraid of meeting him at death.

In the midst of these negative feelings, God gave me what I needed. Through a new set of friends and my philosophy professor, I came to know God as a loving God who was on my side and wanted the best for me. Through prayer, I responded to God’s love and came to know myself as a beloved person. This turned my life around. While I was not perfect, I found I could love and care as God was caring for me. I was “saved” from my fear of God.

Jesus came to earth to help us understand that God is like a good parent who is on our side and wants the best for us. Grace teaches us that he loves because of who he is, not because of who we are. God’s love is a gift that each of us needs. It saves us from false images of him and from fear of the future.

Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus, who showed us—and continues to show us—how much God loves us!

**RESPOND:** *Lord, thanks for your love. Help me to love as you have loved.*

—Palmer Becker

# God's Gift of Guidance

*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.*

1 Peter 2:21 ESV

**READ:** “What are examples of God’s grace?” See example 2 on page 25, and “How to organize your story” on pages 26–27.

**REFLECT:** I had been a pastor for twenty years when I came to a new assignment. I wanted to make my new church a shining light to other congregations and to the world. “I will do it right. I will build a great church!” I shouted to myself.

But I “got lost” in the details of planning and programs. Two years into the assignment, the church was floundering without direction and purpose. I had to admit that I had lost my way and needed the saving grace of God.

For five days I fasted, read my Bible, and prayed. At the end of the fast, the still small voice of Jesus came to me, saying, “I will build my church (see Matthew 16:18). I gave you an example of how to live and serve (see 1 Peter 2:21). You are to love people as I have loved you (see John 13:34).”

As a result, I was “saved” from being lost in the details. Jesus gave me an example of how a human being is meant, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to live and serve. As a result of the gift of God’s example in Jesus Christ, my life and ministry took on new meaning.

**RESPOND:** *Come, Lord Jesus. Show me again the way to live my life. You are the way, the truth, and the life.*

—Palmer Becker

# God's Gift of Forgiveness

*If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*

1 John 1:9 NLT

**READ:** “What are examples of God’s grace?” example 3 on page 25, and “How to refine your story” on pages 27–28.

**REFLECT:** Guilt and shame are terrible problems. They are among the worst of emotions that can haunt us. This is why God’s gift of forgiveness is such a wonderful gift.

I was attending the Mennonite World Conference in Calcutta, India, with a man I will call “Roy.” The environment was strange and unfamiliar to us, so we agreed to stick together. One day, I was drawn away to a set of exhibits and friends, leaving Roy to flounder in the crowd.

When we finally got back together, Roy shared how anxious and upset he had been. I realized my failure to keep our commitment and felt ashamed. In remorse, I asked Roy for forgiveness, which he graciously offered to me. “I won’t hold this against you,” he affirmed.

When I fail in my commitment to love and serve in the spirit of Jesus. I need to be “saved” from my guilt and the consequences of it. I am thankful that if I confess my sin and failure, God has promised to freely forgive me. Just as I didn’t deserve Roy’s forgiveness, I don’t deserve the forgiveness that God offers when I confess that I have neglected a relationship or have failed to live in God’s way.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, I recognize that I sinned when I said \_\_\_\_\_, thought \_\_\_\_\_, and did \_\_\_\_\_ . Please forgive me.*

—Palmer Becker



# God's Gift of Victory

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV

**READ:** "What are examples of God's grace?" example 4 on pages 25–26, and "My Personal Commitment to Jesus Christ" on page 28.

**REFLECT:** There are times when I feel powerless. Someone or something is too strong for me, and I seem unable to resist or overcome the force or habit.

I think of a man I will call "Al." Al had feelings of inferiority that began in his youth, and he had medicated those feelings by drinking alcohol. At first the alcohol gave him a boost in his ego, but over time he found he needed more and more of it to overcome his feelings of inferiority. Things got out of control. Al almost drank himself to death.

One day, a friend looked into Al's eyes and asked, "How are you?" Al knew that his friend cared about him and really wanted to know. "I'm powerless over the desire to drink," he admitted. Together, they went to Alcoholic Anonymous meetings and to church services, where Al came to know that Jesus was the higher power who could save him from the power that was killing him. God gave him the victory that he needed. He was "saved."

In what way are you feeling powerless? How are you seeking to medicate your pain or overcome the power that wants to control you? Through Christ's death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, God unmasked the powers and showed they are not all-powerful. God continues to give victory to those who trust in him. It is the grace of God and can be your gift as well.

**RESPOND:** *Forgiving and empowering God, you are able to give me the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*

—Palmer Becker

# Your Story of God's Grace

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:10 NIV

**READ:** "How to refine your story" on pages 27–28.

**REFLECT:** This week, we have seen that God wants to give us love, guidance, forgiveness, and victory over the powers that seek to control us. These are gifts we need but are not able to earn, buy, or deserve. Grace is God freely giving us what we need!

Grace-filled people are known for sharing the gifts they have received. This session invites you to choose one way in which you have received the grace of God. Tell what life was like before your experience of receiving God's love, guidance, forgiveness, or victory. What happened, and what difference has that experience made in your life?

We are invited to be like Jesus, who seemed to prefer being with sinners and outcasts. He knew what they needed—and they responded. God gives us what we need! Dietrich Bonhoeffer, warns that if we seek to receive grace without responding in kind, we will be "cheap." "Cheap Grace," he says, "is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without obedience, Communion without confession, absolution without discipleship, and grace without the cross." We have freely received and want to also freely give.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, we are thankful for the gifts that you have offered us. Help us to show our appreciation by freely giving as we have received.*

—Palmer Becker

**Unit 2 / Session 1**

# Begin Anew to Belong in Community

*You are members of God's very own family . . . and you belong in God's household with every other Christian.*

Ephesians 2:19 TLB

**READ:** To prepare for the study of unit 2, review the table of contents on page 30 and the introduction to this unit on page 31 of *Begin Anew*. Note that we will be exploring what it means to belong in community in four ways. This week you will be reading session 1, “Belonging in Community,” on pages 32–33 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** It is in gathering together and interacting with others in community that you most fully experience what we explored in unit 1: the love of God, the guidance of Jesus, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. May that be your experience as you explore this unit!

Remember that the four units in *Begin Anew* correspond to three basic core values of Anabaptist faith:

- Unit 1: Begin Anew to Believe—*Jesus is the center of our faith!*
- Unit 2: Begin Anew to Belong—*Community is the center of our life!*
- Units 3 and 4: Begin Anew to become Mature and Behave like Christ—*Reconciliation is the center of our work!*

**RESPOND:** *Lord, we invite you to be central in our group. Help us to understand that where even two or three of us are gathered in your spirit, you are in our midst.*

# Belonging in Community

*Together you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of that body.*

1 Corinthians 12:27 NCV

**READ:** “A community of people” on page 32.

**REFLECT:** Recently, I had a profound experience of belonging in community. It was a wet October evening, and just before turning into the church parking lot, I was hit by a car. I was not hurt, and neither was the other driver. But both of our cars were totaled, and both of us felt physically and emotionally shaken from the impact. We stood shivering on the sidewalk in front of the church.

Moments after the accident, a friend from church appeared, offering support to both of us. He quickly took charge and called emergency services and my family. Next, my pastor came hurrying out of the church, offering words of encouragement. Then, when the paramedics arrived, it just so happened that another church member was on call. By the time my husband showed up on his bicycle, I was wrapped in a warm blanket and in the supportive embrace of my church community. I knew in that moment I belonged to a people!

Being part of a church goes so much deeper than showing up to a Sunday morning worship service. It is about becoming a people. As Peter explained, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:10 NRSV).

**RESPOND:** *God, help me to recognize your work and presence in my life through my church community.*

—Jessica Reesor Rempel

# What Is the Church?

*Live together in peace. Be understanding. Love one another like members of the same family.*

1 Peter 3:8 NIRV

**READ:** “A family” on page 32.

**REFLECT:** In my church, there is a story we are proud to tell again and again about a time when we disagreed. We had an important decision to make as a church family, and no amount of prayer and discernment could bring us to a consensus. Finally, because of the time sensitive nature of the decision, it was brought to a vote. When the results were announced, some of us were relieved, others were overjoyed, and others were devastated.

We remember this day in our church family’s life because instead of quickly rushing off our separate ways when the meeting was over, we stayed in that circle to support each other—no matter how we had voted—and to reconcile our relationships.

The church is the family of God. In 1 Peter 3:8 we read, “Live together in peace. Be understanding. Love one another like members of the same family. Be kind and tender” (NIRV). Being a family definitely does not mean that we will always agree! What it does mean is that we will move forward in our relationships with love and commitment, no matter what.

**RESPOND:** *God, I know that family in all its forms can be messy. Empower me to live out your love in the midst of the mess.*

—Jessica Reesor Rempel

# Being the Body of Christ

*And this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us.*

2 Corinthians 8:5 NRSV

**READ:** “A body” on page 32.

**REFLECT:** One of the ways my parents serve their church is by bringing flowers from their garden in the summer and pumpkins and gourds from their fields in the fall. They create beautiful displays in the sanctuary.

As church members we are incredibly diverse in the gifts we have to offer, and these gifts may vary within a person depending on his or her stage of life. In my current church there is an individual who works as the director of a large non-profit during the week, but on Sunday mornings he can be found clearing coffee cups and washing dishes. A teenager is usually found at the back of the sanctuary, helping with the sound system.

In a body, everyone’s gift is needed. As Paul wrote, “Together you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of that body” (Ncv). The point is that we cannot be a church by ourselves. Just as an eye would not be much use without the rest of the body, so in a congregation we come together with all our unique abilities to fulfill God’s purposes for it.

**RESPOND:** *God, help me to recognize the unique gifts of each person in the body of Christ and to use my own gifts for the benefit of the whole body.*

—Jessica Reesor Rempel

# Living the Upside-Down Community

*“Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”*

Matthew 20:26–28 NASB

**READ:** “An upside-down kingdom” on page 33.

**REFLECT:** When my husband, Steve, was in business school, he would show up to summer classes on a bicycle with a mason jar filled with homemade fair-trade iced coffee. Some of his classmates would look at him a little strangely because of this. Daily trips to the trendy campus coffee shop were the norm, and nobody biked.

When people asked Steve about his “strange” choices, he was able to talk about his vision for the earth and all its people. It was what sprang out of his faith. Being a part of the upside-down kingdom of God often means acting strangely by the world’s standards.

When Jesus was arrested, the authorities expected him to put up a fight. But Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36 NIV), and the violence of the world was not part of the kingdom of God. Whether we find ourselves in dramatic situations where we choose peace instead of aggression, or whether we go against the norm in the daily ritual of drinking coffee, God calls us to be part of an upside-down kingdom.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help me to spread your good news wherever I go, even if it means living my life upside-down.*

—Jessica Reesor Rempel

# Meeting the Deepest Needs

*They voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.*

2 Corinthians 8:3–4 NRSV

**READ:** “God’s primary answer to the world’s problems” on page 33.

**REFLECT:** In the city where I live, loneliness is as much of a crisis as hunger. Several years ago, my church decided the best way we could offer God’s love to the community around us was to provide a weekly community meal. So, every Saturday night from October through April, we serve up a feast for about 200 guests.

The guests are seated at round tables with tablecloths and eat from china dishes. Volunteers serve them a three-course home-cooked meal. When the rush is over, the volunteers sit down at the table they have been serving, and everyone enjoys food and fellowship together. Local musicians provide live entertainment.

Lonely people in our community find these meals meet a deep need within them. Depending on the context of your congregation, you will also find a unique way to meet one of the world’s deepest needs. Doing so is the call of every congregation and of every Christian. It reminds me of one of the early descriptions of church life described in the book of Acts: “All the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need” (Acts 2:44–45 NLT).

**RESPOND:** *God, nudge me gently into risk-taking as I seek to give all that I am and all that I have for the good of your kingdom in the world.*

—Jessica Reesor Rempel



## Unit 2 / Session 2

# Belonging with Purpose and Unity

*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters . . . that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.*

1 Corinthians 1:10 NRSV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 2, “Belonging with purpose and unity,” on pages 34–41 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** Note there are three main parts to this session: Statement of purpose, Statement of faith, and Statement of strategy.

A congregation should be open to people of all backgrounds, ages, orientations, and opinions. However, if members are to have unity, they need to have basic agreement on their purpose, beliefs, and strategy. *Strategy* refers to how the congregation goes about offering and receiving ministry.

Note there is likely too much material in this session for a group to cover during the week. For this reason, you may need to choose what sections are most important, or break the material up into parts that you and your group cover during the course of several weeks.

**RESPOND:** *God, please guide us to the joy of having clearly understood statements of purpose, faith, and strategy.*

# My Family's Story

*And having the goodwill of all the people . . .*

Acts 2:47 NRSV

**READ:** “Our congregation’s story” on page 34.

**REFLECT:** Every Halloween, my brother puts on a haunted house in my hometown. My parents, siblings, extended family, and lots of friends are all involved. My brother uses his passion for dressing up and preparing ghoulish things to create a space where people who might not otherwise interact with each other come together in a new way.

There are people in my brother’s town who look forward to this haunted house every year. In fact, there are people who come from neighboring towns to experience the haunted house! It’s not just children who attend either—parents and adults love coming through, and sometimes go through multiple times. There is a less scary version for younger children, and a more extreme version for teenagers and adults.

Through this annual event, my brother creates a space where barriers are broken and people find they belong together for an evening. They are all united by a simple love of haunted houses. The early church also had “the goodwill of all the people . . . and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47 NRSV).

**RESPOND:** *God, thank you for moments of belonging that break down barriers and show us your kingdom is bigger than we imagined.*

—Amanda Zehr

# Fulfilling God's Purpose

*Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.*

Ephesians 5:19 NIV

**READ:** "Statement of purpose," items 1–3, on pages 35–36.

**REFLECT:** My dad recently spent two weeks in the hospital. It was a very low time for my family. My dad loves hearing us sing and play music, so one evening when we were visiting him, I decided to bring my ukulele and have our family sing for him.

The hospital was very small. Many of the other patients were elderly and were there for palliative care. After singing a song or two, the nurses told us that someone down the hall had requested we come play and sing for her. We went to her room, introduced ourselves, and sang a few hymns.

That evening as we sang songs of praise and comfort in the hospital, the Holy Spirit was so close that we could feel him in the air. I don't know what happened to any of those patients, but I do know that in that moment, I felt I was exactly where I belonged. Through the simple act of ministering to my dad through this challenging time, we were able to join into God's larger purpose of ministering to all his children.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, thank you for the many different spaces in which we belong. Help us to be present to this belonging each moment of our life.*

—Amanda Zehr

# Welcome One Another

*Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.*

Romans 15:7 ESV

**READ:** “We diagram our purpose in the shape of a triangle” on page 36.

**REFLECT:** Draw a large triangle like the one you find on page 36. Replace the words in the diagram to reflect the purposes and activities of your congregation. Ask yourself: *What is our overall purpose? What are our sub-purposes? How do the programs and activities of the church fulfill those purposes?*

Also consider how strong fellowship is in your church. Does your church accept people on the fringes? Is it a basic purpose of your church?

We once had a “Battle of the Bands” event at my home church. One of the guitar players scheduled to perform was kept at work longer than usual, and the band was in desperate need for a replacement. When the band looked out into the audience, they saw me and asked me to play. I was surprised and happy to be asked. Although I hadn’t actively attended or played guitar in that church for years, they still saw me as being part of the church.

We are encouraged to welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed us (see Romans 15:7). Fellowship is one of the key purposes of the church. By welcoming each other, we come to know each other and be known by others. When we know each other, we can know each other’s strengths and draw on them to fulfill God’s purpose for the church.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help us to be vulnerable with each other so we can know others and be known by them. Guide us as we create relationships that fulfill your purposes.*

—Amanda Zehr

# We Were All Equals

*There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.  
For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

Galatians 3:28 NLT

**READ:** “Statement of faith” on pages 37–38.

**REFLECT:** Back in high school, my music teacher was good at creating a non-judgmental atmosphere. All sorts of students were welcome in the music program regardless of their skill—all one needed was a passion for music. Some of the students were active in church, and some were totally opposed to God. Some played in heavy metal bands on weekends, but proudly played their tuba at school during the week.

The music classes for me were like coming home to students who were involved in sports, science, and math. When we walked into the music room, we were all equals. A church should likewise be able to say, “We are a church for all people.” All are welcome. No one is rejected. When we come to God, we find complete love and acceptance . . . always. However, to have unity, a church needs to have clear statements of purpose, faith, and strategy. People can then choose a group and know how to relate to the congregation of their choice.

God is great enough to hold all our differences and use them for his purposes. We bring our passions, our baggage, our hopes, and we all play together in God’s concert band. While we may have many differences, our love for God and each other holds us together as equals.

**RESPONSE:** *Today I come before you, God, knowing I will find complete acceptance and love in belonging to you. Help me to carry that belonging with me throughout the day.*

—Amanda Zehr

# Showing Love Is a Strategy

*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

John 13:35 ESV

**READ:** “Statement of strategy” on pages 40–41.

**REFLECT:** During a challenging time in my life, I found myself working as a cashier at a big box store. When I started, I was full of anger. I did not want to work for a company where greed was the primary driver and workers in foreign countries were paid a pittance to make cheap products sold in our country.

What I did not expect to find was the beautiful community of people into which I was readily welcomed and accepted. There were employees who danced when the customers were not around, who formed genuine relationships both in and out of the break room, and who willingly shared their stories with me. My anger melted away as I opened my eyes to see that, as contradictory as it felt, I belonged there for that season of my life.

May it be true in the church that we all minister in loving ways. When people come, may they be surprised by the acceptance they receive. May we know, as the apostle John said, that “we love because [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19 NIV).

**RESPOND:** *God, help me to share your love, especially in places where it would not be expected.*

—Amanda Zehr

## Unit 2 / Session 3

# Belonging with a Common Vision

*Where there is no vision, the people perish.*

Proverbs 29:18 KJV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 3, “Belonging with a common vision,” on pages 42–46 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** During this week, you will seek to gain a clearer vision for where God is leading your church and what it will take for your church to get there. Vision will enable a congregation to see into the future and be motivated for it. You will find that people are motivated to volunteer, to serve, and to give according to the vision that is set before them.

Discussing a church’s vision will help you ask the “why” questions before proceeding to the “what” and the “how.” Instead of simply discussing what your church is doing in mission, you need to ask why you are doing it. You will see that calling for commitment helps members become confident, while running training programs helps them to be effective.

**RESPOND:** *“God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power; crown your ancient church’s story, bring its bud to glorious flower. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour.”*

# Belonging with Vision

*“Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.”*

Nehemiah 2:17 NRSV

**READ:** The introduction to “Belonging with a common vision” on page 42.

**REFLECT:** To have *vision* means to have a mental picture or idea of what might be. Vision enables people to see into the future and to be motivated toward it. Leaders recruit according to vision. Members tend to volunteer, serve, and give according to vision.

Vision has a way of drawing people together. For this reason, every church must continually ask this question: “What is the vision that binds us together?” Vision defines a church and states what it hopes to accomplish. In Anabaptist communities, a common vision is essential for helping people define who they want to be and providing a sense of identity.

Have you ever tried to make a popsicle-stick house without glue? You don’t get very far—you need something to hold it together. Churches and communities work the same way. They need some kind of “glue” to draw together a large group of diverse people.

Jesus gave us a vision for how we are to live. The church is his body that continues to do what he began on earth. How is Jesus Christ—and especially his Great Commandment and his Great Commission—shaping the vision of your church?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, grant us vision for our church. Help us to see in advance what you want us to be.*

—Chris Brnjas



# Keeping Our Eyes on Jesus

*Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end.*

Hebrews 12:2 GNT

**READ:** “The Anabaptist vision” on pages 42–43.

**REFLECT:** I grew up in a family with seven siblings. It was a loving family with a trust in Jesus, but I was strange, quirky, and a bit socially awkward. Throughout my childhood and into my teenage years, I often felt lost in the mix of life. I was frequently bullied. Most of it was verbal, but some of it was physical. I often felt alone. It took me years to recover from the cavalcade of hurtful words spoken over me and to develop any real sense of self.

Many times, the early Anabaptists were bullied and mistreated. They needed to trust in God’s love and the example of Jesus. It also took Anabaptist peoples many years—in fact, centuries—to overcome the cavalcade of hurtful words spoken over them.

Now that I’m older and somewhat successful, I look back at that scared and lonely child and want to tell him, “It’s okay. You won’t always feel like you don’t belong. It won’t last forever. Lean into Jesus. He’s the best thing for you right now.”

In our personal lives and in our church, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus will help us. It is through him that we experience God’s love and are empowered to share that love with others.

**RESPOND:** *Lord Jesus, when I feel like my friends and family have abandoned me, let me remember that you are as consistent a friend as I can ever have.*

—Chris Brnjas

# A Vision for Mission

*“Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”*

Mark 16:15 NRSV

**READ:** “Our vision for mission” on pages 43–44.

**REFLECT:** In Acts 10, the apostle Peter had a vision of God calling him to include Gentiles into his circle. He received a further vision that it was okay to eat Gentile food—and eat it with the Gentiles! In response to these visions, Peter remarked, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (verse 28 NRSV). So he ate with Cornelius and his family.

These visions brought about a radical shift in the early church’s orientation. They were visions in regard to its mission. As a result, the apostles and elders gathered together in Jerusalem to discern what to do. Peter told his story and finished off by saying, “We believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as [the Gentiles] also are” (Acts 15:11 NASB). James, who had the final word, said that God had set up the church “so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles” (verse 17 NRSV).

The council was given a vision that opened the church to the Gentiles and, literally, all people in the world. I’m sure not everyone went away happy with the decision, and perhaps some even left the church because of it and made their own faction. The church is no stranger to polarized debates. But might the story of how the apostles and elders responded offer a model for how we might discern a vision for mission?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, thank you for the vision for mission that you have given to our church.*

—Chris Brnjas

# A Vision for Commitment

*Commit your way to the LORD, trust in him and he will do this.*

Psalm 37:5 NIV

**READ:** “Our vision for commitment” on page 45.

**REFLECT:** “Church” happens when we commit ourselves to Christ and each other. Early Anabaptists had a vision for being as committed to each other as they were to Jesus Christ.

Over the last number of years, I’ve had the privilege of belonging to The Gathering Church, an Anabaptist/Mennonite church in Kitchener, Ontario. We do not have a church building. Meeting previously in a school, and now in a community center, has reduced the barriers between us and the world. The following statements of commitment have helped us determine who we are:

- We are committed to being a community that is seeking to love God and love our neighbors as best we can.
- We have a unique emphasis on the Holy Spirit that causes us to expect God to intervene. We pray for the miraculous.
- We believe Jesus Christ is central and the Scriptures are core to our worship.
- While we have a set rhythm, we’re not afraid to be experimental.

These are the reasons why I love my church community! What do you love about your church community? To what are you committed?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, give us a new vision for what you mean by “church.” Help us to understand and appreciate the new kinds of church that we see around us.*

—Chris Brnjas

# Our Vision for Training

*Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.*

Proverbs 22:6 KJV

**READ:** “Our vision for training” on page 46.

**REFLECT:** Jesus took three years to train a core of followers. The early church followed his example, and training for baptism and church membership often took a period of three years. It is believed the Gospel of Matthew was used to train new disciples. Rumor has it that catechists were required to memorize the Sermon on the Mount.

An aging member of the First Mennonite Church of Clinton, Oklahoma, who had gone to Sunday school all his life, asked, “When do I graduate from Sunday school?” This prompted the church to have a vision called, “Put your congregation through seminary in ten years.” Leaders planned sermons, adult studies, Sunday night activities, and mid-week Bible studies with a purpose: to prepare all members for ministry.

These *Begin Anew* studies seek to prepare you for ministry. Unit 1 introduces you to foundational truths of the Christian faith. Unit 2 helps you understand your purpose, beliefs, and strategies for ministry. Unit 3 empowers you for healthy relationships with God and others. Finally, unit 4 launches you into having a meaningful ministry in the church and a mission in the world.

Each of us is challenged to keep growing in our faith and life. Where is the cutting edge in your life or congregation?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help us to grasp a vision of a training program that will help us to do your work.*

—Palmer Becker

## Unit 2 / Session 4

# Belonging through Meaningful Membership

*“On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”*

Matthew 16:18 NRSV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 4, “Belonging through meaningful membership,” on pages 47–52 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** This session deals with practical matters related to being a member of a congregation. It describes baptism as the introductory rite into the church and the Lord’s Supper as a ceremony that communicates right relationships with God and each other. Membership is a statement of commitment to God and other believers. The session concludes by giving you an opportunity to request or reconfirm your membership in the church.

You will be asked several questions for the three main parts of this session, which are:

- Baptism
- The Lord’s Supper
- Membership

**RESPOND:** *Lord, thank you for the brothers, sisters, and leaders of the church who have helped me come to commitment and fellowship.*

# A Powerful Public Declaration

*If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Romans 10:9 NRSV

**READ:** “Who should be baptized?” and “When should you be baptized?” on pages 47–48.

**REFLECT:** There are many rites of passage in our lives. We celebrate birthdays, especially when they end with the number 5 or a big 0. We celebrate educational milestones, such as graduating from high school or university. In my life, my father gave me a ceremony to signify my transition to manhood. He released me so I could say, “Now I am my own person.”

This was a rite of passage to signal my transition from being a youth to being an adult. The Jewish faith had a similar ceremony in which the father said to his thirteen-year-old child, “I am no longer responsible for your sins. You are responsible for your own sins.” The child responded, “You are no longer responsible for my sins. I am responsible for my own sins.”

Baptism is also a rite of passage—but it is much more! It is not something that is passive or happens at a certain age. Baptism is a public declaration before witnesses that we are giving our lives to following Jesus Christ. It is not a calling that everyone wishes to undertake—nor is it something we do just because we graduate from high school. It is a public declaration that we are prepared to follow Jesus as our lord. It is what the early Anabaptists lived and died for!

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help me to know what declaration to make and when.*

—Chris Braes

# Needing to Need Each Other

*There was not a needy person among them.*

Acts 4:34 NRSV

**READ:** “How should you be baptized?” on pages 48–49.

**REFLECT:** How we are baptized is not as important as what baptism means to us. It is a confession that we need Jesus Christ and that we need each other as brothers and sisters in the church. Church membership is one way of saying that we need each other.

How much do you need others in your family or church? Old-order Mennonite and Amish groups, who have a strong sense of belonging, have consistently refused to be part of social insurance or government pension plans. These groups reason that if they rely on the government more, they will need their community—the church—less. If there are fewer needs in their community to be met, there will be less meeting of needs and less belonging.

Our motivation to help each other lessens when we are less needed. A reciprocal meeting of each other’s needs is what builds community and a sense of belonging. Ontario’s old-order community explains that “a relationship of love develops when both the giving and receiving is practiced with the people from one’s community.”

What do you think about the idea that we need to need each other? Do you believe that if we are to foster a sense of belonging, we need to meet each other’s needs? What would you be willing to give up in order to increase your need for dependence on your community?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, show us in what ways we need each other.*

—Isaiah Ritzmann

# What Is the Lord's Supper?

*The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."*

1 Corinthians 11:23–24 NRSV

**READ:** "What is the Lord's Supper?" on pages 50–51.

**REFLECT:** I struggle with the act of communion. Is the Lord's Supper a holy and sacred act that conveys God's grace to us? Does my heart have to be absolutely reconciled to every other person in the church before I can eat the Lord's Supper? Is it merely eating a meal together and enjoying the benefits of a faithful community? Can I eat peanut butter and jam sandwiches with my friends and call it communion?

I understand the symbolism, the words, and the practice of the Lord's Supper. As I come to communion, I try to prepare my heart and remember what it means. But observing the Lord's Supper seems to have more significance to others than it does to me. Some interpret the service in different ways—and perhaps that is the secret to understanding it.

Communion is not an individual act but a symbol that happens in community. The Lord's Supper is something we experience *together*. As we participate, we enrich each other's understandings. Communion is embodied, not merely intellectualized.

I don't fully understand what communion should be. But perhaps it would be better to ask a question of each other. *What does communion mean to us?*

**RESPOND:** *Jesus, show me what you had in mind when you asked us to observe the Lord's Supper together.*

—Chris Brnjas



# Belonging and Accountability

*“If you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”*

Matthew 5:23–24 NRSV

**READ:** “Who should participate?” on page 51.

**REFLECT:** Many of us are aware of stories of excommunications—of exclusions and shunning that accompanied the experience of the Lord’s Supper. Members were asked to “examine themselves” so they could forgive or be forgiven of all offences before eating together. The act of eating together symbolized all was well between them and God.

Church discipline was never meant to be punitive. Rather, it was meant to be a spiritual aid. Perhaps some of your most important support has come from people who called you out on your own bad habits. Many have begun to worry that by neglecting church discipline altogether, we may have thrown out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Spiritual aid can come through supportive friendships.

Belonging and accountability belong together. Perhaps the horror stories of accountability-gone-wrong are instances of people who called each other to account before they really belonged to each other. Maybe “the ties that bind” were already pretty loose before the accountability was practiced. On the other hand, when we have the relationship capacity to do so, and we don’t hold each other accountable, we erode the rich experience of belonging.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, give me the grace and relationships needed to call my friends to accountability.*

—Isaiah Ritzmann

# Membership Is a Gift

*Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

1 Thessalonians 5:11 NIV

**READ:** “Membership” on pages 51–52.

**REFLECT:** As a member of a hyper-individualized world, I have opportunities to join numerous and diverse communities. I can join a political party, a sports team, a social network, or a co-operative. Memberships imbue me with certain benefits and responsibilities. If I decide to join a group, I generally know what I will receive and what I will need to give.

Becoming a member of a church means we are choosing to serve—with our time, our finances, and our heart. In the church, as in any community, we have the right to ask, “What is the benefit? How does this benefit me? How can I be a benefit to the group?”

Membership is an invitation to give and receive. How do you see membership as a gift to you from God and your church? How do you see it as an opportunity for you to give yourself as a gift for the purpose of forwarding God’s kingdom in your community?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help me to view membership as both a gift from my brothers and sisters in the church and as a responsibility to give myself to them and my community.*

Chris Brnjas

## Unit 3 / Session 1

# Begin Anew to Become Mature

*Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important, for it promises a reward in both this life and the next.*

1 Timothy 4:8 NLT

**READ:** To prepare for the study of unit 3, review the table of contents on page 54 and the introduction to this unit on page 55 of *Begin Anew*. To prepare for the more specific discussion of becoming more mature through Bible reading, review pages 56–61.

**REFLECT:** This unit will challenge you to develop four spiritual practices. It will also suggest patterns for making them interesting and meaningful. The four practices are:

- The practice of daily Bible reading: *being taught by God.*
- The practice of prayer: *spending time with God.*
- The practice of generous giving: *giving back to God.*
- The practice of meeting together in small groups: *becoming accountable to God and one another.*

A *practice* is something you do regularly so it becomes part of your lifestyle. In doing something repeatedly, you become proficient at doing it. Practices by themselves will not transform you. Only God can do that! But the practices can put you in a place where God can transform your thoughts, feelings, and actions.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, mold me and make me into the kind of person you want me to be.*

# Why Read the Bible?

*I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore, I hate every wrong path. Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.*

Psalm 119:102–105 NIV

**READ:** “Why read the Bible?” on page 56.

**REFLECT:** C.S. Lewis said, “It is Christ himself, not the Bible, who is the true Word of God. The Bible read with the right Spirit and under the good guidance of teachers, will bring us to Him. We must not use the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia out of which texts can be taken for use as weapons.”

Many liberal Christians refuse to regularly read Scripture for fear it might make them judgmental. Many conservative Christians hold the Bible as a replacement to a personal relationship with Christ Jesus. The Bible becomes a kind of authority or lord alongside God.

Lewis rightly points out that Christ is the true Word of God. By reading the Scriptures devotionally and by studying them together, we are introduced to the risen Christ, who is our guide for daily life.

**RESPOND:** *God, help me to know again what it means to delight in your Word. Let Scripture continue to keep me on the right path of following Jesus in my daily life.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

# When and Where to Read

*“Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.”*

Joshua 1:8 NIV

**READ:** “When is the best time to read?” on page 56 and “Where might you read?” on page 57.

**REFLECT:** When I was in seminary, I served on a group that planned ways for students on campus to have a vibrant spiritual life. One idea we came up with was for students to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation as a campus activity. We estimated it would take students about eighty hours to read Scripture all the way through.

We took over a quiet space and brought in comfy couches, pillows, electric kettles, and coffee makers. Then we invited students, professors, and faculty to sign up to read together. Some people came eager to read, while others just sat and listened. Some read for five minutes, while others read for hours at a time.

As word got out about our Bible reading marathon, people from outside our campus joined us. We broadcast what we were doing on social media. Suddenly, all around the world, at all hours of the day, people were tuning in to listen to us read.

When and where do you read your Bible? At times, I have found it helpful to read my Bible alone. At other times, I read it in public. Making a commitment to read it regularly and with others has been the most important aspect in my life. I like to remember that it was a Bible study group in Zurich that began the Swiss Anabaptist movement!

**RESPOND:** *God of truth, help me to prioritize reading your Word so that I might be transformed by your spirit.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

# How Much Should I Read?

*“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

John 8:31–32 NIV

**READ:** “How much should you read?” on page 57 and “One-month Sermon on the Mount reading guide” on page 58.

**REFLECT:** My church gave me my first adult Bible when I was in second grade. I remember going up to the front of the church with my classmates and receiving it. The congregation cheered for us as we received our own copy. Now I could read the Scriptures for myself.

On several occasions during those first years, I made attempts to read the Bible from cover to cover. I would start off well . . . but get off track somewhere in the middle, around the book of Psalms. As I grew, I found that having a Bible study plan helped me. It broke the Bible into daily readings in the Psalms, New Testament, and Old Testament, which made it more interesting. Even so, my early reading centered around learning information or “Bible knowledge.” While it was helpful to read the Bible in this way, it lacked any devotional aspect.

Lately, I have found that spending time with certain Bible verses and letting them “read me” helps me to better understand my own heart and emotions. This allows the Scripture to check my own health with God and with others.

However much of the Bible you read, try to engage it in a way that satisfies your soul.

**RESPOND:** *Patient God, you know my heart. Help me to read from your Word in such a way that it challenges me in times of complacency and comforts me in times of distress.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

# How Should I Interpret the Scriptures?

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:14 ESV

**READ:** “How should you interpret the Scriptures?” on pages 59–60.

**REFLECT:** My friend was surprised that my church had a female pastor. It seemed to contradict his understanding of 1 Timothy 2:12, in which Paul says, “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent” (NRSV). I countered my friend’s argument with Galatians 3:28, where Paul says that in the church “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). Despite our sharing, neither of us left convinced of the other person’s point of view.

Marion Bontrager, a Bible professor at Hesston College, advises new believers with the rhyme, “When two Scriptures seem to disagree, let Jesus be the referee.” This helpful saying reminds me that Anabaptists don’t have a flat or literalistic Bible. Rather, they interpret Scripture through the lens of Jesus. Because Jesus is the fullest revelation of God and God’s will, all Scripture must be read and interpreted in the spirit and nature of Jesus.

Jesus, even more than the Bible, is the standard for interpreting Christian belief, behavior, and mission.

**RESPOND:** *Lord God, thank you for the Scriptures and especially for Jesus, your ultimate Word to the world.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

# How Should I Study the Scriptures?

*Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed,  
rightly dividing the word of truth.*

2 Timothy 2:15 AKJV

**READ:** “How should you study the Scriptures?” on pages 60–61.

**REFLECT:** I remember listening to a fellow Christian from another country who shared that pastors in his nation did not have Bibles readily available to them. As a result, one of the church’s requirements for a person to be able to minister was for him or her to memorize an entire Gospel. This was a high bar for ministry, but it helped ensure the pastor would stay faithful to the Gospel in spite of limited Bible access. Immediately after memorizing a Gospel, the pastor would engage in ministry.

We would do well to think about studying the Bible like breathing. Breathing in provides a way for us to receive life and oxygen. Of course, it is impossible to constantly be breathing in—we must eventually exhale! Our hope is to exhale the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control, goodness, and faithfulness.

**RESPOND:** *God, give me the eagerness to read and study the Bible today. May the words of Scripture become a reflex that satisfies my soul and empowers me to do the work of your kingdom.*

—Jeff Hochstetler



## Unit 3 / Session 2

# Becoming Spiritually Mature through Prayer

*Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray."*

Luke 11:1 ESV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 2, "Becoming spiritually mature through prayer," on pages 63–67 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** Note there are five main questions for you to explore in this session: Why pray? When is a good time to pray? Where can you pray? In what ways can you pray? And, What are other ways to pray?

You are created to have fellowship with God, and prayer is a key way for having that fellowship. During prayer you can share your concerns, confess your failures, and receive encouragement for the day.

In prayer, you are seeking to know God and God's will. There is no need to try to impress him, for God already knows your needs and your heart. Prayer is a time to be real with God and with yourself.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, thank you for adopting me as your child and for wanting to nurture me to full maturity.*

# Why Pray?

*When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

Acts 4:31 ESV

**READ:** “Why pray?” on page 63.

**REFLECT:** Recently, we were at my son’s home for a meal and my six-year-old granddaughter asked her parents if she could pray. As she was nearing the end of her beautiful prayer, her two-year-old brother joined in by saying, “Amen.” The experience reminded me of how important it is to teach and to model a life filled with prayer. Jesus repeatedly did that by going to a quiet place to pray.

But *why* should we pray? I believe prayer leads to a changed life! Prayer is the primary avenue that God uses to transform us. If you are unwilling to change, you will forgo prayer. But if you long for change, prayer will become a natural rhythm of your life.

The psalmist wrote, “I love God because he listened to me, listened as I begged for mercy. He listened so intently as I laid out my case before him” (Psalm 116:1–2 MSG). Other translations say that God “turns his ear” toward us when we pray.

**RESPOND:** *Thank you, Lord, for listening to my pleas. Help me now to also listen to what you want to say to me.*

—Myron Weaver

# When and Where Might I Pray?

*Many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.*

Luke 5:15–16 NRSV

**READ:** “When is a good time to pray?” and “Where can you pray?” on pages 63–64.

**REFLECT:** As a pastor, prayer is an integral part of my vocation. On an almost daily basis, I pray with people I am visiting or who are in the hospital. But what about my own prayer time?

Over the years, I have come to understand the importance of establishing a rhythm of praying in the same space at the same time. We see this in the Bible. Again and again, we read stories of people praying at particular times and in particular spaces. This practice helps us to reorient our lives to God.

Several weeks ago, I was sitting in a restaurant having lunch with a friend. As we were nearing the end of our conversation, he asked if he could pray for me. My friend’s understanding that prayer was not limited to a particular space encouraged me. It caused me to reflect more specifically on when and where I pray.

At my home, I have found a quiet space in my finished basement to pray. During the workweek, I seek to arrive at work an hour or two earlier than my co-workers so I can read, pray, and listen for the voice of God.

**RESPOND:** *Loving God, would you show me that quiet place where I can reorient my life with yours?*

—Myron Weaver

# Seven Minutes with God

*In the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly.*

Psalm 5:3 NIV

**READ:** “In what ways can you pray?” on pages 64–65.

**REFLECT:** In 1882 on the campus of Cambridge University a group of students observed that every person who ever became somebody for God—from Moses to David Livingstone, the prophet Amos to Billy Sunday, whether rich or poor, businessman or military personnel—had at the core of their priorities spending time alone with God.

The students encouraged each other to start by spending seven minutes each day with God. For the first thirty seconds they were to prepare their hearts, thanking the Lord for a good night of sleep, their resources, and the opportunities of the new day. They spent the next four minutes in reading the Bible, beginning with a Gospel, and seeking to hear some word from God. They spent the last two-and-a-half minutes in prayer.

Robert D. Foster of the Navigators says, “Do it not because others are doing it—not as a spiritless duty every morning, nor merely as an end in itself, but because God has granted the priceless privilege of fellowship with Himself!”

**RESPOND:** *Lord, before talking to anyone else in the morning, I want to talk with you.*

—Palmer Becker

# What Does God Want to Say?

*This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.*

1 John 5:14 NIV

**READ:** “What are other ways to pray?” on pages 65–66.

**REFLECT:** Several years ago, I spent a week at the Taize community in France. The community is made up of more than a hundred people from Catholic and various Protestant backgrounds, coming from around thirty nations. Each day there were two two-hour worship services. In true Jewish tradition, the bulk of each service was spent in silence and reading the Psalms.

At first, I found the silence to be challenging. It compelled me to ask, “How much am I listening to what God wants to say to me?” I found the psalmist encouraging with the words, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10 NIV).

There are many ways to pray, and there are a variety of tools to assist in prayer. Perhaps more than anything else we need to follow the biblical prayers of those who prayed as if their prayers could and would make a difference. Might we begin with the Lord’s Prayer?

**RESPOND:** *Attentive God, thank you for listening to me when I turn to you in prayer. Let your Spirit give me the ability to believe that my prayers are making a difference.*

—Myron Weaver

# Can I Commit to Daily Prayer?

*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.*

Colossians 4:2 NIV

**READ:** “My commitment to a daily time of prayer” on page 67.

**REFLECT:** Clement of Alexandria said, “We will not grow with God unless we give of our time and energy to keeping company with God.” Of all the spiritual disciplines, prayer is the most important because it ushers us into the very presence of God. Part of the way we honor this special relationship with our God who pursues us is through prayer.

The important thing to remember is that God is the one who initiates this relationship! Eugene Peterson uses these stunning words to paraphrase Ephesians 1:4 and put this into perspective: “Long before God laid down the earth’s foundation, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love.” God did this even though we didn’t deserve it.

Do you find life so overwhelming that you say, “How can I take time to pray?” Martin Luther challenged this attitude when he wrote, “I have so much to do that I shall have to spend the first three hours in prayer.” Don’t let the three hours overwhelm you! Begin with setting aside a few moments for prayer each day. If you commit to do this, I can almost assure you that you will soon discover new ways to communicate with God.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, I look forward to having fellowship with you and receiving guidance from you.*

—Myron Weaver

**Unit 3 / Session 3**

# Becoming Spiritually Mature Through Generous Giving

*Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.*

1 Timothy 6:17

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 3, “Becoming spiritually mature through generous giving,” on pages 68–71 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked: Note there are seven practical questions for you to explore in this session: What does the Bible say about tithing? Why should you give? When should you give? Where should you give? How much should you give? With what attitude should you give? And, will generous giving cause you to prosper?

**REFLECT:** A beginning point in exploring the practice of giving is understanding that God is the owner of all things. You are challenged to return a worthy portion of what you have been given to God and to be good managers of that which remains under your care. Generous giving will help you clarify and declare your priorities. Jesus said, “Seek first the kingdom of God” (Matthew 6:33 esv), and if you do that, you will receive all that you need.

**RESPOND:** *Thank you, Lord, for blessing us with many gifts and resources. Help me to be a good steward of them.*

# How About Tithing?

*Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.*

Deuteronomy 16:17 NIV

**READ:** “What does the Bible say about tithing?” on page 68.

**REFLECT:** After a sermon on sharing, an older, well-respected man who was usually quiet and reserved stood and began to speak. “After our first year of marriage,” he said, “my wife and I decided we wanted to tithe one percent of our income for every year we’ve been married.” The congregation hushed in silence. “We’ve now been married fifty-three years.” With that, the man sat down.

Tithing expresses a token of our appreciation to God for all we have been given. One of the best things tithing does is to remind us to thank God for the other nine-tenths and to depend on him for what we need.

When we have resources to give, giving is a pleasure. Jesus himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35 NRSV). We need to remind ourselves—and each other—that God wishes us to live generously, which also includes giving of our time and talents. Some people seek to give a tenth of their time to God.

**RESPOND:** *God, the giver of all good things, thank you for all I have been given. Teach me what it means to live generously.*

—Jeff Hochstetler



# Why Should I Give?

*Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

Hebrews 13:5 NIV

**READ:** "Why should you give?" on pages 68–69.

**REFLECT:** Pastor Vernie of Mount Carmel Baptist Church in Norfolk, Virginia, became concerned about the inability of his members to give because of their debt. The church started monthly prayer meetings and counseling for church members who were struggling with credit card debt.

What started off small became a huge success. Since their first meeting, the congregation has wiped out more than \$318,000 of debt, and fifty-six families have been declared debt-free. Families take financial management classes after becoming debt-free. Members who received help have given an average of \$300 to help others eliminate debt. In wiping out fellow church members' debt, Mount Carmel has experienced the joy of giving more. Church tithing has increased since the monthly meetings began.

In an age where families must save for the future—for retirement, cars, insurance, and the other conveniences of modern life—tithing can seem like an impossible task. But we can do amazing things when we give to God a generous portion of what we have been given. Tithing is about faithfulness. Can we trust God to supply our needs on ninety percent of our income?

**RESPOND:** *Generous God, you have given me life and all that I have. Help me to understand the joy that comes with holding possessions lightly. Help me to pay attention to how I can trust you more with my resources.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

# When and Where Should I Give?

*“In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”*

Acts 20:35 NASB

**READ:** “Why should you give?” and “When should you give?” on pages 68–69.

**REFLECT:** Recently, our church approved electronic funds transfer for tithing. This means that instead of a person writing a weekly or occasional check, the church can regularly receive a direct withdrawal from the person’s account. While this has been a convenience for many, it has also created a problem: members were no longer able to place something into the offering. How could they model faithful giving for their children, since their giving was no longer visible?

The solution? The church decided to provide a space for people to mark electronic-funds giving on the offering envelopes. This allowed people to mark the appropriate form, amount of giving, and to participate in the offering time.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:3 that when we give to the poor, we should do it secretly. In some situations, it is appropriate to give anonymously. At other times, it is helpful to have honest conversations with a few trusted church members about money and giving. Mutual disclosure can be a helpful way to discuss when and where are the best times to give.

How much should we give to schools, local organizations, and to trusted mission and service agencies? Those sensitive conversations require everyone to be vulnerable.

**RESPOND:** *Faithful God, help me to remain true to you in giving.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

# How Much Should I Give?

*Each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.*

1 Corinthians 16:2 NIV

**READ:** “How much should you give?” on page 70.

**REFLECT:** A successful entrepreneur in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia felt God calling him to anonymously contribute ninety percent of his profits to the church and keep only ten percent for his family to live on. Eventually, his business attracted the attention of the IRS, who did not believe a man would donate so much to a church. His giving became widely known, and many people were blessed by his example.

In his book *Neither Poverty Nor Riches*, biblical scholar Craig Blomberg points out that the good news of Jesus Christ has a material dimension to it. “It goes too far to say that one cannot be rich and be a disciple of Jesus,” he says, “but what never appears in the Gospels are wealthy followers of Jesus who are not also releasing their surplus wealth for the sake of others in need.”

Is there a right amount to give? Giving ten percent of one’s income is a good starting point. Some give half that amount, while others give more. Whatever you give, let it be done with joy, not bitterness. Give for the sake of others, not to justify yourself.

**RESPOND:** *God, help me to trust you with my finances. Help me to be a good steward of all that you have given me so I may bless others in your name.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

# Do Generous Givers Prosper?

*Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything.*

Mark 12:41–44 NIV

**READ:** “Will generous giving cause you to prosper?” on page 71.

**REFLECT:** In the Old Testament, we find suggestions that if we are faithful and obedient, God will bless us and prosper us; while if we are unfaithful and disobedient, we will be cursed (see Deuteronomy 28:2, 15). However, in the New Testament, we find that even if we are faithful and obedient, we may not prosper. Jesus commented, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10 NIV).

Several years ago, I visited Christians in Cambodia who were living in houses built on stilts near a busy harbor. The wealthy tourists to the region simply ignored the simple fishing village as they walked past it daily on the way to their island destinations. I had even walked by this location and not even noticed it!

The people of this village had been persecuted for their faith, yet they were warm and generous. They were living with the promise that those who are faithful will receive an eternal reward. From their meager means, they served us a generous meal. The people showed me it is not necessarily true that righteous people will prosper and unrighteous people will not.

**RESPOND:** *God, help me to be generous for the right reasons. Help me to give as you help me to see the needs.*

—Jeff Hochstetler

## Unit 3 / Session 4

# Becoming Spiritually Mature Through Small Groups

*“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

Matthew 18:20 ESV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 4, “Becoming spiritually mature through small groups,” on pages 72–76 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** Begin this session by asking the following questions: How might the church be structured? Why meet in small groups? What will your group be like? Where and when will your group meet? What might your group do? And, How might you begin a new group?

In unit 2, we noted that each member of your congregation is encouraged to be part of a small group. Small groups are often the key pastoral and organizational structure of the church. In this study, you will see why small groups are so important to a church. A healthy group of spirit-filled persons might well be the closest you will come to experiencing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven!

**RESPONSE:** *Lord, thank you for friends on whom I can rely in times of difficulty and who can hold me accountable for my commitments.*

# Created in His Image

*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*

Genesis 1:26 NRSV

**READ:** “How might the church be structured?” on pages 72–73.

**REFLECT:** “Screen time” has become reality. Different types of technology make life easier, but it also negatively affects relationships by decreasing the need for face-to-face contact.

While it’s wonderful to be able to view sermons online, screens cannot replace being fully present as active participants in a church. However, just as it is difficult to engage from behind a screen, we may also find it hard to relate to each other in a large congregation. We need to be nurtured in both large and small groups.

In his book *Community 101*, Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian writes, “Community is deeply grounded in the nature of God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Community is God’s gift of himself to humans. Therefore, the making of community may not be regarded as an optional decision for Christians. It is a compelling and irrevocable necessity, a binding mandate for all believers at all times.”

Because God is in essence community and has created us in that image, it’s our mandate to create and make available safe, small spaces of community. It is also our responsibility to lift our eyes from our screens and be fully present with each other when in community.

**RESPOND:** *God, you have created us to be in community with you and with each other. Help us to set aside what steals our attention and engage with others in meaningful ways.*

—Dayna Schrock

# Why Meet in Small Groups?

*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Hebrews 10:24–25 NIV

**READ:** “Why meet in small groups?” on pages 73–74.

**REFLECT:** I will never forget the time I was away from home on an overnight retreat with a small group of women. We had been meeting frequently for accountability, fellowship, Bible study, and to share in the ups and downs of life together. It was life-giving to be a part of this mission-minded group where I could offer encouragement and receive support in times of crisis.

During that overnight getaway, I received a call that my father had been diagnosed with cancer. I was devastated and shared the news with my group. The group members surrounded me, and we cried together and prayed together. Never before had I felt so loved and encouraged than at that moment when I most needed them. In a time of sadness and uncertainty, they were “Christ with skin on” to me.

Do you have a small group of people with whom you share life? Are you vulnerable enough in that group to receive support as well as give it? God longs for you to experience his presence through his people. That can happen when you commit to meeting with others.

**RESPOND:** *Thank you, God, for the gift of people whom you use to support and encourage me in times of need.*

—Dayna Schrock

# What Will Your Group Be Like?

*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.*

Acts 2:46–47 NRSV

**READ:** “What will your group be like?” and “Where and when will your group meet?” on page 74.

**REFLECT:** We are told in Acts 2:42–47 that following Pentecost, new believers devoted themselves to the Scriptures, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. Their act of meeting together in each other’s homes played a crucial role in the growth of the church. The believers became a unified and transformed people.

These groups of believers had the ability to kick back and relax in each other’s homes. Like family, they grew close to one another. I picture them reclining in their main room, sharing, praying, laughing, eating, and taking communion together. I also envision them passing the collection basket to meet someone’s urgent need. Their ability to share with those in need was a direct result of their unity.

People desire the intimacy and fellowship that small groups have to offer. If given the opportunity, needy people will probably want to join your group. When this happens, you might worry, *If we add more people, our small group will grow too large.* Hallelujah! What a great problem! You can always start another group.

**RESPOND:** *Thank you, Lord, for what we learn from people in the early church. Help us to follow their example.*

—Dayna Schrock



# What Might Your Group Do?

*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 emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*

Philippians 2:5-7

**READ:** “What might your group do?” on pages 74–75.

**REFLECT:** In 1995, 168 innocent victims died when a bomb destroyed a federal building in Oklahoma City. The blast was so strong that it took all the leaves and most of the branches from a nearby eighty-year-old tree. The tree was considered a total loss, and no one paid attention to it. However, as the first anniversary of the bombing drew near, the leaves of the tree began coming in. Thanks to its strong, deep roots, it lived through the full blast of the bomb!

Today, the tree stands as a testimony of renewal and rebirth. Its seeds have re-birthed many more trees across the United States. People have come to see the tree as a symbol of resilience and hope and have given it the name “the Survivor Tree.”

What does your group do? In our group, we warmly embrace each other, study the Scriptures, and care deeply for each other. These practices cause our roots to run deep, help us survive the difficult times of life, and enable us to help others find new life.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, help me not to live in isolation. Help my roots to grow deep into you and my community of believers so that we can help hold each other steady when our lives are shaken.*

—Dayna Schrock

# How Might You Begin a New Group?

*“He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”*

Luke 19:7 NRSV

**READ:** “How might you begin a new group?” on page 75.

**REFLECT:** Two weeks ago, I was serving meals to homeless and underprivileged people at Sterling Avenue Mennonite Church when a member of my table shared that she was feeling isolated. We learned she lived alone in a small basement apartment that was in poor repair.

“I read a book on small groups,” she said. “I wonder if a small group is what I need.”

“Great idea!” I replied. “Why don’t you try to find two or three people who have a similar need as your own? I would be happy to meet with you a few times to help you get started.”

The woman followed through. Last Sunday night, I met for the first time with her group of four. We shared our concerns, encouraged each other to do acts of kindness, and prayed together.

Groups are where people can help each other and be helped by God. The church, as the body of Christ, is the best resource for helping troubled people find new life and make a new beginning. Perhaps the most helpful thing we can do for someone who is ill, confused, guilty, or in poverty is to invite him or her to join us in the family of God, where we can care for each other as brothers and sisters.

**RESPOND:** *God, thank you for helping us find those who need you and each other. Help us to be compassionate and supportive of others.*

—Palmer Becker

## Unit 4 / Session 1

# Behaving Like Christ in Response to Need

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example,  
that you should follow in his steps.*

1 Peter 2:21 NIV

**READ:** To prepare for the study of unit 4, review “Behaving like Christ” on pages 78–79 of *Begin Anew*. To specifically prepare for the discussion of session 1, review pages 80–83.

**REFLECT:** The goal of this unit is to help each member of the congregation affirm or discern a new ministry in the church and a mission in the world. God has given each of us gifts and opportunities to make that possible.

The four sessions of this unit will help toward that end. They are: Behaving like Christ in response to need, Behaving like Christ in knowing yourself, Behaving like Christ by offering yourself, and Behaving like Christ in ministry and mission

There is great strength in being able to say, “My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am an (usher) here in the church.” It helps members see themselves as part of the body. To have a clear function or ministry in the church raises one’s esteem and encourages others.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, you came to minister to our needs. Help me to follow in your steps by also ministering to others.*

# What Are Our Natural Human Tendencies?

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*

Romans 12:2 NRSV

**READ:** “What are our natural human tendencies?” on page 80.

**REFLECT:** Even after James and John had heard Jesus’ teaching, seen him heal diseases and cast out demons, and witnessed him predict his coming death—still they asked Jesus for positions of glory in his kingdom! Their natural human tendency to think of themselves first outweighed all they had heard and seen in Jesus (see Mark 10:26–40).

When the other disciples learned of their request, they became angry. How could James and John ask this of Jesus? I wonder if the disciples might also have been angry with themselves for not asking Jesus first. After all, when Peter, James, and John witnessed Jesus’ transformation on the mountain top, Peter had wanted to stay there and bask in Jesus’ glory. He, too, seemed to be thinking of himself. But God responded, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (Mark 9:7 NRSV).

Like Peter, James, and John, we might naturally think of ourselves first and try to improve our own position, power, and prestige. But Jesus shows us another way, if we listen and follow his leading. Instead of following our natural human tendencies, we can be transformed by his life, death, and resurrection and find new life in the Spirit.

**RESPOND:** *Jesus, as you transformed water into wine, transform our natural human tendencies so we might live for you.*

—April Yamasaki

# How Did Jesus Behave in Ministry?

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

Luke 4:18–19 NRSV

**READ:** “How did Jesus behave in ministry?” and “How can you behave like Christ in ministry?” on pages 80–81.

**REFLECT:** If you feel intimidated by the word “ministry,” don’t be! In some countries, ministry means a government department like the Ministry of Agriculture or the Ministry of Public Works. In a Christian context, ministry can refer to pastoral ministry or other work in the church. In its broadest sense, ministry means service.

In public life and private life, our paid vocation and unpaid work, our homes and communities, the church and the world, engaging in ministry means engaging in service. To behave like Christ in service means to serve as he did. Serving means such things as relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, showing the love of Jesus, keeping his commandments, being a witness in all the world, doing justice, acting with kindness, and being humble.

Service might mean preparing a meal, offering hospitality to strangers, or preaching the Word. In whatever form of service God calls you, serving like Jesus means relying on the power of the Holy Spirit so you will be able to love God and love others as Jesus did.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, give me a servant heart and lead me by your Spirit to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you.*

—April Yamasaki

# What Do We Believe About Ministry?

*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.*

Ephesians 4:11–12 NRSV

**READ:** “What do we believe about ministry?” on pages 81–82.

**REFLECT:** We are all called to serve God and to serve others. Ministry in the broadest sense of service is for everyone! There are many different ways of serving both formally and informally. There is unity among Christians because we are all called to serve, and also diversity among Christians as we serve in different ways.

Some beliefs can limit our ministry. Moses believed he couldn’t speak well enough to serve God. Jeremiah assumed he was too young, Isaiah thought he wasn’t good enough, Rahab was a prostitute, and the woman at the well was a Samaritan. Yet each in their own way served God and others in spite of their limitations.

Other beliefs can strengthen our sense of ministry. So, for example, if we believe that commitment, excellence, creativity, innovation, and, yes, even mistakes are part of Christian service, we can be released for ministry. As servants of God, we will want to bring our best selves to whatever we do. Yet as finite and flawed human beings, we also bring our limitations and brokenness. We serve only by God’s grace and by extending grace to one another.

**RESPOND:** *Holy Spirit, empower us for ministry. Give us eyes to see the opportunities you place before us, ears to hear your calling, and hands and feet to respond in service.*

—April Yamasaki

## What Needs Might You Meet?

*“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.”*

Matthew 25:35–36 NRSV

**READ:** “What needs might you be called to meet?” on pages 82–83.

**REFLECT:** Jesus ministered to people according to their need, and yet he did so with a remarkable freedom in response to the leading of the Spirit. When he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed where he was for two extra days before travelling to Bethany to see his friend (see John 11). When Jairus needed Jesus to heal his only daughter who was dying, Jesus still made time for a woman in the crowd in need of healing and restoration to her community (see Mark 5:21–43). He served in response to human needs, but those needs did not drive him.

This is good news for those feeling overwhelmed by the needs of the world and under pressure by the demands in their personal lives! Jesus’ deliberate ministry offers a practical example for those who don’t know where to begin and need to set priorities.

How can we discern the movement of the Spirit in our lives and the needs that God might be calling us to meet? It begins by spending time in prayerful reflection, letting God bring to mind someone who has a physical, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, or relational need. Be attentive to the stirring of your spirit. Listen for God’s call and wait for his timing to help meet that need.

**RESPOND:** *As I seek to respond to human needs, Lord, may I first listen for your leading and respond to you.*

—April Yamasaki

# What Does Your Church Have to Offer?

*“The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”*

John 14:12 NRSV

**READ:** “What does your church have to offer?” on page 83.

**REFLECT:** In my mind’s eye, I can see one panel of a Pontius Puddle cartoon. The earth stands in the center, and radiating out all around are cartoon speech bubbles saying, “What can one person do? What can one person do? What can one person do? What can one person do? What can one person do?”

Thankfully, as a Christian, I am not just one person confronting a world of need. I am part of a local church, which is part of the worldwide body of Christ that stretches from the time of the New Testament throughout history and into the future. So, instead of asking, “What can one person do?” and despairing over our inadequacies, we can join together in the body of Christ and ask, “What is God doing?”

What is God doing through your church? Today’s reading suggests the church offers fellowship, forgiveness, meaning to life, peace, and hope. Some of that might be expressed in the church’s preaching and teaching. Some might take place more informally over a potluck meal or personal conversation.

How do you see these things offered through your church or small group? What else does your church have to offer?

**RESPOND:** *God, please help me to do the caring and leave the curing up to you.*

—April Yamasaki



## Unit 4 / Session 2

# Behaving Like Christ in Knowing Yourself

*The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.*

1 Corinthians 12:7 GNT

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 2, “Behaving like Christ in knowing yourself,” on pages 84–87 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** This session will help you understand yourself and the gifts that God has given you. Three main questions will lead you into your discussions. They are: What are your natural abilities and interests? What does the Bible teach about spiritual gifts? and What are your spiritual gifts?

Dr. Larry Day, in his book *Self-esteem: By God's Design*, says that we gain our identity from who we are and not merely from what we do. As human beings made in the image of God, we have the inherent ability to feel, think, choose, create, communicate, and to be self-aware, morally aware, and spiritually aware. Each of us has at least one ability, interest, passion, and gift that can be used to reduce pain and increase joy in people's lives and relationships.

In this session, you will be helped to discover what those are.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, you have made me in your image. Help me to understand myself.*

# What Are Your Natural Abilities?

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others.*

1 Peter 4:10 NIV

**READ:** “Natural abilities are strengths received at birth” on page 84.

**REFLECT:** As a child in elementary school, I soon became aware it was easy for me to learn. I greeted every new challenge with enthusiasm and was academically at the head of my class. I was fortunate to have teachers who recognized and encouraged my natural aptitude. They knew how to harness my innate ability to learn new things and helped me develop my God-given talents. This was tremendously affirming.

It was only as I grew into young adulthood that I became aware that my natural abilities were not for me alone but were given for the good of others and for the benefit of God’s work in the world. I’m reminded of the words of Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century mystic, who wrote, “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world . . . you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

While our natural abilities may be ours to use as we choose, Scripture reminds us that everything we are finds fulfillment when used to do the work of Christ.

**RESPOND:** *Thank you, God, for the natural abilities you give to each of us. Help us to use them for ministry in the church and mission in the world.*

—Dave Bergen

# What Are Your Interests?

*And whatever you do or say, let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus, all the while giving thanks through him to God the Father.*

Colossians 3:17 NLT

**READ:** “Your interests draw you to another person or challenge” on page 84.

**REFLECT:** What do you like to do? Some people like to work with ideas, while others like to work with things. Some show interest in working with people problems, while others prefer the arts. We look for a job in the area of our interests and tend to relate to people who have similar interests as our own.

One of my areas of passion is playing guitar. I find it personally rewarding, deeply satisfying, and a source of inner renewal. Experience has taught me that this area of personal interest also opens doors. Through music, I am able to express care for others. I am able to draw the lonely out of their isolation and bring them into a worshipful awareness of the presence and deep love of God. I am thankful that an area of my personal interest has been used in amazing ways to partner with God in affirming the worth and beauty of his people.

What is your strongest area of interest? What do you like to do? God has given you interests and passions for a purpose. Seek to find a ministry in the church and a mission in the world that interests you. Your interests will help you enjoy what you can do best.

The hymn writer William Walsham Howe said it well: “We give thee but thine own, whate’er the gift may be; all that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee.”

**RESPOND:** *Dear God, show me what area of personal passion I have that you can use to help me minister to those around me.*

—Dave Bergen

## What about Spiritual Gifts?

*But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.*

1 Corinthians 12:7–11 NASB

**READ:** “What does the Bible teach about spiritual gifts?” on page 85.

**REFLECT:** Our world encourages us to think in terms of individual rights, private affairs, and personal benefits. But I am always struck by the strong emphasis in Scripture on community life, corporate identity, and the common good. While the Bible calls us to be faithful and accountable to God, it also stresses that we find meaning and fulfillment when we live out these things in the context of the wider community of faith—the body of Christ, the church.

There is no “lone goose” Christianity to be found in the Bible. Rather, Scripture always places the living of our faith, and the exercise of our calling through the gifts God has given us, squarely within the community of faith. My gift, the exercise of my ministry, is never for myself but always for others, to others, and with others.

**RESPOND:** *Lord Jesus, grant me the faith and the understanding to live out my spiritual gifts for the good of your body, the church.*

—Dave Bergen

# What Are Your Own Spiritual Gifts?

*God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.*

Romans 12:6–8 NLT

**READ:** “What are your spiritual gifts?” on pages 85–87.

**REFLECT:** When I enrolled in Bible school, I thought it was an interlude between high school and a university career that would help me become an engineer. But God had other plans. In the close community of Christians at Bible school, something surprising happened: I became aware of some of my spiritual gifts. The people in my community helped me explore and release these gifts that had previously been hidden from me for the service of God. These were the gifts of teaching, giving care, preaching, and administering the work of the church.

This experience of learning my gifts and the purpose of them set me on a path that led to seminary and pastoral ministry. There, I further learned that the gifts are given “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12 NRSV). Ministry was something I did joyfully for eighteen years.

I am thankful for the care and prayerful support of that Bible school community. Without it, it would have taken me much longer to become aware of the rich spiritual gifts that God was waiting to release in me.

**RESPOND:** *Holy Spirit, lead me to the places and the people who will further help me to know and embrace my spiritual gifts.*

—Dave Bergen

# How Will You Use Your Gifts?

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.*

Galatians 5:22–23 NRSV

**READ:** Read again the titles and descriptions of the spiritual gifts on pages 85–87 that you think you might have. Note that the fruit of the Spirit, or how we use the gifts, is even more important than having the gifts themselves.

**REFLECT:** Among the spiritual giants we studied in seminary was the thirteenth-century St. Francis of Assisi, who abandoned a life of privilege and excess to live a Christian life devoted to simplicity and service of the poor. A prayer attributed to Francis served as our daily class devotional reflection:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.*

*O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

The self-giving commitment to reconciliation, understanding, peace, and service expressed in this prayer has become a deep influence in my Christian walk.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, guide me to be wise and sensitive in the use of the gifts you have given me.*

—Dave Bergen

**Unit 4 / Session 3****Behaving Like Christ by  
Offering Yourself**

*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

2 Corinthians 12:10 NRSV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 3, “Behaving like Christ by offering yourself,” on pages 88–89 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** Your experiences will often be the most important resource that you will have to offer when it comes to ministry. Note that this session asks you to explore five different kinds of experiences. They include Spiritual, Painful, Educational, Work and Ministry experiences.

Each of us will have positive experiences that will bring us excitement, achievement, and fulfillment. We will also have experiences that cause pain, frustration, and remorse. God can use all of these experiences—both the negative as well as the positive—to help others as they face similar experiences. This session will help you to recall some of your experiences and identify how they might be used.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, thank you for all the experiences that I have been through. Help me to use them for your honor and glory.*

# What Spiritual Experiences Have You Had?

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth.*

Isaiah 53:7

**READ:** “What spiritual experiences have you had?” on page 88.

**REFLECT:** Fifteen years ago, I was invited to a day of silence in order to encounter God. While it was held at a Jesuit retreat center, the invitation came from an old-order Mennonite woman. To begin the day, we read Scripture, listened some taped music, and had prayer. And then, we had silence out in nature with God. It was a profound experience!

Since then, I have entered many times into silence to meet God. It has become a part of my spiritual experience, though it does not make me more pious than anyone else. These silent days are not always easy, for in the silence I find I am often broken and in need of healing. In my most recent eight-day retreat, I could not sleep. It was a dark and lonely experience that I am still trying to figure out.

In the Bible, we read that Jesus often went away to be alone, though I do not know if he was silent with God during those times. Where do you find your entry points with God? Is it in Scripture, conversation, nature, or silence? Remember there are many ways to enter the presence of God. For me, silence has given me a focus for my journey of faith and life.

**RESPOND:** *Dear God, open my heart, soul, and mind to your presence.*

—Fred Redekop



# What Painful Experiences Have You Had?

*“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.”*

Luke 22:42 NIV

**READ:** “What painful experiences have you had?” on page 88.

**REFLECT:** I had a heart attack on November 26, 2007. For about a year following this crisis, I was in disbelief, thinking it might not have ever happened. Then I would look at the scars on my chest and arm, and I knew the experience was real.

We want all the pain in our lives to go away. At least I do. We do not want to have our knees replaced or our headaches to continue. Doctors prescribe all kinds of medications to solve any kind of pain. Some health care professionals go so far as to say there is no reason for anyone to have pain. Some of us pray to God to relieve all of our discomforts and pain.

Jesus was threatened early in his life, yet he continued to confront the authorities. He risked his life and the lives of his followers. He went to Jerusalem knowing he would be arrested and killed. In the final days before the crucifixion, he went back and forth to the big city. He did not ask his Father in heaven to take away all the pain. In the end, he did not deny the pain. He cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 26:46 NRSV).

If you likewise face pain squarely, what can it teach you? How are the painful experiences of your life connected to your faith and the faith of the church?

**RESPOND:** *Lord of heaven and earth, do not take away all our pain. Rather, teach us through it.*

—Fred Redekop

# What Educational Experiences Have You Had?

*From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you  
for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

2 Timothy 3:15 NRSV

**READ:** “What educational experiences have you had?” on page 89.

**REFLECT:** I have been a pastor for thirty years, and I have taken courses throughout my time in ministry. There have been pastor’s theology seminars, pastor’s weeks, and many other courses. I believe they have all taught me something about the Bible, the church, and myself.

In 1982, during the winter semester of my first year at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Indiana, I enrolled in Mennonite history with J.C. Wenger. In my mind, Wenger was a saint and a great church leader. Wenger sat down when he lectured in that course. He had many notes, and he had taught the course many times.

During one class, he said something that I remember every Sunday I preach: “As a pastor, you must be pretty arrogant if you think you can say something new every Sunday.” For me, that means I am standing with all preachers. It means that I must live by the grace of God. It means that I must learn from many other people throughout time. And it means it is fine to repeat stories and parts of sermons.

**RESPOND:** *Help me, Lord, to always be a learner in the kingdom of God.*

—Fred Redekop

# What Work Experiences Have You Had?

*“My Father is still working, and I also am working.”*

John 5:17 NRSV

**READ:** “What work experiences have you had?” on page 89.

**REFLECT:** I have been working for church or church-related institutions for the past thirty-seven years. Some people have said that I should have worked outside of the church for a time, so that I would know what real life is all about. Perhaps that is true.

However, in my life as a pastor, I have been in the midst of many real-life situations. I have held the hand of a woman who was holding the hand of her husband as the nurses removed his respirator. I have listened to people who wanted to have faith, but faith did not come. I have talked to farmers who did not know if they would get a crop. These are all tough real-life situations that people have lived alongside me.

Does real life happen for you inside or outside the church? For the early Anabaptists, all life was sacred, so there was no difference from inside the meetinghouse or out in the marketplace. For me, all work is a calling, whether you are outside the church or inside of it.

**RESPOND:** *God, walk with us wherever our work takes us in this life.*

—Fred Redekop

# What Ministry Experiences Have You Had?

*Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.*

*James 5:14*

**READ:** “What ministry experiences have you had?” on page 89

**REFLECT:** Early in my ministry, a man in my church named Joe phoned me and asked, “Can you come over and anoint my wife for healing?” I said yes and hung up the phone. But then I wondered, *What should I do now?* I had never heard of this practice in the Mennonite church.

I phoned a retired Mennonite pastor who told me how he had done it fifty years earlier. When I arrived at Joe’s house, all his children were there, and even some grandchildren. “What should we pray?” I asked Joe and his wife, Amanda. I prayed, and then I anointed Amanda with oil in the form of a cross on her forehead in the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.

There were tears and silence. Amanda died, but Joe later reflectively said, “The anointing brought us all closer to God. There was healing that we did not know of.”

The ministry of anointing with oil began flourishing at Floradale Mennonite. It went from something that first happened in homes to the hospital and then into the church services. I was amazed what God could do to a community with a little oil and the sign of the cross!

Where have you seen the Holy Spirit move in your life?

**RESPOND:** *Dear God, allow the Holy Spirit to anoint us every day of our lives.*

—Fred Redekop

## Unit 4 / Session 4

# Behaving Like Christ in Ministry and Mission

*While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."*

Acts 13:2 NRSV

**READ:** This week you will be reading session 4, "Behaving like Christ in ministry and mission," on pages 90–95 of *Begin Anew*. Note the questions that are asked.

**REFLECT:** In this final session, you will analyze what you have learned about yourself and apply it to a ministry in the church and to a mission in the context of the world in which you find yourself. You may find yourself affirming a ministry in which you are already involved, or you may find yourself choosing a new ministry or mission. This session will also guide you on how to match who you are with the needs that have been brought to your attention.

Three basic questions call for your attention in this session: What have you learned about yourself? To what ministry in the church do you feel called? To what part of God's mission in the world do you feel called?

It is important for each person to have a ministry and a mission. If you do not, you will either feel inferior to others because you don't think you have anything to contribute, or you will feel bitter because you know you have something to offer but have not been asked.

**RESPONSE:** *Lord, let me have a part in discerning the gifts and ministries of my brothers and sisters in the church.*

# What Have You Learned About Yourself?

*For I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to give you a future and a hope”*

*Jeremiah 29:11 NIV*

**READ:** “What have you learned about yourself?” on page 90.

**REFLECT:** At age forty-five, I enrolled in a three-day workshop called, “Put Yourself Together.” In those three days we explored ten different areas of life, much as we have been doing during these units in *Begin Anew*. We were asked, “What do you like to do?” “What are you able to do?” And “How do you do things?” I learned much about myself and was encouraged to note what I had to work with in my life. The insights cast new light on both my present and my future even as God had spoken powerfully through the prophet Jeremiah,

I wish a similar experience for you. What have you learned about yourself during these sessions? What new insights have you gained? To what type of human need are you most clearly drawn? For what do you seem to have a natural ability? What kind of passions do you have? What experiences have you already had?

Be thankful for the gifts God has given you and the opportunities he has placed before you. He has given them to you for a purpose. Remember that you are not here on earth to merely consume food and resources. You are here to serve. To what service might God be calling you?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, show me in a special way this week how I can partner with you and others in alleviating suffering and building meaningful relationships.*

—Palmer Becker

# To What Ministry in the Church Do You Feel Called?

*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"*

Isaiah 6:8 NRSV

**READ:** "To what ministry in the church do you feel called?" on page 91. Complete the "Roles for ministry" exercise on pages 91–92.

**REFLECT:** As part of an internship program in which I was enrolled, I was required to do a workshop to help participants move from constantly looking at their weaknesses to exploring their strengths. I decided to call my workshop, "You and Your Options." The purpose of the course would be to help others as I had been helped to assess their strengths and set goals for using them. Eight people registered, and we had a profitable experience.

Several months later, I participated in a silent retreat. For eighteen hours I refrained from talking and focused on listening to the Spirit. By the afternoon, I was tired from a long walk and retreated into a quiet grassy area. There I lay down in the sunshine and took a nap.

When I awoke, I felt a call saying, "Palmer, why don't you develop the 'You and Your Options' exercises into a published set of materials? Young people and others could be helped to find their way as you did." I responded to the call and, thankfully, within a year several hundred youth groups were doing "You and Your Options."

Each of us has gifts, insights, and experiences that God can use to minister to the needs of others. Might you need to take time for a silent retreat to find yours?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, what are you inviting me to do?*

—Palmer Becker

# My Commitment to a Ministry

*So we rebuilt the wall, and all the wall was joined together to half its height;  
for the people had a mind to work.*

Nehemiah 4:6 NRSV

**READ:** Reread “What have you learned about yourself?” on page 90 and review what you have identified in the “Roles for ministry” exercise on pages 91–92.

**REFLECT:** Not long ago, I made an appointment with the pastor of a thriving church to inquire how they went about ministry. When I met with him, I noticed that behind him was a whiteboard containing the names and ministries of the 142 members of his congregation. Each member had been assigned to a particular ministry in the church. Some were teachers, deacons, or song leaders, while others were in charge of the grounds, the kitchen, or the hymnbooks.

When we got to eleventh grade in my home church, we were invited to be “alms bearers.” This meant that each Sunday we were responsible for taking the offering. We felt as if we had an important role in the church and wanted to do it with poise and dignity. It was a way of serving Christ and the church. When I became a pastor, I asked the head usher to either pray the offertory prayer or to ask one of the ushers to pray it. During the years that followed, the head usher thanked me many times for trusting him and his team with that responsibility.

What might be your ministry? You will likely choose a ministry through a combination of feeling a positive inner call and receiving an outer call or invitation from a person who knows you and your gifts. Come to know your gifts and a task that needs doing.

**RESPOND:** *Lord, anoint me with your Spirit for the ministry to which you are calling me.*

—Palmer Becker



# What Will Be Your Mission?

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.”*

Matthew 28:19–20 NRSV

**READ:** “To what part of God’s mission in the world do you feel called?” on page 94.

**REFLECT:** I had just turned twenty years of age and had finished two years of college. I was attentively listening to a team of workers from Jackson, Mississippi, give a report on how they were helping African-American churches teach subjects in their Vacation Bible Schools. Meanwhile, Rosa Parks was calling for equal rights by refusing to sit in the back of the bus.

I felt a leap within me. *I could teach Bible stories to children!* I told myself. I went home and said to my dad and mom, “I would like to help African-American churches in Mississippi teach their children and build relationships with the people in the area.” Harvest was a couple weeks away, but my parents said, “Go, we will find a way to manage.” What a life-changing experience it was!

Ministries have a way of building on each other. That summer experience led to a ministry the next year during college among sharecroppers who were moving to South Bend, Indiana. That experience, in turn, prepared me for a ministry among aboriginal tribes in Taiwan, and then for working with Cheyenne families in Oklahoma, a Hispanic fellowship in Oregon, and a Laotian congregation in Minnesota.

To what might God be calling you? What has God prepared for you to do? What opportunity lies before you?

**RESPOND:** *Here am I, Lord, send me.*

—Palmer Becker

# My Commitment to Mission

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

Acts 1:8 NRSV

**READ:** Reread “What have you learned about yourself?” on page 90 and review what you have identified while working on page 94.

**REFLECT:** When my friend Stan Bohn served as pastor of the Rainbow Boulevard Mennonite Church in Kansas City, Missouri, he encouraged each member to join a service club in the community, such as the Rotary. In British Columbia, Walter Paetkau encouraged each member to spend as much time serving in the community as they were hoping to spend in the church. In each case, the emphasis was on the church serving the community.

Each Wednesday morning, a church in Kitchener, Ontario, called The Gathering serves breakfast to about 140 people in its needy community. “Why do you do it?” I asked them. They responded, “We do it because Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’”

Today, through modern communication and personal contact, we can learn about various people groups in our community or even in our world. When we see someone who is hungry, thirsty, strange, naked, sick, or in prison, we are encouraged to respond as the Good Samaritan did: by sharing what we have to offer.

What resource do you have to share? Where and how might you share it?

**RESPOND:** *Lord, I want to be more than a consumer. Empower me to share joyfully what gifts or resources you have entrusted to me.*

—Palmer Becker

# Meditation Writers

**Melissa Miller** is a Mennonite Church Manitoba pastor, currently serving in the area of family ministry. She loves conversations, especially those where God's lively mission of healing, reconciliation and peacemaking is at work.

**Ed Olfert** has worked as a pastor, welder, trucker, heavy equipment operator, farmer, writer (*And It Was Very Good*), and dean at a Mennonite boarding school. He also identifies as spouse, father, opa, and passionate restorative justice player.

**Lois Siemens** is a bi-vocational pastor at Superb Mennonite Church in rural Saskatchewan and enjoys pulpit supply for numerous congregations in the area who are without a pastor. Other times you can find her wandering through the Kerrobert Reservoir with camera in hand or reading and having coffee at the local bakery.

**Palmer Becker** has spent a lifetime serving the church as a pastor, conference executive, educator and author. He is editor of *Begin Anew* materials and author of *Anabaptist Essentials*. Palmer lives in Kitchener, Ontario with his wife, Ardys.

**Jessica Reesor Rempel** Through her ministry with Pastors in Exile, Jessica is passionate about nurturing community, extending radical hospitality and seeking out sacred moments in the midst of the mundane. Jessica and her husband Steven and baby daughter Anna live in Kitchener, Ontario, where they are active members of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church.

**Amanda Zehr** says, "I went to school, had some fun, got some degrees, and am now a pastor whether I find myself serving in a church or not." Amanda is a small-town girl from southern Ontario, with jobs that have ranged from pastor to Starbucks barista. She loves bringing more love into the world by baking pretty cupcakes and giving them to people.

**Chris Brnjas** lives in Waterloo, Ontario with his wife Rachel and tries to live out following Jesus in community. He attends The Gathering Church, a Mennonite Church Eastern Canada congregation in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

**Jeff Hochstetler** and his wife, Kelsey, and their daughter live in Berlin, Ohio, where he serves as Family Life Pastor at Berlin Mennonite Church.

**Dayna Schrock** is a member of the pastoral team at Berlin Mennonite Church giving leadership to small groups.

**Myron Weaver** is a member of the pastoral team at Berlin Mennonite Church, married to Sheryl, parents of two married sons and grandparents to two grandchildren. Myron enjoys traveling and being outdoors; specifically riding bicycle.

**April Yamasaki** is an author of numerous works and Lead Pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford, BC. She loves blogging and connecting with readers through her two websites, [apriyamasaki.com](http://apriyamasaki.com) and [whenyouworkforthechurch.com](http://whenyouworkforthechurch.com).

**Dave Bergen** lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba with his wife Essie. He spent many years as a congregational pastor and, most recently, was Executive Minister of Christian Formation with Mennonite Church Canada. Currently Dave is semi-retired, operates a small home repair business, serves as Finance Chair in his congregation, and enjoys pursuing his hobbies as a gardener, motorcyclist and traveller.

**Fred Redekop** was a pastor for 30 years, and now is seeking a new calling. Part of the new calling is being an Opa to his two grandsons.